

LITERARY TRADITION AND LITERARY CHANGE IN BLACK AFRICA*

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Writing has been with us for so many centuries that we take it for granted. We are apt to forget that all literature has its roots in the spoken word. We conveniently ignore that there is no recognizably human group, however "primitive", but has its own imaginative tradition in the use of speech. Indeed, "literature", with its etymological reference to script, is the only word we have for the whole of the verbal art. As a result, we tend to relegate the verbal artefacts of pre-literate societies to the condition of "folklore" while romantically extolling the virtues of "tradition".

Talk about traditional Africa is all the more urgent and copious as there is a widespread fear that tradition, whatever it is, is doomed to be soon swept out by all the wonderful novelties from the western world. The general feeling has been succinctly expressed by a historian from Mali, Amadou Hampate Bâ, in his oft-quoted dictum that "whenever an old man dies, it's a library that burns". A burning library is certainly a sorry sight, at any rate for the likes of us, inveterate book-worms. Yet it does not spell Armageddon. To preserve all of mankind's verbal output is not possible - however hard the Library of Congress may try - and probably not desirable. New seed must have dead leaves to feed on. Life goes on. New books are being produced. New media are being invented. Room must be found for them. Destruction is a vital necessity. Before bewailing the vanishing of tradition(s), then, we had better pause a while and wonder what "tradition" is.

There is a thought-provoking Igbo maxim to the effect that "it is not traditional to be conservative". This apparent paradox is the voice of Life itself: in his pre-literate wisdom, the black man is acutely aware of the fact of change and of the need for change. Only white historians of an inordinately obtuse disposition have dared claim that African societies have no history for the irrelevant reason that they have no written records of their history. The African himself, however, is willing to forget and forego his "tradition", that is, his accustomed way of life, if it appears to disqualify him from righteous enjoyment of the (to him unquestioned) benefits of a more powerful civilization.

In the field of literature - for which we had better use the more comprehensive label "verbal art" - the word "tradition" refers to the accumulated patrimony of centuries, perhaps millennia, of creative oral activity and to the oral mode of transmission of this legacy.¹ It is this oral tradition which is allegedly threatened by western innovation. But although our exquisite sensibilities may feel the hurt, it is necessary to emphasize two generally neglected facts. One is that writing has been practised in considerable areas of sub-Saharan Africa for several centuries.² The other is that the oral tradition can no longer fulfil its functions in the new circumstances which have been created by the irrepressible, uncontrollable play of History.

The main function of literature, whether oral or written, has usually been to shape the knowledge and the wisdom of a society into some verbal formulation that can be recollected and transmitted: in a pre-literate society, mythical tales provide answers to the same questions to which we expect replies from theology, metaphysics and more recently astronomy and geology. The society does not question the accuracy of the legends dealing with its own past any more than we doubt the findings of allegedly "scientific" history. Like much of our epic or dramatic writing animal fables and allegorical tales have an educational purpose: their concern is to give persuasive shape to the group's conception of desirable conduct.

This oral manner of conveying and preserving knowledge and wisdom was undoubtedly suited to the needs of the small-scale tribal societies of pre-colonial Africa. In a limited sense, it is plausible to surmise that its message was basically conservative. Small tribal societies are weak. They must build up a power structure that enables them to resist their natural and human enemies. All intellectual exertions are designed to preserve and bolster the organization which has enabled them to endure so far. Hence the cult of the ancestors. Hence the gerontocracy. One of the major literary genres is the praise poem, which magnifies the pillars of the tribe's history, the heroes who embodied its virtues and demonstrated its capacity for survival. Its opposite, satire, is also widely used, but it has a more personal character, censuring departures from the accepted norms, not the norms themselves. It has never been the purpose of oral art to question premises or encourage heresy. So much for social and ethical content.

But we must also keep in mind that voice of the bard cannot reach farther than the few members of the village group on whose extremely undifferentiated experience his inspiration feeds. Because oral art deals with persons and events with which all the members of its audience are closely acquainted, it can afford to be cryptically allusive in its constant use of metaphor. Like Dante's Divina Commedia it could not possibly be understood, let alone enjoyed, by outsiders except through a most unwieldy array of footnotes!

Few African writers really wish to emulate such exponents of obscurity as Mallarmé or Ezra Pound. Nevertheless, the effect of resorting to oral devices is obvious in the poetry of Senghor: it is hardly accesible to the average African be-

cause it is in French; further, it appeals to the European aesthete for the wrong reasons: because the unintelligible allusions to Serer and Wolof characters, artefacts and customs create an alluring aura of Surrealist magic.

A similar fate has awaited one of the most favourite genres in Africa's oral heritage: the short story, which, for some reason, is called folk-tale when it is not the outcome of written composition. In a pre-literate culture, the tale has no existence independent of actual performance. The role of the implicit "author", who first invented it, is entirely subordinate to, or rather totally obliterated by, that of the reciter, the teller of tales. The work of art is the performance, the closest parallel in literate societies being perhaps Wagner's conception of opera as a Gesamtkunstwerk. The reciter, bard, griot, the oral performer does not rely solely on the wording of the story to produce his effects. He can call upon a variety of skills: music, song, above all mimicry, and the whole gamut of inflections of which the human voice is capable. He can also count on audience participation to an extent which would presumably be frowned upon in Bayreuth. The writer is deprived of this wide scope of aesthetic resources. Throughout the nineteenth century the African tale as translated or rather adapted into European languages by well-meaning missionaries became a fashionable genre as juvenile reading matter. It almost reached the status of a valid literary form with the collection published by Blaise Cendrars in 1921. Those printed tales, however, in which the bare bones of a skeletal story are often disguised under totally non-African romantic descriptions of nature, are just mummified corpses when compared with the lively, rich, juicy, frequently sly and quizzical delivery of a practised native reciter. Birago Diop is probably the only African writer who, being well acquainted with the oral tale, had sufficient control of a European language to create, with alien words, a verbal approximation of the basic total effect of the traditional performance.

These two examples are mentioned simply as concrete individual illustrations of the fact that the introduction of writing and printing is just one element in a vastly complex process of culture change which involves not only the poet or the reciter and his audience, but the structure and the way of life of the whole society. It is in the very nature of things that the oral tradition should be bound to make room for this new trend, which is already becoming a tradition, even though the verbal art may lose in intensity and intimacy what it thus gains in diffusion and permanency.

But the simultaneous introduction of writing and printing is not the only revolution that literature is undergoing in Africa today. An equally significant departure from tradition is related to language use. All of the continent's oral art and much of its pre-colonial written literature is couched in its numberless vernaculars. Nevertheless, all that is accessible to the outside world is the poetry, the prose fiction, the plays, that have been written in European languages. This is not the place to discuss the discrepancy between the reality and our image of it. It is better to concentrate on the special historical interest that attaches to the study

of the present transitional phase in the development of African oral art owing to the fact that, for the first time in the history of mankind, it is possible to investigate at close range and with the sophisticated methods of modern scholarship, what happens when a stronger society enforces its ideals and techniques upon a weaker one, which tries to get hold of those instruments of power while clinging as much and as long as is feasible to the customs and beliefs that constitute its cultural identity. In this respect, revealing parallels ought to receive more attention than they have been given so far.

When Julius Caesar established Rome's control over the Celtic tribes of Gaul, he introduced not only a new skill, writing, but also a new language, Latin. The process of cross-cultural hybridization that was thus initiated has been dubbed "glottophagy" by a French scholar:³ an élite of newly-literate Celts received a modern education and availed themselves of their mastery of the new technique and the new language to compose in Latin. There is no doubt that oral art in the Celtic languages of Gaul survived, but it was never written down and is now totally lost: we can only infer its existence from our knowledge of Celtic culture in Ireland and Wales. Although conscious linguistic colonialism was absent from Roman thought, the sheer power and prestige of the imperial city led to its language being spontaneously adopted for literary purposes by "barbarian" literati. The languages really spoken by the people were not even reduced to writing until more than twelve centuries after the Roman conquest, and more than six centuries after the fall of the Roman empire!

Starting in the early sixteenth century, the whole of Black Africa was likewise assaulted by foreign glottophagi coming from Europe.⁴ But the damage done was especially conspicuous in those parts of the continent which came under the colonial control of Romance language-speaking nations. In the French and Portuguese empires and in Spanish (now Equatorial) Guinea the emergence of vernacular writing was effectively prevented by the language policy of the colonial administration. In Italian Ethiopia the fascist authorities brutally interrupted the steady course of Ghe'ez and the promising growth of Amharic, until, that is, they were driven out after a mere half-dozen years of ruthless imperialism.⁵ Throughout what we might call "Latin" Africa, intensive glorification of the colonial language led to the African élites adopting and internalizing the euro-centred view of the alien idiom as the only suitable medium for civilized intercourse. The consequence is that while Africa has produced a considerable amount of creative writing in French and Portuguese, there is no written art in such important languages as Wolof, or Mande, or Kibundu.

Embracing the colonizers' languages represents an even more decisive break with pre-colonial tradition than merely adding a new medium for literary expression. But discarding the vernacular is not an inherent consequence of colonial enterprise: in the former British empire a situation of diglottism prevails, which is reminiscent of the beginnings of creative writing in the European areas beyond the limes of Roman civilization. In such places as Ireland and Scandinavia, Latin and writing were also introduced simultaneously: not by the Roman legions and administra-

tion, but by harmless Christian missionaries. The new élite of literate converts used Latin for the writing of hymns and the recording of their own people's history. But they also took advantage of the new technique for the recording of their oral lore, with the result that an impressive body of imaginative writing in Celtic and Germanic dialects was in existence long before Romance languages started producing a written art of their own.

Whether we turn to South, East or West Africa, we find that in most cases vernacular creative writing antedated literary composition in English. The result is that the verbal artist in former British-controlled Africa is privileged with an opportunity which does not arise in "Latin" Africa: the possibility of selecting the language (his own or English) that best suits his purpose as a writer.⁶ Actually, this possibility confronts him with a dilemma, into which I am not going to probe. Nor do I intend to dwell upon the peculiar difficulties raised by the absence of vernacular writing in a large part of Africa and the co-existence of a vernacular and an alien tradition elsewhere. These are questions that will have to be investigated by competent African scholars. Let us simply note for the time being that while the oral tradition is necessarily vernacular, the budding tradition of writing introduces a further element of deviation: the foreign languages.

But whichever language he chooses, the African writer is faced with a third aspect of the irrelevance of the oral tradition. As a creative artist, he cannot rest satisfied with the mere recording of oral lore. Nor can the African past offer him useful models for the new genres that writing and printing demand: especially novels and plays with complex, well-organized plots, rounded, highly individualized characters, etc. Most early African writers, the best of whom were trained in European or American universities, have hitherto done their best to imitate and emulate European models: Chinua Achebe's novels are in the tradition of Victorian prose fiction; and Christopher Okigbo openly acknowledged his debt to T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound.

The results of this subservience to the European tradition have by no means been negligible. Nevertheless, the most pregnant event in the literary life of Africa in recent years has been the revulsion of a new generation of critics and writers against such allegiance to alien trends. The greater part of imaginative writing since independence increasingly appears to them as the grafting of an African shoot on to the mighty trunk of European literature, an artificial outgrowth with no roots in its native soil. This foreign-educated generation, it is felt, was hypnotized both by the magnitude of the European achievement and by their own personal problems as an overprivileged élitist intelligentsia trying to make the best out of the culture clash. In 1979 a group of young stalwarts vituperated against what they called "the Leeds connection"⁷ because several of the most prominent Nigerian writers, including such luminaries as Wole Soyinka, had studied for a while at the University of Leeds, where they had allegedly imbibed the irrelevant standards and deleterious criteria of western writing.

This shrill denunciation of European literary supremacy was the most articulate aspect of a phenomenon that had been gathering strength for more than a decade: the rise of a popular body of imaginative writing, whose authors are graduates of African universities, teacher-training colleges or even high schools. They are not quite conversant with standard English (not to mention the Queen's) or academic French but their language is understandable to a large local readership. They are the dignified successors of the hack writers who had been feeding the African market with mawkish romances, gory thrillers and crude porn. Whether they reach print in Ibadan, Nairobi, Yaoundé or Dakar, it is their main distinction that they are equally unattracted by the phoney negritudinous glamour of "traditional life" and by the highbrow self-centred torments of intellectual been-tos: their concern is with the everyday experience and problems of the ordinary African in the new, urbanized society. To the European reader using cultured standards, their work is certainly a mediocre sample of English - or French - language fiction. But in the African context it may come to be regarded as signalling the real birth of a genuine African tradition of writing, trying as they do to reflect problems that are of substantive concern for a substantial proportion of their fellow-citizens and in a language which increasing numbers of even semi-literate readers can readily understand and enjoy.⁸

Only time (meaning not decades but centuries) will tell us which of today's novelties will go to the making of a tradition. My personal guess, subjective and totally unauthoritative, would be that vernacular languages have little chance in the former French and Portuguese empires in the foreseeable future. Some will, undoubtedly prosper in former English territories. European language writing will keep the upper hand for many decades. The flexibility of English, already exemplified in the United States and in the white Dominions, will facilitate its evolution into an adequate literary medium. The rigidity of French will make this mutation more difficult, and it is by no means to be excluded that the adaptation of academic French and Portuguese to the African cultural and linguistic substratum may in the long run give rise to Afro-romance languages. This might be a satisfactory way of bypassing the either/or prospect sketched by Albert Memmi when he wrote twenty-five years ago that "la littérature colonisée de langue européenne semble condamnée à mourir jeune", adding that "les prochaines générations, nées dans la liberté, écriront spontanément dans leur langue retrouvée"⁹. The first of these new generations is now coming to the fore and it still uses European languages to formulate the new tradition, youthful, vigorous, pregnant with unpredictable potentialities, which is growing lustily under our eyes. The denial that history has so far inflicted upon the Tunisian sociologist's forecast should remind us of the healthy truth in Niels Bohr's dictum to the effect that "prediction is very difficult, especially about the future". Tradition is changing all the time, and only time will tell us which particular innovations will prove enduring enough to become in their turn traditional.

NOTES

* A paper read at the conference of the British Comparative Literature Association held in Sheffield, November 1982.

- (1) For a convenient account, see Ruth Finnegan, Oral literature in Africa, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970.
- (2) See Albert S. Gérard, African Language Literatures. An Introduction to the Literary History of Sub-Saharan Africa, Washington: Three Continents Press, and London: Longman, 1981.
- (3) Louis-Jean Calvet, Linguistique et colonialisme. Petit traité de glottophagie, Paris: Payot, rev. ed. 1974.
- (4) This, it should be recognized, is a constant in historical power relationships. The fate of Amerindian languages both in North and South America is a case in point. And we must remember that when the Arabs conquered the Maghreb in the seventh century, they introduced their own language and script. Their impact was so overwhelming that to this day the autochthonous Berber population have not been able to develop a written art in their own dialects. It is probably significant that many Berber writers, especially in Algeria, have turned to French rather than Arabic. In fact, it was in Black Africa that the Arabic script was first used (in the eighteenth century) for the recording of vernacular languages such as Swahili, Fulfulde or Hausa. Our knowledge of this written "tradition" is fragmentary and superficial, but it seems that it derived largely from the Arabic Muslim legacy. Swahili writing contains some faint echoes from pre-Islamic times, but the major part of "classical" Swahili literature, which was produced in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, deals with subject matter connected with the Prophet's life and the early times of Arab expansion soon after hijra.
- (5) On Ethiopia, see Albert S. Gérard, Four African Literatures: Xhosa, Sotho, Zulu, Amharic, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971.
- (6) For a discussion of the significance of Protestant missionaries' activity in this regard, see my essay "La politique coloniale et la formation des littératures vernaculaires en Afrique britannique", Commonwealth Miscellanies 1 (1974-75), pp. 3-10.

- (7) Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jerie, Ihechukwu Madubuike, "The Leeds-Ibadan Connection: The Scandal of Modern African Literature", Okike, 13 (1979), pp. 37-46. The group had for some time been advocating a movement "Towards the Decolonization of African Literature", Okike 6 (1974), pp. 11-27, and 7 (1975), pp. 65-81.
- (8) For bibliographical information on this phenomenon as it first occurred in West Africa, see the section on "Popular Literature" in Bernth Lindfors, Black African Literature in English: A Guide to Information Sources, Detroit: Gale Research Company, 1979, pp. 151-3. For its more recent emergence in Kenya, see notably Bernth Lindfors, "East African Popular Literature in English", Journal of Popular Culture, 13 (1979), pp. 106-15, or Ulla Schild, "Words of Deception: Popular Literature in Kenya", in U. Schild (ed.), The East African Experience, Berlin: Reimer, 1980, pp. 25-33. On similar writing from francophone Africa, see Albert Gérard and Jeannine Laurent, "Sembène's Progeny: A New Trend in the Senegalese Novel", Studies in Twentieth Century Literature, 14 (1980), pp. 133-45.
- (9) Albert Memmi, Portrait du colonisé, Paris: Buchet-Chastel, 1957, p. 146.