

# Obumselu on African Literature



# Obumselu on African Literature:

*The Intellectual Muse*

Edited by  
Isidore Diala

Cambridge  
Scholars  
Publishing



Obumsele on African Literature: The Intellectual Muse

Edited by Isidore Diala

This book first published 2019

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2019 by Ben Obumsele

All rights for this book reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN (10): 1-5275-2305-5

ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-2305-0

For Professor Ben Obumselu:  
Master, mentor, model, and much more

A solid academic, one of the pioneers of the distinctive University of Ibadan brand, and one whose personality helped to shape Nigeria's collegial culture before its later debasement . . . . This volume fills in a yawning gap in the compendium of African literary criticism, since Obumsele was such a reticent expositor of his own productivity.

—**Wole Soyinka**

Wherever Obumsele's name was evoked, it was always with uncustomary reverence. . . . The reverence was for his solid scholarship and perspicacious mind; his assured, limpid prose which lent to his pronouncements a kind of magisterial poise; his cool and classical power of exegesis. This compendium of Obumsele's work is an invaluable contribution to the criticism of African literature.

—**Femi Osofisan**

This compendium is a welcome tribute to Ben Obumsele, one of the most widely read, liberally educated, and profoundly cerebral scholars Nigeria has ever produced. . . . In it we encounter the genial, affable, humorous, and disarmingly accessible gentleman—a scholar who knew how to captivate without being intimidating.

—**Niyi Osundare**

Ben Obumsele did not write much—most of his critical productions are available here. This was perhaps an innate habit of perfection, a proneness to treat knowledge as something that would endure, deserving to be honed like a work of art.

—**Dan Izevbaye**

# CONTENTS

Acknowledgments .....	ix
Foreword .....	xi
Introduction .....	xiv
Chapter One..... The Background of Modern African Literature	1
Chapter Two..... African Eden: Cultural Nationalism in the African Novel	31
Chapter Three..... Marx, Politics and the African Novel	53
Chapter Four..... <i>A Grain of Wheat</i> : Ngũgĩ's Debt to Conrad	76
Chapter Five..... Mofolo's <i>Chaka</i> and the Folk Tradition	91
Chapter Six..... Chinua Achebe's African Aesthetic: A Reconsideration of <i>A Man of the People</i>	102
Chapter Seven..... The French and Moslem Backgrounds of <i>The Radiance of the King</i>	114
Chapter Eight..... In the Oriki Tradition	137
Chapter Nine..... Christopher Okigbo: A Poet's Identity	160

Chapter Ten .....	183
Cambridge House Ibadan, 1962-66: Politics and Poetics in Okigbo's Last Years	
Chapter Eleven .....	206
Ben Okri's <i>The Famished Road</i> : A Re-evaluation	
Chapter Twelve .....	222
Two Pioneer African Novelists: Tshetisho Solomon Plaatje and Mopoku Thomas Mofolo	
Chapter Thirteen .....	249
Wole Soyinka's <i>The Interpreters</i> : The Literary Context	
Chapter Fourteen .....	269
An African Critic on African Literary Criticism: An Interview with Ben Obumselu	
Chapter Fifteen .....	289
We Need an Element of Prophecy in New Nigerian Writing	
Index .....	303



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My debts are eternal to Professor Ben Obumsele whose undergraduate student I was at Abia State University, Uturu, Nigeria. His unusual intellectual brilliance filled me with a perpetual yearning and enabled me discover a vocation. Moreover, his guidance and generosity were luminous signposts to my supplicant feet. I am ever in his debt also for entrusting me with the responsibility of this volume. I am equally grateful to Professor Obumsele's widow, Fidelia, and his whole family for conceding ample space for my discipleship to him.

My heartfelt thanks are due to some preeminent Nigerian intellectuals who responded enthusiastically to the idea of this volume: Professors Wole Soyinka, Dan Izevbaye, Abiola Irele, and Niyi Osundare. Professor Soyinka envisaged that this compendium would fill a crucial gap in the history of African literary criticism and made the concession that his eulogy at Obumsele's passing be used for the blurb; Professor Irele thought it a boon to have Obumsele in one volume, given the quality of his works; Professor Izevbaye described this project as "exciting" when I first mentioned it to him and created time for the Foreword; and Professor Osundare was eager to see this volume in print. Their keenness meant I could not relent. I would like to thank Dr Ruthmarie Mitsch specially for always making available to me her invaluable editorial skills. I also thank John Egole for all his assistance with this project. To my wife, Chy, and our children, Ebube, Chijos, Noly, and Too, my eternal love for the delight they take in my work.

For permission to reprint already published material, I am indebted to the University of Ibadan Press for the articles published in *Ibadan* 22 (1966): 46-59 and *Ibadan Studies in English* (1970): 131-51; to the University of Kent Press for the article published in *Twentieth Century Studies* 10 (1973): 107-27; to Ethiopie Publishing Corporation for the article published in *Benin Review* 1 (1974): 80-91; to the Department of English Literature, University of Sheffield for the article published in *Sheffield Papers on Literature and Society* 1, 1976, 33-44; to the English Teachers' Association of Zambia for the article published in *The English Teachers' Journal* 1.2 (1977): 13-20; to Indiana Press for the articles published in *Research in African Literatures* 11.1 (1980): 1-25, 41.2 (2010): 1-18, and 49.2 (2018): 167-81; to The Literary Half-Yearly Press

in Mysore, India, for the interview published in *The Literary Half-Yearly* 30.2 (1989): 82-104; to Africa World Press and Isidore Diala for the article published in *The Responsible Critic: Essays on African Literature in Honor of Professor Ben Obumselu*, 2006, 57-78; the University of Pretoria Press for the article published in *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde* 48.1 (2011): 26-38; and to Kraft Books Limited and Ezechi Onyerionwu for the interview published in *Nigerian Literature: The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Conversation*, 2012, 23-42.

## FOREWORD

DAN IZEVBAYE

The literary community owes Isidore Diala much thanks for bringing together in one volume the essays of Benedict Ebele Obumsele, who distinguished himself as one of the earliest African scholars to engage directly with the texts of the emergent African literature (as distinct from theorizing the literature) and sought its appropriate place among the literatures of the world. Ben Obumsele did not write much—most of his critical productions are available in this collection. This was perhaps an innate habit of perfection, a proneness to treat knowledge as something that would endure, deserving to be honed like a work of art—not unlike the creative procedure of Okigbo, with whom he had such an intimate working relationship that he became something of an Ezra Pound to Okigbo's Eliot. It is perhaps because of this inhibiting standard that his critical output eventually became rare in this sense of not being readily available to the scholars who would have found much scholarly value in them, and also because these essays are distinguished for the scope and assurance of their scholarship as well as their critical perception and discrimination.

It is not always necessary to evoke the moment and milieu of a distinguished scholar to explain the quality of his work. However, placing Obumsele in a historical context, as he himself would have done, does cast some useful light on some of the sources of his academic performance and choices. Obumsele was among the constellation of African scholars and writers educated at the University College Ibadan in the 1950s. It was the era, described by Robert Wren as “those magical years,” that produced a stellar community of the first generation of Nigerian writers that included Achebe, Soyinka, Clark, Okigbo, Mabel Segun, Chukwuemeka Ike, and Elechi Amadi and also produced distinguished literary scholars, including Obumsele, Obiechina, Irele, and Echeruo (himself a writer). It is significant that the paths of the two groups were not identical, although they did converge. At the University College, the strictly Eng. Lit. curriculum itself was not culturally neutral. If anything, Achebe complained that their learning took place “in a colonial classroom,” and a comment by Ulli Beier—a contemporary outsider-insider—was scathing:

“The poor students were spared nothing: *Beowulf*, Chaucer, Dryden, Milton and Wordsworth—daffodils and all!” This partly explains why the emergent African writers sought a voice of their own in a world that sponsored their education and authorized the world in which they lived but did not feel they belonged. The reason for the emergence of the scholar critics was more complex. Confronted with the objectivity of scholarship, they sought to objectify the content of their literature curriculum and see it in relation to the emergent literature of their own culture. It explains the range of reference to the literature of the West in the work of these scholars compared with the more strictly African focus of critics a generation after. A misunderstanding arose from the occasional tendency of later scholars to isolate the European reference in the work of these critics from its total, enabling context—the context being their literary education as a synthesis of their cultural background and their university curriculum. For their engagement with the literature of the West was not meant to provide a model for all literature. It was this ideal that caused Obumsele to admit that he once erred by denying the oral tradition its legitimacy as a key resource of written literature, and to return instead to the vision of an ideal by which all literary forms are understood. These scholars saw the literature of the West only as the most complex of the written form of literature, though not necessarily the only path to a written tradition.

Obumsele sums up his personal perspective on the purpose of a multicultural literary education, although this need not be considered a precise reflection of the point of view of his contemporaries: “The idea was to expose the youth to the greatest ideas of mankind, and not for each tribe to worship its own tribal gods.” If this point of view is taken into account, his skepticism towards one of the ideological objectives of postcolonial theory would not come as a surprise to the reader. In other words, by distancing himself from much of theory, Obumsele was making a deliberate choice, not disguising an inability to engage with theory. What he chose to do, and did exceedingly well, was the detailed analyses of texts in the context of the history of ideas. The underlying assumptions of his work may not have been made explicit in the form of a theory. It does not mean that they have not been deeply thought through or are not ever present. A good example of Obumsele’s critical performance is his analysis of the Muslim and French backgrounds of *The Radiance of the King*. It shows a critic in complete control of his subject.

Given this quality, it is something of a surprise that, in his lifetime, Obumsele was regularly lured away from a tenured position as teacher-scholar-critic—sometimes by circumstances, but also often by

choice. He himself described his temperament as that of a rolling stone. What his evocation of Ulysses shows in this context is not merely the physical parallel between the ancient wandering warrior and the modern roving scholar. Personifying the ideal of the eternal wanderer creates an image of the essential philosopher who is liberated from the restrictive loyalty to any one idea or discipline by his restless intellectual curiosity. Obumselu, who could have been a politician, a diplomat, an entrepreneur, eventually found an anchor as a university teacher, and literature offered him a specific home where his restless intellect found fulfilment in ranging over the literatures of Africa and the Western world. It also, perhaps, explains why he was attracted by the personality of Okigbo, who had tasted the possibilities of a profession in teaching, librarianship, publishing, creative writing, and the army, and why his critical taste was drawn to that poet's similarly unfettered imagination.

# INTRODUCTION

## ISIDORE DIALA

Upon Professor Ben Obumsele's (1930-2017) passing on 4 March 2017, some of Africa's most distinguished writers and literary scholars bore their choicest garlands of flowers to his memorial bier. Wole Soyinka, Africa's first Nobel laureate, venerated him as "a solid academic, one of the pioneers of the distinctive University of Ibadan brand, and one whose personality helped to shape Nigeria's collegial culture before its later debasement" (2). Recalling Obumsele's "weighty and illuminating evaluation" of his work, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o described him as "a first-rate intellectual who took literary scholarship on Africa to new heights" (3). Femi Osofisan remarked on Obumsele's "solid scholarship and perspicacious mind; his assured, limpid prose which lent to his pronouncements a kind of magisterial poise; his cool and classical power of exegesis" (10). Considering him "meticulous in research" and "catholic in intellectual range," Niyi Osundare appraised Obumsele as "one of the most widely read, liberally educated, and profoundly cerebral scholars Nigeria has ever produced" (8). Dan Izevbaye, who acknowledged Obumsele not only as a teacher but as a mentor and a first-rate intellectual, highlighted his pioneering role in laying the foundation of the practice of literary criticism in Africa (4). For his part, Afam Ebeogu exalted him as "a moving encyclopedia who would, in a most smooth and unpretentious manner, express amazing views on practically every subject but more especially in the humanities" (13).

Obumsele was a pioneer student in the honours degree programme in English in the University College Ibadan, Nigeria, under the headship of Professor Molly Mahood. Winner of the Open Scholarship for the best candidate in the Faculty of Arts when he entered the University in 1951, he also won the Faculty Prize as the best graduating student in 1957. On his return from Oxford University, England, with a doctorate, Obumsele taught for three years at the University of Ibadan before moving at the onset of the civil war to the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. He fled the country after the war because he was under military surveillance, given the prominent roles he played in Biafra (see Diala, "Ben Obumsele and the

Dialectic of Cultures” and “Ben Obumselu: The Intellectual Muse”; and Williams, “The Missing Scholar as Icon”). During that period of exile, he taught in universities in England, Zambia, Zaire, Botswana, and Swaziland. He returned to Nigeria in 1981 to serve as Special Adviser to the then Governor of Anambra State, Jim Nwobodo, and, at the collapse of the Second Republic, taught for several years at Abia State University, Uturu, Nigeria. Obumselu left the university in 1986 to begin new careers in Lagos.

Obumselu’s absolutely variegated career history included stints as university lecturer, soldier, journalist, political adviser, speech writer, and entrepreneur. He, however, acknowledged a special spiritual and mental identification with the vocation of the university teacher, and so, not surprisingly, ended his career as a lecturer at Paul University Awka, Nigeria. Exceptionally gifted and learned, Obumselu was absolute in his devotion to his students: every class he held, like every student’s script he read, bore the imprint of his intellectual competence and generosity. He equally underscored the scholar’s responsibility to extend the frontiers of knowledge through research. Ironically, Obumselu’s recognition of scholarly research and publication as a gesture towards the attainment of immortality reveals both the high seriousness with which he associated the scholarly vocation and the sober insight that severely restricted his own scholarly production. His comment on Okigbo’s self-defeating outrageously ambitious poetic adventures throws a disconcerting light on his own situation: the fixation on perfection contains the seeds of its own defeat.

The dialectic of cultures is the presiding preoccupation of Obumselu’s publications and appraising the place of African literature in the universal scheme of cultural interchange his critical speciality. He considered human cultures as necessarily exogamous and regarded the writer’s signal duty as the assumption of the godlike responsibility to increase the scope of life and push forward the frontiers of light by subjecting the human patrimony to an original synthesis. For Obumselu, cultural interchange is not only a universal norm; it is even more crucially capable of enriching modern African literature. In an essay not anthologised in this volume, “Ideals in English Literature,” he contends:

For there are new roles for African literature to play in the modern world. They have to be aids to private contemplation on experience whereas in the past they only called for public participation and festivity. They have to attempt epic representation of whole ways of life whereas in the past they had only a referential relationship to the details of their culture. They have to provide criticism of life when in the past they only

re-enacted the values of life. And just as the study of Latin and Italian literature led to the renovation of English literature during the Elizabethan period; just as the study of Greek literature led to the enrichment of the scope of Latin literature; so should exposure to English and other European literatures renew and extend the resources of our national literature. The submission to new sources of suggestion is not always fatal. (6)

Christopher Okigbo, Wole Soyinka, Léopold Sédar Senghor, Camara Laye, and Ben Okri especially among African writers represented for Obumsele talented artists whose conscious creative exploitation of their multicultural filiations did not only enable them to enrich and reinvent their models but also strengthened their engagement with indigenous African literary forms.

Given the indispensable comparative dimension of Obumsele's scholarly engagements, his readings in the world's literatures necessarily had to be astounding even as the articles anthologised in this volume as African literature reveal. The oeuvres of Virgil, Shakespeare, Tolstoy, Albert Camus, Julien Green, François Mauriac, Gustave Flaubert, Franz Kafka, Iris Murdoch, Jean-Paul Sartre, D.H. Lawrence, Joseph Conrad, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Graham Greene, E.M. Forster, Joyce Cary, T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, W.B. Yeats, Federico García Lorca, Stéphane Mallarmé, Percy Bysshe Shelley, William Wordsworth, Samuel Coleridge, among many others, are not merely pedantically alluded to in these essays; they are examined with expertise and in depth for the light they shed on the creative endeavours of African writers. With his engagement of literatures in multiple languages of the world as these essays also highlight and his mastery of the modes of critiquing various art forms other than literature, including music, sculpture, and painting, Obumsele set in relief his intellectual audacity and refusal to acknowledge limitations. He identified the defiance of boundaries and the consequent passion to transcend frontiers, which defines the human species, as the distinctive attribute of the intellectual:

There is a part of our nature which is impatient of limitations. We all, from Icarus to Daedalus to the babalawo, want to fly. We knock all the time on the prison walls of circumstance. Deep in our hearts is a radical rejection of all constraints, a desire to be free like the gods. The love of omnipotence can, of course, be merely irritable or neurotic. But in the intellectual, it is a sober acceptance of the task of changing the real world. Adam's curse is not the command to earn his bread by the sweat of his brow; it is his need to eat the forbidden fruit and change himself. ("A Job" 6)



Moreover, Obumselu's concern is with the nature of the imaginative activity itself which no national literature alone could adequately explain.

In his earliest published essay, "The Background of Modern African Literature," Obumselu was rather sober in his assessment of the potentials of African folklore in the development of the African novel. However, he rethought the matter completely. Beginning with the essay "Mofolo's *Chaka* and the Folk Tradition," he laid emphasis on the writer's use of the indigenous African heritage. That heritage and its potentials become focal in the two previously unpublished essays in this volume, "In the Oriki Tradition" and "Two Pioneer African Novelists: Tshetisho Solomon Plaatje and Mopoku Thomas Mofolo." Obumselu's discovery is a tradition of the African novel almost entirely rooted in the poetics of African folklore which began with Mofolo and Plaatje and blossomed in Camara Laye and Ben Okri. In like manner, he explored at length the transformational impact of indigenous African poetry on Christopher Okigbo's craft even when Okigbo never gave up his multicultural filiations; he also repeatedly referred to the corresponding influence of Africa's idiom of abstraction and intellectual approach to sculptural forms not only on Braque and Picasso but also on their followers such as Gris, Léger, Delaunay, Archipenko, Laurens, Lipchitz, and Zadkime.

Obumselu planned a scholarly work on the African novel to which he gave the tentative title "The Story of African Story Telling." His intention was to focus on Camara Laye, Mongo Beti, Ayi Kwei Armah, and Ben Okri as storytellers attempting to revive the oral arts of old Africa, while bringing other contemporary African novelists and some traditional bards like Amadou Koumba into a unique and novel perspective. He envisaged it would be an opportunity to put into proper focus virtually everything he had written. The essay "Two Pioneer African Novelists: Tshetisho Solomon Plaatje and Mopoku Thomas Mofolo," just like "Wole Soyinka's *The Interpreters: The Literary Context*," was meant to be part of the project. He also meant to add an essay on Achebe (tentatively titled "The Perils of Realism") as well as an essay on Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, among others. Especially in the final semester of his life, he worked devotedly on the project. Indeed, towards the end, as he moved in and out of the hospital, his continued devotion to the project became an act of defiance and self-transcendence. He did not, however, complete the writing. When I met him last on 9 February 2017 at his residence in Lagos, the day he left home for the last time for the hospital, he suggested this volume to me and even remarked on its possible composition.

The thirteen articles in this volume have been arranged chronologically and are followed by two interviews. In depth, in breadth, and in thoroughness, these works together point to the range of Obumsele's presiding concerns and convictions, and highlight the analytic rigour of his formulations as well as the inimitable grace, power, and distinction of expression that characterised his work till the end. Published in a number of journals representing several countries, and hence with different spelling and punctuation conventions as well as different conventions for notes and references, the works are here reprinted in the style and format of their original publication. However, the footnotes in the original publication of "The Background of African Literature" have been changed to endnotes and very obvious spelling errors and misprints have been corrected in all the works. The form "Igbo" is preferred to the "Ibo" of the earlier publications and "Wollof" has similarly been updated to "Wolof." In some places, the omitted first names of writers or scholars have been provided (and accents added where appropriate) to make such references more specific. The interview granted to Ezechi Onyerionwu titled "We Need an Element of Prophecy in New Nigerian Writing" has been published here without the ample editorial annotations of the original; and Christopher Okigbo's Igbo name which appears as "Ifekandu" in "Christopher Okigbo: A Poet's Identity" has been changed to the form validated by his family, "Ifekandu."

On the back page of the copy of Obumsele's 2004 Pan-African Art Circle of Artists lecture "In the Oriki Tradition" which I received from him, he described the work as being "in very active progress." Cancellations of sections of the script as well as words, phrases, and even an occasional paragraph in longhand (some of them virtually indecipherable or eventually also cancelled!) which were superimposed on the typescript bore testimony to his comment. Moreover, the script, or at least the copy that he gave to me, had no bibliography. Given that the article is crucial in Obumsele's reflection on the afterlife of African oral literature and especially on the poetics of the African alternative to the European novel, I have attempted a careful and painstaking reconstruction of the article here. The attempt to track down the references has been daunting but fruitful except in a couple of cases. The article fully deserves its place in this compendium. "Mofolo's *Chaka* and the Folk Tradition" appears here with an additional brief passage which Obumsele himself incorporated in longhand in the copy of the essay that he gave to me.

Eulogising Obumsele at his passing as an unforgettable fixture in the youthful community of scholastic excitation at the University College, Ibadan, Soyinka remarked on how Obumsele brought his sharp mind to

bear on both academic and political discourse. Soyinka regretted that Obumselu had been “for far too long a yawning gap in any compendium of African literary criticism, since Obumselu was such a reticent expositor of his own productivity” (2). In like manner, preeminent literary scholar Abiola Irele, who himself was sadly to depart this earthly realm of being shortly after Obumselu, extolled Obumselu’s career and lauded especially “the acuity of his insights and the elegance of his formulations” (7). Appraising Obumselu’s article on Laye particularly highly, Irele commented that Obumselu’s work deserved wider dissemination especially after his death so that his memory could be kept alive “as part of the institutional heritage of the University of Ibadan and our other academic institutions in Nigeria” (7). This compendium of representative works by Professor Ben Ebelenna Obumselu on African literature, *Obumselu on African Literature: The Intellectual Muse*, is offered as a token of the living treasury of the distinctive Obumselu heritage.

### Works Cited

- Diala, Isidore. “Ben Obumselu and the Dialectic of Cultures.” *The Responsible Critic: Essays on African Literature in Honor of Professor Ben Obumselu*. Ed. Isidore Diala. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2006. 271-93.
- . “Ben Obumselu: The Intellectual Muse.” *JALA: Journal of the African Literature Association* 9.2 (2015): 229-44.
- Ebeogu, Afam. “An Inscrutable Mask.” Facah 13-14.
- Facah, Reginald, ed. *Professor Ben Obumselu (1930-2017): The Renaissance Man*. Abuja: The Professor Ben Obumselu Funeral Committee, 2017.
- Irele, Abiola. “Benedict Obumselu: In Memoriam.” Facah 5-7.
- Izevbaye, Dan. “Obumselu, Early and Late: A Tribute.” Facah 4-5.
- Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o. “He Lives on.” Facah 3.
- Obumselu, Ben. “A Job for Intellectuals.” Speech Presented to the Ibadan University Alumni Association, Concorde Hotel, Owerri, October 1986.
- . “Ideals in English Literature.” *Concepts of the Ideal in English Literature*. Ed. Theo Vincent and A.E. Erubetina. Lagos: The Department of English, U of Lagos, Nigeria, 1990. 3-8.
- Osofisan, Femi. “Uncle Obumselu, Farewell.” Facah 10.
- Osundare, Niyi. “Farewell to the Responsible Critic.” Facah 8-9.
- Williams, Adebayo. “The Missing Scholar as Icon: Ben Obumselu and the Crisis of Intellectual Modernity in Africa.” *The Responsible Critic*:

*Essays on African Literature in Honor of Professor Ben Obumsele*. Ed.  
Isidore Diala. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2006. 1-14.  
Soyinka, Wole. "A Hovering Presence Recaptured." *Facah* 2.

## CHAPTER ONE\*

# THE BACKGROUND OF MODERN AFRICAN LITERATURE

I use the word 'background' in a very restricted sense, not to denote the whole body of human culture against which literary works are set, but only those imaginative ideas generated within a culture and shared between the artist and his audience, which operate as implicit elements in the structure of works of art.

We need no previous knowledge about South African life to understand and enjoy *Mine Boy*; the object of the novel is to give us knowledge of that life as an ordered imaginative experience. Our response to the intuitions recreated in the work of art may indeed suffer if extraneous information is permitted to get in the way of fresh participation in the novel. But we cannot possibly see *Mine Boy* for what it is unless we have been prepared by previous literature and other imaginative experience to respond to the pattern of spiritual growth which ends at the point when the hero's ordeal begins. I find no evidence that this kind of pattern is available in traditional African literature.

### *Shylock and the Tortoise*

There is an amusing literary anecdote told by the delightful Danish novelist, Baroness Karen Blixen, who settled in Kenya in the period between the World Wars. I recall the story because it illustrates how very intimately the meaning of a work of art depends on implicit patterns which lurk in, and make up, the literary imagination of a society.

Baroness Blixen recalls in the episode how her African servant, Farah Aden, responded to the story of *The Merchant of Venice*. Farah listened eagerly to the affairs of Antonio, Bassanio, and Shylock, and the financial deal, verging on illegality, which connected them.

---

\* First published in *Ibadan* 22 (1966): 46-59.

But when the story ended in defeat for Shylock, Farah was furious:

‘What?’ said he. ‘Did the Jew give up his claim? He should not have done that. The flesh was due to him, it was little enough for him to get for all that money.’

‘But what else could he do’, I asked, ‘when he must not take one drop of blood?’

‘Memsahib’, said Farrah, ‘he could have used a redhot knife. That brings out no blood.’

‘But’, I said, ‘he was not allowed to take either more or less than one pound of flesh.’

‘And who’, said Farah, ‘would have been frightened by that, exactly a Jew? He might have taken little bits at a time, with a small scale at hand to weigh it on, till he had got just one pound. Had the Jew no friends to give him advice?’

Farah, with the slightest change of mien and carriage, now took on a dangerous aspect, as if he were really in the court of Venice, putting heart into his friend and partner Shylock, in the face of the crowd of Antonio’s friends, and of the Duke of Venice himself. His eyes flickered up and down the figure of the merchant before him, with the breast bared to the knife.

‘Look, Memsahib’, he said, ‘He could have taken small bits, very small. He could have done that man lot of harm, even a long time before he had got that one pound of his flesh.’<sup>1</sup>

It is possible, I suppose, that in retelling Shylock’s story to Farah, the Baroness, accomplished raconteur though she was, may have failed to give sufficient weight to the poetic and moral elements in the play which should direct the sympathies of her listener. But I doubt whether any educated European is likely to fall into Farah’s error even after the barest recapitulation of the main episodes. After all, Shylock’s Jewishness joined to his love of usury and his cynical vengefulness is likely to elicit a predictable response, if not in proper earnest, then for the limited purposes of aesthetic participation. The audience whom Shakespeare addressed saw Shylock as a thorough villain—he is described as the devil nine times in the course of the play. And as a villain in a comedy his designs are bound to come to grief in the end. The comic form presupposes that the sympathies which the author rouses in his reader would be gratified; and even when these sympathies are put upon the rack by setbacks which the admirable characters suffer, this merely creates a tension which renders the gratification more intense when it comes.

Farah obviously had no conception of such a form. He must have imagined Shylock as the hero of an amoral tale of cunning, the kind of tale

told in East Africa about the exploits of the hare, in West Africa about the tortoise and the spider, the numerous yarns about resourceful rogues among the Hausas, tales about Uthlan-kayana among the Zulu, Akan stories of Ananse, Cameroonian stories about Wanyeto among the Nso, and so on. In such tales, the audience is not expected to take sides; the interest lies in the ingeniousness of the action itself. Moral partisanship is not allowed to interfere with the hearer's enjoyment of what, I believe, we should regard as pure form. (It is of course arguable, though I doubt whether it can be argued convincingly, that these stories are cautionary tales warning the young against gullibility.)

***'The form remains, the function never dies'***

Farah's difficulties were not caused by his ignorance of the social life of Venice, or by institutional or intellectual difference between the European and the African background. He erred because the literary forms which had shaped his imagination did not prepare him for, and may indeed have inhibited, the responses which *The Merchant of Venice* called for.

This is to say that the art of a society has its own continuity; and that this imaginative tradition is distinct, although it is not entirely separated from, the continuity of practical life and conceptual experience. No doubt Farah would have been prompt to recognize and deplore Shylock's callous miserliness, if the merchant's proceedings had seemed to him to have any bearing on practical life.

If we wish to insist that the literary works which our contemporaries are now writing should be described as 'African' with the object of characterizing some quality in the literary works themselves and not merely the racial origin of the authors, we ought, I think, to imply among other things that these works appeal to an imagination created in a large measure by the tradition of African literature. How subtly persistent such traditions are is illustrated by Farah. But we can illustrate it in another way by the instance of the epic recitations of the Ankole. These poems, described locally as *ebyevugo*, were made up traditionally by Ankole warriors to commemorate each his own heroism in battle. But with the establishment of British rule in East Africa, tribal wars ceased. And yet when the Ankole wished to celebrate any social event in which courage had been displayed, they persisted in using the background and vocabulary of military operations which had become conventions in the *ebyevugo*. Thus in 1949, when the Abassasam clan moved their cattle fairly peaceably from Nyabushozi to Buganda, Rumanywe composed an *ebyevugo* in which the movement of troops, the clashing of spears, and the

heaping up of corpses are described. His public expected this traditional décor, which was, besides, a valid and colourful metaphor for what had actually occurred in 1949. Moreover, the poet would have found, had he given thought to the matter, that apart from the expectations of his public there is another way in which previous Ankole poetry controlled his choices; that is, that he could attain poetic richness only if he kept close to the situations already marked out by previous poetry because it is only within those narrow limits that poetic forms have developed in Ankole life and language. He could, of course, introduce daring innovations into the existing tradition; but he could hardly hope to create a new form, a new poetic language and new experiences, all by himself. For although the tradition in which he worked was capable of growth, and even of complete transformation, every departure from the poetic past would have to be at the same time a continuation and a fructifying of that past.

Now the heroic song of which the *ebyevugo* is an East African example is one of the most common and persistent African literary genres. Notable lyrics in this kind occur in East, West, Central, and South Africa; it is superbly illustrated in the *oriki* of the Yorubas. In the modern life of the cities the heroic song persists in such popular lyrics as the Fante *Edusei Okamafo* or the praise songs in *King Kong*. At a more sophisticated level we encounter it in Senghor's *tagas*, 'To Governor Eboue' and 'Taga for Mbaye Dyob', or (to cite a less successful instance) in Alan Paton's 'Praise Song for Luthuli'. We need not assume that this form is uniquely African since it is really an epic fragment of which there are magnificent instances in the heroic literature of Ireland, Scandinavia, Greece and India.

### ***Obscurity, Ancient & Modern***

I must confess that the African heroic poem seems to me to fall short of the highest poetic merit. (On the other hand, the Bambara *story* about Kala N'dji Korobba and Kala N'dji Thieni is perhaps superior to any other epic narrative of comparable length that I am acquainted with.) The Ankole lyrics suffer from a rigid repetitive structure heavily clogged with nominal phrases, which gives the poet no scope for narrative or emotional depth.

I Who Give Courage to My Companions!  
 I Who Am Not Reluctant in Battle made a vow!  
 I Who Am Not Reluctant in Battle made a vow at the time of the  
 preventing of the elephants and with me was The Tamer of Recruits;  
 I Who Am Not Loved by The Foe was full of anger when the enemy  
 reported.  
 I Who Am Vigilant called up the men at speed together with The



Pain Bringer;  
 I found The Giver of Courage in secret conference.  
 I Whose Decisions Are Wise, at me they took their aim and with me  
 was Rwamisooro;  
 I Who Overthrow the Foe returned to the fight as they attacked us.

Ruhimbana!  
 Rutasiraaraa nkahiga!  
 Rutasiraaraa nkahigira omu ihinda-njojo na  
 Rwinikabigomba  
 Rutakundirwa nkabiihirwa nibabuura.  
 Rutahwekyera nkabahuruza akaata-manegye na Rukaranga  
 Rubahimbya nkashanga naabonana.  
 Rubogoka bakandomba empinju na Rwamisooro  
 Rukumbagaza nkatsyamuka nibatuteera.<sup>2</sup>

The Yoruba *orikis* are much superior to the Ankole recitations. They are witty, colourful, varied, and full of imaginative figuration. But the figures tend towards the riddle rather than metaphor, with the consequence that the *oriki* is unintelligible without extensive historical exegesis.

The wind blew at Akesan,  
 And only two fruits fell down  
 Ayika got to the tree and picked one.  
 But when Oloro came, there was no fruit left  
 Ayika split his fruit in two  
 And gave half to Dejutelegan, son of Sabi.  
 Ayika split his fruit in two.  
 Then each of them had half,  
 And Dedjutelegan, son of Sabi,  
 Had a whole fruit.

Efufu Akesan fe, koro 'san meji l' o bo  
 Ayika de 'bi osan, o he kan;  
 Ayika de 'bi osan o he kan  
 Oloro l' o de 'be ni o ri a rara.  
 Ayika pa ti 'e pere, o fun Dojut' elagan, omo Sabi.  
 T'awon mejeji d'ababo, ti Dojut' elegan, wa d'odidi.  
 (*Oriki*, Timi Lagunju)<sup>3</sup>

The poem does not disclose that the allusion is to a chieftaincy dispute. Even if we do not need to know this specifically, we would fail to enter fully into the feeling of the poem if Lagunju's cleverness in acquiring a

whole fruit remains a mysterious fact of social history instead of being realized as an experience in the poem!

You, a notorious confuser.  
 You confused everybody by your appearance.  
 Akanji you confuse all those  
 Who tie cloth round their waists, without carrying a child . . .

Damu-dabo, o damu alejo, o damu onile;  
 Akanji Ogun tii damu afunja ma pon 'mo.  
 (*Oriki*, Timi Adetoyese 'Laoye)

I doubt whether any reader would recognize the uniform of the Nigerian Police in the last line; and surely our response to Laoye's guile depends on our understanding that he outwitted even trained detectives.

They keep on saying:  
 Father take the black, and I give you the white;  
 When you take the blue, then I give you the black.

Nwon a ni baba, gba dudu, ki nfun o ni funfun,  
 O ba gb' alaba, ki nfun o ni yankun.  
 (*Oriki*, Timi Lagunju)

The language of the *Oriki* lacks that simplicity without which, to use Swift's words, no imaginative creation can attain greatness. Wrapped up in obscure parochialism, the poetry never emerges into the larger vital air of universal human experience. As in the *ebyevugo* there is no narrative or psychological truth to sustain the heroic portrait and give it a stable concreteness. And amid the fulsome praise which is served up so lavishly in the *oriki* there is almost always the jarring note which should have reminded us of Farah but for the fact that here, after all, we are in the context of real life.

Gbededile, you are a mountain,  
 You killed a child with a copper rod.

Gbededile, o f'oke se  
 O fi baba lu'mo pa.  
 (*Oriki*, Timi Mosunloye)

I suppose we have to admit that the epic tradition has very little compassion in it, except perhaps in Medieval Europe, and even there, not always.

Presumably, it can be claimed with some show of evidence that obscurity is a part of the tradition of African poetry. (Indeed, the poetic metaphor is generally a means both of the elucidation of meaning and of elegant disguise or concealment. Especially in cult poetry and versified riddles the object of figurative language seems to be to defeat the curiosity of the uninitiated. But if poetry of this kind pleases us, it does so mainly by gratifying our appetite for unraveling mysteries and detecting occult resemblances.)

There is a mode of Amharic verse called *semm' nna worq*—usually translated as “wax and gold”—which seems to me to typify this characteristic of African verse. In the *semm' nna worq* the gold of poetic meaning is embedded in waxen allegory:

Ye-bah'tawi lijj sifellig le'ullinna  
 Ye-Kistosn misht telant weshemenna  
 Qitel bitablew hono qeremenna<sup>4</sup>

The son of a hermit, high rank to display,  
 Made love with Christ's wife yesterday,  
 When she fed him with leaves he wasted away.

But this is only to say that

The hermit cherishes hunger as a man  
 cherishes his son; to imitate Christ  
 in holiness, the hermit has kept a fast,  
 but now that he has eaten leaves (which  
 are permitted during a fast) his hunger  
 has subsided.

This kind of poem can only be enjoyed within a closed society in which the non-denotative meanings which words gather round them from time to time acquire wide acceptance and intelligibility. The appeal is formal; the art that of decorative transformation. Many contemporary African poets seem to me to practice this art—notably Tchicaya U Tam'si, and, in some of his later poems, John Pepper Clark. When Wole Soyinka's *Abiku* asks that he be dug deep “into God's swollen foot”, we are being offered the fruits of a decorative fancy. However, no historical connection is postulated—a case might possibly be made for a cultural or psychological link—between the obscurity of modern African poetry and the indigenous tradition. The idiom of contemporary African verse has primarily European sources.

### *The Persistence of the Heroic Song*

Even when the weaknesses of some of the *orikis* are admitted, it remains true that the heroic song is one of the traditional forms which can develop in contemporary African writing. Although the literary mood of post-Independence Africa is liable to be satirical rather than heroic, commendatory and memorial verses will always have occasional relevance and value. Mr Christopher Okigbo's recent centenary poem for W.B. Yeats owes its inspiration to the tradition of the *oriki*; not only the general poetic attitude but also details of language derive from the praise songs of Ede. Where the traditional minstrel celebrates

The son of Olunloye, who converted  
A thick jungle into a habitable place;  
Who made impassable bush  
Into a broad trodden path . . .<sup>5</sup>

Yeats's power of giving resonant form to the inarticulate is expressed by Mr Okigbo in very similar words:

You who converted a jungle into marble palaces  
Who watered a dry valley and weeded its banks—  
For we have almost forgotten your praise names—  
You who transformed a desert into green pasture  
You who commanded high ways to pass through the forest—  
And will remain a mountain even in your sleep . . .

The *oriki* singer praises Olunloye's composure in the turmoil of war:

He slept soundly, unmindful of war.  
Fighting a battle in front,  
He marked out the next battle field behind him,  
So that the young generation might no longer  
Have to fight any wars.

Using almost identical words, Mr Okigbo pays tribute to Yeats for his manifold genius and for opening a new territory to poetry.

[You] who, fighting a battle in front  
Mapped out, with dust of combat in the eyes of you,  
The next battle field at the rear—  
That generations unborn might not taste steel.

The best example of the modern praise song is, of course, to be found in Senghor's poetry. Senghor has a more assured, more adaptable voice, and when he soars into hyperboles, his humour, his sense of proportion, does not desert him.

You who have never killed a rabbit,  
 who went to ground under the bombs of the great vultures,  
 Dyob! you who are not captain or airman  
 or trooper, not even in the baggage train  
 But a second class private  
 in the fourth Regiment of the Senegal Rifles  
 Dyob, I will celebrate your white honour.  
 The girls of Gandyol will make you a  
 triumphant arch with their curved arms,  
 arms of silver and red gold  
 Make you a path of glory  
 with their precious cloth from Rivers of the South.

The native inspiration also survives in the works of two Madagascan poets, Flavien Ranaivo and Jean-Joseph Rabearivelo, who have made extensive use of the indigenous poetic dialogue form called *hain teny*. Indeed there are instances of modern works written in the vernacular in which the traditional Muses are heard, notably in the poems of J.H. Nketia, J. Jolobe and Adeboye Babalola. Some of the works of the last two poets in the vernacular have been rendered into English.

### *The Continuity of Language*

This brings me to the question of the translation of vernacular poetry into European languages. This is perhaps the point to advance the second criterion which modern works written by Africans should satisfy if the serious use of the phrase "African literature" is to be justified.

I have suggested in the first place that there ought to be a continuity of literary forms. We can speak about European literature because of the endurance of such forms as comedy, detective fiction, the lyric, etc., which are not external conventions of art only but forms of imaginative experience. These forms have a continental provenance, and endure historically. But there is also a continuity of language. I do not mean that European literature is written in one language only, nor is English literature, taken by itself, restricted to one literary idiom alone. I mean that our warrant to think in terms of a continuing European tradition depends in part on the fact that the contemporary European artist has

always used his medium in a manner which referred to predecessors in his own and other European languages, that in the matter of literary language, the new derives from, subsumes and enriches, even when it seems to repudiate, the old.

An African literary work translated into the language of European literature almost immediately ceases to be African. It loses those native virtues—vernacular rhythms, the allusions that depend on auditory effects, sound texture etc.,—which make it rich and resonant in the original. It may attain a new opulence in translation, but this depends entirely on the resources of the new medium and the translator’s control of these resources.

Consider, for instance, the following lines taken from an English rendering of a Somali poem:

The British were broken, the noise of battle engulfed us;  
With fervour and faith the Dervishes attacked us.

Ingriis jab yoo wacha ku dhacay jae iyo baaruud e  
Wachay noo jajuunteen na waa jibasho diineed dheh.<sup>6</sup>

On consulting an Arabic scholar one discovers that the poetical effects which we respond to in these lines are not present in the original Arabic text—the iambic rhythm, the final cadences, the sensuousness of “broken” and “engulfed”, and the old English alliterative pattern evident in “British . . . battle”, and “fervour . . . faith . . . Dervishes”. The Arabic poet’s soldierly understatement, “in the midst of a quarrel” is inflated to “the noise of battle engulfed us”; the Arabic “with religious zeal” is expanded in search of an alliteration to read “with fervour and faith”; the choice of language being directed at every turn by the translator’s sense of what poetic richness in English required. On the other hand, the sound texture, the rhythmic value of syllables, and the verbal over-tones of the original Arabic text are not, could not have been, reproduced.

Wole Soyinka’s translation of the Yoruba rhapsody in praise of yam is delightful, and astonishingly accurate for a translation. But Soyinka takes the liberty of excising an inelegant passage and of making one or two interpolations of his own. Thus when we have considered the poetic values of the original and the occasional departures from the literal sense of the Yoruba, we are obliged to regard the translation as an English adaptation of the original Yoruba.

*Iyan O!*  
Slithers down to cool the chest,