UNIT 2 AFRICAN LITERATURE: CULTURE AND POST-NATIONALIST POLITICS IN KENYA AND NIGERIA

Structure

2.0 Objectives
2.1 Introduction
2.2 The Politics of Language
   2.2.1 Choosing Between English and Native Languages
   2.2.2 Swahili
   2.2.3 Kikuyu
2.3 Literature and Social Commitment
   2.3.1 Prose Writing in Kenya
   2.3.2 Theatre in Nigeria
2.4 The Writer in Africa
   2.4.1 Cultural and Political Assertion
   2.4.2 Censorship
2.5 Let Us Sum Up
2.6 Questions
2.7 Suggested Readings

2.0 OBJECTIVES

The primary objective of this unit is to outline how cultural production in Africa has been directly affected by the choice of a particular language (English, Swahili, Kikuyu, Igbo etc) as a means of education and how writers, particularly from Kenya and Nigeria, have responded to this choice. In the socially committed literature emerging from these nations the freedom of the writer has often sought to be curtailed. A brief survey of Yoruba theatre and Kenya prose writing is included in this unit with the aim of indicating how this literature both reflects and questions the structures established after independence, sometimes leading to the political persecution of the writers who dared to question. Please note that we will speak mostly of Kenya and Nigeria and not the rest of Africa as the texts prescribed in your course are Wole Soyinka’s A Dance of the Forests and Ngugi wa Thongo’s A Grain of Wheat.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In any given time and place cultural production can take many forms all of which—music, dance, painting, sculpture, oral traditions, literature—are reflective of the social and historical processes in a society. In this unit I shall focus on the role literature, and the language it is written in, plays in African countries like Kenya and Nigeria when political independence has already been achieved. Let me begin by giving a brief account of the political situation in these countries in the years when they were under colonial control and immediately after they won their freedom from colonial rule. You will read in detail about the historical and political background in Blocks 2 and 3. Although British control over Kenya was established by the Berlin Conference in 1885, European settlers poured in only from 1895 onwards. Kenya became a British colony in 1920. The war of independence known as the Mau Mau war lasted from 1952 to 1960 leading to negotiations, which resulted in independence in 1963. Immediately after independence English was the official language in Kenya.
In 1974 Swahili replaced English as the official language in the wake of a process which had begun in 1969, when a constitutional amendment had instituted the use of Swahili in the National Assembly.

Let us now turn to Nigeria. Parts of the country which form Nigeria today were Protectorates under the British towards the end of the 19th century. Nigeria gained independence in 1960 and became a federal republic in 1963. Post-independence Nigeria has had a succession of military governments. Between 1967 and 1970 the eastern regions seceded from the republic in what came to be called the Nigerian Civil War. There are almost 400 indigenous languages in Nigeria. English and the main language of each state are the official languages. I think it should be obvious to you that once nationalist struggles in these countries achieved their political objective—indeed—one of the most important post-nationalist concerns to emerge was the question of which language to adopt. I am suggesting that before this concern was taken up by writers like Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Wole Soyinka they had to conceptualise the role of the writer in postcolonial Kenya and Nigeria respectively. Both have dealt with this in talks which have been published and are now recognised as seminal theorisations. Soyinka's ‘The Writer in a Modern African State’ was an address delivered at the Afro-Scandinavian Writers' Conference, Stockholm, in 1960, shortly before the Nigerian Civil War. Ngugi's ‘The Writer and His Past’ and ‘The Writer in a Changing Society’ were in the form of a paper given to the Kenya Historical Association in 1968 and a speech delivered to Makerere extra-mural students at Tinja, Uganda, in 1969. Both Soyinka and Ngugi visualise the role of the writer in historical terms. The following quotations will help clarify the point I am making:

The African writer needs an urgent release from the fascination of the past. Of course, the past exists, the real African consciousness establishes this—the past exists now, this moment, it is co-existent in present awareness. It clarifies the present and explains the future, but it is not a fleshpot for escapist indulgence, and it is vitally dependent on the sensibility that recalls it.

(Soyinka, 1993: 18-19)

I believe the African novelist, the African writer . . . must be committed on the side of the majority (as indeed he was during the anti-colonial struggle) whose silent and violent clamour for change is rocking the continent. By diving into himself, deep into the collective unconscious of his people, he can seek the root, the trend in the revolutionary struggle. He has already done something in restoring the African character to his history, to his past. But in a capitalist society, the past has a romantic glamour: gazing at it . . . is often a means of escaping the present. It is only in a socialist context that a look at yesterday can be meaningful in illuminating today and tomorrow. Whatever his ideological persuasion, this is the African writer's task.

(Ngugi, 1972: 46)

Do you notice any similarities in the statements by Soyinka and Ngugi? Firstly, both agree that for the African writer to remain embedded in the past, whether it be a glorious vision of pre-colonial existence or the excesses of the colonial regime, is detrimental because it is “escapist.” If the writer takes recourse to the past it should be in terms meaningful and relevant to the present. Secondly, what Soyinka, calls “the sensibility” of the author and Ngugi labels “the ideological persuasion” is responsible for how meaningful a role writers can play in the historical processes of which they are a part. And finally, if such a role involves serving as a “conscience” of society (Soyinka) by examining it in a “socialist” manner (Ngugi), how pertinent is it to the social, political and economic problems faced by many countries in Africa? This is not to imply that Soyinka and Ngugi have similar political orientations. Indeed one can label these positions as the right and the left respectively. However, this does not take away from my main point that both have tried to assign a socially
Introduction

and culturally committed role to the African writer. As the next section will indicate, they have in very different ways, also addressed the question of language.

2.2 THE POLITICS OF LANGUAGE

2.2.1 Choosing Between English and Native Languages

It might surprise you to learn that unlike the situation in South Africa or Francophone Africa where languages like Afrikaans and French were, and in some cases continue to be, imposed on the native populations, the official policy in British Africa was to encourage instruction and education in indigenous languages. James Booth has pointed out that in the British colonies indigenous languages were employed in primary education, English becoming the exclusive language of instruction only at the secondary level. We shall look at this in the context of the promotion of literacy, modern education and creative writing in East and West Africa. The missionary societies taught reading and writing to those they wished to convert and procured vernacular translations of scriptural texts in the nineteenth century (Gerard, 1981: 173). In 1922 one such missionary society obtained financial support from the Phelps-Stokes fund for an enquiry into the educational systems in Africa. The enquiry commission proclaimed an “emphatic belief in the value of the Native languages” thus distancing themselves from the linguistic policies followed by the French and the Portuguese in their African territories. Given this report’s declaration that “The processes of education must begin with the characteristics of the people as they are and help them to evolve to the higher levels” and the British governmental memorandum in 1925 specifying that “the study of the educational use of the vernaculars is of primary importance” (Gerard, 1981: 183) it seems as if the British government was involved in the noble mission of encouraging native languages.

Let us first take the case of Kenya. It is an indication of the confused aims of the British colonists that although the colonial government declared in 1929 that English should be the official language of Kenya, Swahili continued to be the language of instruction in schools, possibly because English was considered too powerful a “political tool” to be given to Africans. Only the Kikuyu Independent Schools proved an exception to these rules since in 1935 they decided to introduce English as the medium of instruction at all levels. In a surprising change in policy the 1950s saw the introduction of English at the primary level by the government. Shortly after independence, the Ominde report commissioned by the Kenyatta government saw in English the possibility of promoting “national unity” (Sicherman, 1990: 28) leading to widespread protests against its imposition.

What is the situation like in Nigeria? As in the other British colonies here too the official policy was one of promotion of vernacular languages and literatures. Whereas this policy was successful in the case of Yoruba language and literature leading to the appearance of original writing, both prose and poetry, during the first half of the twentieth century, it did not work as well among the Ibos, the other major linguistic groups in Nigeria. One of the most moving accounts of the linguistic dilemma Ibo writers find themselves in is provided by Chinua Achebe:

I have always been fond of stories and intrigued by language—first Igbo and later English which I began to learn at about the age of eight. I don’t know for certain but I probably have spoken more words in Igbo than English but I have definitely written more words in English than Igbo. Which I think makes me perfectly bilingual.

(Achebe, 1973: 190)

An educational code had been promulgated in Nigeria in 1903, the first government secondary school was founded in 1911 and these combined with the influence of Henry Carr (1863-1965), the first Nigerian high official in educational matters, led to
the emergence of a literate class (Gerard, 1981: 247). That this class was fluently bilingual, as Achebe indicates with reference to himself, has been attributed to sociological and linguistic factors. Gerard suggests that the variety of Ibo dialects led to controversies over orthographies (spellings) and hence to the neglect of Ibo language and literature. Moreover, Ibo children, initially taught to read through the vernacular primary readers, were encouraged to read in English by their parents. English was seen as a means of acquiring positions of power in the governmental machinery (1981: 260). What Gerard fails to point out is something to which Achebe has obliquely drawn attention to in the essay ‘Named for Victoria, Queen of England’: if the missionaries used the vernacular languages for the spread of Christianity, they also introduced the native converts (like Achebe’s family) to English literature through translations of the Bible, Christian hymns and works like The Pilgrim’s Progress. This was also a factor in the Africans’ desire to acquire the English language. This was despite efforts like the Nigerian ‘National Policy in Education’ (1977) which outlined the government’s policy to encourage indigenous languages by advocating that each child should learn one of the three “major” languages apart from the mother tongue, the major languages recognised are: Hausa, Ibo and Yoruba.

Asserting the efficacy of one’s own languages against an imposed one as a marker of cultural identity is a common anti-colonial strategy in nationalist politics. The British African colonial policy by and large supported the use of indigenous languages. This does not mean that no power and prestige came to be attached to English, rather a premium was attached to acquiring an English education. It is this mindset which writers like Ngugi and Soyinka are reacting against in the period following the nationalist struggle (postcolonial Kenya and Africa) when the hegemony of the colonial language still reigns supreme.

2.2.2 Swahili

To counter this hegemony the adoption of a common pan-African language has been proposed. As early as 1959 the Second Conference of Negro Writers and Artists which took place at Rome called for the choice of one African language which “would not necessarily belong to a relative majority of peoples” and that “All Africans would learn this national language besides their own regional language and the European language of secondary education,” the latter would be optional. In addition “a team of linguists would be instructed to enrich this language . . . with the terminology necessary for the expression of modern philosophy, science and technology” (qtd. In Booth, 1981: 64). Recognising the importance of language as a constituent in “social programming” Soyinka has called for the adoption of a common African language which would do away with colonially imposed divisions. Read the following statement carefully and attempt to understand the relationship between culture and language:

... attention must be called again to the fact that our present national boundaries are colonial, that the cultural orientation is therefore still predominantly colonial, that the linguistic boundary is even more critical than the geographical because it is culturally divisive, but also that to replace such boundaries with several nation-linguistic boundaries is to enshrine for all time the principle of colonial fragmentation.

(Soyinka, 1993: 91)

To do away with these “nation-linguistic” boundaries Swahili is envisaged as an ideal choice because most of East and Central Africa already speaks and writes in this language. This will help in combating the cultural fragmentation which arose out of various African nations making a choice between European languages and the languages spoken within its boundaries. Having no common African languages to communicate in is perceived a serious handicap to African cultural (one might also add political and economic) solidarity.
Please do not assume that the project is not fraught with contradictions and difficulties in implementation. One of the most obvious of these is the enormous scholarship which would be involved in translating works from other African languages into Swahili for educational purposes. It is quite possible that the governments of many countries where Swahili is not used, such as Nigeria, would prove resistant to the idea for economic or cultural chauvinistic reasons. Countries like Kenya and Tanzania where Swahili is already an established language would be at an advantage and probably stand to gain more out of this proposal in cultural and linguistic terms. These are inequities which even the ideal of a pan-African cultural synthesis cannot wish away. Backed though it is by bodies like the Congress of Negro Writers and Artists, Union of Writers of the African Peoples, the All-Africa Teachers Union and authorities like Cheik Anta Diop and Wole Soyinka, the problems already outlined make its implementation difficult, if not impossible. No wonder then the adoption of Swahili as an African *lingua franca* has not materialised.

2.2.3 Kikuyu

The most ardent advocate of Kikuyu language and literature, Ngugi wa Thiong'o has often been criticized for his neglect of Swahili which is the national language of Kenya. Ngugi's championing of oral literature in Kikuyu is seen as a deliberate indifference to Swahili literature. Sicherman observes that objectively speaking Swahili literature both written and oral, in Kenya as well as in Tanzania, is by far the most dynamic branch of East African literature alive today. Hence Ngugi's neglect of the teaching of Swahili literature in the Department of Literature at Nairobi has been criticised (1990: 35). We will see whether this charge has any validity. In 1968 Ngugi and two of his colleagues called for the abolition of the English Department at the University of Nairobi. The new organising principle they proposed involved a study of Kenyan and East African literature, African literature, third world literature and literature from the rest of the world at what was named the Literature Department at the University of Nairobi (Ngugi, 1986: 94-5). In continuation with the same "Nairobi Literature Debate" the Dept. of Literature co-organised a conference on 'The Teaching of African Literature Kenyan Schools' at which one of the strongest recommendations made was: "A clear programme of Swahili literature be introduced and be made compulsory in schools...Swahili has a major and an increasing role to play in Kenya and needs to be given greater emphasis that it has hitherto been accorded" (Ngugi, 1986: 99). Ngugi's endorsement of this report indicates that the focus on his tribal language Kikuyu in his fictional and theoretical works does not necessarily imply a bias against Swahili which is the official language of Kenya.

I will now focus on Ngugi's views on literature as a means of cultural expression with reference to his native language, Kikuyu. In 1963, Obi Wali published a controversial article entitled 'The Dead End of African Literature' which Ngugi read prior to its publication in *Transition*. Wali's argument "that any true African literature must be written in African languages" and that "it is better for an African writer to think and feel in his own language" had a profound influence on Ngugi's own formulations on the issue (Sicherman, 1990: 28). Literature written in colonial languages is not African literature since it involves a "dissociation, divorce, or alienation from the immediate environment," an idea which becomes clearer when the colonial language is seen as "a carrier of culture" (Ngugi, 1986: 17). This is how he correlates the two:

Language as communication and culture are...products of each other. Communication creates culture: culture is a means of communication. Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world. How people perceive themselves affects how they look at their culture, at their politics and at the social production of wealth, at their entire relationship to nature and to other beings. Language is
thus inseparable from ourselves as a community of human beings with a specific form and character, a specific history, a specific relationship to the world.

(Ngugi, 1986: 15-16)

Given this basic relationship between language and culture it is no wonder that Ngugi’s choice of writing in his mother tongue Kikuyu is intended as a means of giving expression to the daily rhythms, social structures and struggles of the Kenyan people. He publicly rejected the English language in favour of Kikuyu in 1977 but had written and produced plays in Kikuyu since 1976. His plays were seen as subversive by the Kenyan government. Not only were they banned, they also led to Ngugi being put in prison for the year 1978. Despite political repercussions the use of Kikuyu for creative purposes has had a significant impact in Kenya. As Ngugi explains, his novel The Devil on the Cross written in Kikuyu was “received into the age old tradition of storytelling around the fireside” when groups of workers, families would gather together for readings from it (1986: 83). This marked the success of his agenda of reaching out to people in a language and idiom familiar to them, making literature not the elitist pursuit it was when it was written in the colonial language but socially relevant to the masses.

Writing in Kikuyu has not been an easy task for Ngugi. The language did not possess a significant tradition of novel or fiction writing. The existing Kikuyu orthography proved unsatisfactory for conveying certain sounds and tonal variations (Ngugi, 1986: 74-5). Despite these linguistic constraints and political persecution Ngugi’s efforts at creating a significant body of literature in his native language are commendable. Hence it is all the more ironical that living in exile for over a decade now Ngugi has reverted back to using English, the colonial language he once rejected so vehemently.

2.3 LITERATURE AND SOCIAL COMMITMENT

2.3.1 Prose Writing in Kenya

Ngugi’s writings are a case in point for the oft-made claim that among the various ethnic groups in Kenya, the Kikuyu who experienced the severest forms of racial, political and economic tensions, were “the most advanced tribe, with more educated members and a higher degree of political consciousness” (Hatch qtd. in Gerard, 1981: 309). Among those who sought to create a tradition of novel or fiction writing in the Kikuyu language, Ngugi has singled out Gakaara wa Wanjau who established a journal in the language. Having been imprisoned for writing in the language of the masses he kept a diary as a record for the years he spent in prison (1952-1962) which was later published as a book (Ngugi, 1986: 24, 74). That this writer’s career has had a profound influence on Ngugi’s should be apparent: like him Ngugi writes, or at least wrote, in Kikuyu besides having maintained a record of the one year he spent in a maximum security prison published as Detained: A Writer’s Prison Diary. However, Ngugi’s educational training and early career also illustrate the fact that the Kikuyu were the first to recognize the advantage to be gained by adopting English. As early as 1938 Jomo Kenyatta’s Facing Mount Kenya was the first book written by a Kikuyu to attract worldwide attention (Gerard, 1981: 309).

The most significant body of Kenyan prose writing in English has come from writers whose native language is Kikuyu. Many of the works written in the nineteen sixties and seventies deal with the Mau Mau movement and its aftermath. I will discuss a few of these novels of ‘freedom’ briefly. Some of these are Ngugi’s Weep not, Child (1964), A Grain of Wheat (1967), Charity Waciuma’s Daughter of Mumbi (1969), John Karoki’s The Land is Ours (1970), Godwin Wachira’s Ordeal in the Forest (1968) and Meja Mwangi’s Carcase for Hounds (1974) and Taste of Death (1975). Critical opinion is divided on the depiction of this important event in Kenya’s history.
On the one hand some of the fictional reconstructions, whose names have been listed, depict rural families caught in the crossfire between the Mau Mau guerilla forest fighters and the home guards or security forces who sought to control the "violence" perpetrated by the former. On the other they find it hard to reconcile themselves to the brutal excesses of the Mau Mau guerillas. David Maughan-Brown in a discussion of four novels dealing with this event forwards the opinion that Mwangi, Mangwa and Wachira represent it "in just as negatively equivocal a manner as the politicians and businessmen whose political and commercial interests were most obviously served by the tactic of retrospective criminalisation of the movement" (1985: 206).

Prose writing in Kenya has also explored other themes. Charles Mangua and David Maillu have depicted the alienation of the educated elite, their growing disillusionment, the generation gap between parents and their children in works which have been discredited as non-serious and lacking in value because of the supposedly obscene language used. Women novelists and short story writers like Charity Waciuma and Grace Ogot voice their concern for the place of women in African society. Waciuma's autobiographical work *Daughter of Mumbi* presents events in Kenya immediately after independence through the consciousness of a young village girl who grows up to be a teacher. In her stories Ogot, who has played an active part in Kenyan politics, also presents simple village characters who, once they become politically informed, try to remedy the ills plaguing post-independence Kenya. Much of the recent Kenyan writing has moved beyond nationalist concerns to other social, political and economic issues which need to be voiced and redressed. This brief account of prose writing in Kenya has attempted to indicate this shift.

### 2.3.2 Theatre in Nigeria

Theatre in Nigeria developed out of a combination of traditional rituals involving masquerades, chants, music, dancing and themes and ideas derived from the Bible under the influence of the missionaries. As Ulli Beier has detailed in an exhaustive essay on Yoruba theatre which "began to perform Biblical stories in and outside the church" with music based on Yoruba hymns. These plays, first performed in the nineteen thirties, were meant for the instruction of members belonging to that particular faction of the Church as well as fund-raising devices (1967: 245). Since both traditional and alien influences helped in initiating theatrical activity in Nigeria, in this section I shall talk about theatre in Nigerian languages as well as in English.

A coming together of both influences is seen in the plays of Hubert Ogunde who is credited with the initiation of professional theatre in Yoruba (Beier) and the secularisation of Yoruba drama (Gerard, 1981). Yoruba language theatre has the advantage of attracting large audiences and is therefore a commercially profitable proposition. Moreover Ogunde's plays with their improvised dialogues, music based on hymn tunes but using traditional instruments and political satire were very popular in Nigeria and outside it. He first started performing in the 1940s. Very early on in his career his commitment to social causes was revealed in a vernacular play entitled *Strike and Hunger* (1945), dramatizing the country-side strike which broke out in 1945. The titles of some of his other plays *Let the Yoruba Think* and *Truth is Bitter* hint at their being vehicles for social and political commentary. Ogunde's theatrical development has been discussed in four neat phases by Michael Etherton: the phase of cultural nationalism from 1944-1950; consolidation of the company through independence 1954-64; post-independence party politics 1964-66; the company since the civil war 1972 to the present day. Etherton is of the opinion that Ogunde does not seem to have responded to the political organisation in various regions of Nigeria which was taking place in the 1950s (1982: 46). Despite this and other kinds of criticism levelled against the sensationalism and spectacle of Ogunde's plays there is no denying that his travelling theatre was instrumental in creating a tradition of Yoruba drama which others built on. One of these was Ogunde's colleague E.K. Ogunmola who removed the music hall element from Ogunde's plays and substituted it by serious acting to develop Yoruba 'Opera' as a "serious theatre form" (Beier,
Ogunmola is famous for his dramatic rendition of Amos Tutuola's folkloric quest-narrative The Palm Wine Drinkard. Some of his plays like Conscience and Love of Money are social satires aimed at exposing the materialism and hypocrisy rampant in Nigerian society. Another important Yoruba playwright is Duro Ladipo who draws on Yoruba myths, poetry, music for his plays. He has used Samuel Johnson History of the Yorubas (1921) as source material for the legends he dramatises in The King Did Not Hang and The King is Dead. The former gained international acclaim when it was performed at the Berlin Theatre and Music Festival in 1964 and at the Commonwealth Festival in Britain in 1965. One of Ladipo’s favourite themes is the clash of cultures, sometimes explored through myths, legends and at other times through folklore.

Yoruba language theatre in Nigeria is complemented by English-language theatre. Soyinka’s plays for instance also explore the contact and clash between tradition and modernity through myths, legends and folklore. In fact Soyinka’s dramatic theory derives from this aspect of Yoruba culture. The traditional content of Soyinka’s plays has often been a subject of discussion. It has been suggested that as far as the songs in his plays are concerned, they are “pseudo-traditional,” many are taken from “popular disc records of modern commercial musicians who work in the traditional mode” (Ogumba, 1972: 5). Perhaps the strength of Soyinka’s dramaturgy lies in using tradition or pseudo-tradition to comment on the contemporary Nigerian situation. A case in point is A Dance of the Forests, performed in October 1960, the month in which Nigeria achieved Independence, which uses Yoruba myths to indicate the destiny to be attained by post-Independence Nigeria. Soyinka has explored a variety of dramatic styles in his oeuvre: farce, tragedy and romantic mythology being a few of these (Esslin, 1967: 260). Nigeria’s other major English-language playwright is J.P. Clark. He too has transmuted legends into plays, the most famous of these being Ozidi (1966). This play derives from the traditional Ijo saga or epic, centred on Orua in the Delta region of Nigeria (Etherton, 1982: 68). His other plays The Raft, The Masquerade and The Song of the Goat published together in 1964 are all realistic tragedies. Both Soyinka and Clark use a highly stylized poetic idiom but to different purposes. Clark’s characters are generalized in part due to what Esslin has labelled “the stark, timeless and almost placeless simplicity of the language” whereas Soyinka’s use of verse reinforces his plays’ setting in the present, “a very recognizable independent Nigeria with its corrupting town life set against superstition and backwardness in the countryside” (Esslin, 1967: 260). Reading through this synoptic survey I hope it is apparent to you how English and local language (specifically Yoruba) theatre in Nigeria draws upon local traditions to reflect, discuss and critique the social and political ills plaguing contemporary Nigeria to emerge as a theatre of commitment.

### 2.4 THE WRITER IN AFRICA

#### 2.4.1 Cultural and Political Assertion

Assertions of cultural and political nationalism are usually viewed as a part of the anti-colonial struggles of the colonized. Only two examples of such assertions will be given in this section: that of Negritude which posits an African world union based on shared racial, cultural and spiritual essences and that of the ‘African Personality’ which is pan-Africanist in its orientation.

The Negritude movement started by intellectuals from the French colonies is seen as a reaction against the French colonial policy of assimilation. According to Frantz Fanon the assimilationist phase constitutes the first stage of cultural evolution. The second stage is the “cultural nationalist” phase in which the native intellectual remembers an “authentic identity” and “kicks against” attempts at assimilation (Amuta, 1989: 158-59). So Negritude (the word was coined by Aimé Cesaire) represents the second phase in Fanon’s schema. Its key ideas are a repudiation of
"certain intrinsic values of European civilization" such as its machine technology, materialism, contractual manner of social relationships, adherence to scientific planning in every detail. In contrast it “extols the African’s close attachment to the soil and to nature, the warmth of his humanity expressed in relationships which are purely personal and zest for a life which is not circumscribed by much planning” (Obiechina, 1967: 27). This view of an unsullied African cultural and social essence has, on the one hand, been deemed essential to a recovery of African dignity (Achebe) and on the other, been repudiated as replicating the stereotypes of the instinctual African versus the rational Westerner established by the colonisers (Soyinka). Soyinka’s is the most trenchant critique which has been launched against the Negritudists. Responding to statements like “Emotion is completely Negro as reason is Greek” Soyinka says that Negritude “accepted one of the most common blasphemies of racism, that the black man has nothing between his ears, and proceeded to subvert the power of poetry to glorify this fabricated justification of European cultural domination” (qtd. In Booth, 1981: 9). This denial of reason to Africans is, in Soyinka’s view, playing into the hands of Europeans who used this logic to justify colonisation. Valid though Soyinka’s argument is, it is probably necessary to see Negritude as an ‘essential’ step in the reconstitution of a racial and cultural identity.

Kwame Nkrumah’s philosophy of ‘the African Personality’ is often dismissed on the same grounds as the Negritude movement. What I now want to emphasise is that both Nkrumah’s nationalist and pan-African vision represent what Fanon has called the “nationalist” or “fighting” phase in which the native man of culture “after having tried to lose himself in the people, will on the contrary shake the people’ (Fanon qtd. In Armuta, 1989: 159). Kwame Appiah has observed that Nkrumah’s nationalist enthusiasm were largely pan-Africanist and hence it needn’t come as a surprise that he was central to the foundation of the Organisation of African Unity, represented Africa in the Non-Aligned Movement and at the UN and was consistent in his preoccupation with the complete liberation of Africa from colonial rule (1992: 262-63). Look at this extract from Nkrumah’s work I Speak of Freedom (1961) and mark the use of cultural stereotypes and political prophecy:

I believe strongly and sincerely that with the deep-rooted wisdom and dignity, the innate respect for human lives, the intense humanity that is our heritage, the African race, united under one federal government, will emerge not as just another world bloc to flaunt its wealth and strength, but as a Great Power whose greatness is indestructible because it is built not on fear, envy and suspicion, nor won at the expense of others, but founded on hope, trust, friendship and directed to the good of all mankind.


Notice the use of adjectives like “deep-rooted wisdom and dignity,” “innate respect,” “intense humanity” which are said to characterise “the African race.” There is an easy slippage from racial characteristics to political rhetoric when it is said that this race will be united under “one federal government,” a form of pan-African unity, which Nkrumah envisaged. In an attempt to define both the ‘African Personality’ and pan-Africanism, some indication of which is provided in the passage quoted above, Obiechina has forwarded the view that whereas the latter “is an essentially political movement aimed at continental co-operation between independent African states,” the former “is a psycho-ethnological concept resembling Negritude but differing from it because it applies to the African continent alone” (1968: 29).

These instances of cultural and political self-definition need to be viewed as arising out of the exigencies of colonial rule and neocolonial domination over African countries. Both the Negritudists from French colonial Africa and the Caribbean and Nkrumah from Ghana voice versions of cultural and political autonomy. If these inadvertently echo racist vocabulary it is probably because, in Achebe’s ringing words, “it is in the nature of things that we may need to counter racism with... an
anti-racist racism, to announce not just that we are as good as the next man but that we are much better” (qtd. in Booth, 191: 11).

2.4.2 Censorship

The important role fulfilled by writers in their engagement with social, cultural and political concerns has not gone unchallenged in Africa. Many have had to pay a heavy personal price for their activist creativity in the form of bans on their work, imprisonment and exile. One of the earliest instances is the ban imposed by the colonial authorities on Ogunde’s play Strike and Hunger in 1945. In the 1960s Ogunde produced plays commenting on political events in Western Nigeria. As a result his company was banned for performing in the region for about three years. Ladipo, another Yoruba playwright, was caught in the midst of a controversy about the use of drums in the church, leading him to perform his religious compositions outside the church (Gerard, 1981: 256). Soyinka continues the tradition of Nigerian playwrights getting into trouble with the authorities. This is largely due to his deliberately provocative activities such as supposedly forcing his way into the Ibadan Radio Station in 1965 to substitute a tape announcing an Action Group election victory in place of the official tape announcing a rigged victory or covering his car with placards accusing the police of brutality (Booth, 1981; 119-20). An account of his imprisonment is grandiosely titled The Man Died: Prison Notes of Wole Soyinka (1972). Whether through activism in literature or through direct involvement in political events, Nigerian authors have aroused the ire of authorities leading to consequences like the ones detailed.

The crackdown on artistic freedom has taken more severe forms in the East African countries Kenya and Uganda. The Ugandan poet Okot p’ Bitek’s best known work Song of Lawino was at first rejected by publishers because of its explicitness in sexual matters. Okot was later dismissed from his post as Director of the Uganda Cultural Centre because of his outspokenness in political matters. Living in exile in Nigeria he found employment at the University of Nairobi (Gerard, 1981: 305). No writer illustrates the case for political persecution better than Ngugi wa Thiong’o who got into trouble with the authorities over the performance of his play I Will Marry When I Want (1977) in Kikuyu. Deemed as politically subversive its license was revoked after a few performances and Ngugi was put under detention on 31st December 1977. The official explanation was that he was “being held under the Public Security Act for possessing 18 banned books” (Sicherman, 1990: 11). He wrote Devil on the Cross while in prison and later published an account of his imprisonment in Detained: A Writer’s Prison Diary. In 1982 while Ngugi was in London he received news of his impending arrest in Nairobi and decided to remain in exile. Over the years he has been accused of leading a clandestine opposition political group in Kenya, his books have been suppressed by the government and people arrested for reading them out aloud (Sicherman, 1990: 16-17).

The careers of these African writers illustrate the conjunction between literature and society which they have been attempting in their work. That this conjunction often takes the form of state sponsored repression of the right to free expression only serves to indicate that many African writers get too close to reality for comfort.

2.5 LET US SUM UP

I began this unit by discussing the close relationship between culture and language. There are diverse cultures and many languages reflective and constitutive of those cultures in Africa: Yoruba and Kikuyu being only two of them. That these have received considerable attention in the recent past is, in no small measure, owing to their cause being championed by Soyinka and Ngugi. Both are a part of the tradition of socially committed writing which, despite attempts to curb it, has exerted a
profound influence in the nationalist and post-nationalist phases of various African countries. A sign of the vitality of such a tradition is the exchange of ideas among African writers in the form of endorsement or critique. Thus Soyinka critiques the Negritudists, Achebe defends them and their influence on Nkrumah is more than obvious. The role of the writer in Africa is not, or rather cannot be, restricted to that of a social commentator. As Ngugi has shown through his grassroots theatrical activities it is necessary to involve the masses if literature and culture are to serve as effective tools of resistance. If this resistance involves taking the risk of persecution, African literary history illustrates that writers consider this a small price to pay.

2.6 QUESTIONS

1. How is language reflective of culture? Cite the views of two African writers on this issue.

2. List the advantages and disadvantages attendant in the use of Swahili as a pan-African language.

3. Discuss the intersection of literature and politics with reference to prose writing in Kenya and theatre in Nigeria.

2.7 SUGGESTED READINGS


