UNIT 22: LITERATURE AND SOCIETY IN NIGERIA

22.0 OBJECTIVES

The twin objectives of this unit are to survey, briefly, the history and social organisation in Nigeria through the ages as also to look at the tradition of writing in Nigeria including the tradition of writing novels. This will help us understand not only the Ibo society in Nigeria about which Chinua Achebe writes in his novels, including Things Fall Apart but will also help us know more about other ethnic groups in Nigeria and the contribution these groups have made to the development of Nigerian literary writings, particularly the novel written in English.

22.1 INTRODUCTION

The Federal Republic of Nigeria lies in the Gulf of Guinea on the West Coast of Africa, that is to say on the Atlantic coast. In terms of population, Nigeria is the fourth largest African country with the Hausa, the Fulani, the Yoruba and the Ibo as its principal ethnic groups.

Surrounded by two other famous seats of ancient civilisations, namely Ghana and Mali, Nigeria has been one of the oldest seats of human habitation where human organisation reached significant levels of social and technical development. Excavations at the Nok village in the Province of Zaria have shown that the Nigerians made good pottery and used baked clay for making figures of humans and animals. They also worked in iron and bronze and the world famous 'The Bronzes' and 'Benin Heads' are Nigeria's gift to the sculptural world of today.

Since most of the Nigerian languages which number about three hundred were without a developed script, not much is known about the literary achievements of this ancient seat of civilisation. However, a fair guess about its developed state can be made from the folklore, sayings and proverbs as also the customs and rituals which survive even today.

Besides the various African languages, Nigeria today has two more languages in its linguistic profile. These are English which is its official language and pidgin, which is a fascinating blend of English and some of the African languages.
22.2 NIGERIA: SOCIO-POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT THROUGH THE AGES

22.2.1 North-West: The Hausa people
The Northern part of Nigeria is very different from the south and the east and this difference is not due to geography and climatic conditions alone. The people living in the northern parts of Nigeria were called the Hausa people and were primarily farmers. They were conquered by the Berber people from further north around the eighth century A.D. As we have stated in the Unit 20, it was around this time that people from the Middle East and northern Africa came into the continent, primarily with the aim of spreading Islam. Another group of Berbers came to the area a little later and completed the task of conquering the remaining states of northern Nigeria. Around A.D. 1000, these Berbers even ventured to the south which is the land of the Yorubas and conquered part of it as well. However, they could impose on the Yoruba people neither their language nor their religion.

In the early parts of nineteenth century, the Hausa people in the north were overrun by the Fulani who waged a holy war against them in the name of a purer and truer Islam under the leadership of Usman dan Fodio. The Fulani divided the area into small states called 'emirates' and ruled over them through emirs. These emirs also conquered Ilorin in the south and began to trade in slaves towards the end of the nineteenth century, thereby providing the British who were present on the west coast with an excuse to intervene. By 1903, the northern part of Nigeria had been brought under the British protectorate and was ruled through the emirs without any interference in the social, cultural, religious and educational affairs of the Hausa people.

22.2.2 South-West: The Yorubas
The southern part of Nigeria was inhabited by the Yoruba people who were primarily farmers by profession and pagan in terms of religion. As stated above, the Berbers had conquered parts of their territory around the year 1000 A.D. but they had failed to impose their religion or their language on the Yoruba people. Soon the Fulani, who had overrun the north also came down south and conquered Ilorin. They joined in the slave-trade that had been operating from the west coast by capturing the Yoruba and selling them to the Europeans. Once again the British intervened and by 1861, the island state of Lagos had been annexed. Instead of trading in slaves, they introduced trading in palm oil. They, however, were scared of malaria which was rampant in the region and had therefore no intention of setting up a permanent political structure. However, the presence of the French and the Dutch in the vicinity forced them to conclude treaties with many local chiefs and the Yoruba territory too had been annexed. The missionaries followed suit and soon the "pagan" Yoruba had been converted into Christianity in very large numbers.

22.2.3 South East: The Ibo people
The east which was inhabited by the Ibo people has had a less advanced socio-political organisation than the Hausa and the Yoruba. Lesser material progress could be a possible reason for this. In modern political jargon, Ibo socio-political organisation could be described as comprising 'village democracies' with the clan as the basic unit. Like the Yoruba, the Ibos too were pagan in their religious beliefs. We can learn more about the socio-cultural life of the Ibo people from our reading of Things Fall Apart which is a novel based on the life of Ibo.

22.2.4 Nigeria: Independence and After
As stated in Unit 20, the end of the Second World War saw the rise of nationalism in various parts of Africa, including in Nigeria, primarily due to increased economic hardships faced by the people in European colonies. Unemployment was rampant and inflation runaway. Three major political parties emerged on the political scene in Nigeria. These were the National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) backed by the Ibo people and led by the Hausa and the Fulani people and led by Abubaker Tafawa Balewa and the Action Group backed by the Yoruba and led by Obafemi Awolowo.
Internal autonomy was granted to the Eastern and Western Regions in 1957 and to the Northern Region in 1959. A year later, that is on October 1, 1960, Nigeria attained independence and Abubaker Tafawa Balewa became its first Prime Minister heading a coalition government. However, internal struggle started soon after for the control of power, since there were not only various ethnic groups but also there was a big difference between the developed south and the underdeveloped north.

In 1966, the army intervened. Tafawa Balewa was killed and the power passed into the hands of the army. Simultaneously, large scale killings of Ibo people at the hands of the Hausa people started, leading to the declaration of independence by the Ibo people calling their eastern land Biafra. The civil war which ended only in 1970 claimed more than 150,000 lives. The Biafran cause was lost. Nigerian economy boomed with the soaring oil prices in the seventies and the early eighties but slumped later. Today Nigeria is back in the hands of the armed forces.

22.3 EARLY NIGERIAN WRITINGS

22.3.1 The transformation - from oral to written
As has been stated in Unit 21 and also elsewhere, literary efforts in various Nigerian languages were oral because the languages lacked scripts or systems for writing them down. The tradition of written literature begins in the middle of the nineteenth century with the arrival of the missionaries who introduced the British system of education which laid sufficient emphasis on learning with the help of books. The printing press was introduced and translations of the Bible, other religious books as well as some creative literature were introduced. Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress was a favourite prescribed text. The only exception to this paradigm was the northern region where Arabic had been introduced and some written literature in it had existed since the fourteenth century. The introduction of the British education system, Christianity, the market economy together with the development of towns led to the complete disruption of the homogeneous socio-cultural lives of Africans which favoured oral forms of literary compositions-stories, plays and poems.

22.3.2 Early writings in Yoruba
Isaac Thomas’s The Autobiography of Segilola: The Lady with the Delicate Eye-Balls was perhaps the first attempt at imaginative writing in Yoruba. It was written in the form of letters written by a prostitute to the editor of a newspaper, describing her plight in Lagos. Later, the book was to inspire Cyprian Ekwensi to write about metropolitian life, particularly of Lagos, in his novels of which Jagua Nana is the most well-known. Ekwensi writes in English.

D.D. Fagunwa is the most important Yoruba writer whose blend of reality and fantasy in The Brave Hunter in the Forest of the Four Hundred Gods and The Forests of Oldumare are adventure stories with heavy doses of morality. Fagunwa has inspired a number of writers to follow his style of mixing reality with fantasy. Among the better known of such writers is Amos Tutuola whose novel The Palm Wine Drinkard has already been referred to in Unit 21. Didacticism is a distinctive feature of Fagunwa’s writings.

22.3.3. Written literature in Hausa
As stated in some parts of this very Unit, the Arabs had come to the land of the Hausa people in northern Nigeria around the eighth century. By the fourteenth century, Arabic had established itself in the region and learned written texts had appeared on government and religion. By the seventeenth century early attempts at creating literature in Arabic were made and these were in the form of praise poems. Dan Marina, Muhammad b. Muhammad and Usuman Dan Fodio were pioneers in this respect. Among the prose writers in Hausa, who came much later, are Muhammad Bello and Abubaker Bello. The first Prime Minister of Nigeria Abubaker Tafawa Balewa was also a prominent Hausa novelist.
22.3.4 Ibo literature

In 1935, Pita Nwana’s short novelette *Omenuko* was published after it had won a prize in a literary competition and it became the first Ibo literary effort in writing. The story of a slavetrader who after various adventures and misfortunes finally repents for his sins, it is full of didacticism. The book was to inspire Chinua Achebe to write about the life of the Ibo people in English.

L.B. Gam’s adventure story *Odunoda’s Travels* is modelled on *Gulliver’s Travels* and has allegorical implications. D.N. Achara’s *Afa Bingo* is an allegory too.

22.4 NIGERIAN NOVEL IN ENGLISH

The novel, as stated in Unit 21, is a form alien to Africa. It is a literary import from Europe. However, being a form which is a kind of hold-all, the novel is easily adaptable and thus the Africans have adopted it to serve their artistic needs. Since the oral story was the dominant form of literary expression in Africa, a number of Nigerian novelists have very skillfully made use of that form while writing novels. Take the case of D.D. Fagunwa and Amos Tutuola. Both of them tied together, very skillfully, a number of short narratives to create a longer tale. In fact, most Nigerian novelists in English, like their counterparts writing in other African regions, have continued to write short stories along with novels. The names of Chinua Achebe, Cyprian Ekwensi and Flora Nwapa spring to one’s mind immediately.

22.4.1 Amos Tutuola

Amos Tutuola, as we have stated earlier, is the first major Nigerian novelist in English whose *The Palm-wine Drinker* published in 1952 sent European critics into raptures. While they praised it sky-high for its novel use of English, particularly his deliberate ignoring of the regular structure of the language, Tutuola’s fellow Nigerian writers were embarrassed by his ‘incorrect’ use of English.

However, Tutuola’s novel which is the story of the adventures of a palm-wine addict in search of his dead palm-wine tapper, is a serious attempt to fuse folklore with modern life and Tutuola succeeds fully in doing so. In fact, therein lies the intrinsic value and strength of his book and not in his ‘new’ use of English as had been made out by his European critics. Tutuola repeated his success in *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts, Simbi and the Sayso of the Dark Jungle, The Brave African Huntress, and Feather Woman of the Jungle*.

22.4.2 Cyprian Ekwensi

Cyprian Ekwensi began as a writer of cheap, love stories meant primarily for titillating the young. *When Love Whispers* belongs to this phase. Ekwensi soon graduated to the realm of serious novelists and has specialised in exposing the seamy side of city life. *People of the City and Jagua Nana, The Drummer Boy and An African Night’s Entertainment* all deal with the theme of city life.

22.4.3 T.M. Aluko

T.M. Aluko, unlike Chinua Achebe whose work we shall not discuss in this Unit but in the next Unit, believes in debunking the tradition. He believes that all was not well with many traditional aspects of Nigerian life. *One Man, One Wife and One Man, One Matchet* are his well-known novels. To Aluko: nothing is sacrosanct, nothing above criticism and in a typical style of African humour, Aluko satirises the whole gamut of African traditions and beliefs. *Kinsmen and Foremen and Chief the Honourable Minister* are his other novels.

22.4.4 Buchi Emecheta and Flora Nwapa

Buchi Emecheta and Flora Nwapa are among a host of women writers who have enriched the Nigerian novel in English by highlighting the problems of women both in pre-
independence and post-independence Nigeria. They have also provided the necessary women's perspective to various aspects of Nigerian social, political and cultural life. While *Destination Biafra*, *Joys of Motherhood*, *Bride Price* and *Second Class Citizen* are well-known works of Buchi Emecheta who lives in London and publishes from there. *Efuru*, *Idu* and *One is enough* are well-known novels by Flora Nwapa.

### 22.4.5 John Munyone and others

John Munyone's *Only Son* and *Obi* and Nkem Nwanko’s *Danda* are powerful statements about the clash between the two cultures - European and African. Ben Okri, who has been awarded the Booker Prize for his *Famished Road*, uses the Yoruba myth of children who are unwilling to be born to survey and critically evaluate the whole gamut of contemporary Nigerian life and its history. Wole Soyinka who won the Nobel prize for literature a few years ago and who is primarily a poet and a playwright, has also written a few novels.

**Exercise 1**

Answer the following questions in your own words:

1) **What are major ethnic groups in Nigeria and which parts of the country do they live in?**

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2) **What kind of socio-political organisation did the Ibos have? How was it different from the political organisation among the Hausa and the Yoruba people?**

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3) **What factors helped in the development of the written form of literature in Nigeria?**

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4) **How is the novel as a literary form different from the other literary forms which were prevalent in pre-European Africa?**

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5) Which literary form from the oral literary tradition helped Nigerians in novel-writing and how?

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22.6 LET US SUM UP

Nigeria has been the seat of a famous ancient civilization. It is inhabited by four principal ethnic groups - the Hausa, the Fulani, the Yoruba and the Ibo. The Hausa and the Fulani are primarily Muslim by religious faith and live in the north while the Yoruba and the Ibo are Christian or pagan by religious faith and live in the southern and eastern parts of Nigeria respectively.

Since the British missionaries first came to the south and the east and established schools there, the Yoruba and the Ibo concerned a greater share in development and occupied important positions in the administration, leaving the Hausa and the Fulani far behind. This led to inter-ethnic tensions in the post-independence era leading to a civil war - the Biafran war - from 1967 to 1970 in which over 150,000 people lost their lives.

Early Nigerian writing showed the influence of Christianity. Although novel-writing was foreign to African literary traditions, Nigerians have adapted themselves well to this new form. Amos Tutuola, Chinua Achebe, Cyprian Ekwensi, T.M. Aluko, Ben Okri, Wole Soyinka, Buchi Emecheta and Flora Nwapa are well-known Nigerian novelists.

22.6 SUGGESTED READING


Roscoe, Adrian Mother is Gold (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge), 1971.

22.7 ANSWERS TO EXERCISES

1) The Hausa, the Fulani, the Yoruba and the Ibo are the major ethnic groups in Nigeria. The Hausa and the Fulani live in the north, the Yoruba in the south and the Ibo in the east.

2) The socio-political organisation of the Ibo was village based and each unit was a small autonomous village democracy. Unlike them, the Yoruba, the Hausa and the Fulani had much larger socio-political units with a strong central authority.

3) The written form of literature developed primarily because of the introduction of the British education system in Nigeria. Conversion to Christianity and the introduction of the printing press facilitated the change over from oral to written form of literature.
The process of urbanisation and the introduction of a market economy also played their role in it.

4) Stories, poems and plays were the prevalent literary forms in pre-European Nigeria and were all suited to the community-oriented cultural activities which were primarily oral. Novel, on the other hand, is more suitable to written form and does not need group participation.

5) Oral story is the form which helped Nigerians in taking to novel writing. Early novels were a string of stories bound together skilfully. Tutuola and Fagunwa are well known examples of these kinds of writings.