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## THE SITUATION OF THE AFRICAN WRITER IN POST-COLONIAL AFRICA

The ten years or so which have elapsed since Britain, Belgium and France granted independence to their former colonies have seen in many ways a gradual, but definite deterioration of the relations between the African writer and the political power. No country in black Africa has yet embarked on a systematic "purge" of its intelligentsia - as again recently in Egypt against left wing and Marxist intellectuals -, but more and more frequently black writers have to face either imprisonment or exile.

The arrest of Sylvain Bemba, the Congolese short story writer involved in the rebellion of Ange Diaware against the Brazzaville regime, is only the last instance of a long series of bitter quarrelling between outspoken writers and ruling politicians. It looks like a divorce between literature and politics after the pre-independence era, when black intellectuals and African leaders joined their forces in the revolutionary effort which put an end to colonial rule. Both writers and politicians could then claim they were jointly expressing the will of the masses. Today black writers contest the ability of the new African ruling class.

In 1967, in her *Anthologie negro-africaine*, Lilyan Kesteloot wrote that "the great inspiration, nourished by the hope and the proximity of liberation, has, obviously died. After independence one cannot eternally sing freedom, and even less the past sufferings of slavery". In 1971, Jacques Chevrier, in an article on African post-independence literature, noted a sort of *desenchantement* in the works of a new generation of disillusioned and resentful African writers.

In fact, many of the African novels published in the past ten years are

if not an act of accusation, at least a bitter satire of the political mores of contemporary Africa.

This is particularly striking for English-speaking writers of West Africa, probably because countries in this part of the continent experienced years of turmoil and instability, Nigeria with the Biafran civil war, Ghana with the upheavals which followed Nkrumah's deposition, and Sierre Leone with a series of plots. In Ghana, corruption and nepotism of the ruling class are indeed the decor of the novels of Ayi Kwei Armah, Kofi Awoonor and Cameron Duodu. The novels of Armah and Awoonor take place more or less explicitly during the Nkrumah era, while Cameron's book does not seem to refer to a specific political regime.

Venality, at all levels in the administration and in the government, is almost specifically the major theme of Armah in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. It is the story of a civil servant, who refuses, in spite of the sarcasms of his wife and his mother-in-law, to follow the example of his colleagues and of the ruling class and to live from embezzlements and grafts.

In *This Earth, My Brother*, the stench of the refuse heaped at the fringe of the capital's destitute suburbs is used by Awoonor as a symbol of a rotten regime. The fate of the hero, a brilliant lawyer who ends in a lunatic asylum, seems to be a parable of the degradation of the political power. However, Awoonor's opinion on Nkrumah is not entirely negative. In an article published after the Osagyefo's death the Ghanaian author recognizes that Nkrumah remains "the symbol of emergent Africa", in spite of a noted alteration in his behaviour after 1965. (See *Africa Report*, June, 1972.)

There are only a few references to the political situation in *The Gab Boys*. Duodu deals mainly with the problem of the half educated and jobless youth. But the description of a party given at his home by a high-ranking civil servant provides the author with the opportunity of depicting a ruling class whose main interests seem to be drink and women.

Nigerian novelists, such as Cyprian Ekwensi, Chinua Achebe, T.M. Aluko or Wole Soyinka, have as well denounced the lust of the ruling class for money and pleasure and its incapacity to conduct the affairs of the state.

The first writer to sound the alarm was Cyprian Ekwensi, in 1961, in *Jagua Nana*, where the henchmen of a corrupted politician kill the young lover of an ageing prostitute. In *Chief, the Honourable Minister*, Aluko tells the bewilderment of a teacher, who has become a minister by accident, when discovering the all-pervading corruption and the intrigues of foreign embassies. Achebe is ferociously sarcastic in *A Man of the People*, a portrait of a half-literate minister of culture, whose prime interest is to make money and chase women. As for Soyinka's *The Interpreters*, *The Times* of London gave the following resume of the book: "...a group of young Nigerian intellectuals trying to make something worthwhile of their lives and talents in a society where corruption and consequent cynicism, social climbing and conforming give them alternate cause for despair and laughter".

French-speaking writers are no less critical of African governments than their English-speaking colleagues. One of the first to attack and to ridicule the new "African power" was Daniel Ewande, of the Cameroons, in a ferociously illustrated pamphlet, *Vive le President*. The book abounds in vindictive statements: "In our African countries, often misnamed as under developed countries, there are only good presidents. It is an entirely erroneous opinion to think that it could be different. If they were no good, our presidents could not stay in office." A play by the Congolese Maxime N'Debeka, with almost the same title, *Le President*, introduces a bloodthirsty and lecherous head of state, who seems to be an African version of King Ubu, the cynical and coarse monarch of French playwright Alfred Jarry. The "president" orders the assassination of his son, who had dared to disapprove of his father, and is himself murdered by his own bodyguard, after a grotesque attempt to seduce the wife of the army commander-in-chief. *Tribaliques*, a collection of short stories by Henri Lopes, the Congolese minister, is a hardly disguised condemnation of the regime of the now defunct Fulbert Youlou, presented by the author as a typical neo-colonialist stooge, whose administration and police are in the hands of the former colonial power. The novel of Ahmadou Kourouma, *Les Soleils des Independances*, is yet another satire of the new African ruling class. The arrest of the hero, Fama, for an alleged complicity in an imaginary plot against the government, is as senseless as his release after years of detention in an erratic political system.

*Wole Soyinka and the failure of the African writer*

These novels - and our list is not a limitative one - is no doubt a significant testimony of the lucidity and courage of the new generation of African writers, who did not hesitate to take to task the rulers of their own country, an enterprise probably more difficult, and certainly less rewarding than the adventure of their predecessors who attacked colonial domination.

However, most of these novels were published only recently, after 1968: the succession of coups d'état (the first was Sylvanus Olympio's murder in 1963) had then already assumed alarming proportions. One has to take into account this tardiness of literary reactions to political instability in Africa when examining the merciless accusations leveled at African writers in general by Wole Soyinka, in an article which has now become famous in the 1967 June-July issue of *Transition* (then published in Makerere). "The stage at which we find ourselves now", wrote Soyinka in the article, "is the state of disillusionment and it is this which prompts an honest examination of what has been the failure of the African writer, as a writer. And this is not to say that if the African writer had truly responded to the political moment of his society he would not still be faced with disillusionment. For the situation in Africa today is the same the world over, it is not one of the tragedies which come of isolated human failures, but the very collapse of humanity. Nevertheless the African writer has done nothing to vindicate his existence, nothing to indicate that he is even aware that this awful collapse has taken place. For he has been generally without vision.... Isolated by his very position in society, he mistook his own personal and temporary cultural predicament for the predicament of his entire society and turned attention from what was really happening within that society. He even tried to give society something that the society had never lost - its identity... When the writer woke from his opium of metaphysical abstractions, he found that the politician had used his absence from earth to consolidate his position. More often than not, the writer, who in any case, belonged in the same intellectual class or to a superior, rationalised the situation and refused to deny himself the safety and comfort of aligning himself to the ruling elite. He was in any case still blinded to the present by the resuscitated splendours of the past."

Soyinka condemns the African elite on two counts: first he blames the intellectuals of the "negritude" movement of having been primarily concerned with esthetic problems, such as the African personality, while political problems were more important; second, he accuses African writers of having been the docile followers of the black bourgeoisie who succeeded the colonial rulers.

Soyinka's criticisms appear all the more formidable because the Nigerian writer himself ran the risk of defying openly the governments of his country. In 1965, he took control, by force, of radio Ibadan and denounced the rigging of the western region elections, and in 1967, he signed an appeal for a cease fire in the Biafran civil war. On these two memorable occasions, he was arrested and sent to jail. His appeal in favour of the Ibo rebellion was particularly significant, as Soyinka himself is a Yoruba.

Meanwhile, in the eastern region, the most brilliant Ibo intellectuals took without hesitation the side of Colonel Ojukwu: Cyprian Ekwensi was director of the Enugu information services; Chinua Achebe acted as a sort of Biafran P.R.O. abroad; and Christopher Okigbo died fighting for Biafra.

*The posthumous trial of an Ibo poet.*

Okigbo's death has prompted Ali Mazrui to devote his latest book to what is probably one of the most dramatic instances of political commitment for an African writer. It is a play entitled *The Trial of Christopher Okigbo*.

The poet is tried at the gate of a sort of African paradise by a jury of elders who are supposed to pass a sentence on Ibo separatism and the poet's political commitment. The elders of Africa listen to a prosecutor - Apollo Gyamfi counsel for damnation - and to Okigbo's lawyer - Hamisi, counsel for salvation.

The most interesting aspect of the prosecutor's charge is probably the distinction he makes between three different levels of responsibility for the artist and writer: first towards himself, or personal, second towards humanity, or universal, and third towards the collectivity he belongs to,

or social. For Apollo-Gyamfi, there is a hierarchy between these three moral codes, individualist, universalist and social. Social responsibility comes last for the artist, whose first duty is towards himself, and secondly to the universal. The creativity of the artist, argues Gyamfi, implies that his personality is of primordial importance, while esthetic criteria which are the norms of his work are universal. Gyamfi stresses that Okigbo, by fighting for the Ibo cause, placed his social group before art in his scale of values. The Ibo poet, says the counsel for damnation, also failed to see that, while the ordinary citizen has first a duty to his collectivity, the artist and writer, as an exceptionally gifted person, has a more important part to play and his responsibility is to the universal. In other words, and more simple terms, the intellectual has to remain aloof from parochial controversies. And Gyamfi concludes by accusing the poet of having "descended from the mountain of human vision to the swamp of tribal warfare."<sup>1</sup>

Ali Mazrui's play deals there not only with the "balkanisation" of Africa by the colonial powers which imposed artificial borders ignoring ethnic realities, but also with the old controversy between *art pour l'art* and the political commitment of the writer.

In his answer to Gyamfi, the poet's counsel for salvation, Hamisi, argues that the distinction between the three levels of responsibility is too "European", and that in Africa, art is the fruit of collective experience.

The play ends with a more-or-less explicit condemnation of Ibo separatism; the elders of Africa point out the necessity of building a new Africa where African traditions must merge with Christian and Islamic teachings (Mazrui is Moslem). The debate includes now the well known dilemma of the black writer torn apart between his traditional culture and western culture.

No doubt, all these problems are intimately connected, and the African writer has indeed to face three alternatives: tribe or state, European culture or African culture, political commitment or art for art's sake. It is, however, slightly surprising that Mazrui, a professor of political science, should still consider the last alternative as a valid one,

(1) See the review of Mazrui's book in *Ba Shiru*, Vol. 4, No.4 *A Journal of African Languages and Literature*, edited by Stephen Moyo at the University of Wisconsin.

at a time when in Africa and elsewhere the political commitment of the artist is almost a matter of course. He himself was involved in a political controversy - and protested courageously - when the editor of *Transition*, his friend Rahat Neogy, was jailed under president Obote's regime.

It remains that two of the most prestigious African intellectuals, Soyinka and Mazrui, differ in their opinion on the Biafran episode. As for political commitment, the Nigerian thinks African writers failed to assess the real problems of post-independence Africa, while the Kenyan contests the validity of the only case of political commitment he chose to deal with, a political commitment for a cause which was precisely supported by Soyinka, at least "objectively" in the Marxist sense of the word.

#### *Political commitment and "lumpenmilitariat"*

Soyinka might be right when he regrets the tardiness of African writers in assessing the real problems of post-colonial Africa. However, many black intellectuals did, at a very early stage in the sixties, take the risk of open opposition to new African regimes, and paid dearly for it. Three prominent writers and essayists have died in the jails of their own country: J.B. Danquah in Ghana, Fily Dabo Sissoko in Mali, Keita Fodeba in Guinea. Others have been detained or are still in prison: Koffi Gadeau, Seydou Badian, Tchoumba Ngouankeu, Mgr. Tchidimbo, Dikwa Akwa, Djibril Tamsi Niane... while quite a few escaped detention only by fleeing into exile.

It is of course difficult to tell among them the men whose downfalls have been caused by their own ambition and those who have been the innocent victims of an arbitrary power. It must also be noted that in Africa writers are often politicians and vice versa. But, as a whole, the new generation of African writers and artists is rather critical of African governments, in contrast with the griots who sang the praise of the ruling dynasties. Black intellectuals in independent Africa have produced works of protest as vigorous as the works of their anti-colonial predecessors, and it can probably be said that in Africa, a written literature of opposition and contestation has succeeded to an oral and conformist literature.



It does not look likely, at a time when military governments seem to become the rule rather than the exception in Africa, that this non-conformist attitude will gradually vanish. There might even be a risk of increased misunderstanding between military rulers and African writers. At least, a recent article by Ali Mazrui, where he describes the new Uganda regime as the rule of a "lumpenmilitariat" provides one instance of such probability. Full of contempt, the expression was aimed not only at the former soldiers of the colonial army, who rose from the ranks to officers' status, such as General Amin, but also to the apparently undisciplined and primitive mob of new recruits.

But, if a military regime is led by half illiterate soldiery, the sort of bourgeois coalition between African writers and politicians exposed by Soyinka cannot take place: the possible partner of the African intelligentsia is not any longer the national bourgeoisie, but what could perhaps be considered as a military proletariat.

This is not a purely theoretical hypothesis: in *The Barrel of a Gun*, Ruth First notes that "every rank had a turn at coup-making", namely non-commissioned officers in Togo, Mali, Gabon and Nigeria, and recalls that in Sierra Leone in 1968 "the rank and file disproved the old adage that the army worm does not turn and, with the non-commissioned officers, found in pay grievances enough initiative to lock up the entire officers corps and set up their own temporary government".

Such an analysis seems to imply a distinction between officers' coups and N.C.O.s' coups and the question would then be whether officers belong to the bourgeoisie and whether N.C.O.s are representative of the proletariat. But the real problem is of course whether such a military proletariat can really express the aspirations of the masses. According to Ruth First, "the coup d'état... by definition, precludes mass participation", and is "the active symptom of crisis within the power elite."

Where should the African writer stand in such a predicament? He is close to the black bourgeoisie, because he enjoys the privilege of academic education, and he has to sever his ties with his own class if he wants to become the herald of the proletariat. Marxist theoreticians make the distinction between bourgeois and revolutionary writers,



while Soyinka, like many other African intellectuals, stresses - in the same article in *Transition* - that "the artist has always functioned in African society as the record of mores and experience and as the voice of vision in his own time."

It is not without significance, in this respect, to remember that not only Soyinka, but also South African writers, such as Ezekiel Mphahlele, condemned negritude because of the identity of interest and culture between the African bourgeoisie and the African intelligentsia. According to Mphahlele - in *African Image* - negritude was only an esthetic exercise by well-off intellectuals. Mphahlele remarked that black South African intellectuals still belong to the African proletariat - because apartheid regulations apply to them just as to the ordinary worker or peasant -, while the intellectual elite in independent Africa, because of its culture and diplomas, which provide them with well paid jobs, is part and parcel of the black bourgeoisie.

Again such an analysis ceases to be true when power is in the hands of military rulers whose education is sometimes limited, and whose background is sometimes closer to tribal peasantry than to urban sophistication.

Already, to a certain extent, the position of African intellectuals had been made uncomfortable with the accusations of neo-colonialism by Marxist theoreticians against leaders of the negritude movement such as Senghor. Their fate might become even more precarious wherever a military junta replaces civilian rule, if only because army discipline seems to be foreign to literary freedom. But it would be irresponsible to generalise: there are cultured and left wing army officers, as well as there are right wing and conservative intellectuals.

Writers can also be good soldiers of an irrefutable cause: in Africa today indeed where, for instance, poets like Agostinho Neto and Mariodde Andrade are leading the struggle against Portuguese domination. And the stubborn continuation of the liberation battle - and its successes in spite of the assassination of Eduardo Mondlane and Amilcar Cabral -, the revival of black resistance against racial oppression in Rhodesia, Namibia and South Africa, the final failure of the so-called "dialogue" policy will also provide black writers with sound reasons to be less pessimistic about the fate of Africa.