African Literature and the Politics of Culture

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For the
eagles in flight:
Aôndodoo, Doosuur,
Terungwa and Terzungwe;
that they may be a revelation
to their generation; and
that they may travel light
from the undulating
valleys to the lofty
mountain-
tops

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In the summer of 2010, I had the singular fortune of being nominated for the International Faculty Development Programme of the University of Navarre IESE Business School, Barcelona, Spain by the School of Media and Communication of my university, Pan-African University (now Pan-Atlantic University), Lagos, Nigeria. The IFP was primarily intended for personal and professional development but the present book also benefitted generously from that fortune. It was during the programme that I sufficiently recovered my sanity of mind and clarity of thought and vision to retrieve the first draft of the book which I had abandoned. For this opportunity, I sincerely thank Professor Emevwo Anselm Biakolo, my diligent dean for that kind dispensation to be part of the programme.

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While I was yet to recover from this preceding fortune, it was soon to be succeeded by another fat fortune. In the winter of the same year, I was awarded a fellowship by the University of Cambridge, United Kingdom. In Cambridge, I was a visiting research fellow in the Centre of African Studies and Wolfson College working on a project whose central theme was: “Myth and Modernity in African Literature”. However, this book extended its fortunes by opportunistically demanding attention, at least occasionally. I profited from the rich library and archival re/sources in Cambridge to update some of the bibliographical information and enrich the data.

For temporarily relieving me of my duties as the Director of Academic Planning and member of Senate, I again thank Vice-chancellor Elegido for his persevering interest in my work and career. I also thank again,

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From Lagos, I joined the University of Ibadan, my Alma Mater as a member of faculty in the Department of English where I also taught African/Afro-Diasporic literatures, postcolonial studies, creative writing and literary theory. In Ibadan too, my students in the undergraduate and postgraduate classes helped in burnishing the rough edges of some of the

ideas through their active participation in the discourses I generated. As much as they learned from me, I also harvested from some of their ripened thoughts and I thank them for this.

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PREFACE

One of the constitutive and framing discursive possibilities of this book is to rethink or reconceptualise the riches and reaches of the regimes of literary and cultural knowledge production/circulation in and about Africa. It is also a determined attempt to remap or re-delineate the boundaries of cultural meaning systems central to the African ontological and philosophical tradition. The other which also lends elemental energies to the book's abiding thematic gravitation is to contemplate the contours of difference differently, to re-contextualise culture as a text in the constant and ceaseless motions of history and post/modernity. This is crucially important for Africa and other peripheral peoples and cultures of the world whose knowledge production processes have been, historically, externally mediated and brutally disrupted by forced enslavement, colonisation and the empire-building machinations of metropolitan European cultures.

Literary and cultural production in and about Africa has always been mediated by a complex of historical contingencies some of which are outside the cultural orbit of the continent. The colonial and imperial enterprise, for instance, played a decisive and critical part in the (re)constitution of African social and cultural histories and with enduring repercussions. Some of the consequences of the European empire-building project in Africa have continued to define and underwrite African modernity and to structure the rhizome and modes of epistemological response to them. At the centre of all this is the reality of cultural hegemony imposed by the European Self and the politics of resistance by the African Other to register and inscribe cultural agency and subjectivity.

This book, therefore, essentially negotiates African literature as a veritable site of cultural production and situates it within the dynamic of cultural politics. The book critically evaluates African literature as a site of cultural contestation with European politics of knowledge production about others and as a strategy of knowing them. It understands literature broadly as constitutive of the oral and the written, and draws for analytic purposes from these two axes to strengthen the arguments it generates. It also attempts to locate the politics of national re/invention and national narratives within the intricate matrices of a violent history inaugurated by Europe through the artificial fabrication of nation-states with arbitrary boundaries. In addition to this, the book also implicates the paradoxes inherent in the exclusionary practices against women as the mothers of

their respective nations on the continent.

The production and merchandising of knowledge about the cultural self structures the self's relations with others. For Europe, the desire to know the self and to know others with the strategic intent to impose hegemonic control over them has always been consistent with the imperial gaze and its knowledge production programmes and strategies. In his books, *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said, the Palestinian American scholar, has commented insightfully on the putative hegemonic relations between Europe and others in order to accomplish the imperial designs of Empire. Said understood this obsessive desire on the part of the West to understand others as a political and ideological strategy to mobilise knowledge systems that in many situations misunderstood, misinterpreted and misrepresented the very others the West sought to know. As he observes:

> My contention is that Orientalism is fundamentally a political doctrine willed over the Orient because the Orient was weaker than the West, which elided the Orient's difference with its weakness....As a cultural apparatus Orientalism is all aggression, activity, judgment, will-to-truth, and knowledge (*Orientalism* 204).

Said is here concerned about the Orient but this imperial attitude of the West applies to other cultures, too. For instance, the European explorations of the African coast and, later the penetration of the hinterland, were motivated by this imperial desire to know others more than they know themselves; to name them and to interpellate them in terms of their essential difference from the European self. This rehearsed perception of others on the part of Europe gave stridency to narratives produced by the early explorers ranging from Christopher Columbus, David Livingstone, Mungo Park, Hugh Clapperton, and the Lander Brothers, Richard and John, etc. It is, therefore, not incidental that the understanding of others by diverse European publics was largely structured and determined by the narratives by these men with enormous epistemological capital. In other words, these narratives were distilled from a particular positionality and laced with an ideological agenda which was specific to and espoused a particular cultural politics and imperial knowledge formation.

As a quintessential part of European knowledge production, these narratives were complicit in the execution of a cultural agenda that privileged Europe, namely to negatively name, blame, maim, tame, declaim, and eventually claim Africa as a hunting ground and her resources/treasure trough as the fair game there from. But it was not only

the explorers that were efficient and zealous avatars of European cultural suzerainty. The philosophers after them were equally, if not more pious, in their demonization of Africa and its peoples and cultures employing rhetorical strategies to exercise power and control over the colonies. Men as diverse as Darwin, Frobenius, Roper, Gobinieu, Hegel, Hume, Locke, Montesquieu, Voltaire, etc. constituted a most unsparing Sanhedrin which condemned Africa/Black peoples to the gibbet.

In the assured estimation of these European men of culture, Africa had no history, no literature, no culture and, to put it poignantly, no humanity. For even if humanity were to be conceded or ascribed to such a brute, it would have to be shared with primates. The negation of African humanity was to be validated by European writers like Joseph Conrad, Joyce Cary, Elspeth Huxley, Fred Majdelany, Graham Greene, Robert Ruark, among others. In their narrative élan, these writers delineated Africans as though they belonged eternally to pre-history and remained monumentalised in the kinesis of civilisation and culture. Narratives, European narratives were, therefore, an intrinsic part of the architecture of knowledge that was called to service by the metropolitan cultures to label Africa as different from the rest of humanity.

What made the European negation of African/Black history particularly dangerous and disabling, as fraudulent and irresponsible as that was, is that denying a people their history decapitates them and assaults their cultural and communal consciousness, a firm foothold with which to enact their strength in shared experiences, a vital force with which to confront a common history. Africa's case was compounded or exacerbated by not only cultural knowledge but also the brutal force of military weaponry, an array of bayonets, bullets and maxim guns. To deny a people their history is to deny them their very humanity, to erase, or to efface them from existence.

This is because a people can cast around their past to harvest the rich resources of their history for the inspirational purposes of liberation from their oppressors. But woe unto such a people if they are robbed of that history or they allow other people to appropriate it, manipulate it and in the end socialise them into believing that that history never existed or, at best, was an accident; that it began with them and will end with them. Woe unto such a people too if they behave as though their history can retrieve itself without their agency, or that the history is altogether irretrievable and cannot be retraced and re-written from their privileged perspective.

It seems to me Africa has suffered victimhood from both trajectories. For there appears to be a sense of historical amnesia on the part of Africa even though African historians have tried to rewrite African history.

However, the amnesia has been aggravated by the imperial designs of Europe and the absence of a visceral will to retrieve that history and harness it for the ever-gnawing contingencies and challenges of modernity. Not everything from history is worthy of such a harvest, though. Historical consciousness, for it to be a revitalising force, must necessarily be selective, be critical and targeted at those elements of that history that hold relevance for the present and can galvanise the search for a secure, assured and promising future.

As Chinua Achebe, the Nigerian novelist has observed, it is not enough to celebrate the past without interrogating it. For resident within the labyrinths of the past are certain imperfections which must be consigned to the eaves of history. The tragic dimensions of *Things Fall Apart* and the cultural contest which haunt its novelistic contours issue partly from this ossified, mechanical attachment to tradition and the past without adequate introspection on the part of Okonkwo, the hero who wilfully ignores the arrival of a new cultural ethos.

But to appropriate Wole Soyinka's magisterial framing of this reality, the past must address its present. Soyinka, however, leaves out the future which is equally important, if not more important, than the present. For to summon the past to attend to the present without focusing penetratingly on what reposes in the womb of the future will be limiting vision which can be dangerous. For the future being of African people and culture is what really constitutes our humanity, the sum-total of the grammar of our lives which have been brutalised and violated by the insolence and violence of history. Much more importantly, it is obvious that in our future history, our past history and present history will necessarily be present. This is why visionary governments have visions that prospect into the future; peoples and societies also plan for the future with their present policies and resources drawing from the informing lessons of past and present history.

Part of the crisis of knowledge and cultural production as well as the constitutive arrested development historical amnesia engenders in Africa today is because the sights of the political leadership, but also the acquiescent led, are almost exclusively concentrated on the present. And where there is no clear vision about the future, the people perish especially when they are plagued by an unthinking and pestilential leadership. Postcolonial leaders and policy makers also think – if they do really think – in only one direction: the present which also means themselves, not the people and their future, but their hedonistic and sybaritic pleasures. Leadership here is all incorporating and does not particularise or essentialise the political elite even though they are more fully implicated. It, indeed, involves the entire spectrum of the intellectual, professional,

cultural and commercial elite in positions to make decisions on behalf of the entire community.

Talking about the leadership deficit and crisis of vision on the continent, it is compelling to seek attributions to the pestilence in the alienation of women. The fact is that African women have in some ways been erased from the contours of social and cultural production, as well as political participation and hence the absence of a counterbalancing and complementary force that will galvanise development. The continued exclusion of women from untrammelled political participation and visibility in other diverse publics is itself an enduring contradiction. This is because this negates their centrality to society and culture which has been envisioned in the trope of the woman as the mother of the nation. The situation is changing, though. With the increased allocation of space to women and their enhanced participation in the political process in many African countries like Liberia, Rwanda, Nigeria, South Africa and Malawi, women are beginning to be the true mothers of their nations. But more can still be done for African womanhood. This is because of her centrality to the general well-being of society.

This is the substrating argument of the second and sixth chapters of this book: the imperative need to resolve the disquieting paradox of African patriarchal cultures inscribed in the idea of the woman as the mother of the nation where women are excluded through inclusion. If women are mothers of the nation, as they truly are, then they should be so not only when it privileges phallocentric ideology. In particular, the objectification of women as prostitutes, mistresses or courtesans by some male writers without a progressive attitude represents the flagellation of patriarchal power and hegemony which occludes female agency and subjectivity. To be sure, many male African writers with a socialist orientation have delineated female characters as prostitutes but have endowed them with the charisma and temperament to change the course of history and the destiny of society. Sembene Ousmane, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, and Ayi Kwei Armah are eloquent examples here. Such delineations uphold and enable women. They portray women as makers of history who are strategic to the narratives of their nations, the discourses which they institute and endow them with a viable voice and crucial role to play in the engineering of society.

Needless to say that some will find this argument rather offensive, even nauseating because they either think women are the problem rather than the solution or that they have never been marginalised in the constitution of nationhood, or even both. But like Pilate said, what I have written, I have written. I have long been proselytised by the persuasive

theology of women's liberation and I am even casting around to convert some agnostics to this cause among my male chauvinists. It is my conviction that the men have largely failed to make the desired difference on the continent. Perhaps, they are too slow in causing the difference. Let the women occupy the centre stage to see if a balancing act can retrieve society from the gaping precipice.

Some of the discourses I have put forward in this book, I must admit, are not so new, and that is if there are really any new discourses anyway. In that regard, I do not lay claims to freshness of thought or originality of vision so much as I understand and appreciate that the continued currency of the discourses is validated by the fact that the malodorous putrefaction of their carrion continues to assault our collective unconscious as a people. This, to me, is a stimulus, a call for the re-imagining of the discomfiting challenges they present so as to crystallise the contradictions of the moment. Even though the discursive skirmishes occasioned especially by the oral – written interface are not new and have endured, I still believe that there is a complex of literary/cultural interpretive possibilities which benefit from the memory archive of pre-scientific society which is dominantly oral and which is relevant for the challenges of modernity.

Chapters Three and Four belong to this discursive category. In re-imagining the role of pre-industrial orality in the age of a scribal and digital/satellite communication technology employing the epic narrative mode in J. P. Clark-Bekederemo's *Ozidi Saga* and D. T. Niane's *Sundiata*, my argument gestures towards the interfaces that subsist between tradition and modernity not in the Manichaeism of Western intellection but as coterminous, co-eval expressive categories. Orality here ceases to be an objectified and subsidiarised medium of artistic articulation. Rather it engages in a robust and mutually beneficial and catalytic relationship with the written tradition. The power the oral or spoken word holds for modernity and its integralness to today's wor(l)d is underscored by the radical instabilities that cyberspace has instituted including secondary orality which thrives on the instrumentality of the oral wor(l)d. In this regard, it is impoverishing to continue to construct essential differences between orality and writing as if they are monads whereas the realities of our post/modern existence prove otherwise that they reinforce each other.

But in the relentless engagements with past history as a dialectical continuum with present and future history, African/Black peoples must be necessarily self-critical, selective and also problematise that historical heritage by interrogating it. This is because a nativist imagination which mechanically enthrones narcissism can return us to the past with all its imperfections. A culture and people desirous of participating meaningfully

in modernity must be dynamic and move with the motions of history. In praising the cogency and relevance of Afrocentricity as a cultural discourse, we must also not lose sight of its potential pitfalls which include an uncritical flight into the past as if it is the only available viable and authentic source of cultural knowledge without recognising and appreciating the rich legacies of modernity.

Chapter Five addresses this focal concern: the paramount need to avoid the limiting possibilities of the Afrocentric and Eurocentric cultural discourses by negotiating our way through an alternative liminal discourse, the post-Afrocentric, which emphasises the strength in the two adversarial discourses to engage the contingencies of the present and the future. The imperative for this alternative inheres in the fact that the two oppositional discursive binaries are not self-sufficient in themselves. Indeed, they are fraught with shortcomings. The Afrocentric discourse insists on the validity and authenticity of African culture, an argument which is compelling and persuasive. However, when this culture is conceived in a romanticist or idealist perspective as essentialist, invariant and unchanging, it negates the very idea of culture as a dynamic and living tissue which is in a state of flux and exists in fidelity to the verities of history.

It is this imperative of the narcissistic imagination that the Eurocentric discourse is guilty of and which the Afrocentric discourse revisions. The Eurocentric discourse comes to culture on a high horse and with a superior tendency, a posture which announces itself in holier-than-thou habits. This singular understanding of culture in the dynamics of superiority/inferiority by the Eurocentric discourse renders it vulnerable and exposes its flanks to critical attacks. Its arrogant assumption that it is the only cultural discourse that exists negates the existence of other alternative discourses. Indeed, it is the materiality of the oppositional cultural discourse(s) that validates the Eurocentric discourse. For without the former, the latter will lose its appeal. There is, therefore, the need for some measure of cultural self-denial to create space for mutual dialogue and accommodation between the two cultural discourses. This creative approach recognises the validity of the two discourses, appreciates their strengths and weaknesses, and maps out the terrain where cultural exchange and interaction can occur.

The exclusionary politics against North African literature - as if it does not belong to the larger corpus of African literature which is its parent – constitutes the driving force for the argument in Chapter Seven. This politics is practised mainly by those who can be called purists of African aesthetics. The contention here is that North African (Maghrebi) literature lacks rootedness in the African continent because of Arabic linguistic and

cultural influences. However, the validity and valence of this perspective self-destruct because apart from the indigenous African languages, all the other languages through which African literatures receive expression are colonial and hegemonic languages. In this regard, they are as guilty and alienating as Arabic. It is, therefore, intriguing and uncharitable to single out Arabic as the lone culprit. North African literature, therefore, qualifies as African literature, if not for anything else, because of its cartographic location.

In an attempt to establish the filiation of North African literature to African letters, I have appropriately examined the work of Naguib Mahfouz, Egypt's 1988 Nobel laureate for Literature and a representative voice from the region, to demonstrate the shared historical and cultural experiences that structure the African postcolonial condition. My argument is that through the fiction of Mahfouz's, it is possible to mine meaning systems whose historical particularity which is moored in the colonial and imperial encounter continue to bear relevance on Egypt's and Africa's postcolonial condition. Specifically, I have deployed his novels, *Miramar* and *Children of Gebelawi* as analytic typologies to underscore the violent and disruptive legacies of colonialism on the postcolony and how this in turn exerts profound impact on present-day political, economic and socio-cultural developments.

That Egypt has been a boiling political cauldron in recent history eloquently validates and testifies to the burdens placed on postcolonial becoming by the antimonies of history. The fall of long time ruler, Hosni Mubarak in a violent revolution – in what has become known as the Arab Spring - and the accession to power by the Islamic group, the Muslim Brotherhood (which only recently has been overthrown in a coup), shows that Egypt is still in the throes of transformation and is unrelentingly struggling with the demons of modernity. What is focal here is the defining role narratives can play in the negotiation of the perennial national question. Mahfouz has sufficiently hinted in his fiction that the future of Egypt lies in democracy, the rule of law, religious moderation and tolerance and the enforcement of human rights and freedoms. These concerns remain central to his patriotic vision as a writer who invests his oeuvre with meaning modes which appeal to Egyptian national sensibility.

Embedded in the very thematic structure of this book is the power of myth and the mythic in Africa. The idea of myth as history or culture or both has been of especial appeal to me in recent times. In this book, therefore, I playfully engage myth and the mythic in the African imagination not as an end in itself but as a means to foregrounding its interminable and indeterminate intersection with modernity. In some

regressive critical discourses, myth has been constituted as a frozen and monumentalized cultural event which bears no relevance to the historical present. The critical strategy here is to re/present myth as a cultural stasis which belongs to prehistory. However, myth participates in active and dynamic dimensions in re/engaging and re/visioning present and future history even as it is rooted in past history. In myth, therefore, resides the presence of the past in the present and in the future. This is what endows myths with dynamism, freshness and currency in the relentless kinesis of history.

As such, I negotiate myth as a modernising agent in African culture and politics. The novelistic universes of many African writers, among them Ngugi wa Thiongó and Ayi Kwei Armah, two African writers with a progressive vision and temperament is very illustrative in this circumstance. My contention here is that the narrative and cultural properties inherent in the African myths deployed by the writers constitute a sufficient discursive engagement with the present realities and contradictions in which the continent is enmeshed. The myth of national independence by African nation-states following the wresting of political autonomy from European colonial powers provides a constitutive sieve through which African novelists negotiate the re/invention of nationhood in Africa. For instance, using the Mau Mau nationalist resistance initiative against British imperial stranglehold in Kenya, Ngugi locates the struggle within the dynamic of economic and cultural imperialism. By recuperating the Anoa myth and harnessing it for the present, Armah also argues that true political independence has remained elusive in Ghana and Africa because external and internal colonialism have taken turns to exploit, oppress and marginalise the peasantry and the mass of the people who are the true makers of history.

It is my steadfast hope and sincere expectation that the present book will be useful to scholars and students of African literature and culture as well as the general reader. I admit that in this kind of effort, it is notoriously difficult, if not impossible, to speak to everyone using the same language. What is, however, undeniable is that African literature has developed in strict fidelity to history and politics. Much of this history has been fabricated by others on behalf, and in spite, of Africa. To think otherwise is to visit violence on the historical process. Indeed, to think otherwise is also to negate the reality of the African postcolonial condition and the politics of culture which over-determines literary and artistic production on the continent. The arguments here now have a definitive and autonomous life of their own. Let the reader acknowledge their autonomy and make sense of them in the house of textual and cultural signification.

CHAPTER ONE

THE POLITICS OF KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION AND CIRCULATION IN THE AFRICAN LITERARY TRADITION/CULTURE

> […] we can also begin to see, and to question, those arrangements of foregrounding and backgrounding, of stressing and repressing, of placing at the centre and of restricting to the periphery, that give our own way of life its distinctive character.
> (Hawkes, "Preface". *The Empire Writes Back*, viii).

> While the imperial metropolis tends to understand itself as determining the periphery…it habitually blinds itself to the ways in which the periphery determines the metropolis – beginning perhaps, with the latter's obsessive need to present its peripheries and its other continually to itself.
> (Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 6).

> […] one of the striking features of colonial writing is that the knowledge which is so central to the maintenance of colonial rule could have been produced through interaction and dialogue with 'native' guides and interpreters… Even though the knowledge which is produced from those indigenous sources is often manipulated by the colonisers, and the aim of this knowledge is often to make clear differentiation between colonised and colonising cultures, the source of this information does not have a profound effect as the type of information structures which are constituted.
> (Mills, *Discourse*, 122).

Introduction

In their controversial but also undeniably seminal book, *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature*,[1] Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie and Ihechukwu Madubuike have distilled an eminently compelling argument about the integrity of African aesthetics and culture and their autochthony in African history and cosmologies. This radical triumvirate has denounced the imperial onslaught of the Western academy and the imposition of its canonical standards and hermeneutic paradigms on

African literature by establishing its historical uniqueness and cultural autonomy in the African ontology. Implicitly implicated in their position is the denial of the filiation of African literature to European letters, an idea that has perennially ruled the Western imagination. In particular, these critics argue that the provenance of African literature can be firmly located in African oral traditions and cultures, and not in foreign nurseries from where literature is believed to have been transplanted onto the fallowed, virgin African humus or alluvial earth.[2]

Deploying the novelistic tradition as an exemplary paradigm, Chinweizu and Company have convincingly postulated that the genealogy of the novel form can be found in extended African oral narrative forms like epics, legends, sagas and myths. The only problem being the politics of first naming[3] since these narratives were not assigned the distinct name as "the novel" before Europe executed its own naming rite. Their names, they reason, existed in their own indigenous African languages. It is their courageous conviction that more than anything else, it is this rich quarry of oral forms that constituted a veritable source of prototypes for the emergence of the modern African novel.

This counter-hegemonic perspective undermines the uncritically received dominant idea that exclusively locates the ancestry of the novel in the historical specificity of the 18th century industrial revolution in Europe[4] which produced a nascent elitist class with an overweening desire for fantasia and exotica. Through their cultural politics which privileges Africa, these three critics have largely wilted European cultural imperialism and its empire-building project which violates and tyrannises other alternative epistemologies of seeing and making sense of the world. In this particular case, their counter-hegemonic practice inserts a rite of cultural resistance against the Western constitution of African literature as a mere appendage or satellite of mainstream European literary traditions.

To be sure, any analytic paradigm which ignores or overlooks the provenance of the African novel in the rich fund of African oral traditions and cultures but rather seeks to locate it exclusively in European literary sources is at best ahistorical and represents wilful violence to truth. Indeed, Chinweizu *et al's* position is corroborated by Abiola Irele who also establishes the indebtedness of the African novel to African oral forms. Acording to Irele,

> [...] there can be no doubt that the appeal of the novel has to do with the integrative function that oral narratives have always played in African societies, a role that is well illustrated not only by the didactic and reflexive purpose of the folk tales and fables that inform the sensibility and define a primary level of the imaginative faculty in traditional African

> societies, but also by the centrality of the mythical tale, extending to the great oral epics – as exemplified by the Sundiata epic of Mali and the Ozidi saga of the Ijaws (sic) – with the ideological and symbolic significance these varieties of the narrative form assumed in precolonial and their continued relevance in the contemporaray period. In short, the novel has acquired today a cultural significance that was once the exclusive province of the oral narrative. (1)

Though this Afrocentric critical collective has been pilloried and characterized as "nativist", "traditionalist", "idealist", "romanticist" and "essentialist",[5] their very demonization itself smacks of another form of essentialism which is even more deleterious. The welter of acerbic criticisms their book precipitated notably from vocal critics like Wole Soyinka, Chidi Amuta, and Anthony Appiah follows the familiar path (mis)taken by critical juggernauts against Senghorian Negritude.[6] The ironic edge in these censures is that the literary and critical practices of some of these critics betray them also as purveyors of traditionalism or nativism of some sort.

For instance, the rootedness of Soyinka's mythopoiesis in indigenous Yoruba metaphysics and his appropriation of Ogun, one of the deities that populate the elaborate Yoruba pantheon, as his creative daemon, is itself an index of his nativism.[7] Indeed, Soyinka himself has been interrogated by Appiah for aggregating African cultures and traditions into a unitary mythic system and presenting them under the rubric of Yoruba culture, a veritable rite of cultural synecdoche, as if there is a monolithic, generalist African culture by which one can be used as a paradigm for all others.[8]

On his part, Appiah in his *In My Father's House,* attempts a negotiation of Africa in the philosophy of culture, a project in which he inscribes the inescapable trajectory of racial hybridity as the defining category of our post/modern lives. The point, however, is that this attempt at cultural self-knowledge by Appiah achieves coherence only in its embeddedness in African cultural codifications and traditional systems even as he celebrates its hybrid manifestations in his appropriation of the homiletic biblical metaphor of many mansions "in my father's house."[9] In sum, therefore, like the Afrocentric triumvirate of Chinweizu, Jemie and Madubuike, Soyinka and Appiah are also nativists, traditionalists or Afrocentrists, perhaps without fully realising it. The only difference among them is in terms of the magnitude of ideological involvement, impassioned politics and the heightened mode of articulation of this cultural beingness.

As African writers and critics, all of these people are involved in a cultural nationalist project, articulating an Afrocentric perspective, espousing to a programme of cultural selfhood and civilisational worth on

behalf of the African/Black community even as they argue for cultural plurality. They are, therefore, custodians of the communal conscience, word and voice, speaking on behalf of the collectivity, *re*-presenting the dynamism and resilience of African/Black humanity and culture before the world. They are warriors for the preservation of Black cultural ontology, its integrity and the progressiveness of its vision in a modern world. They are the *obasajong*, avatars and receptacles of Black cultural sensibilities. Gilbert Doho explains the concept of the *obasajong* in Cameroonian/African cosmology and it is worth quoting him at length:

> The warrior for the collective cause is known within the IJagang people of Cameroon as the *obasajong.* Working as a kind of secret society, the *obasajong* is the mouthpiece of the people and the guardian of the collective property, the land. The *obasajong's* cause is a collective cause, and its struggle is a collective one. Therefore, the *obasajong* hides behind a mask, not wanting to individualize the fight or the *obasajong's* power. The mask makes the cause collective and therefore entails a collective responsibility. Thus the *obasajong* disregards the modern, singular self or "I"of power and expands it to "We". The *obasajong's* language is carved in riddle, anecdote, and metaphor but not in a way that is hidden to the people... A body radiating messages, he or she is the metaphor of all the arts with the power to carve, dance, ritualize, and perform for the kingdom... Because the *obasajong* rejects the modern "I" of power, it is postmodern because it is a site of contestation. The *obasajong's* discourse indicts any and all modern imperial discourses... I view the *obasajong's* ongoing fight for the marginalized masses of Africa within the development narrative of new African nations as marred by the egoistic "I". Identifying with our suffering masses, most of our committed writers have posited themselves, although in most cases not explicitly, as *obasajongs.* This kind of writer or *obasajong* is a fighter who yesterday or today, physically or verbally, in oral or print form is crusading or has crusaded for the oppressed people of Africa (151, 152).

The African/Black writer, artist or critic as *obasajong* is uncompromisingly committed to the cause of the people, drawing from the inexhaustible pool of African social/cultural history and body of knowledge. But if they are accused as guilty of nativism and traditionalism, it will seem the accuser is an enemy, within or without, who is threatened by the dedicated aesthetics of the *obasajong.* For the voice of the *obasajong* is a collective voice which articulates the communal perspective, the perspective of the people, not merely that of the self.

There is another dimension to the argument on the so-called traditionalist aesthetics or nativist imperative in the (re)imagining of African literature and culture. This has to do with C. L. Innes who joins the discursive fray

by positing patronisingly that the cultural nationalist position of the nativists on the essentiality of African literature and its rootedness in African cosmologies and cultures self-contradicts and self-destructs. This is because, according to her, it strengthens the perspective of colonialist representations of Africa rather than weaken it. Innes submits that Eurocentric perceptions of African cultures have therefore received validation from the feeble responses elicited by cultural nationalists/ traditionalist aesthetics and it is worth quoting her at length:

> In response to the dismissal of 'native culture' by the colonizers, many cultural nationalists tended to assert the existence of a culture which was an anthithesis of the colonial one – and hence either antagonistic or complimentary to it. What is striking and paradoxical about the antithesis proclaimed by some nationalists is that it so frequently derives from and affirms the antithetical images already developed by the colonizer in order to justify his presence. Instead of denying the distinctions made by the colonizer to deny his presence, and insisting that the...African is capable of reason and self-discipline as the Englishman, many cultural nationalists celebrated the very characteristics for which they were disparaged – emotionalism, irrationality, primitiveness...Senghor, the spokesman for 'Negritude' and later president of Senegal, proclaimed that 'emotion is completely Negro, as reason is Greek' and went on to define the essential characteristics of Negro Literature as 'rhythm, emotion and humour' – characteristics which sound all too similar to those expected of the stage Negro minstrel. Where the colonizer has contemptuously discussed the native as belonging to the natural rather than the human world cultural nationalists affirmed their peoples' 'closeness to nature', and declared their culture essentially agrarian or peasant in contrast to the urban and mechanistic civilization of the colonizer. Where the colonizer insisted that the native had no history, and had been left out of its linear progression, cultural nationalists pointed to an unchanging tradition, a timelessness, or a circular history which will install the pre-colonial past. Where the colonizer celebrated his literature, his written records, as a mark of his superior and developing civilization, the colonized intellectual emphasized oral traditions, which were claimed to *preserve* the past, and celebrated the language and voice of the non-literate 'folk' (123).

I have chosen to elaborately lift Innes' words with deliberation. This is because though her position possesses a compelling edge, it also represents one of the most pernicious species of "colonialist criticism"[10] of other cultures under European hegemonic domination. To be sure, Africa is not alone in this epistemic violence and cultural imperialism of Europe as Innes herself includes the Celts and Australians in this Eurocentric critical theatrics. But as the Tiv[11] say, even when you are with your fiancée and

you are both attacked by a temperamental swarm of bees, self-preservation dictates that you seek safety first before you think of love. So to our cultural tents, the Celts and Australians! Innes has intrigued me as one of the most unrepentant Eurocentric critics I have encountered. Even in an epoch when some of her kind has charitably accepted guilt over the predation, ruination and flagrant misrepresentations European colonialism and imperialism visited on African culture and civilisation, she still engages in guerrilla criticism which opens gapingly her critical flanks and renders her vulnerable.

The first questions Innes needs to attend to before we can launch into the hinterlands of the argument are: who invited the Europeans to Africa? What motivated them to come in the first place? What moral justification did they have besides capital accumulation and mercantilist interests? In any case, must culture conform to that of Europe before it is human culture? Why should Europe set the standards of global culture as if it has exclusive prerogatives to do so? The truth is that African and other so-called marginal cultures of the world have enriched European culture and civilisation through their self-giving and as victims of an exploitative history of imperial appropriation of their resources and cultures for the efflorescence of Europe while these cultures have remained impoverished.

There is ample historical evidence to justify this position of African peoples, cultures and civilisation enriching Europe in the course of history. Many African artistic accomplishments, for instance, were looted during the heyday of colonial thievery and now adorn Western museums. The cities of Europe have been built with the flowing blood, sweat, wealth and resources mined from the colonies. This is an incontrovertible fact of history and it does not get vitiated whether Europe admits or acknowledges it or not. The colonies were exploited of their rich resources for the industries of Europe during the industrial revolution and the finished products were sent back to the continent as a profitable market and the accruing profits ploughed back for European industrialisation. Blacks who were forcibly enslaved worked the mines, sugar and cotton plantations to build Europe. These rhythms of historical violence perpetrated and perpetuated by imperial hegemony constitute a residuum which has distorted and continue to distort African/Black societies to date.

Wole Soyinka is particular about these historical injustices Western involvement in African societies through slavery, colonialism and imperialism, especially the artificial invention of nations which balkanised Africa into arbitrary boundaries according to European fiat has caused the continent and its Diaspora populations. These historical dislocations and disruptions, according to him, still continue to exert negative repercussions

on African/Black peoples thus providing a compelling basis for a programme of reparations for these historic wrongs. He states that the Atlantic slave trade "was an enterprise that voided a continent, it is estimated, of some twenty million souls and transported them across the Atlantic under conditions of brutality". (39) He further elaborates:

> More than quantifiable humanity was lost to that continent. The slave trade also imposed a rupture in the organic economic systems of much of the continent. It is a distortion that – partially at least, and compounded later by the imposition of colonial priorities in raw materials for Europe's industrial needs and the advent of multinational conglomerates – must surely account today for the intractable economic problems of that continent. Was the "partitioning of Africa" by the imperial powers simply a geographical violation of the people's right of coming-into-being as nations? Only if we insist on believing that the political instability within the so-called nations that make up the continent today owes nothing whatsoever to the artificiality, the sheer *illogic* of their boundaries. It is therefore appropriate to add partitioning to the wrongs that underlie the cry for reparations from Africa.... (39-40)

What Europe needs to do is to acknowledge these facts of history beginning with Eurocentric critics like Innes who misrepresent these immutable facts. Perhaps, Innes should be told that taking refuge in a tissue of sweeping generalisations does not help an argument. In specific terms, when she derides Negritude and inverts it in commas (whatever that means), she should realise that rhythm, emotion and humour are quintessential of the human condition and Europeans are not immune to them. These same human feelings will become celebrated as essentially European when it privileges the European wo/man of culture. Besides, why isolate this claim by Senghor? Is that all that Negritude is about? Certainly, Negritude especially the militant wing of David Diop, gave a serious indictment of, and damning verdict against, European colonial involvement in Africa when he described it deploying the metaphor of vultures, avian creatures that survive on carrion, on death. But critics of Innes' ideological persuasion will focus on what is convenient for, and affirmative of, them and their prejudiced audiences.

It is instructive that Innes does not isolate this metaphor as representative of Negritudinist poetics because of its truthfulness in capturing the devastation and death Europe wrecked on the continent. European science and technology, with all its advantages, has become an albatross even to Europeans themselves and many can confess that the future of humanity in terms of the environment and ecological life is in Africa. And perhaps, Innes should realise that history and a written culture

in Africa did not originate with the disruptive presence of Europe but rather predated it. When the Europeans first penetrated the continent, they met history but refused to acknowledge it because it was in their interest to deny the presence of history as a justificatory claim for colonial domination in the guise of their civilising and evangelising mission.

The running charges against these purveyors of "ancestuous aesthetics"[12] and other cultural nationalists of narcissism, romanticism and navel-gazing, in some quarters, only reinforce one fact: that the barbed critical arrows that have emerged from their quiver have met the appropriate marks. They have thus carefully unmasked the Western literary and critical establishment and their willing local collaborators who have surrendered their cultural birthright for a mere morsel of porridge or a tragic horn of hemlock. And the ancestral line of the latter group is as long as the list of sins and infidelities the radical trio has accused and found them guilty of.[13] In their literary and critical practices, the West advocates tendencies that freeze literature and art into a cultural experience for its sake (the art for art's sake school) and prescriptively proceed to evaluate culture as a hermetic event without materiality and moorings in its social conditions. They also fashion an impenetrable idiom with solecisms that hark back to Euro-modernist intellection.

These discursive altercations are to be expected because they are quintessential of the conflictual cultural formations in the world today and the never-ending ideological contest to control and determine signification. This is because whoever controls and manipulates the discourse on culture inevitably controls the levers of power. Chantal Zabus argues that there "will always be a conflict between traditionalists wanting to construct an ideal past and modernisers embracing change" and that "usually this takes the shape of nationalist (or regionalist) versus internationalist or cosmopolitan" (25). In the African situation, however, the argumentations about the origination of African aesthetics in traditional sources should not be merely self-serving, self-inflicting but should gravitate to an elaboration of how indigenous cultural knowledge production can privilege and galvanise the continent and Black peoples on the path of lasting decolonisation, freedom and sustainable development.

In this cultural schema, it is not sufficient to state that African oral traditions provide the substratum for modern African letters (Chinweizu & Co), though this is a legitimate and commendable project; or that such an argument is ahistorical and nativist (Soyinka and Appiah). Both critical formations possess merits but also disabling flaws. It is my proposition that where the real argument congeals precisely is to what useful ends we can put our multiple heritages: how African literatures and cultures can be

productively engaged and harnessed in the monumental task of rehumanising African humanity as a people who have been violated and brutalised in the course of history.

But I must hasten to qualify this historical derivation of the African/Black predicament. This is important because ascribing it to the violence of history is not synonymous with abdicating responsibility for the African predicament or absolving Africns of their iniquities and accusing others exclusively and self-righteously. Such a body of discourses, according to Iye, will only "overestimate the external causes of the moral crisis...and entirely overlooks the crucial notion of individual responsibility and ignores the role of peoples in the making of their own fate". To do so will align Africans with the categories of people who "have a tendency to believe in discourses that seek the source of their troubles outside them and their sphere of influence. They do not like to disturb their soul and to question their conscience in order to determine their part and take responsibility in the moral crisis of their society" (Iye 91).

Thus while Aricans rail against others for hyphenating their humanity, they must also dispassionately look into themselves and discover where they have compromised and reduced their humanity, too. *Blamocracy*, as the Somali writer, Nuruddin Farah calls it, will not advance the African/Black cause for development in a modern world but rather aggravate the condition. Reason: if African/Black peoples "do not place themselves, as individuals, in the geography of the collective collapse, but outside of it" (188), it will be tantamount to defecating in the hut and accusing another individual of the peculiar mess. Such escapist tactics seek only to renounce individual responsibility and to hide ostrich-like in "collective definitions" (Cingal 342).

As the above epigraphs which preface this chapter eloquently attest, an elemental cultural struggle has always structured the relations between Europe, Africa and other cultures of the world. The putative superiority of European culture and its unbridled arrogance has made it to trample and unleash violence on other subjugated cultures. Consistent with this imperial project of violently predating on other endangered cultural formations is the ideological manipulation of these cultures and their appropriation by Europe for its self-enrichment. Slavery and slave trade, colonialism and imperialism, and now globalization and the postmodern turn have all been complicit in this regime of imperial containment and domination of others. In all this, the production and circulation of dominant knowledge grids has been central and strategic to the imperial programme.

Complicit in this epistemic network were a violent European history,

politics, ideology and racism. Thus positioned as a monumental historical event, the colonial encounter magnificently (re)fashioned an elaborate body of knowledge(s) whose hegemony and discursive temperament were mediated by cultural politics and ideology. While colonialist knowledge systems exercised epistemological domination over the indigenous order and ideologically sought to interiorise it within its dominant fabrics, the dominated, indigenous tradition also devised strategies of refusing and resisting this regime of containment. Involved in this contestation were the various conduits of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourses and their informing political and ideological apparatuses. These were mobilised in the production and distribution of dominant knowledges during the heyday of colonialism and imperialism and in turn generated the counter-hegemonic processes that were deployed in the indigenous forms of knowledge to subvert this hegemony. The fabrication of this corpus of knowledges is now hypostasised in African literary traditions and cultures.

Thus, these tissues of issues are inescapably implicated in discursive strategies surrounding the politics of the production and distribution of knowledges in societies and cultures. This politics is particularly pronounced in societies and cultures that are writhing in transitional throes, and are in a state of becoming. And continental Africa is in a state of rapid transition, in a state of becoming perhaps, perpetually. This is particularly so in the nimble – footed, capricious, postmodern global neighbourhood we inhabit today which Rosalind Brunt *et al* characterise as "the age of satellite transmission and digital storage" where "all that is clear amid the confusion of voices is that old cultural assumptions no longer hold" and that "the difficult distinction now are not only those between high and low cultures but also those between state and market, national and multinational cultures". Correspondingly, therefore, the discourses - and their institutional frameworks- (re)generated by the postmodern epoch are subject to, and defined by, radical temporal shifts, strategic ideological mutations and political (re)positionings. This is because as Sara Mills informs, "[D]iscourses change over time and depending on the economic and social conditions within which they are generated" (118-9).

The amalgam of issues involved in this discursive existence gravitate to the asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination the turbulent currents of change inevitably inaugurate in the reconstitution of the calculus of historical reality. This is precisely what Mary Louise Pratt conceptualises as "the contact zone", the interstitial transitional gulf of "social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other" (4) in their rites of self-presencing and self-definition. This