

THE POST-INDEPENDENCE LITERATURE OF KENYA AND UGANDA

by Edward Hower

The Experience of Independence

In Okello Oculi's book-length poem, *Orphan*, an abandoned African child berates his African mother for having rushed away

*to the false hopes of romance  
with the Wild Cat in the western glow. (1)*

The orphan is clearly meant to represent Modern African Man, but why has the poet chosen a "wild cat" as a symbol for his European father, and hence for Colonialism and European Influence? The poet explains: this wild cat, *ngunyideng*, is a beast that

*traps hens by opening its anus for hens to peck and poke. When a hen has dipped its head far enough in to enable a grip, the wild cat suddenly closes its anus. It can thus carry a heavy weight without a fight... The hen suffocates fast. (2)*

Throughout this poem, as throughout much of the recent fiction and poetry of Kenya and Uganda, the rashness of the "hens" - even more so than the cunning of the "wild cats" - is attacked and lamented. The villains are those Africans who have been lured and trapped by promises of a better life in the Europeanized city, and who, by turning their backs on their heritage, have abandoned their people to moral and spiritual suffocation. And the heroes? Often they are very "modern" heroes indeed: suffering, bewildered, feeling men and women, powerless but for their eloquence to combat the frustrations of life in a radically changed world.

African traditions, as described in contemporary literature, have not entirely lost their hold over people, but they have been severely weakened by the immediacy of the problems of adjusting to a modern, foreign-influenced style of life. Many writers feel, however, that at least a partial return to traditional values is necessary if their countries are to escape becoming another dumping-ground for second-rate European products and ideas. These writers do not embrace negritude, nor are they concerned with defining the African personality or glorifying the past. Traditional values, they argue, are relevant today not because they are old, but because they can serve as reminders of the strengths that Africans have always possessed, and which they will need to call upon again to withstand the morally devastating process of social change.

Independence in Kenya and Uganda has often been depicted as a confusing, disillusioning experience. The people have quickly discovered

not only that it has failed to bring prosperity and economic self-determination, but also that many foreign ideas have as strong a hold over them as they did during the Colonial era. Formerly, the people had to be coerced and bullied into accepting them, now they feel forced to continue conforming to them out of fear that they will be left behind in the dust on the road to progress. African nations today must offer Western-style education and rule according to ideals founded in Europe and America and only partially African-Socialized, if they are to be able to provide the goods and services available to citizens in Western countries. They must provide them, because, having been promised them, most of the people want them. But many writers are asking: How badly do you want them? Badly enough to sell your soul for them? Are they worth it? And do you not have, as Africans, something that is worth as much, something that to you should be worth more? And they ask: If people exploit and dehumanize each other, sacrificing their cultural identity, can they truly be called an independent people? They answer No. They say No to ideological neo-Colonialism, they say No to governmental corruption and pomposity, and they say No to "progress" which takes place at the expense of human needs - all human needs. Some say it subtly and quietly, some humourously, and some in voices filled with rage and despair. But in whatever tone or style, all are attempting to impress upon their readers the necessity of re-evaluating what has been done to them in the past, and what they are doing to themselves today in their efforts to remake their society.

Thus, the function of the writer in Kenya and Uganda has been one of interpreting the experience of Colonialism and Independence, attempting to supply some continuity, some meaning to the changes that have taken place within him and around him in individual human lives. It is life at this everyday level, he feels, that tests the validity of the political, ideological life of his nation. Like his characters, the writer has serious questions about whether the egalitarian ideals set forth at Independence have been implemented by the leaders, and, more important, about whether many of the goals of nation-building - expansion of industry and higher education - have served the needs of the people for expressing what is uniquely theirs, their Africanness, their humanity, upon which they must depend to survive as a people.

In adopting a critical stance, the writer has alienated himself from the values of the elite of his society, the class to which, by virtue of his higher education, he should belong. By holding up these values to ridicule and scorn, he feels he is speaking with the voice of the common people, whose lives mirror his own past life and from whom he continues to take inspiration. Like many of them, he finds he is no longer suited to village life. Though many of the traditions he writes about still survive, he describes them with nostalgia and longing, as from across a great distance separating him from the forces that can no longer provide him the spiritual sustenance they once did. But, again like most of his compatriots, he finds he cannot feel at home in the modern city, either. His adjustment to his new environment is constantly

exacerbated by his awareness of the inequalities and injustices, vulgarity and dehumanization he sees have accompanied his nation's progress to Independence and modernization. Though the writer's function is unique, his feelings are not, they are taken from what he sees and experiences. If at times he becomes alienated from the "mainstream" of the life of the nation, it is because there are at times no ways to find it - too often it disappears beneath the surface of concrete, glass, and rubble, and then everyone, not just the writer, is alienated, from himself and his aspirations, from others, and from the African and Western values which should define its flow and keep it visible.

How readily the writer can relieve his alienation depends on how well he can resolve within him the conflicts between Africa and Europe, between past and present, and interpret his experience to the people around him who are attempting to synthesize the contrary influences in their own lives. Some writers have remained painfully ambivalent; though their sensitivity has allowed them to identify with their people, their inability to resolve their conflicts has prevented them from espousing any one position. For them, Independence is not seen as the culmination of an heroic struggle, but rather as an event which, in itself, had little effect on the capabilities of the people to solve the problems out of which the struggle erupted. Other writers have taken a definite stance, and have anchored themselves to a position of negation, of refusing to accept much of the ideology of modernization as set forth in Independence rhetoric. They have consistently pointed out that some of the promises made to the people have not been kept, and that others, when implemented, have resulted in social fragmentation and individual frustration. Finally, there are some writers who have, in addition to taking negative positions, attempted to reaffirm the strength and vitality of their people to withstand the effects of fragmentation and frustration. For these writers, conflicts between traditional African values and modern Europeanized ones can be resolved. If Africans will re-evaluate the foreign influences they have been lured into accepting, and will reaffirm pride, respect, manliness, all the traditional humanistic ideals, African culture can provide continuity and meaning to the lives of the people today, as it has in the past.

### Ambivalence

The conflicts between indigenous and foreign cultures, which runs through almost all of the literature of Kenya and Uganda, is never, of course, simple or clear-cut. The characters in James Ngugi's novels, Kikuyu villagers, are men and women whose lives have undergone many changes which have left them haunted by ambivalence. They can no longer choose between two ways of life, for both are already part of them. The line of demarcation between what is theirs and what is foreign, when it is visible at all, winds and shifts beneath their feet as they attempt to go about the business of their daily lives unentangled and

uncommitted. But, though no one wants to commit himself irrevocably to one side or the other, everyone eventually must. As religious and political issues force the sides farther apart, the line is drawn tighter, and people find themselves separated by it not only from their selves of yesterday, but from their families and neighbors as well. And as the conflicts become open and ugly, each side accuses the other of betrayal - betrayal of the ancient traditional values, and betrayal of the ideologies of nationalism and Uhuru.

Those who suffer the most in Ngugi's novels are those who attempt to reconcile the opposing forces, to select from both worlds those things which will be most useful and satisfying and to use them either to unify the people, or at least to find some personal freedom from inner conflicts. Waiyaki, in *The River Between*, is such a man. Hoping to make use of his mission education to lead his people in revolt against the colonialists, he finds himself opposed by a village preacher, Joshua, a misguided colonial stooge, and is eventually cast out by his villagers, accused of betraying them out of his refusal to renounce his love for Joshua's daughter. The reasons for Waiyaki's failure to convince both sides of the need for reconciliation lie in his unwillingness to compromise his visionary idealism. He is a thoughtful, sensitive man, who knows that neither side is wholly right or wholly wrong; to espouse the simplified view of either side, he knows, can only fail in the long run to win sufficient support for the cause of freedom. A simple, one-sided ideology, however, is what the nationalists demand, and since Waiyaki cannot give it to them, he finds he has outgrown his usefulness to the movement. Yet he cannot cease his efforts to resolve the conflicts within him. He loves the daughter of the nationalists' enemy, and in the world he hopes to build, there must be room for love and reconciliation for those like himself who care for all the people, for themselves, regardless of their positions in society or political affiliations. To do other than to seek reconciliation, Waiyaki feels, is the ultimate betrayal; grasping at facile substitutes for reconciliation can bring only personal and national disaster. This man is not a freak, a rarity, Ngugi feels - the villagers who finally condemn him creep away from the scene with guilt in their eyes, aware that they have been manoeuvred by their new leaders into rejecting the man they once loved. They know, and he knows they know, but he is as powerless as they. The die is cast. An open, violent conflict - the "Mau Mau" rebellion - is imminent.

In "*Mau Mau*" General, which is no doubt today's "official" version of Kenya's revolution, Warihui Itote (General China) describes the exploits of the leaders in such bold colours as to qualify them as Africa's new folk-heroes. Very few other writers, however, have attempted to glorify the war, for they find that the issues behind it were too complex and too painful for facile, one-sided evaluations. Indeed, until James Ngugi's *Weep Not Child* appeared in 1964, no African writer had attempted an in-depth evaluation of any kind. In this novel, Ngugi examines the alternative to thoughtful reconciliation between the sides: the resort to violence. And he finds that no matter how inevitable and

justified such a course of action was, it could not provide a true resolution to the conflicts out of which it erupted.

Ngugi finds little to glorify in the rebellion. Heroism, for him, is a word that cannot be applied to such abstractions as "the cause" or "the struggle"; it is a personal quality, brought about by circumstances of the moment in individuals who at other times are quite uncertain as to what constitutes the appropriate reaction to the problems confronting them. The heroes of *Keep Not Child* are, like Waiyaki, hesitant, Hamlet-like figures. Sometimes they act courageously, but more often they remain unsure, and their indecision renders them, like Waiyaki's fiancée who died of circumcision wounds in her effort to be both an initiated woman of the tribe and a Christian, fit only as sacrificial victims. In *Keep Not Child*, it is Ngotho who is sacrificed. Unable to reconcile his traditional beliefs with the violent methods employed by the rebels, he becomes isolated by both sides in the struggle, and loses his manhood - at first symbolically and then literally - as a result.

About those characters who do commit themselves, it is the author, in his treatment of them, who remains ambivalent. Howlands, the settler on whose land Ngotho's family lives and who is ultimately responsible for Ngotho's death, is not depicted as an evil man, but one who, like many of the other characters, becomes helpless to assert his humanity amid the inhumanity and chaos he is inevitably drawn into. The author, though never sympathetic to Howlands, clearly understands him and his weaknesses, and realizes how, under terrible stress, a person's nature can degenerate into paranoid cunning and violence. Ngotho's son, Boro, also takes a position which commits him to acts of violence, acts which later cause him to shudder with the knowledge of how great a price his humanity has paid as a result of his revolutionary activities. Ngugi's sensitivity to the human motives on both sides of the conflict is (to the European reader, at least) one of his great strengths as a novelist; occasionally, however, it gets in his way, and reduces some of his characters to positions of abject helplessness. Such a character is Njoroge, another son of Ngotho, who suffers and broods throughout the book, the passive victim of terrible, mindless forces. Only at the very end of the book does he realize that his efforts to pin his hopes on both European education and African nationalism have left him in that nether-land between, inadequately educated and weakly committed. But when he comes to view himself as a coward and a traitor, the reader is unconvinced - he has simply been too young and naive throughout. When, in the last few pages, he pulls himself together, what he stands for becomes apparent: out of death (Njoroge's family's and the nation's) must come rebirth, in a new generation (Njoroge) who will attempt to put the pieces back together again. Though Njoroge is not a very forceful symbol of this new generation, he is nonetheless effective as a reflection of the helplessness and tragedy with which so many people were afflicted during the revolution - the conflict which, to Ngugi, had a life and a maniacal force of its own that rendered everyone, the

committed on both sides and the uncommitted alike, powerless to retain control over their own lives and destinies.

Other Kenyan writers have, like Ngugi, emphasized the disintegrative effects of the war upon the population. Among the best are Leonard Kibera and Samuel Kahiga, many of whose stories are anthologized under the title *Potent Ash*. Kibera's brilliant story "The Stranger" recreates the terrible atmosphere of tension and suspicion that threatens to destroy the social cohesion of a Kikuyu village caught up in the war. In such a setting, the only man who is able to retain his humanity is a deaf-mute cobbler. This man defies everyone with his silence and perseverance - the British soldiers who beat him, the rebels who rob him, and the villagers who exploit, defile, and betray him. "He stayed. And he saved our soles", (3) Kibera says of the cobbler. The deaf-mute's defiance and suffering become a symbol of the villagers' lost unity, a reminder of the strength they had always found in their relationships with each other but had recently abandoned under the stress of war. The implication of the story is that only a madman or a saint - and the cobbler appears as both - could have performed such a service during such a trying time. No ordinary mortals, such as Ngugi's characters, could have remained so strong as to have preserved their integrity unscathed.

A deaf-mute also appears in Ngugi's third novel, *A Grain of Wheat*, in somewhat the form of a folk-hero, though of a very different sort than those praised by Itote. Ngugi's deaf-mute, like Kibera's, is innocent of any involvement in the violence. He is shot down while fleeing in hopeless panic from the scene of warfare. Perhaps the ultimate symbol for this period in Kenya's history will become this deaf-mute, a man caught between opposing forces of destruction, armed only with a silent cry of agony which, like those of Picasso's *Guernica* figures, will continue to be heard in men's hearts long after the rhetoric of myth-makers has died away.

In *A Grain of Wheat*, Ngugi continues to raise the questions of what constitutes heroism and betrayal, but here, he seems to have made up his mind, for he has added a new dimension to this book, a sense of history. The events he describes shape the attitudes not only of individual characters, but of an entire village, and by extension, a nation, toward its own past and toward the meaning of Independence. An individual can refuse to pass judgment, finding the task too painful upon discovering that others' weaknesses mirror his own, but a people must demand a clear history to give them an identity, and must evaluate their leaders carefully in order to reject the weak and place their trust in the strong as a gesture of their confidence in themselves. Thus, the people of Ngugi's village attempt to create some order out of the chaos they have experienced, and to find a man who, by retaining his integrity throughout the struggle, is worthy to become their leader. They must also know their history; they must discover who betrayed them in the midst of the war by betraying their hero, the man on whom they

had pinned all their hopes, to the enemy. They must discover the traitor because, in the words of one of the speechmakers at the Independence celebrations,

*even now this war is not ended. We get Uhuru today. Tomorrow we shall ask: Where is the land? Where is the food? Where are the schools? Let therefore these things be done now, for we do not want another war...no more blood...in these our hands. (4)*

When finally the villagers learn that the traitor is none other than the man they had recently chosen as their new leader, they are crushed, unable to react, after bearing so much suffering, to the immensity of the crime against them. Numbly, they disperse, the celebrations having come to a thudding anti-climax.

*The sun had faded; clouds were gathering in the sky... A few... elders remained behind to complete the sacrifices before the storm. (5)*

What will become of these betrayed people? The reader never really learns, for here Ngugi returns dramatically to the personal, rather than the public, domain; solutions to past conflicts and future dilemmas cannot, for him, be found anywhere else. Gikonyo, his central character, whose past and recent agonies mirror those of the village, is finally able to evaluate his experiences and gain a greater sense of his humanity as a result. Finding his once-shattered strength, he is able to forgive and love his wife, who betrayed him while he was away fighting and in detention, by yielding out of despair to the advances of a colonial stooge. It is no accident that her name - he calls her "a new Mumbi" - is that of one of the founders of the tribe, because for Ngugi she is the tribe, the land and its people, in whom Gikonyo has found renewed faith. Recovering his love, he can finally accept even her bastard child, and, with it, all the betrayals and tragedies of the past. Old conflicts, and many new ones as well, remain unsolved - the people will demand Where is the land? the food? the schools?; the storms will come and the sacrifices of the people may never be completed. But now, perhaps, the shared experience of trauma and recovery can become a new source of strength for those who must face the problems to come of making a new nation.

In *A Grain of Wheat*, the reader can still identify with the weaknesses as well as the strengths of the characters - the foolishness of the villagers who, desperate for a leader, created myths around an unworthy man, and the terror of the traitor, which trapped him into a single act of cowardice. But here, the author's unwillingness to harshly judge any of his characters is not seen so much as ambivalence, but as a refusal to make facile, politically expedient statements about the fate of the villagers and the nation. If we are left wondering about them, it is because their future is uncertain. They are not left without hope, however, for Ngugi has made a strong statement about the capacities of, at least, individuals among them to recover and assert

their faith in their people. What ambivalence remains in the author's attitude is no longer about the abilities of the people to regain their personal integrity, but about the political and military commitments they made in the past, the legacy of which they must live with today.

### Negation

The theme of betrayal runs through the writings of most of Kenya's and also Uganda's best writers. Many of the hottest political issues: land alienation, tribal rivalries, education, Africanization - are not often dealt with, but what does appear is a more general feeling of discontent and resentment, which is directed at the leaders of the new societies from whom the people have expected so much, but - according to the writers - have received so little, once Independence was gained. These leaders originally gathered support by rallying the people to the cry of freedom, democracy, and equal opportunity for all. The Kanu Manifesto (1960) stated that freedom from hunger, illiteracy, and unemployment should be guaranteed to all citizens, and assured them that Kenya would firmly reject the possibility of ever accepting the model of

*"government by the rich, of the very rich, for all", as practiced in some modern so-called democracies. (6)*

These ideals genuinely captured the imagination of the people, and the people have not lost faith in them today. What they have lost faith in appears in the literature to be the abilities of their leaders to implement the ideals in order that the entire nation, not just a privileged class, may enjoy their benefits.

Thus, it is not surprising that elites often appear as scapegoats in the fiction and poetry of Kenya and Uganda. One of the most amusing but bitter stories about elites is Leonard Kibera's "The Spider's Web", which describes the life of a house servant who finds the emotional strain of working for an African family more trying than the simple racial prejudice he encountered from his former European employers. The servant's mistress, who was once a local heroine for her defiance of the Europeans, has now become the "queen" of the household, who insists on "cornflakes in bed", emasculates her bureaucrat husband, and slaps her servant when he picks a twig off her favourite tree to pick his teeth with. Most attacks on the elite are head-on assaults: the flywhisk, symbol of the politician's power, often waved at political rallies to excite the emotions of the audience, is the subject of this poem by John Ruganda, a Ugandan.

#### The Flywhisk

*Fling it sharply, and growl:*

*Rebels hide their heads*

*Wave it gently, and smile:*

*Flies flit from pus drooping eyes  
Sling it on the arm, finally:  
Empty stomachs will drum for you. (7)*

Poverty and hunger and frustration are often contrasted with the comfortable circumstances in which the elite live, and the comparison is a bitter one. Kibera and Kahiga, Wilson Mativo, Barbara Kimenye in their stories, Okot p'Bitek, Okello Oculi, and Lennard Okola in their poems, are among the authors who present a disturbing picture of the new societies of Kenya and Uganda, a quite different one than what we might find in the newspapers or works of many political and social scientists. What these writers depict is a society fragmented into many discordant elements: a fat, corrupt, powerful but insecure elite; a tiny bourgeoisie struggling after the wealth and prestige of the elite; a poor and frustrated urban working class; and a mass of people who do not fit very well into any stratification system - peasants surviving under famine conditions, "forgotten" cattle-keeping peoples, unemployed urban migrants living off relatives or by their wits, criminals, beggars, and prostitutes. In fact, the society is hardly stratified at all, except when we look at the position of the elites as opposed to that of almost all the others.

Political influence, and especially higher education, are the means by which the elites have attained their positions. But higher education is viewed as a divisive influence: rather than preparing people for leadership, it allows them to become detached from the people they should serve. Okot p'Bitek has this to say about students:

*They are committed and conservative. They have vested interests. They look forward to graduation, the circumcision ceremony before joining the "big car" tribesmen. Our universities and schools are nests in which black exploiters are hatched and bred, at the expense of the tax payers, or perhaps heartpayers. (8)*

As for the majority of the population, who cannot receive a higher education, there seems to exist very limited access to the high standards of living enjoyed by the "'big car' tribesmen". "My job is to mend electrical breakdowns, and then buy paraffin" (9) is how Sam Tulya-Muhika's character, an electrician, expresses his frustration at finding himself left out of the process of modernization going on around him. He muses:

*I must toil and labour - for little or no reward. I am poor because everyone else is rich. It is not until everyone is rich that one is poor...Everyone is overtaking me - leaving me behind. No one looks aside; not even the government. (10)*

This man's job is a good one in Uganda, but his plight is that of "relative deprivation". He has been exposed to new ideologies, promising equal opportunities for all and often implying prosperity for all, and

has seen his own people take advantage of new opportunities available only to those with education or political pull, and grow prosperous, while he, though somewhat better off than before Independence, has remained relatively poor. The cleavage between men like this, and those at the top, is what the writers are angry about. The fact that it exists, and appears to be perpetuated, indicates to them that many of the egalitarian ideals of Uhuru have been betrayed.

That so many writers have chosen to identify with the poor and frustrated of their nations - instead of, say, writing about village affairs, or about the life-style which they, as educated people, are entitled - indicates the strength of their commitment to a negative stance, a position of refusal to accept the commitment of their leaders to modernization planning which leaves so many of the people far behind the privileged few.

A number of writers, some of the best of whom we shall discuss now, are asking their countrymen to look beyond the "tangible", socio-economic causes of their dissatisfaction, to the moral and spiritual malaise which they believe has afflicted their land as a result of foreign - and materialistic and dehumanistic - values. These writers emphasize that it is not just the ideals of Uhuru that have been forgotten, but the traditional African ideals and values as well. And as we shall see, there is a causative relationship that is sometimes stated and always implied: the new ideals have been betrayed because the older ones have been neglected and devaluated and despised.

The traditional cultures of Kenya and Uganda are rarely systematically analysed in the literature; for the writers they are given, understood entities, which need little explication. But wherever African culture is mentioned, in the same breath is implied that it stresses that one is considered good or bad, strong or weak, a success or a failure, according to how one lives up to personal rules of conduct. These ideal standards of conduct - the kind that Ngugi's characters refused to give up - can roughly be enumerated as self-confidence and pride, integrity, industriousness, and the willingness to give of oneself to one's family, kin, and neighbors. Ideas of wealth and status are not, of course, absent from traditional value structures; those with more wealth and/or power than others are accorded high prestige - if they achieved their positions without violating proper rules of conduct. But the point is that one need not be wealthy or powerful to be considered a valuable, respectable person. One can still maintain one's dignity and sense of worth regardless of one's economic or political position in society.

This is the point, the writers insist, that people seem to have forgotten.

The change in values, according to the writers, began during the colonial era when the Europeans, sometimes unwittingly, gave many Afri-

cans the notion that no one was worth anything unless he was rich and powerful. Too often, Africans internalized this notion - or at least some of them, the elites of today, did. The Europeans, by pointing to their wealth and power as justification for their right to rule, and then by withholding access to them, made many Africans feel they were lacking something essential, and were therefore inferior. These Africans were led to believe that the only way to regain their sense of worth was by equalling the Europeans, and that the only way to equal the Europeans was on the Europeans' terms. And today, this feeling is perpetuated by those who act as if the only way to continue feeling equal and strong and secure - as a person or as a nation - is to continue pursuing wealth and power, regardless of how many personal, humanistic (i.e. tribal, antiquated, irrelevant, worthless) values one violates.

It is precisely this new imported value system, stressing the importance of wealth, power, and modernity for its own sake, that makes living in the new societies of Kenya and Uganda such a difficult and confusing and unsatisfying experience for the characters and narrators of the literature. Life is difficult because even after an individual has assimilated the new values he has no guarantee that he will attain the promised rewards unless he is highly educated or has highly-placed friends. It is confusing because he is never sure how many new values he has assimilated, and must assimilate, and under what circumstances they are appropriate or inappropriate. And life is ultimately unsatisfying because in order to acquire the promised rewards, he must make so many sacrifices in terms of respectful, successful personal relations (successful as defined by the value system in which he has grown up) that he never receives the assurance that he is truly a person worthy of the admiration, love, and respect he cannot help feel he is entitled to. Thus, the writers tend to view with regret the weakening of traditional values not because they are traditional, not even necessarily because they are African, but because they offered every man, regardless of his accomplishments, opportunities for genuine personal satisfaction in life.

The new literary magazines from Nairobi especially abound with stories and poems emphasizing this theme. The characters and narrators of these young writers are constantly running amok because, in their recent economic success and arrogance, they have failed to respect their kin and friends, and have thereby betrayed the values of their people. The conflicts between the old and the new, once the rude remark or thoughtless insult has been made, appear to be irreconcilable - for some, there is no going forward, for others, there is no going back, for both the betrayer and the betrayed, the dilemma is a source of great regret and suffering.

It is not only the abandoned traditionalists, and those caught between the two worlds, for whom the experience of Independence has often been painful and hollow. The men and women of the city, committed

to following the lure of prosperity and cut off permanently from their rural kin and past, have not seemed to fare much better. The city in the new literature is a gaudy, bleak place; its inhabitants must, and can, adjust themselves to it, but it offers them little in return for the personal stability and satisfaction they have sacrificed in the process. Samuel Kahiga's story, "In Silent Shadows", explores the barren world of the "successful" executive. This man is critical of his educated girlfriend for having accepted the meaningless conformity of urban life, yet the reader is left convinced that he, too, is as much a passive victim of his life of mediocrity and materialism as he is detached and alienated from it. His relationship with his girlfriend is typical of relationships in the urban maelstrom from which they feel powerless to escape:

*In our circle of the whirlpool we have been thrown together and the forces around us hold us in place. Our dazed minds say that we have chosen it. (11)*

These city dwellers, though always fending off real intimacy, have little choice but to cling to what they have of each other for illusory security. For such men as the narrator of Kahiga's story, there is only one place to escape to for comfort - the world of the dancehall. Here he may relax with men he likes, regardless of their statuses, and perhaps, for a relatively few shillings, find a girl who will allow him to act out all his fantasies of virility and authority, in a manner which he may imagine his ancestors dominated their women and inferiors.

### Reaffirmation

These fantasies, and the lives of the girls who have learned to survive by catering to them, are explored in Okello Oculi's powerful prose and poetry novel, *Prostitute*. The author's narrator, ubiquitous and anonymous, is so much a part of the life of the city that she considers herself a symbol for all it stands for, a "guidepost on the road to progress". For, like the city, she is most concerned with two things, appearances and money. To her clients, she has no substance at all, her facade is her reality - her gaudy clothes, European-style wig, cream lightened skin, padded breasts, the mechanical movements she makes in mockery of true expressions of feelings. To her, her clients have no substance either, apart from the money she can tease them out of. Her relationships with practically everyone are dehumanized, superficial, and brutal, but because this particular prostitute is Okello Oculi's poet, they are also intimate, allowing her to view a wide range of people through eyes that see directly into those parts of them which are most ridiculous and revealing.

She knows nothing of politics, but she knows politicians and other elites very well indeed. She overhears them, makes "love" to them, and listens to them boast of their status. She knows what their status is

worth:

*Your qualification qualifies me into the edges of those pits  
that flow day and night with fermented stale urines and washings  
of clothes, slum clothes. Your car key you wave at me to unlock  
my body with unlocks the tiny door to my dungeon in the slums,  
opens the gates to the arena infested with red-eyed vampire  
bedbugs. (12)*

Obviously, her facade of compliance has not impaired her powers of perception. Her facade is her reality only to others, to herself she has another reality: passionate, lonely, frustrated, enraged, willful, strong. Though she cannot, dare not, communicate it to anyone (except the reader), she might find, if she could, many others in all walks of urban life living tortured dual existences similar to her own.

The prostitute (she has no name in the book, her life does not require her to have even that much identity) views society as if it were a man who had used her, and then denied that he had ever sunk so low. She, too, has been doubly betrayed - exploited by the lusts of those who have renounced the kindness and respect of their traditional culture, and mocked by the hypocrisy of those who have forgotten the democratic ideals of Independence. Yet she has not accepted her fate. Though she is an integral part of her degrading environment, her passionate protest blasts up through the conditions that threaten to suffocate her humanity. Okello Oculi has succeeded in creating a character who is more than a symbol, a victim, an observer. Despite the eloquence of his attack on the "prostitutes" at the top of the social scale, the reader remembers most vividly those at the bottom, the girls of the dance-halls and slums, for it is the integrity and vitality of his narrator that clearly triumphs over the dehumanizing circumstances in which she lives.

At the end of *Prostitute*, the narrator is left with a half-caste child, the gift of some "white Tarzan". In Okello Oculi's *Orphan*, we find a half-caste child (he is named Okello) appearing again, this time as the focus of the taunts and disgust, pity and sometimes love, of his kin and neighbors. They do not really know what to do with him, but he is there, confronting them: Modern African Man, and decisions must be made about what is to be his destiny.

Throughout the poem, Christianity, soldiers, higher-education, town women, tourists, anthropologists, white and black Europeans alike, are in turn lashed with the eloquent scorn of Okello Oculi's narrators. But the most devastating criticism of Europe and its history comes from the European himself, the orphan's father:

*Europe's propaganda and onslaughts at  
My pride and core corroded my madness,  
While she gloated at success and*

*Desecrated the sanctity of manness with  
Growing expertise and awarded degrees  
To its planners,  
And pet-named her quilt "profits". (13)*

The device of having a European speak these lines emphasizes the universal validity of Okello Oculi's message. The poet is not merely damning Europe and eulogizing Africa, he has become Man, evaluating Western history and culture, and urging himself to be worthy of that which is best in him, that which he has too often denied.

*Humaness and morals were known and practiced  
Before you began life;  
Tenderness, humility and decency  
By man to man in honour of manness. (14)*

the orphan's father tells him, urging him to revive these virtues which do not belong to Africa alone, but are basic to all humanity. In the struggle to reassert its "manness", its soul, its identity, Africa must not, the poet urges, take its cues from Europe, it must not

*Mimic...diseases in others  
In the name of "catching up"...  
No husband borrows soldiers  
To fertilize his wife with,  
And no sane woman goes for pregnancy  
From the murderer of her husband. (15)*

No, Africa must reaffirm its faith in its own strength and vitality:

*Give the injured manness in you a chance!  
Feed its yearns for a healing  
On the curative herb smokes of tenderness  
To manness in others. (16)*

This conclusion gives a perspective to the preceding chapters that has been missing from many of the works we have been looking at, a dimension of confidence and pride. All the bitterness and rage, conflict and ambivalence with which the villagers have considered the orphan and his mother and father are now seen as an essential cleansing process which modern Africa must undergo if it is to succeed in reasserting its heritage. By championing Africa's "manness", Okello Oculi is not advocating a return to any glorious past, rather he is urging that what essentially made the traditions of the past worthy of reverence - the strength that is found in human relationships which are based on respect and pride - be emphasized again, over-emphasized if necessary, in defiance of the forces of uncertainty and greed which threaten to bury them.

Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino*, another book-length poem, also emphasizes the vitality of African traditional life, with some of the most

eloquent praise-poetry to be found anywhere in African literature. Yet to praise Africa is by no means Okot p'Bitek's whole intent, for he does so in the process of making a bitter comparison between traditional African values and those of urban dwellers and elites. Like Okello Oculi's, his comparison is made for the purpose of reminding modern Africa that its ancient values need not be considered only things of the past - what is good and strong and beautiful has endured in its people, and must be allowed to flourish among them in a modern setting.

*Song of Lawino* is called *A Lament*, and the poet's narrator is a neglected rural wife who laments the changes that have taken place in her husband since he threw in his lot first with Europeans and then with African politicians. Lawino, the wife, speaking for traditional Africa, feels that her husband has benefited from neither set of associates. From the Europeans, he has received Christianity and an education, gifts Lawino feels are of dubious value. In Christianity is crystallized for her the essential hypocrisy, the inherent double standard, of all Western ethics:

*I refused to join  
The...catechist class  
Because I did not want  
To become a housegirl... (17)*

*My elder sister  
Was christened Erina  
But she suffered bitterly  
In order to buy her name.  
And her loin beads  
No longer fitted her... (18)*

*The Padre and the Nun are the  
same...*

*To them  
The good children  
Are those  
Who ask no questions,  
Who accept everything  
Like the tomb  
Which does not reject  
Even a dead leper! (19)*

Lawino understands that proselytizing represents an attempt to convert the African to servility, that its ministers do not practice the morality they preach, and that the Christian message, because it refuses to entertain serious spiritual questions put forth by Africans, cannot stand up to the Africans' scrutiny. She thinks of Christianity as a plot to make Africans reject all that is meaningful in their traditional lives; and of the education offered in the mission schools, she thinks no better:

*My husband's house  
Is a mighty forest of books  
Dark it is and very damp  
They choke you  
If you stay there long... (20)*

*Listen, my husband...  
...you behave like  
A dog of the white man!  
A good dog pleases its master...  
The dogs of white men  
Are well trained  
And they understand English... (21)*

Of African politics, Lawino is equally (but not so frequently) critical. Politics has not united the people, she says, but divided

them into different camps, and thus, from each other. And it has aligned them behind politicians who are more interested in accumulating spoils than in fulfilling their promises to the people.

*Someone said  
Independence falls like a bull elephant  
And the hunters  
Rush to it with drawn knives  
Sharp shining knives  
For carving the carcass.  
And if your chest  
Is small, bony and weak  
They push you off  
And if your knife is blunt  
You get the dung on your elbow  
You come home empty-handed  
And the dogs bark at you. (22)*

Such fighting over the spoils of Independence is not something only politicians do - everyone must, it seems, for without something tangible to show for one's foray into modern life, one is no longer considered a man of worth, or a man at all: such a man, who returns with nothing, is "silent" with shame, "Like a woman who has broken a taboo!"

But Lawino's song is not primarily one of bitterness, it is often one of seduction, for Lawino loves her husband and wants him back. She pleads with him to recall how beautiful he once thought her, and she him, and how meaningful his life with her was. Her descriptions of herself and her life sometimes tends toward the idealistic, for they are the stuff of beautiful poetry; the lure of traditional satisfactions is real and compelling, more so the poet feels, than the lure of the gaudy cities. Okot p'Bitek in his verse is able to present the beauty of African life in such a way that its capacity for idealization is its greatest strength and source of inspiration.

And so Lawino concludes her song with these exhortations:

*If you are not utterly dead...  
Take courage...  
You will recover...  
The blindness you got in the library  
Will be removed by the diviner!...  
You must vomit  
The shyness you ate in the church...  
Beg forgiveness from them [the elders]  
Ask them to give you  
A new spear  
A new spear with a sharp and hard point  
A spear that will crack the rock...  
Ask them to restore your manhood! (23)*

She asks him to realize what he has been doing, in blindly following Western ways:

*...when you insulted me...  
You were insulting your grandfathers...  
You were threatening  
To cut yourself loose,  
To be tossed by the winds  
This way and that way  
Like the dead dry leaves  
Of the olam tree  
In the dry season.* (24)

And her final plea is this:

*Here is my bow-harp  
Let me sing greetings to you...  
Let me show you  
The wealth in your house  
Ocul, my husband,  
Son of the bull  
Let no one uproot the Pumpkin [pumpkin: the Acholi symbol of the  
folly of human rashness] (25)*

It is not the poet's purpose to urge his readers to eschew all foreign influences - though this is what Lawino says - but to make them aware of the necessity of evaluating foreign influences critically--which is what Okot p'Bitek does throughout the poem. In order to evaluate, one must have a set of standards by which to judge his culture--his own set of standards.

In the concluding stanzas quoted above, traditional culture is again presented in the imagery of a medicine, a purgative, because the poet feels that in order for the African to recall his own unique way of seeing things, he must first cleanse his mind of foreign ideas and thinking patterns which cannot help but prejudice his perception and judgments. Without undergoing this cleansing process, the African is "cut loose" from his identity, and is in danger of falling under a new kind of servitude--"to be tossed by the winds/this way and that way"--at the mercy of every foreign influence and indigenous whim of the moment that comes along. Such helplessness cannot help but render him "dead", in terms of the virility of his culture. Okot p'Bitek's Lawino, like Okello Oculi's prostitute, is a strong, compelling character, one who by her example as well as her words has shown that by critically examining Africa's past and present, the African can once again rely on his manhood, his pride, his unique strengths. By reaffirming their faith in the humanistic values of Africa, the poets tell their brothers, and by becoming aware of the "wealth" in their own "house", Africans can remake their society into a satisfying place in which to live.

FOOTNOTES

1. *Orphan*, p. 14
2. *Ibid.*, p. 103
3. *Potent Ash*, p. 55
4. *A Grain of Wheat*, pp. 250-51
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 252-53
6. KANU Manifesto, p. 9
7. *Zuka* 1, p. 32
8. *Transition* 32, p. 47
9. *Zuka* 1, p. 7
10. *Ibid.*, p. 8
11. *Nexus* 3, p. 13
12. *Prostitute*, p. 28
13. *Orphan*, pp. 97-98
14. *Ibid.*, p. 98
15. *Ibid.*, p. 99
16. *Ibid.*, p. 99
17. *Song of Lawino*, pp. 112-13
18. *Ibid.*, p. 114
19. *Ibid.*, p. 137
20. *Ibid.*, p. 202
21. *Ibid.*, p. 205
22. *Ibid.*, pp. 188-89
23. *Ibid.*, pp. 209-12
24. *Ibid.*, pp. 213-14
25. *Ibid.*, pp. 215-16

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