

CULTURAL REVOLUTION AND THE AFRICAN NOVEL

by

Dr. J.I. Okonkwo

The centrality of culture to a people's material and spiritual well-being is a long-established truism. The idea has received emphasis in African circles from all who have thought seriously about the state of African societies since the appearance of foreign political, mercantile, and religious actors on the African continent. Slavery and colonialism propelled Africa into the world economy. Since the achievement of political independence, the far-reaching consequences of colonialism have relentlessly created problems manifested in moral chaos, socio-economic confusion, and political instability. The rash of coups that have now become the only consistent feature of African governments, is symptomatic of the insecurity which characterized post-independence African societies. In essence,

The succession of military coups of Africa since 1965 has thrown the contradictions of African independence into bold relief. These coups in themselves are only manifestations of a deep-seated malaise that has afflicted the African body politic, dramatizing in the dash for power the interest of an elitist minority in uniform armed with the most sophisticated weapons that money can buy...

But these coups, as they appear in rapid alternation, continue to bear testimony to Africa's frenetic search for some type of true independence.

In the pre-independence years, African nationalists sought the re-establishment of coherence and integrity in African life through programmes of cultural retrieval. The efforts in literature resulted in the works, especially novels, categorized as those of "cultural nationalism" which debunked West European culture and extolled Africa's traditions. By concentrating on the presentation of pre-colonial or colonial African societies, as in Camara Laye's The African Child, these novels drew attention to the wholesome dignity of African traditional life and institutions. Achebe's Things Fall Apart and Arrow of God are recognized as classics in this literary movement.

However, being realists and intellectuals, some of the novelists often penetrate the real dilemma of Africa's position; and, while admitting the attraction of Africa's Golden Age, the fact of survival in the modern world, they also intimated, cannot be easily brushed aside, or wished

away. Thus, the Most Royal Lady of Kane's Ambiguous Adventure, while recognizing the beauty of traditional life, especially in its fusion with Islamic religious aspirations, would wish the people of the Diallobe to learn "how to join wood to wood", in order to preserve their dwelling places, their bodies, and learn how "to conquer without being in the right". The dilemma of how to reconcile the claims of the past with the exigencies of modern life occupies a central place in the theme of Ambiguous Adventure, and stimulates the debates through which the novel progresses. The argument between the chief of the Diallobe and the Teacher of the Glowing Hearth, over whether to allow the people to attend the French school, or maintain their patronage of the devotional school, called the Glowing Hearth, is instructive. The School here symbolizes the acquisition of new foreign technology and culture:

"If I told them to go to the new school... they would go en masse. They would learn all the ways of joining wood to wood which we do not know. But, learning, they would also forget. Would what they would learn be worth as much as what they would forget? I should like to ask you: can one learn this without forgetting that, and is what one learns worth what one forgets?"

"At the Glowing Hearth, what we teach the children is God. What they forget is themselves, their bodies, and the futile dream which hardens with age and stifles the spirit. So what they learn is worth infinitely more than what they forget."

"If I do not tell the Diallobe to go to the new school, they will not go. Their houses will fall into ruins, their children will die or be reduced to slavery. Extreme poverty will be entrenched among them, and their hearts will be filled with resentment."

"Extreme poverty is, down here, the principal enemy of God."

"Nevertheless, master, if I understand you alright, poverty is also the absence of weight of substance. How are the Diallobe to be given knowledge of the arts and the use of arms, the possession of riches and the health of the body, without at the same time weighing them down, dulling their minds?"²

Oyono's Meka of The Old Man and The Medal, deeply humiliated and degraded for his failure to appreciate the real import of the medal presented, and his failure to fall in step

with the cultural rituals of the new world (represented by the colonial agents), can only complain that his problem "is only the whites, just the whites." His fellow Africans realize that peace and dignity will continue to elude them, unless they learn to counter the white menace. The discomfort about Africa's underdog position in the world is even more articulately expressed in the novels of Mongo Beti. In spite of Iean Medza's rambunctious adventure and enjoyment in the Kalan Garden of Eden, his attitude to the simple villagers, which oscillates between admiration and contempt, remains, in the main, supercilious and critical. His overall assessment of them and their mode of existence is partly illuminated during his leave taking of them:

They lavished advice and blessings on me with great generosity, nearly all saying exactly the same things in exactly the same fashion: they wore identical expressions, their general attitude and homely wisdom came off the same peg in every case. It was all madly boring.³

Most readers of Mongo Beti's Mission to Kala are so taken in by his seeming Afrocentric perspective, that they often miss one important aspect of Medza's discovery from his experience in Kala. It is obvious that he discovers, among other things, the pleasure of communal relationships and freedom from unnecessary inhibitions. However, he also discovers laziness, time-wasting, lasciviousness and lack of ambition to rise above mere existence; but also

Not least among these was the discovery - made by contact with the country folk of Kala, those quintessential caricatures of the 'colonized' African - that the tragedy which our nation is suffering today is that of a man left to his own devices in a world which does not belong to him, which he has not made and does not understand. It is the tragedy of a man bereft of any intellectual compass, a man walking blindly through the dark in some hostile city like New York. Who will tell him that he can only cross Fifth Avenue by the pedestrian crossings, or teach him how to interpret the traffic signs? How will he solve the intricacies of a subway map, or know where to change trains?⁴

From the practical point of view, it is impossible for Africa to retreat into the seclusion of a Kala. Even Umuofia at Umuaro have felt the impact of the new world order. Location like Echewa's setting in The Land's Lord where father High becomes vulnerable on account of his isolation, hardly exists anymore. But were they in existence it would be foolhardy to retreat into them. The modern world compels. At present

Africa is "a guest in a century which belongs to Europe and the Western hemisphere." (Nuruddin Farah, Sardines, London: Allison & Busby, 1981, p. 207).

It becomes imperative therefore that Africa masters the signposts and skills of the modern world, in order to control it and imprint her own influence on it, as advocated by the The Most Royal Lady. For this reason, such sentiments as have been expressed by the literary critics of the triumvirate in Towards the Decolonization of African Literature,⁵ where an advocacy for the sole cultivation of simple literary art, as characterized traditional society (an appeal to traditionalism that Soyinka dismisses by reference to reversion to raffia skirts and jungle drums⁶), sound facile and simplistic. The obstacles to nation-building and governance have been stressed by an eminent Nigerian scientist and scholar, who analyzes the stultifying effects of the weight of tradition on national development. An unqualified adherence to traditional tenets and practice, undermine seriously any effort at forging national unity; it impedes progress because "There is the conflict between the ideal of Nigerian and indeed of African citizenship and the reality of tribal narrow loyalties." He poses the inevitable question: "Can we modernize and remain African?"⁷ Another writer, Mariama Ba, has recently re-echoed this anguish of standing between the devil and the deep blue sea:

Should we have been happy at the desertion of the workshops, the shoemaker's shops? Should we have rejoiced so wholeheartedly? Were we not beginning to witness the disappearance of an elite of traditional manual workers?

External questions of our eternal debates. We all agreed that much dismantling was needed to introduce modernity within our traditions. Torn between the past and the present, we deplored the 'hard sweat' that would be inevitable. We counted the possible losses. But we knew that nothing would be as before. We were full of nostalgia but were resolutely progressive.⁸

The consensus then is that African culture, for the African, is vitally relevant for the preservation of identity, for healthy development, and for active participation in the future destiny of African or other societies, for

only the devotees of traditional values are capable of furthering their personal development in the modern world and expanding it to the fullest extent. But for them to recover these values does not mean to return to the societies of old, not only for the practical reasons, or even for reasons of conven-

ience, but because they are men of the twentieth century.

Divorced from their cultural roots, for instance, such characters as Achebe's Obi Okonkwo (No Longer At Ease), Armah's Baako (Fragments), Awoonor's Amamu (This Earth, My Brother), like the Lagos Umuofians "are rootless, urbanized, degraded: victims of the colonial heritage which crippled old values, they are adrift in a modern limbo, unable to return to their original morality or embrace a fruitful one."¹⁰

With greater realization of the extent of cultural estrangement on the part of the younger generations of Africa in particular, the emphasis of some writers has shifted from the expression of cultural nationalism to a demand for cultural revolution: "Total national liberation must manifest itself in the establishment of a revolutionary culture as the foundation of nation-building."¹¹ The new effort is to employ literature in the vanguard movement of mapping out, in more definitive concrete terms what direction the new African culture is to take, in the new definition that art "is not a mirror, but a hammer: it does not reflect, it shapes."¹² A more prescriptive approach to the projection of values is demanded from some quarters of writers in order to assist in "bringing about a system by which their society must exist."¹³ Many recent African novelists have consequently transcended the expository techniques of the cultural nationalism school, and attempt to indicate what features of the African traditional system are worth preservation. The task is approached in a number of varied ways - direct statement, the juxtaposition of old and new with comments on the relative merits of each, through characterization, or through a detailed analysis of a factor that requires reconsideration. All of these features are observable in the socialist realistic novels like Soyinka's Season of Anomy, Armah's Two Thousand Seasons, or Ngugi's Petals of Blood. Here, Soyinka's Season of Anomy will be used for illustration.

Soyinka's Season of Anomy (1973),¹⁴ opens with the isolated, neglected location, Aiyero, considered by the modernists at Ilosa (the swinging capital of this African country) as "the prime example of unscientific communalism, primitive and embarrassingly sentimental." (p. 2.). Except as a target of slave raiders in its history, Aiyero has remained untouched by the reorganizations of institutions and disruptions of life patterns and value systems experienced by the rest of the country. Consequently, its original, traditional system has remained intact, free from outside contamination. Soyinka rehearses Aiyero's customs and rituals which have, even in modern times, fashioned young men and women who are able to resist the mass corruption of the modern world. Aiyero's integrity derives, not from ignorance or

innocence, that type of innocence that is vehemently spurned by the seventeenth century poet, John Milton, who writes:

I cannot praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue
unexercised and unbreathed, that never sallies out
and sees her adversary, but slinks out of the race,
where that immortal garland is to be run for, not
without dust and heat. Assuredly we bring out
innocence into the world, we bring impurity much
rather; that which purifies us is trial and trial
is by what is contrary.¹⁵

Aiyero, like its parent body, Aiyetomo, sends its young people all over the world "to experience other mores and values," but the wonder is that, unlike the youth of the rest of the country, represented by Amusa Sango of Ekwensi's People of the City, or Obi Okonkwo of Achebe's No Longer at East, the Aiyero youths always voluntarily come back to their roots. From their earnings in the outside world, they contribute materially to the maintenance of Aiyero and its institutions. Freedom, therefore, is one of the basic tenets of Aiyero. Individuals are free to find out for themselves other ways of life and to adopt those, if they so desire. "All that counts is that they see the difference and they choose" (p. 10).

The most remarkable feature of Aiyero is its communalism which has made it escape the excessive individualization which characterizes the modern world, and which is responsible for the fragmentation of modern societies, breaking up families and clans. This break-up has loosened the controls that regulate the individual's obligations to his fellow men. Characters like Chief Nanga of Achebe's A Man of the People, Koomson of Armah's The Beautiful One's Are Not Yet Born, Chui and Kimeria of Ngugi's Petals of Blood, or Ababio of Armah's The Healers, exemplify the disruptive nature of modern individualism. Aiyero's institutions ensure, not a monotonous, undifferentiated society, but one in which each individual plies the trade best suited to his ability, and Aiyero is a non-commercial, non-materialistic society, devoid of the economic speculations of the modern world. It is a community that devotes itself to the basic occupations of farming and fishing. It produces sufficient material for its self-sustenance; and all its products go back to its community, making it possible for them to control the nature and extent of their consumption and expenditure. The funeral of the Custodian of the Grain, for instance, spreads over a number of days and, because of the great regard for him and his exalted position, the community spends lavishly for the celebration. The set-up resembles that in other pre-capitalist societies where

The individual is placed in such conditions of

gaining his life as to make not the acquiring of wealth his subject, but self sustenance, its own reproduction as a member of the community, the reproduction of himself as a proprietor of the parcel of ground, and, in that quality, as a member of the commune.¹⁶

The community of Aiyero has an unshakable confidence in itself, as indicated in the meaning of its name. "It works, it is upright and balanced because we have made it so." (p. 8). This self-confidence is transmitted to the children in their earliest years, and is responsible for their ability to withstand temptations from corruptive influences. As Pa Ahime instructs Ofeyi who had gone to Aiyero, first to seek disciples in his socialist campaigns, but later to seek enlightenment and recruits for his cultural retrieval programme:

We are here, we prosper and we know harmony. It suffices. It is the first principle we teach our children, they grow up despising dead knowledge whose nature is the nature of what is gone, dead, rotted. This is not to say that we keep things hidden. All our people know from where we came, and they know that we founded Aiyero to seek truth, a better life, all the things which men run after. They also believe that we found it. That is why our children always come back. (p. 9)

Aiyero practises an eclectic and pragmatic religion which he refuses to label, believing in religion's reflection in the lives of the people rather than its isolated labelling and description. To the citizens, its religion is "a way of life" (p. 10), very closely bound to the everyday living of the people as opposed to the practice of those whose concern is the "paying lipservice to dubious gods." What Aiyero has are "observances" celebrated through highly stylized rituals as demonstrated during the custodian of the Grain's funeral. This ritual is marked with solemnity and enlivened with colourful displays of intricate dances, singing, and appeasement of the ancestors through diverse offerings of blood, oil, kolanuts, and pigeons. The ceremony is crowned with a stylized slaughter of eighty select bulls whose gushing blood concludes the cleansing act.

Aiyero is presented as a pointer to the direction which the new Africa requires in its quest for regeneration through cultural retrieval. The chief protagonist of Season of Anomy, Ofeyi, comes to Aiyero "wallowing in the filth and compromises of Ilosa" (p. 23), and discovers that Aiyero can provide some of the solutions to the problems of the outer world, which is immersed in greed, corruption, and tyranny. Ofeyi is anxious

to escape from Ilosa where "Money, in enlisting in its own servies the ablest minds from the field of politics, economics, science, religion, education, literature, and the other arts, was able to create a new culture, a society which it, money, was both the image and the soul."¹⁷ For himself, Aiyero acts as a balm, restorative and invigoratin; and he keeps coming back, especially when in distress. He wants something more - to introduce some of the Aiyero tenets and practices into life outside -

the Aiyero ideal disseminated with the same powerful propaganda machine of the Cartel throughout the land, taking hold of undirected youth and filling the vacuum of their transitional heritage with the viril shoot (p. 19).

Iriyise, Ofeyi's girlfriend, "the gin-and-tonic siren from the godless lights of the capital," that notorious courtesan "whose only knowledge of fulfilment till now had been the aftermath of love" (p. 7), "took to Aiyero as a new organism long in search of its true element" (p. 3) - which demonstrates that a dose of Aiyero would be the salvation of a country lost in its feverish mad pursuit of material wealth, and in its social and moral corruption and degradation. Ofeyi wants to inject the rest of his country men and women with the "essence of leaves or bark" which Aiyero injects into her children and "innoculates them against the poison of places like Ilosa, against temptations such as the Cartel can offer" (p. 24).

In spite of his admiration for the integrity and incorruptibility of Aiyero, Soyinka suggests that, in its totality, Aiyero is inadequate for present needs. He declines an offer to stay and be absorbed in its organization as successor to the dead Custodian of the Grain. To be immersed in Aiyero would be to take a retrogressive step, for its confines are narrow and its self-sufficiency suffocating. The modern world needs expansion and co-operation. The modern world is a reality which has bridged the gulf that separated people and their achievements from each other. What is necessary is to extract the relevant invigorating qualities which can serve as stabilizer for the present. Some of these qualities are honesty, integrity, dedication to work and ideals, earnestness, moral probity, and public spiritedness. Aime Cesaire identifies others in

the civilization that has given original communal institutions to the world of politics and sociology, as for example the village democracy or the age group of family ownership... and so many institutions that bear the stamp of the spirit of solidarity; "this civilization, the same that on another plane

has given the world of morals an original philosophy founded on ¹⁸the respect of life and the integration in the cosmos.

All this corresponds with the recommendations of seasoned statesmen like Senghor¹⁹ and Nkrumah;²⁰ and Kofi Awoonor believes that "the artistic thrust of modern day Africa is for synthesis, acculturation, for the cultural amalgams that will still express her essential nature."²¹

NOTES

¹Kofi Awoonor, The Breast of the Earth, New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1978, p. 46.

²Cheikh Hamidou Kane, Ambiguous Adventure, 1962, trans. Katherine Woods, London, Heinemann, 1972, pp. 34-35.

³Mongo Beti, Mission to Kala, 1957, trans. Peter Green, London: Heinemann, 1966, p. 160.

⁴Ibid., p. 181.

⁵Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie, Ihechukwu Madubuike, Toward The Decolonization of African Literature, Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishing Col LTD, 1980.

⁶Wole Soyinka, "Neo-Tarzanism: The Poets of Pseudo-Tradition," Transition, 48, 38-44; "Aesthetic Illusions: Prescriptions for the Suicide of Poetry," The Third Press Review, 1 September/October, 1975.

⁷Eni Njoku, "Convocation Address, June 8, 1984," University of Nigeria Nsukka Graduate Album, 1963-1966, An Annual Publication of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, 1966, pp. 97-98.

⁸Mariama Ba, So Long a Letter, 1980, trans. Modupe Bode-Thomas, Ibadan: New Horn Press, 1981, pp. 18-19.

⁹Lilyan Kesteloot, Intellectual Origins of the African Revolution, Washington, DC: Black Orpheus Press, 1972, p. 105.

¹⁰Steven Jervis, "Tradition and Change in Hardy and Achebe," Black Orpheus, 2, Nos. 5 & 6 (1970), 36.

¹¹Ladun Anise, "Cultural Revolution and National Liberation," The Black Scholar, Vol. 6, No. 7 (April 1975), 45.

¹² Leon Trotsky, Literature and Revolution, Michigan: Ann Arbor Paperbacks, 1960, p. 137.

¹³ Kole Omotoso, "Politics, Propaganda and Prostitution," Afriscopes IV, ii (1974), 47.

¹⁴ Wole Soyinka, Season of Anomy, London: Rex Collings, 1973. Page references to the novel are from this edition.

¹⁵ John Milton, "Areopagitica," The Student's Milton, New York: Appleton - Century-Crofts, Inc., 1961, p. 738.

¹⁶ Karl Marx, Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations 1858, trans, Jack Cohen, intro. E.J. Hobsbawm London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1964, p. 74.

¹⁷ Chancellor Williams, The Rebirth of African Civilization, Washington, DC: Public Affairs Press, 1961, p. 74.

¹⁸ Aime Cesaire, "World Congress of Black Writers," Black Orpheus, No. I (Sept. 1957) 45.

¹⁹ Leopold Sedar Senghor, On African Socialism, 1961, trans. Mercer Cook, New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1964, p. 165.

²⁰ Kwame Nkrumah, "African Socialism Revisited," African Forum, No. 3, Winter 1966, p. 7.

²¹ Kofi Awoonor, The Breast of the Earth, p. 33.