

Modern African Literature and Cultural Identity

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Modern African literature has gained recognition worldwide with such classics as Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Ngugi wa Thiongo's *Weep Not Child*, and Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*. This recognition was reinforced by Soyinka's winning of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1986. Modern African literature is written in indigenous African languages and in European languages used in Africa. Written African literature is very new compared to the indigenous oral tradition of literature which has been there and is still very much alive. While there are literary works in Yoruba, Hausa, Zulu and Sotho, among others, this literature in African indigenous languages is hardly known outside its specific linguistic frontiers. Writers such as Mazisi Kunene, Ngugi wa Thiongo and the late Okot p'Bitek first wrote some of their works in African languages before translating them into English. Most African writers, however, write in English, French, and Portuguese. There is the Eurocentric temptation to see modern African literature written in these European languages as an extension of European literature. However, after modern imperialism, language alone cannot be the sole definer of a people's literature.

Defining African literature, Abiola Irele writes:

The term 'Africa' appears to correspond to a geographical notion but we know that, in practical terms, it also takes in those areas of collective awareness that have been determined by ethnic, historical and sociological factors, all these factors, as they affect and express themselves in our literature, marking off for it a broad area of reference. Within this area of reference then, and related to certain aspects that are intrinsic to the literature, the problem of definition involves as well a consideration of aesthetic modes in their intimate correlation to the cultural and social structures which determine and define the expressive schemes of African peoples and societies (1981, 10).

This definition of literature takes note of place with its people and society having "aesthetic modes" and "cultural and social structures." Language is not the prime focus in this definition of literature, whose "essential force" is "its reference to the historical and experiential"

(Irele 1981, 11). African writers create works “which are peculiarly African and yet set in the modern world” (Mbiti 1969, 228). It is this cultural distinctiveness that I intend to tackle in discussing modern African literature in English.

Ethical and Moral Nature of African Civilization

Traditionally, African literature is an informal evening fire-side school in which elders and parents teach the young ones ethics, morality, and the culture of the community. The inter-relatedness of literature and morality is demonstrated by various poetic traditions in Africa. An example is the Igbo *Mbari* tradition, a celebration through art of the world and the life lived in it. It is performed by the community on command by its presiding deity, the Earth goddess Ani. Ani “combined two formidable roles in the Igbo pantheon as fountain of creativity in the world and custodian of the moral order in human society. An abominable act is called *nso-ani*, taboo-to-Earth” (Achebe 1990, 167). Thus African literature is traditionally didactic. The writer in modern-day Africa has assumed the role of the conscience of the society, reminding readers and society of the high cultural ethos that must be upheld. Since the small communities have merged into states, writers now focus on nation-states; hence they produce many works of literature satirizing the corruption of modern governments. Almost all the works of Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, and Ngugi wa Thiongo are criticisms of negative social and political practices. The aim of the criticisms is to change the transgressors of sociopolitical ethics and morality into positive agents in society.

Utilitarian Function of African Literature

There is, culturally speaking, no art for art’s sake in Africa. Every literary work has a social function. Songs, prayers, praise chants and abuse are placed at the service of the community. This utilitarian function of orature is imbibed by modern writers. Rites of passage are celebrated with poems. In *Idanre and Other Poems* Soyinka bases “Dedication: for Moremi” on the naming ceremony of his Yoruba people. The speaker-parent of the poem impresses upon the daughter the African cherished qualities of fertility, wealth, and longevity. For the child to live to be a worthy ancestor, the poet exhorts:

Fruits then to your lips: haste to repay
The debt of birth. Yield man-tides like the sea
And ebbing, leave a meaning on the fossilised sands (1967, 25).

Ancestors are highly valued in traditional Africa and everybody lives to be a deserving one. In "For Georgette" in Christopher Okigbo's *Heavensgate*, the birth of a child is symbolic of communal renewal and revitalization. In Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* there is also a naming ceremony of Ikem and Elewa's daughter. She is symbolic of hope for the future. Children are highly cherished in Africa as a means of immortalizing the race. The death of very old people is also celebrated as in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Modern African literature is the repository of the cultural life of the people and is a major source of education for the young everywhere and urban people who have lost touch with their roots.

Social Cohesion

The African writer has been nurtured in a society in which the sense of community is very strong. A cardinal point for understanding the African view of humankind is the belief that "I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am" (Mbiti 1969, 108-9). Literature in Africa has been and remains an affirmation of faith in one's cultural ideals. Social cohesiveness is very important to Africans because they believe that "the earliest act of civilization was...the establishment of a cooperative, interactive, human community." Kunene adds:

The idea of integrating the artist's vision within a broad social experience becomes a normal and natural process that does not require rules for its application. Both the philosophic and artistic worlds fuse to produce a discipline that aims at affirming the social purpose of all expressions of human life. In short, the ideal of social solidarity is projected (1982, xvi).

Modern African literature is very socialized. This literature is different from that which focuses on the individual. It is this communal spirit which informs the characterization and social analysis in Soyinka's *Interpreters*, Ngugi's *Petals of Blood*, and Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*. In each of these novels a group, rather than an individual, is emphasized. There is no single protagonist that overwhelms other characters. For instance, in *Anthills of the Savannah* it is the fate of the nation of Kangan that is at stake in the lives of Sam, Christopher Oriko, Ikem Osodi, and Beatrice Okoh. Similarly in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*, the community can be said to be a protagonist struggling against Western intruders to maintain its cultural practices. The focus on society with its attendant social criticism in modern African literature is in the African tradition.

Defense of African Culture

African writers, in affirming their faith in their native culture, defend it against alien encroachment and prejudices. The Negritude writers asserted their Africanity to fight against colonial prejudices. Even though at times the poets might have romanticized the African past, their exaggerated portrayal is a weapon against cultural annihilation. Every African writer is a negritudinist in one way or another. One example of the defense of the indigenous culture against the invading Western one is expressed in Okigbo's *Heavensgate*. The contrast is clearly expressed in the use of negative images to describe alien culture and positive ones to describe the African way of life. John the Baptist is made ridiculous as he carries a "bowl of salt water" "preaching the gambit:/life without sin,/without life" (Okigbo 1971, 6). The alien imperialists, in trying to save people's souls, according to Okigbo, sowed the "fire-seeds" of destruction. Jadum may be half-demented but he expresses the African ethical viewpoint. He admonishes:

Do not wander in speargrass,
After the lights,
Probing lairs in stockings,
To roast
The viper alive, with dog lying
Upsidedown in the crooked passage...

Do not listen at keyholes,
After the lights,
To smell from other rooms,
After the lights (1971, 8).

This is an affirmation of African religions which attempt to save lives rather than souls as alien Christianity is supposed to be doing.

In a similar way, Okot p'Bitek of Uganda in *Song of Lawino* imbues Lawino, the symbol of African cultural independence, with dignity, humility, respect and authenticity. She is opposed to Clementine and Ocol who indiscriminately copy alien Western ways of life and so look absurd. Lawino assumes the royalty and courage of the bull and the beauty and gracefulness of the giraffe; but repulsive animals such as the hyena, monkey, ostrich and python represent the copied alien ways.

African writers, in asserting their cultural identity, condemn Western intervention as disruptive of the growth and development of African culture through colonialism. Cultural habits and practices change and the writers generally feel that there were and still are sufficient mechanisms and ample latitude for internal changes in African cultural life. After all, culture is dynamic. As Achebe demonstrates in

Things Fall Apart, such practices as the throwing away of twins, the *osu* caste system, human sacrifice and exiling a person for inadvertent murder were already being questioned from within by Obierika and others. Africa did not need colonialists and the Christian religion to change. In Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*, the dramatist's viewpoint suggests that the practice of the king's horseman accompanying him to the spirit world by ritual suicide was already failing and needed no colonial intervention to stop. The colonial officer's intervention resulted in a greater tragedy for the society in the waste of two lives in the place of one. Mazisi Kunene, the South African poet and scholar, has cautioned in *The Ancestors and the Sacred Mountain* against any group assuming ethical and moral superiority over others because of its material and technological advantages (1982, xi). Material and technological advancement and ethical and moral advancement do not necessarily go together and are in fact antithetical in the experience of both Africa and Europe. As cultural standard-bearers of their people, African writers use literature to assert cultural independence.

African Mystical Life

Africans are generally a spiritually minded people. It can be said that "the whole psychic atmosphere of African village life is filled with belief in...mystical power" (Mbiti 1969, 197). It holds true also of city life. As a result of this, the supernatural plays an important part in African literature, especially in the drama and fiction. This belief in the supernatural is sometimes wrongly dismissed as superstition. The mystically minded African believes that not everything that happens in life can be explained rationally. There are ancestors, spirits and gods influencing the affairs of the living. There are natural laws which when violated trigger punitive responses in the form of ailments from the spiritual world. Witches and wizards abound in societies to cause mainly mischief. Diviners and medicine-men also abound to ward off evil forces from individuals, families, and communities by recommending sacrifices.

The mystical nature of the African worldview is copiously reflected in modern African literature. Elechi Amadi in *The Concubine* writes of a beautiful lady who is dedicated to the gods and the man who marries her and incurs a fatal curse on himself. Zulu Sofola in *Wedlock of the Gods* deals with a similar theme.

Divinities proliferate in African literary works. Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* portray the supremacy of Ani, the Earth goddess of the Igbo people. Any offence against the Earth goddess is punished seriously. For instance, when Okonkwo beats his wife during

the Week of Peace, he offends the goddess and is punished for it. Soyinka exploits the Yoruba pantheon in his poems, novels and plays. "Idanre," the title poem of *Idanre and Other Poems*, is centered on Ogun, "God of Iron and metallurgy, Explorer, Artisan, Hunter, God of war, Guardian of the Road" (Soyinka 1967, 86). Ogun is the "septuple god." In the same poem there are references to Sango, god of lightning and electricity; Orunmila, the Sky-god and essence of wisdom; and Esu, god of chance and disruption. In *The Interpreters* Kola's sculpture of the Yoruba pantheon is a reflection of the mystical and spiritual lives of the characters of society.

The theme of reincarnation as of *abiku/ogbanje*, the wanderer-child, in the poetry of J. P. Clark and Soyinka and in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is a reflection of the beliefs of African people. Spirit possession, a mystical experience, has been exploited by dramatists and novelists. Achebe's traditional priestesses experience spirit possession. The mystical worldview that informs modern African literature is highly visible in the way gods and priests affect the course of things in society. Ritual with its accompanying solemn music and chants has been an asset to African drama and poetry in particular and literature in general.

Order and Justice

African writers have in various ways attempted to explain the African concept of order as opposed to the Western/colonial, which is equated with obeying man-made laws. Achebe, Ngugi, and Soyinka have all dealt with this theme. The colonialists in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* impose their laws on Africans, introduce Western courts and police and forcibly jail those opposed to them. According to these foreigners, they are trying to maintain law and order. In traditional Africa there are no jails. Justice is done for the reconciliation of the affected parties, not to set them on parallel paths the rest of their lives. In traditional courts, reparations, restitutions, and settlements are made to the offended party, but the community or family makes sure that the two parties are reconciled. The justices of Umuofia—masquerades—in *Things Fall Apart* are good examples of traditional African dispensation of justice.

Order to Africans is perceived as natural and ritualistic to ensure harmony, the absence of which will bring calamity to the whole group. For this reason, an individual could be sacrificed to avoid a war, a plague, or any anticipated communal disaster. In other words, the individual can be sacrificed for the well-being of the community. Because of

the spiritual nature of African society,

Most African peoples accept or acknowledge God as the final guardian of law and order and of the moral and ethical codes. Therefore the breaking of such order, whether by the individual or by a group, is ultimately an offence by the corporate body of society (Mbiti 1969, 206).

Wole Soyinka deals with the practice of individuals being used as their community's carriers in both *The Strong Breed* and *Death and the King's Horseman*. In *Mandela's Earth and Other Poems* there is the suggestion of the African nationalist leader being a sort of carrier for his black people because of his strong will and sense of sacrifice. Perhaps the best expressed clash of African and Western notions of law and order in African literature is found in Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*. The Oyo people had a practice in which whenever the king died, his prime minister (horseman) ritually killed himself to accompany his master to the spirit world. This practice had been there from the beginning of the Oyo Kingdom and had continued to ensure stability in the state. Then came the turn of Elesin Oba in 1946 and, though vacillating, his death was stopped by the colonial administrator who detained him. Of course, the colonialists, who "have no regard for what they do not understand," called the practice suicide and a barbaric custom. However, Elesin's son Olunde, who had been pursuing medical studies in England, returned and killed himself in his father's place to save the family from shame. It was only after seeing his son's corpse and the irredeemable shame he had brought upon himself for doubly failing his duty that he strangled himself in detention. Where African law and order demanded an old man for the stability of the state, two lives were lost with the attendant tragic consequences. In this example, culture is used in modern African literature to question European/Western ignorance of other people's ways and to criticize the arrogant behavior which causes tragedy for others.

Land

Africans are bound mystically to their land. The land is sacred and dedicated to the ancestors and gods. Before a house is built or a farm started, there is libation to the earth. Of course, everybody is aware that it is the earth that receives one at the end of life. Land sustains the corporate existence of Africans, and families quarrel over a piece of land, sometimes with casualties.

Ngugi has made the relationship between people and their land the major focus in many of his works, especially in *Weep Not Child* and

Petals of Blood. Land is so important that:

Any man who had land was considered rich. If a man had plenty of money, many motor cars, but no land, he could never be counted as rich. A man who went with tattered clothes but had at least an acre of red earth was better off than the man with money (1964, 22).

It is in this light that the many African writers' concern with the impact of land on characters and society can be better understood. Land ownership means wealth, stability, honor, and dignity. Lack of it means poverty, rootlessness, and no dignity. The Gikuyu loss of land in colonial times was highly resented. Nguo and Kamau among others work as shamba boys on land which had previously belonged to their families. Land gave impetus to the Mau Mau insurrection against British colonialism which ushered in Kenyan political independence. In *Petals of Blood* the black exploiting group of Chui, Mzigo, and Kimeria appropriate other people's land. This is highly resented and eventually leads to their being killed.

Land features in another manner in African literature. Land is sometimes identified with the traditional rural environment. In West African and South African writings, the movement from rural to urban areas causes a sense of alienation in the characters. As Mbiti puts it, the "detachment from the land to which Africans are mystically bound, and the thrust into situations where *corporate existence* has no meaning, have produced dehumanized individuals in the mines, industry and cities" (1969, 219). Alienation from the land is a major theme in African literature, more so than in Western literature. In Africa every day is Earth Day, not one day in the year!

African Folklore

Folktales, proverbs, myths and legends, all parts of the rich African folklore, are very much alive and they infuse modern African literature with motifs, themes, characters, and techniques. Nguo draws a lot from Gikuyu folklore in *The River Between*, *Weep Not Child* and *Petals of Blood*. Jack Mapanje, the Malawian poet, draws much from native folklore in *Of Chameleons and Gods*. He uses mythical characters to criticize contemporary society. He admits that "Glory Be To Chingwe's Hole" has an obscure reference to a Chewa myth:

Do you remember Frog the carver carving Ebony Beauty?
Do you remember Frog's pin on Ebony Beauty's head
That brought Ebony to life? And when the Chief
Heard of a beauty betrothed to Frog, whose dogs
Beat up the bushes to claim Ebony for the Chief?

Even when Fly alarmed Frog of the impending hounds
Who cracked Fly's bones? Chingwe's Hole, woodpeckers
Once poised for vermillion strawberries merely
Watched fellow squirrels bundled up in sacks
Alive as your jaws gnawed at their brittle bones (1981, 44).

This myth is used to portray the selfishness and meanness of modern African rulers.

Many of the animals and plants in Africa evoke characteristics emanating from folklore. This cultural trait is reflected in characters which are more symbols (pejoratively called *types* in Western critical parlance) than just themselves. Ngugi's *Matigari* is a good example of the representational character common in African literature. The representational dimension derives from folktales. African dramatists in particular have exploited the trickster motif in their plays. As animals such as the tortoise and the hyena are not just animals but human representations, so are characters modeled on them representatives. Zulu Sofola's *Wizard of Law* and Soyinka's *The Trial of Brother Jero* are examples. Some of the most impressive anecdotes in Achebe's works are derived from Igbo folklore. The tortoise who suffers for his greed and cunning recurs in many African novels and plays.

Though allusions to folklore may be obscure to outsiders, they give a certain profundity to the literature. Ibrahim Tala rightly observes that in Africa

new writers incorporate oral literature in their writing to give a flavour of authenticity to their works and to show as modern Africans [they] are conscious of a rich source of literary inspiration. They include oral tradition to link their past with their present experience (as a group), to localize the content of their works, to educate fellow Africans and give them confidence in their cultural heritage and to enlighten outsiders and help them get rid of the false impression about African cultures acquired from years of cultural misrepresentation (1984, 95-6).

Traditional African literary forms and techniques have been adopted by modern writers. In drama the storyteller features in plays by Soyinka, Ola Rotimi, and Femi Osofisan. Ngugi's *Devil on the Cross* is told by a Gicaandi Player. African poetry has distinctly traditional African rhythms. In many cases, the poet superimposes European words on an existing musical composition. As I have written elsewhere,

There are certain poetic forms with innate generic rhythms. Africans thus writing dirges, abuse songs, praise chants, odes and other poetic forms instinctively fall back on traditional African rhythms associated with the forms they want to use (1989, 9).

Kofi Awoonor's "Songs of Sorrow" reflects the slow mournful rhythm of the Ewe dirge:

Dzogbese Lisa has treated me thus
It has led me among the sharps of the forest
Returning is not possible
And going forward is a great difficulty
The affairs of this world are like the chameleon faeces
Into which I have stepped
When I clean it cannot go

I am on the world's extreme corner,
I am not sitting in the row with the eminent
But those who are lucky
Sit in the middle and forget
I am on the world's extreme corner
I can only go beyond and forget (Moore and Beier 1967, 98).

The Yoruba-speaking poets have absorbed the *ijala* and *oriki* chant rhythms of their people. In "Muhammad Ali at the Ringside, 1985" Soyinka chants:

Black tarantula whose antics hypnotize the foe!
Butterfly sideslipping death from rocket probes.
Bee whose sting, unsheathed, picks the teeth
Of the raging hippopotamus, then fans
The jaw's convergence with its flighty wings.
Needle that threads the snapping fangs
Of crocodiles, knots the tusks of elephants
On rampage. Cricket that claps and chirrups
Round the flailing horn of the rhinoceros,
Then shuffles, does a bugaloo, tap-dances on its tip.
Space that yields, then drowns the intruder
In showers of sparks—oh Ali! Ali!
Esu with faces turned to all four compass points
Astride a weather vane; they sought to trap him,
Slapped the wind each time (1989, 48).

Similarly, Niyi Osundare in *The Eye of the Earth* sings the Earth's praise in *oriki* rhythms. Though not of Yoruba origin, but benefiting from his studies and working experience in Ibadan, Christopher Okigbo uses incantatory rhythms to sing the praise of W. B. Yeats in "Lament of the Masks":

THEY THOUGHT you would stop pursuing the white elephant
They thought you would stop pursuing the white elephant
But you pursued the white elephant without turning back—
You who charmed the white elephant with your magic flute

You who trapped the white elephant like a common rabbit
You who sent the white elephant tumbling into your net—
And stripped him of his horns, and made them your own—
You who fashioned his horns into ivory trumpets—
They put you into the eaves thatch
You split the thatch
They poured you into an iron mould
You burst the mould...(Maxwell and Bushrui 1965, xiv).

This form of repetition unique in *ijala*, the hunters' chant, gives a distinctive African flavor to the rhythm of modern African poetry. Traditional forms and rhythms affect its diction, prosody, syntax and other linguistic aspects.

African writers are students of their folklore. Soyinka researched into Yoruba oral drama between 1959 and 1961. Kofi Awoonor collected and translated Ewe dirges in a book titled *Guardians of the Sacred Word*. Clark worked on the Ozidi saga of the Ijo people. Kofi Anyidoho is a trained folklorist. Mapanje researched into Chewa oral literature. Zainab Alkali studied Bura folklore. I have worked on the oral literature of the Urhobo people and the songs and epics of north-eastern Nigeria. This study of folklore or involvement in its preservation is a form of professional apprenticeship for writers and the knowledge gained gives one the confidence to operate from the cultural milieu.

African Time and Space in Literary Form and Vision

Traditional African concepts of time and space have their impact on literary form and vision. Time is seen not only as lineal but cyclical. Thus death is the beginning of a spiritual existence, and birth into this world is the end of one stage of existence. While the impact of this concept is strong in the *abiku* poems of both Soyinka and Clark and in the themes of reincarnation in the works of many writers, there is a subtle manifestation of the concept of time and space in the literary form. The refrain of traditional songs is a manifestation of this concept on a creative plane. In many poems, especially those of Mazisi Kunene, Okot p'Bitek, Kofi Awoonor, and Wole Soyinka, the beginning and end are connected to show a sense of continuity in the cyclical nature of things. In the novel, this break with lineal time could be problematic to outsiders who, for instance, cannot see the African time movement in works like Soyinka's *Interpreters* and Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*. These works are not static but have a certain movement which, while not denying a forward thrust, comes and goes in a continuing flux.

The breath-space of oral literature has its influence on modern African poetry. In the poetry of p'Bitek, Awoonor, Okigbo, Anyidoho,

Osundare and many others, the poetic line approximates a breath-space. This has generally given rise to long lines on the page, rather than the five-foot iambic line of English poetry. African people's culture is so strong that when they change their medium of artistic expression from oral to written, their creative products still bear their deep-rooted response to reality. African concepts of time and space inevitably form part of the "literary" aesthetics.

The Language of African Literature

The language of modern African literature whether written in English, French or Portuguese is peculiarly African. It is informed by African languages with their proverbs, axioms, rhythms and oratorical structures. I have already illustrated the transplanting of African rhythms into modern poetry. The tonal African languages have trained the ears of modern African poets to retain and use incantatory rhythms that iambic English and alexandrine French do not neutralize. As wisdom is highly appreciated in African societies and as "proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten" (Achebe 1958, 5), oratory is an integral part of African literature. African literature carries proverbs, symbols and folkloric connotations that are peculiar to the land. Thus the writer may be writing in English, but the words have different symbolic meaning than they have in mainstream English—if there is such a thing nowadays! Those lines from Awoonor's "Songs of Sorrow" come to mind again. When the speaker of the poem says "When I clean it cannot go," it has meaning to the African sharing the same linguistic base but may look quaint to other users of English. Similarly, "I can only go beyond and forget" expresses the speaker's desire to die and be relieved of his earthly suffering. Plants and animals like the iroko tree, the spider, tortoise, hyena, bull, and giraffe, among others, have symbolic meaning which African folklore has given them. In modern African literature the European languages used have been enriched by local color.

Universality

Unique as African literature is because of the culture it carries, many writers attempt to universalize the cultural experience. Soyinka has attempted this in his poetry, fiction and drama. In his creative works and in *Myth, Literature and the African World*, Soyinka sees Yoruba gods as having Greek parallels. Ogun is likened to both Apollo and Dionysus, registering the Yoruba god's duality as creator and destroyer. In *Season of Anomy*, Ofeyi is modeled on Orpheus while Iridise is modeled on Euridice and both characters in the novel are involved in

a quest as their Greek counterparts were in classical literature. Jack Mapanje in a note of explanation says his poem "Glory Be To Chingwe's Hole" has an obscure reference to a myth, the "Chewa version of the Greek myth of Pygmalion" (1981, 77). Jared Angira of Kenya, Syl Cheney-Coker of Sierra Leone, and Lenrie Peters of The Gambia use classical allusions in their poems to extend their experiences beyond themselves as individuals and make these experiences timeless human ones. Archetypal and cross-cultural images and symbols relate African literature to other literatures of the world. For instance, in the poems of Ewe/Ghanaian Kofi Awoonor and Ijo/Nigerian J. P. Clark, there are references to the belief, also expressed in Greek classical literature, in the ferryman or boatman of death who comes to take away the dead across the sea to the spirit world. When African writers consciously or unconsciously use archetypal images, they validate and universalize the African experience. At the bottom of things, all peoples whether in Africa, the Americas, Asia or Europe are human. Though the African world is unique, "it possesses...in common with other cultures the virtues of complementarity" (Soyinka 1976, xii). In an increasingly cosmopolitan world, African writers borrow the relevant from other traditions. That is why, despite their uniqueness, they resemble others in some ways.

Conclusion

The indigenous culture has functioned effectively in modern African literature by giving it not only deep and solid roots but a concrete and relevant background and setting. The culture provides the literature with allusions, images and symbols, aesthetic direction and a moral and ethical imperative. African literature has distinguished itself in spite of colonial and neocolonial onslaughts on the native culture. The African culture in its material dimension has been used in literature to disabuse minds about colonialism and its justification. The ethically rich culture has enhanced the works of writers who see themselves as having the social role of cleansing the society. New novels, poems and plays are modeled on folkloric forms and techniques and these works have demonstrated the affirmation of faith by different generations of African writers in their cultural heritage.

African literature is suffused with cultural traits. Modern drama is characterized by rituals, the supernatural and spirit possession and a language enriched by proverbs. Fiction has many folkloric anecdotes and concentrates on the direction of the entire society, the land and being in harmony or not with the environment. Poetry absorbs qualities of traditional oratory, ritual, incantatory rhythms, and symbolic animal and plant imagery originating from folklore. All three major genres—

poetry, drama and fiction—have gained tremendously from the oral tradition of African literature which when transferred to writing still retains its vibrant, live, audience-conscious and concrete nature.

Modern African literature informed by African culture is utilitarian, more socialized than based on individual psychology; it is community-oriented and didactic for ethical and moral instruction. It draws on the beliefs, worldview and folkloric heritage of African people. Though written in European languages, modern African literature comes out distinctly African.

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