NEW WRITERS, NEW READERS

By Charles R. Larson

Looking back at the past 25 or 30 years, it is clear that the writing of fiction in sub-Sahara Africa has been dominated by Nigerians.

Why? The Nigerians' most obvious asset has been their perseverance despite such severe national upheavals as repeated coups and the 1967–70 Biafran war. Even in formerly French Africa, the most talented authors either have been silenced by government censorship or have slackened their efforts.

Numerous factors combined to give Nigeria its preeminence.* Nigeria's large population (35 million in 1959, just before independence) with its increasing literacy (6.1 percent in 1952, 25 percent in 1975) provided a literary marketplace. The development, in the eastern city of Onitsha, of a "pop" literature for the masses also helped. Perhaps the most important stimulus was the emergence of a group of young Nigerian intellectuals who spearheaded a national literary movement.

The literary output of these writers gave strength to Nigeria's post-independence drive for "Africanization" during the early 1960s. As a teacher at a boy's secondary school in eastern Nigeria, I at first followed a syllabus (set by the new government in Lagos) devoted only to England's great men of letters: Shakespeare, Hardy, Milton, Bunyan—all the obvious authors. This soon changed. British literature that described a world few Nigerian youths had ever seen or imagined was replaced by the works, in English, of native-born writers.

Most modern African fiction has been written in the "colonial" languages (English, French, Portuguese); Nigeria's has been no exception. Fifteen years ago, African writers hotly debated the problem of writing in European languages. Some younger writers argued that by using the colonial language they were denying their African heritage. Yet many African languages, although rich in narrative tradition, still lack a written literature. And the question of "authenticity" soon faded when it

*Of 215 books in the prestigious Heinemann Educational Books' African Writers Series, 52 are by Nigerian authors. South Africa is second with 23 books.

became clear that works in indigenous languages would have few readers outside Africa and that (in those days, anyway) the African writer's readers and publishers were mostly in Europe.

Today, the publishing situation is changing as a second generation of Nigerian writers and readers emerges. But the Nigerian who writes in his tribal language still discovers that he has considerably reduced his potential domestic audience. Nigeria has nearly 250 languages and dialects, so (as in most of sub-Sahara Africa) a European language—a second language—has become the language of literature, and of officialdom. After the second grade, instruction in Nigerian schools is in English.

"So Sweet and Sexy"

Nigerian literature began its emergence shortly after World War II with the development of publishing in the Ibo city of Onitsha. The literacy rate, particularly in the urban centers, had begun to grow. During the war, many Nigerian males had fought with the British armies in Europe and the Middle East—an eye-opening experience. In the cities, Nigerians came together from different tribal groups. And Western movies and lifestyles became popular as the booming oil-and-cocoa economy put money in Nigerian pockets that had been empty.

"Onitsha Market Literature"—the Nigerian equivalent of the American dime novel—developed as a response to an expanding audience. Newly, often barely, literate Nigerians devoured these sensational stories. The Onitsha writers' works, using a vocabulary of several hundred English words, were often replete with grammatical and typographical errors. The readers didn't mind.

Some of the early titles accurately indicate the works themselves: *The Sorrows of Love, Veronica My Daughter, Life in the Prison Yard*—melodramatic accounts of life, designed to serve as moral examples for their readers.

Mabel the Sweet Honey has always been my favorite. The author's description of his book, taken from the cover, reads as

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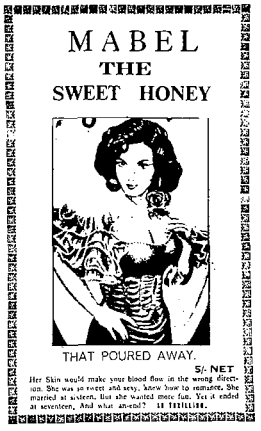

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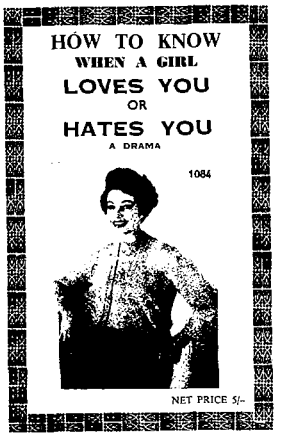


By S. Eze. Printed by Providence Printing Press, Nigeria. Copyright reserved.

During the civil war, Onitsha market books were stamped "Printed in the Republic of Biafra." Rarely more than 64 pages long, they frequently picture stiffly posed, sweater-clad Caucasians on their covers. The reason: To keep costs down, printers go to press with whatever art is available; one major publisher uses a supply of plates from a European sweater catalog.

follows: "Her Skin would make your blood flow in the wrong direction. She was so sweet and sexy, knew how to romance. She married at sixteen. But she wanted more fun. Yet it ended at seventeen, and what an-end? SO THRILLING."

Other Onitsha pamphlets are self-help books: *Money Hard to Get But Easy to Spend; How to Speak to Girls and Win Their Love; How to Avoid Misatkes* [sic] *and Live a Good Life—A Moral Instructions on Don'ts in Public Meetings, Social Gatherings and Functions for Boys & Girls, Workers and Traders.*

One of Nigeria's most famous writers, Cyprian Ekwensi, now 58, began his publishing career in Onitsha in 1947 with *When Love Whispers,* a "pop" novelette about a young woman who meets and marries another man while her fiancé is going to school in England. Ekwensi, an Ibo who has worked as a pharmacist, forester, and Nigeria's Director of Information Services, later found British publishers for his work. His most popular novel is *Jagua Nana* (1961), the melodramatic tale of an aging prostitute.

The first Nigerian writer to gain an international reputation was Amos Tutuola. Born in 1920, Tutuola astounded the London literary scene in 1952 with his rough-hewn *The Palm-Wine Drink-*

ard. The novel, best described as an oral epic set down in broken English (Tutuola's formal education was limited to primary schools), caused immediate controversy. Europeans and Americans concluded that subsequent African literature would be written in Tutuola's style; the author's fellow Nigerians were embarrassed that their semi-literate countryman had dishonored them. Neither reaction was justified. Amos Tutuola was and is one of the foremost African story tellers, Nigeria's counterpart to Aesop or the Brothers Grimm.

If Amos Tutuola represents homespun narrative, Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka represent formal writing in the Western tradition. Achebe, 49, is an Ibo from eastern Nigeria; Soyinka, 44, is a Yoruba from his country's western region. Both began publishing shortly before Nigeria's independence in 1960 and are also, it seems to me, the two most talented Anglophone writers on the continent. Frequently nominated for the Nobel Prize, they are probably the only writers in tropical Africa who could live on their royalties, although both teach—Achebe at the University of Nigeria in Nsukka, Soyinka at the University of Ife.

Focusing on Immorality

Achebe's masterpiece, *Things Fall Apart* (1958), was the first novel by an African writer included in the required syllabus for secondary-school students throughout English-speaking Africa. It chronicles the coming of the white man to a small Ibo village in the 1890s. The main character, Okonkwo, is the archetypal Iboman (masculine and warlike); he dies tragically by taking his own life, a symbolic act representing the death of the traditional culture.

Though the book was praised when it first appeared, only years later did Achebe achieve international fame. By that time, he had published a sequel, *No Longer at Ease* (1960); *Arrow of God* (1964); and *A Man of the People* (1966), a satire which predicted Nigeria's era of political instability. As an Ibo, Achebe spoke eloquently for the Biafran cause during the war, but since that time, he has largely been silent on politics in his writing, limiting himself to poetry and short stories.

Wole Soyinka, on the other hand, has become not only Africa's most famous playwright but also Nigeria's most prolific writer and social critic. At last count, he had published more than 20 volumes of drama (including *A Dance of the Forests,* 1960; *The Lion and the Jewel,* 1963), poetry, fiction, and literary criticism.

Soyinka's finest work is *The Man Died* (1972), a journal of

the two years he spent in prison in Lagos during the civil war. Held by the Nigerian government without specific charges and denied writing materials by prison authorities, Soyinka kept his mind active during his years of solitary confinement by surreptitiously writing a number of subsequently published works, including his journal, between the lines of books that were somehow smuggled into his cell.

Ekwensi, Tutuola, Achebe, and Soyinka are beyond doubt the leading figures on Nigeria's colorful literary scene; their literary reputations are assured. But there are at least a handful of other important writers. Several of these—John Pepper Clark, Gabriel Okara, Christopher Okigbo (who was killed in the Biafran war), T. M. Aluko, John Munomye, Elechi Amadi—began their writing careers at roughly the same time as Achebe and Soyinka. A number of younger writers (T. Obinkaram Echewa, Flora Nwapa, Nkem Nwankwo) have shown great promise.

As Nigerian society has changed during the last few decades, most of these writers have shifted their social focus from the impact of colonialism to the behavior of Nigeria's new, native elite. Current literature places more emphasis on the individual than on the system, as writers examine present-day African problems, especially corruption and immorality among political and social leaders.

Nigerian writers have been successful by world standards. To illustrate the richness of Nigeria's literature, several excerpts follow, drawn from an Onitsha pamphlet, two novels, a poem, and a play:

The Nigerian Bachelor's Guide

by A. O. Ude

Onitsha market pamphlets usually have modest sales of 3,000 to 4,000 copies, but the more popular have been reissued several times. The Nigerian Bachelor's Guide, *for example, has sold 40,000 copies. In this excerpt, its author gives "Advice to Young Men on Marriage."*

Q. When you are ready for marriage what will be your target for selecting a wife?

A. The target should be

(*a*) A girl from a good family. For a family to be good, the parents of the girl must have lived successfully as husband and

wife. The father should not be too poor and his wife should be a dutiful, strong, intelligent, faithful wife. She and her husband should have a fair report of people.

(*b*) The girl should not be very beautiful, for beautiful women are dangerous. She should not be ugly. Ugly women make their husbands unhappy and uncontented.

(*c*) The girl should have good manners and be of good conduct.

Q. Why do you say that beautiful women are dangerous?

A. This is so because many of them are generally loose. They suffer too much from the trials of men and so become too kind to men. This often leads them to evil. Women of moderate beauty are therefore better for housewives.

Q. Is it good to go against the advice of your parents in choosing a wife?

A. It is not good. Our parents are our God's representatives and in all matters relating to marriage, their voice should be heard. In the real sense of the word, they are not against our marriage, but at times, after examining the girl and family, our parents may have good objections to our marrying the girl we love. Love is strong, but we should try to suppress it, and look for another girl. Failure in marriage is generally due to the neglect of our parents' advice while selecting a wife.

Q. Is it good to pay £100 for a girl?

A. No. This is buying the girl. Human beings should not be regarded as articles for sale. A sensible wise man will not receive a farthing for his daughter.

No Longer at Ease

by Chinua Achebe

Although Chinua Achebe did not leave home to study at a foreign university, many other Nigerian writers and teachers (including Wole Soyinka and T. Obinkaram Echewa) have studied overseas. In this excerpt from Achebe's second novel, No Longer at Ease, *the central character, 25-year-old Obi Okonkwo, has just returned to Lagos after studying English literature in London. His childhood visions of Lagos aren't quite the same as the city he sees on his return to his homeland.*

Obi was away in England for a little under four years. He sometimes found it difficult to believe that it was as short as that. It seemed more like a decade than four years, what with the miseries of winter when his longing to return home took on the

sharpness of physical pain. It was in England that Nigeria first became more than just a name to him. That was the first great thing that England did for him.

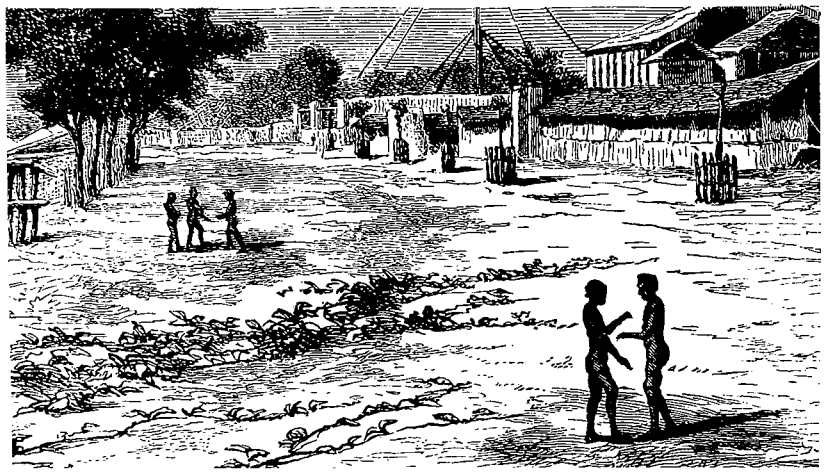
But the Nigeria he returned to was in many ways different from the picture he had carried in his mind during those four years. There were many things he could no longer recognize, and others—like the slums of Lagos—which he was seeing for the first time.

As a boy in the village of Umuofia he had heard his first stories about Lagos from a soldier home on leave from the war.

. . . "There is no darkness there," [the soldier] told his admiring listeners, "because at night the electric shines like the sun, and people are always walking about, that is, those who want to walk. If you don't want to walk you only have to wave your hand and a pleasure car stops for you." His audience made sounds of wonderment. Then by way of digression he said: "If you see a white man, take off your hat for him. The only thing he cannot do is mold a human being."

For many years afterwards, Lagos was always associated with electric lights and motorcars in Obi's mind. Even after he had at last visited the city and spent a few days there before flying to the United Kingdom his views did not change very much.

Some years later as Obi, newly returned from England, stood beside his car at night in one of the less formidable of Lagos slum areas . . . his mind went over his earlier impressions



Early Lagos

From Visitors Guide to Lagos, *1975.*

of the city. He had not thought places like this stood side by side with the cars, electric lights, and brightly dressed girls.

His car was parked close to a wide-open storm drain from which came a very strong smell of rotting flesh. It was the remains of a dog which had no doubt been run over by a taxi. Obi used to wonder why so many dogs were killed by cars in Lagos, until one day the driver he had engaged to teach him driving went out of his way to run over one. In shocked amazement Obi asked why he had done it. "Na good luck," said the man. "Dog bring good luck for new car. But duck be different. If you kill duck you go get accident or kill man."

Beyond the storm drain there was a meat stall. It was quite empty of meat or meat-sellers. But a man was working a little machine on one of the tables. It looked like a sewing machine except that it ground maize. A woman stood by watching the man turn the machine to grind her maize.

On the other side of the road a little boy wrapped in a cloth was selling bean cakes or *akara* under a lamppost. His bowl of *akara* was lying in the dust and he seemed half asleep. But he really wasn't, for as soon as the nightsoilman passed swinging his broom and hurricane lamp and trailing clouds of putrefaction the boy quickly sprang to his feet and began calling him names. The man made for him with his broom but the boy was already in flight, his bowl of *akara* on his head. The man grinding maize burst into laughter, and the woman joined in. The nightsoilman smiled and went his way, having said something very rude about the boy's mother.

Here was Lagos, thought Obi, the real Lagos he hadn't imagined existed until now. During his first winter in England he had written a callow, nostalgic poem about Nigeria. It wasn't about Lagos in particular, but Lagos was part of the Nigeria he had in mind.

> "How sweet it is to lie beneath a tree
> At eventime and share the ecstasy
> Of jocund birds and flimsy butterflies;
> How sweet to leave our earthbound body in its mud,
> And rise towards the music of the spheres,
> Descending softly with the wind,
> And the tender glow of the fading sun."

He recalled this poem and then turned and looked at the rotting dog in the storm drain and smiled. "I have tasted putrid flesh in the spoon," he said through clenched teeth. "Far more apt."

Telephone Conversation

by Wole Soyinka

After attending Ibadan University, Wole Soyinka moved to England in 1954 to study at the University of Leeds. Upon receiving a degree in English literature, he worked at London's Royal Court Theatre until his return home in 1960. This humorous poem, one of Soyinka's best known, drew on his experiences in England.

The price seemed reasonable, location
Indifferent. The landlady swore she lived
Off premises. Nothing remained
But self-confession. "Madam," I warned,
"I hate a wasted journey—I am African."
Silence. Silenced transmission of
Pressurized good-breeding. Voice, when it came,
Lipstick coated, long gold-rolled
Cigarette-holder pipped. Caught I was, foully. "HOW DARK?" . . .
I had not misheard. . . . "ARE YOU LIGHT
OR VERY DARK?" Button B. Button A. Stench
Of rancid breath of public hide-and-speak.
Red booth. Red pillar-box. Red double-tiered
Omnibus squelching tar. It *was* real! Shamed
By ill-mannered silence, surrender
Pushed dumbfoundment to beg simplification.
Considerate she was, varying the emphasis—
"ARE YOU DARK? OR VERY LIGHT?" Revelation came.
"You mean—like plain or milk chocolate?"
Her assent was clinical, crushing in its light
Impersonality. Rapidly, wave length adjusted,
I chose. "West African sepia"—and as afterthought,
"Down in my passport." Silence for spectroscopic
Flight of fancy, till truthfulness clanged her accent
Hard on the mouthpiece. "WHAT'S THAT?" conceding
"DON'T KNOW WHAT THAT IS." "Like brunette."
"THAT'S DARK, ISN'T IT?" "Not altogether.
Facially, I am brunette, but madam, you should see
The rest of me. Palm of my hand, soles of my feet
Are a peroxide blonde. Friction, caused—
Foolishly madam—by sitting down, has turned
My bottom raven black—One moment madam!"—sensing
Her receiver rearing on the thunderclap
About my ears—"Madam," I pleaded, "wouldn't you rather
See for yourself?"

The Lion and The Jewel

by Wole Soyinka

The Lion and the Jewel, *Wole Soyinka's satire of the clash between tradition and modernity in Africa, is often described as the finest play written by an African dramatist. Set in the western Nigerian Yoruba village of Ilujinle, its central characters are Baroka, the 62-year-old* Bale *or village chief, who has a reputation for opposing progress; 22-year-old Lakunle, the village teacher, who wants to modernize the village but whose ideas of progress are superficial ("High-heeled shoes for the lady, red paint/On her lips."); and Sidi, the beautiful but mischievous village belle who is sought in marriage by both men. In this excerpt, Baroka has just tried to woo Sidi by promising to put her picture on the village's first postage stamp.*

BAROKA:

I hope you will not think it too great
A burden, to carry the country's mail
All on your comeliness. . . .
For a long time now,
The town-dwellers have made up tales
Of the backwardness of Ilujinle
Until it hurts Baroka, who holds
The welfare of his people deep at heart.
Now, if we do this thing, it will prove more
Than any single town has done! . . .
I do not hate progress, only its nature
Which makes all roofs and faces look the same.
And the wish of one old man is
That here and there,
[*Goes progressively towards Sidi, until he bends over her, then sits beside her on the bed.*]
Among the bridges and the murderous roads,
Below the humming birds which
Smoke the face of Sango, dispenser of
The snake-tongue lightning; between this moment
And the reckless broom that will be wielded
In these years to come, we must leave
Virgin plots of lives, rich decay
And the tang of vapour rising from
Forgotten heaps of compost, lying
Undisturbed. . . .
Your school teacher and I are much alike.
The proof of wisdom is the wish to learn
Even from children. And the haste of youth

Must learn its temper from the gloss
Of ancient leather, from a strength
Knit close along the grain. The school teacher
And I, must learn one from the other.
Is this not right? . . .
[*Sidi nods, tearfully.*]
The old must flow into the new, Sidi,
Not blind itself or stand foolishly
Apart. A girl like you must inherit
Miracles which age alone reveals.
Is this not so?

SIDI:

Everything you say, Bale,
Seems wise to me.

BAROKA:

Yesterday's wine alone is strong and blooded, child,
And though the Christians' holy book denies
The truth of this, old wine thrives best
Within a new bottle. The coarseness
Is mellowed down, and the rugged wine
Acquires a full and rounded body . . .
Is this not so—my child?

The Land's Lord

by T. Obinkaram Echewa

T. Obinkaram Echewa was born in an Ibo village and educated in the United States at Notre Dame, Columbia, and the University of Pennsylvania. His novel, The Land's Lord *(1976), tells the story of Philip, an unpaid Ibo servant for Father Higler, the white village missionary. Philip is a recent convert to Catholicism, but his fear of* jujus *(spirits) remains strong. Finding Christianity, with its promise of heavenly salvation, no more able than his tribe's idolatry to grant him earthly happiness, he has sought revenge by sinning against the gods of both religions. In this excerpt from the book's final chapter, Philip is on trial before the village elders after "crossing legs" with his mentally retarded foster daughter.*

"You know," one man was now saying, "before the White Man came, it was wrong for a man in this village to go in with a woman in the day time. Now the young men do it. The White Man did not ask them to do it, but they do it because of his coming. Our nights have been turned into days and our days

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into nights. It seems we are confused. Our old certainties seem no longer to be certified. Strangers argue with our truths, and we stand and stare about like foreigners in our own land—as if we have to ask permission to be who we are and think what we have always thought, and act as our fathers acted before us. . . . What are we waiting for? Has the sun not already set twice since this act? Do we want the anger of the Land on our heads before we act, the anger of the concord of jujus assembled here? Do we want the ground to shake? Or the hills to vomit fire first? . . . I take my seat!" . . .

"Do you not know what we must do to you?"

Philip: "Yes. And I am ready. I have no fear in my heart. But for whose sake must you do it?"

"All. For the sake of all. You. The Gods. The Land. All these jujus. Ourselves and our customs and traditions, the whole communion of our group, both living and dead, born and unborn. We have all been tainted by you. The Land must be propitiated with your blood because you have tainted it. It must be cleansed and renewed."

Philip: "But why? Because you fear punishment? Then it is you who are afraid. It is you whose hearts shake and tremble. But me, I am not afraid of how you judge me or what you do to me. I have hit my one blow. I have my revenge against everything!" . . .

"Whence your new courage?"

Philip: "Did I choose to be born? I was born a slave to duty. I had no choice and no voice. My pains and sufferings, my sweats and tears did not justify me. So I have given myself one choice."

"And *this* was it? This heinous act! I say enough!"

The interrogator leaped forward and grabbed a machete.

"If he does not stop talking I will behead him here in front of all of you!"

The dramatic gesture brought the interview to a halt.

When the questioning stopped, Father Higler pleaded with the elders to save Philip's life, but they would not listen. The priest lunged forward and cut the ropes binding Philip. Instead of fleeing, Philip grabbed a machete and stabbed himself saying:

"I must die my own death. But if my life has been useless, then my death too. It must be without use. . . . Yes, I will die, but I will not die at your hands, like a goat in sacrifice, so that your hearts can stop their trembling and your minds can have peace."