

Preface

To the First Volume

It is often the tradition in Africa that a dancer puts the best foot forward at any public rehearsal of communal and individual talents – which is something that this collection parallels in its own critical and literary disposition. But here, in this volume, I seem to have vitiated an artistic code of presentation by starting out with probably my nastiest piece.

Although the most quoted and discussed of my essays, “Bards and Tyrants” might leave many hearts flinching or missing a beat. Whether from the awkward emotions that African affairs are made to evoke in the reader, or by the uncanny veracity of the issues appraised thereon, albeit in such a blatant offensive, one may not tell of that forum where I had told a tale of a foolish king at forty and the response of his bards who refuse to sing his praise but rather chronicle his outright and legion follies. And that *is* Nigeria.

No serious evaluation of contemporary African history, or of sustainable economic development of the region, should ignore the contributions of the creative literatures of her people to the African debate. As a Nigerian it was often irritating to listen to our African neighbours call us Africa's big-for-nothing giant. No less a leader as Ghana's Jerry Rawlings in his revolutionary years had opined to the world that Nigeria was an imperialist stooge although he was later to apologise for that meditated outburst. But through this millennial era when issues of Sub Saharan African underdevelopment, and Nigeria's complicity in leading the backward procession, recur in contemporary literary and cultural experience one is left with no doubt that the bleak prospects of a failed nation, by every definition of the word, stare us squarely in the face. And what is more baffling is that her writers and critics, at every creative and polemical exercise, had severally warned of the

(double) trouble with Nigeria without genuine, remedial actions from our ever hustling managers of affairs. That the country is a failed state from every political, educational and economic assessment leaves few watchers in doubt, and going by the metamorphosis in 2007 of another patch of ineptitude in the Yaradua presidency and his PDP rogue party, all that Nigeria has had to offer the civilised world for this umpteenth time are the blighted reincarnations of Balewa, Ironsi, Gowon, Babangida, Abacha and Obasanjo clownish kinglets and clown cabinets.

Within this curious contradistinction was laid the ebullient and intense spirit of Nigerian writing in all forms and genres of literary and critical acclamation from Achebe and Soyinka at home, through Okri and others in the Diaspora. It is a feat that has found a ready parallel in the lotus flower that thrives in the murkiest of vegetation. For sub Saharan Africa, it still leaves a strange and morose aftertaste that this hopeless lack of purpose that constitutes its average experiments in modernity has had minds like Nkrumah, Mandela, Nyerere, to mention but a few, who once guided its course. Why there has been very little or no impact of sustainable economic growth and development from within is what many creative literatures of the continent have offered on the world reading table.

For me this entire collection can only but tenuously propose by its arrangement a modest contribution to the discourse of literature and society. Having begun in a forum with the usual indictments in the trenchant style of new Nigerian poetry, there is a sense of justification that the acerbity which exaggerates the polemical concerns of the first essay presentation is attenuated by subsequent tributes and happy reflections in the collection. One can only wish that there can be more critical bards in the societies of African folklore than we have had as of date, and that a more intense study of African oral traditions, which I have only briefly touched on the

works of Chinweizu and the riddles of my community, could well preserve the heritage of our people, if only, to equip them towards confronting the challenges of modern existence. Similarly the literary crafts and chat section represented here might as well read as continuing holistic parts of an entire viewpoint which is integral to the vision that African writing must continue in the task of purposive artistic evaluation of its merits and those of the environment in which it thrives.

There now attends in world readership the conviction that the literatures of Africa, as cultural products of their peoples and nationalities, are deeply enmeshed in the questioning of historical, social, cultural, political, economic and religious fundamentals of existence. It thence supports the proposition, mentioned early on, that any serious examination of the issues of our continental underdevelopment which ignores the serious creative literary inputs of those members of Africa's cultural society misses the most altruistic and useful insights into remedying present African political and economic conditions.

Although some of best chapters of modern African writing have been written in the works of our septuagenarians – an assertion as factual as their most elegant and determined past struggles to shove off the colonial yoke that bedevilled and impoverished our world – today's literati must not suffer the lack of direction and discretion that modern African leaders display in their political, economic and cultural imitation of Europe and America to the amusement and contempt of the rest of the world.

Thus by allowing the essay “Bards and Tyrants” to stand for the title of the whole collection, I have nearly acquiesced to a pedestrian journalese that inscribes Africa's fate as sorely torn in two opposing and irremediable directions charted by her bards and petty tyrants. One includes members of a visionary literati who seek to elevate the potentials of their educational and cultural

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inheritance. They stand against the daft and vulgar politics of tyrannosaurs who hasten to complete the devolution of their continent in a state of complete and total degeneracy. It is the frightening prospect of this latter possibility that all partakers in contemporary African writing should, and must, confront in any real or imagined, personal or corporate, endeavour.

Chinle

January 2009