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by

Tanure Ojaide
Acknowledgements

Preface

This book is an assembly of essays and lectures written and delivered respectively at different times in the past decade. They address issues of culture and literature from a personal African perspective. Some points are repeated in several essays to reinforce the overall concern about the plight of modern African culture with its literature. Being both a creative writer and a literary scholar, culture has always interested me. The two essays on African culture – the possible impact of the New World Order and globalization on African culture and the contemporary state of the culture – register this concern.

In each of these presentations, now chapters, I have worked from the premise that literature is a cultural production and so it has its unique aesthetics and other characteristics as the culture conditions both its creation and reception. What one culture considers good literature may not necessarily be seen as such in another culture. Culture conditions a writer’s assumptions of his or her role (or none at all) as a writer. This inevitably results in the writer’s fashioning a concept that governs the content and form of his or her writing. Put in a different way, there is a cultural tradition of literature and each writer or verbal artist fashions his work to enhance, subvert, or transform that tradition with his individual talent. The tradition provides the aesthetics with which to judge the success or otherwise of a literary creation.

The African writer in English, French, or Portuguese works within two cultures or traditions: the metropolitan culture of the language and the native/indigenous culture in which the African writer was raised and from which he or she writes. While no serious critic nowadays considers the African writing in an originally European language European literature, still the African writer has to be cognizant of being raised in one culture and writing in the vehicle of an alien culture. This has been more so since the language has been used as a tool in the
domination of his or her people. One of the chapters, “Whose English?: The African Writer and the Language Issue,” addresses a concern that has been there from the beginning of modern African literature. Many African writers respond individually and the now familiar positions of Chinua Achebe and Ngugi wa Thiongo reflect their respective acceptance or rejection of the foreign language as a vehicle for modern Africans to express themselves creatively.

Many African writers use the foreign-derived language, which has become extra-territorial and indigenized, to express their responses to contemporary reality. One could argue that much as the African writer, especially poet, attempts to be creative with the language of choice, he or she aims more to convey the sense of urgency of the African condition than to solely advance the language. While style stands out in a writer like Kojo Laing, the focus seems to be the content. For most African writers though, there is the attempt to balance content and form. Put differently, the content conditions the form of the literary work.

The focus of this book is African culture and its imaginative productions in the arts, especially in literature. One essay, “How the Urhobo people see the world through art,” delves into plastic/visual art to reinforce the place of artistic productions in the lives of an African group. Art expresses the totality of the people’s experience, worldview, and sensibility. In other words, the African creative imagination reflects the daily lives, beliefs, struggles, and the existential angst of the African people. No aspect of the people’s experience is excluded; hence no material – political, social, economic, religious, or any other – is extra-literary to the African writer. Art reflects life just as life informs artistic creations. In the essay on “divine mentoring,” an artistic tradition is exposed in the manner poetry, in the form of songs, was (and is still) composed by an African group and the place of religion and beliefs in the social consciousness and the artist’s effort to create a healthy ethos in the community.

The essays derive from my concern about the direction of African culture and its artistic creations in a global age. The African writer has the right to write as he or she pleases, but it is important to know the tradition from which one writes. Since culture is dynamic, one expects the writer and scholar, even within one’s culture, to be flexible in aesthetic choices by embracing some conventions and discarding others that are constrictive and inimical to humanity. Correspondingly, an African writer may absorb techniques or conventions that may help him
or her create the new African reality. Relevance should be a guiding principle. The writer must be relevant to the society, whose virtues and ideals he or she extols.

History has been a prime factor in the African experience. This inevitably results in the writers addressing the historical circumstances of the continent. The chapter on self, myth and historical consciousness examines this issue.

Time and place condition the writer’s experience; hence the repetition of the saying that the writer is not an air plant. Two essays, written from a personal experience, examine the phenomenon of the writer’s place in his or her writing. In the two essays, “Nativity and the Creative Process: The Niger Delta in my Poetry” and “Inviting the World Into the House of Words: The Writer, His Place, People and Audience,” I use my own Niger Delta background to show the influence of landscape, folklore, and others to show the writer’s rootedness to a specific place.

One essay uses Nigeria as an example to look ahead at what the literature of Africa would be and bring in the new millennium. The projections for the future are based on past and current happenings. Also there is the admission that an accident or a genius could establish a direction for national literature – one person blazes the trail and others follow.

The justification of African literature in the American literature curriculum draws attention to the relationship between modern African literature and African-American literature. The specific essay distinguishes African literature while also showing how indebted to it African-American literature is. The qualities of African literature help to broaden and deepen the conventional concepts of literature in the West.

The essays espouse a role for the writer in society, informed by the African indigenous traditions of literature. The book, thus, aptly begins with the challenges of the African writer today. The African writer, working in the tradition of his or her forebears in the oral tradition, is much aware of certain responsibilities to the society that nurtured him or her. The artist uses his or her talent to promote the positive values of the society. This rather didactic role seems to be a common attribute of most African writers, who decry corruption and other negative practices around. The writer fashions a vision for the elevation of the society and writes with the aim of making the society better than he or she met it. There appears to be a sense of urgency in the works of many
African writers because of the so many problems associated with underdevelopment and Third World that inhibit or hold back the humanity of the people. The writer’s place and time are relevant in the fashioning of a personal role. The chapters on nativity, myth and historical consciousness and their impact on the writer reinforce the role of the writer in projecting his or her people’s cultural identity.

The role of the African writer has been expanded to encompass more than the indigenous to reflect the current reality of the African. Africa has gone through various external and internal dynamics that have reshaped the culture into a new identity. The essays arise from the need, after so much has happened to Africa, to (re)order the fractured psyche into a wholesome imagination. The role of the African writer, at the forefront of the opening and concluding chapters, places the African writer beside writers from other cultures and continents and accentuates the special place writers find themselves in because of the continent’s history, society, politics, and socio-economic conditions.

Literature matters from the African experience. Writers, for writing their minds on national issues, have been jailed and executed by military and civilian dictators in Africa. If they were not afraid of the power of the word, the nervousness of dictators in nations of vigorous writing would not be there. Literature has been in the vanguard of the liberation of modern Africa as seen in works against colonialism, economic mismanagement, political corruption, apartheid, and other negative factors that have plagued parts of the continent. Literature remains a vibrant form of opposition against the excesses of political leaders almost in every African country. It also draws attention to society’s excesses and aims at sensitizing the readers’ minds towards a more humane society. One of the later chapters deals with what literature has done in Africa and the rest of the world in countering different forms of terror. The concluding chapters, except the last on recent African poetry reviews, are linked with the early ones, since the question of the writer’s role is touched again – this time on how writers have used their literary talent and expertise to struggle not only for personal freedom but for the overall struggle against evil in society. Literature, in the African experience, ranges on the side of good against the forces of evil, as it does on the side of the masses and the disadvantaged against dictators and exploiters.

It is my belief that these essays will be useful reading for writers, literary scholars, critics, and students of modern African literature and
comparative literature, and the general reader of literature in contextualizing the African literary experience and imagination.

*Charlotte, NC. August 3, 2005*
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