

# Preface

This anthology of essays brings together original critical comments on Nigerian literatures written in the 1970s and 1980s. I started sourcing for the materials in the early 1990s. Most of the essays had not been published at that time. Some were commissioned by me for the purpose of the anthology. Eight of the essays had been published in one form or the other and their sources are duly acknowledged.

My initial plan was to have the book in two volumes. This first volume contains materials dealing with Nigerian literatures from their earliest beginnings to the first decade after Nigeria's independence in 1960. The second volume will feature essays covering the period from 1970s to the present. This division is done for the purpose of editorial convenience. Some of the essays such as those by Chinua Achebe, J.P. Cark, Chukwuma Azuonye, and Karin Barber deal with contemporary literary traditions.

The 23 essays in this volume examine two distinct traditions of Nigerian literary heritage – the oral and the written. Achebe's essay in Chapter 1 serves as a prolegomena for the entire project. However, Chapters 2 to 11 represent the oral tradition while Chapters 12 to 23 focus on the tradition of letters. The chapters provide a historical perspective on the diversity and growth of Nigeria's literary culture over the ages.

The essays are organised around the thematic locus *radical*, an ideological label which helps to foreground the political imperative that informs the interpretation emphasised by the contributors. My critical bias in this respect has benefited from the robust debates and exchanges amongst Nigeria's literary scholars in the last quarter of the twentieth century. During the period there was a sharp divide between radical, neo-Marxist interpreters of African culture and literatures on the one hand and their conservative counterparts on the other. The epithet *radical* is also used in the classical Marxian sense to mean original, deep, and comprehensive.

The ideological debates were healthy for the growth of Nigeria's literatures and their evaluation in academic publications and the mass media. These public exchanges influenced the thematic and stylistic orientation of many writers and artists. Wole Soyinka's winning of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1986 intensified the discourse, especially with the rising tide of mass revolts against military juntas of the time. Soyinka himself was often a target of harsh

comments by some of the younger, more ultra-left critics. He was later to pay tribute to that tempestuous era with the publication of his book, *Art, Dialogue & Outrage: Essays on Literature and Culture*, (Ibadan, New Horn Press, 1988) In choosing the essays for this volume, I have placed premium on interpretations that draw attention to the political and ideological foundations of the materials examined.

The value of the critical discourse represented by the essays can be gauged by the fact that all the contributors were at one time or the other engaged in Nigeria's academic institutions. All the authors, except Abu Abarry and Karin Barber are Nigerian nationals. After editing the essays, I left the university system and became a practising journalist in Lagos (1991–2001). My attention was diverted from the book project during that decade and thus it suffered awful delay. I would like to urge the contributors to pardon me for this lapse. In the interval of a decade and a half, some of the authors would have published their works elsewhere.

I regret to point out that three of the distinguished contributors passed away during the period. These are Professor Samuel Omon Asein of the University of Ibadan, Professor Aderemi Bamikunle of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, and Dr. Tar Ahura, formerly the Provost of the College of Education, Katsina Ala, Benue State. The publication of their essays will serve as tribute to their contribution to the development of Nigerian literatures.

Notwithstanding the delay in the publication of the book, the essays will be useful to students and researchers on Nigerian literatures. It is noteworthy to observe the amount of work that has been done on Nigerian literary development in the past two decades. There is now ample material for a second volume and more. To invoke the words of Chinua Achebe on Nigerian literatures, it is morning yet on creation day.

G.G. Darah  
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