

Mapping Nigerian Literature

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Abstract

The discursive formation within which Nigerian literature emerged as a complex of diverse literary forms was one governed by an ethic of verbal artistry with strands that have resulted in discernable changes and continuities between the oral mode of the indigenous society and its more prestigious written counterpart of contemporary times. What this implies is that Nigerian literature like the literatures of other human societies has both an oral and a written category with the former predating the latter. The non-literate societies of pre-colonial Nigeria operated an oral literary culture (orature or oral literature) that consisted of poetry, folksongs, myths, legends, folktales, proverbs and other forms of dramatic and theatrical productions (Akporobaro 2001, 2008; Finnegan 1970). With the coming of Islam and Christianity, the introduction of literacy in Arabic and English and the advent of colonial rule, the artistic landscape broadened. The rise of Nigerian literature on the template provided by these developments is the subject of this introductory study.

The Oral Origin of Nigerian Literature

The connection between oral and written Nigerian literature may not be self-evident given the state of near extinction in which Nigeria's indigenous oral art forms have fallen; but the connection exists and is not always peripheral. A close reading of some of the best texts in written Nigerian literature in any of the three major genres of literature would yield enough evidence to justify this position. Indeed some studies (including Emenyonu 1988; Sekoni 1988) have asserted the oral origin of written Nigerian literature, while deploring the attempts in certain quarters to subsume the former under the latter. Locating the origin of written Nigerian literature, in English or the indigenous languages, in its oral predecessor is as natural as speech precedes writing. Most literatures in the world, it should be said, first existed in oral forms (Awoonor 1974, Uka 1980, Chinweizu *et al* 1980). As Awoonor posits, the various ceremonies for life and its renewal in Africa, including the funerary messages for the dead constitute the bedrock of literature. The non-literate indigenous societies of Nigeria were oral societies and to that extent their literary productions were oral in nature. It is in this context that Irele (2001) sees oral literature as the basic intertext of the African imagination. The point cannot be too strongly made that the relegation of oral Nigerian literature and the disruption of the smooth and natural transition from an oral to a literate culture was partly a consequence of the interruption occasioned by the advent of the Abrahamic religions and their introduction of Arabic and English into pre-colonial Nigerian societies.

An additional factor was colonialism which provided political ballast to the assimilationist-cum-hegemonic effort of foreign religionists, particularly Christian missionaries. This point shall be examined from a related but different perspective shortly. Suffice to say that the oral literature of Nigeria consisted in the myths, legends, tales, songs, proverbs and epics etc, of

the diverse communities that inhabit the Nigerian geographical space. Of the various forms poetry seems to have been the most developed and, perhaps, the genre with the oldest provenance. Among the Yoruba for example, poetry is a highly developed form. One example of this is *Esu pipe* which is the invocatory chant poetry performed for Esu, the youngest of the primordial deities said to be the offspring of Obatala and his wife (Soyinka 1976). Esu is the symbol of poetic justice who mediates between man and the deities. He is conceived in the indigenous Yoruba mind as a trickster god who can be benevolent, not the evil entity of the Judeo-Christian or Islamic imaginary (Abimbola 1997, Aiyejina 2009). He is an amoral being indifferent to the principle of good or evil. A typical *Esu pipe* must reflect all the known attributes, the likes and dislikes, of Esu as Yoruba myth has it. The poetry/song type for Sango, Oya and Osun is respectively called *Sango pipe*, *Oya pipe* or *orin Osun* (Ogundeji 2003:7). Others include *Ekun Iyawo* (nuptial or bridal chant), *Iwi* or *Esa Egungun* (masquerade ancestral chant), *Iyere Ifa* (Ifa's praise lamentation), *Ijala* (hunters' chant employed in the worship of Ogun) and, perhaps, the most popular of them all, *Oriki Orile* (lineage praise chant). Each of this poetry/song type is basically chanted and/or sung. Other groups in Nigeria have poetic forms of their own. *Udje*, for example, is a satirical form of indigenous Nigerian song/poetry prominent among the Urhobo of the mid-west of Nigeria (Darah 1981, 1982). There is the Tiv's kwagh-hir theatre which combines elements both of poetry and drama (Hagher 2003); while the Igbo have diverse poetic forms including, epic, funerary and various types of traditional poetry (Azuonye 1989; Uzochukwu 2001).

The transmission and preservation of the oral forms, however, have been both fragile and unstable as they rely, in the main, on human memory. Beyond the fragility of human memory, the colonial anthropological attempts at exoticising the forms, defining them as unrefined types of Anglo-western archetypes while placing undue stress on their functional elements over and above their literary/aesthetic properties, did incalculable damage to the literary status of the oral productions which came to be defined in largely utilitarian/ritual terms. Such othering of Nigeria's or Africa's artistic creations by the Anglo-European metropole has come under the interrogative discourse of African scholars, with some of them questioning the homogenising overgeneralisations involved in the representation of Africa and Africans in discourses emanating from the centre. The net effect of this is that decades after written Nigerian, nay African, literature gained universal recognition, however grudging that might have been, African literary scholars are still engaged in producing counter-discourses for the explication of Africa's verbal arts.

Nigerian Literature in the Indigenous Languages

The second strand of what constitutes Nigerian literature is the literature written in the indigenous languages of Nigeria. Some scholars (Emenyonu 1988, Sekoni 1988) firmly hold that authentic Nigerian literature is that which is written in the indigenous languages. For Emenyonu, "It is important for any reader of fiction in Nigeria to realise that no matter how much the author denies or disguises it, every Nigerian who writes fiction in English today has his foundation in the oral heritage of his ethnic group.... An authentic study of Nigerian literature must, therefore, begin by examining and appreciating the origins and development of literatures in Nigerian indigenous languages." Emenyonu's position aligns with that of

such scholars as the Kenyan writer, Ngugi wa Thiongo (1986; Ashcroft 1989) and before him, Nigeria's Obianjulu Wali who as far back as the early 1960s defined African literature as the literature written in the indigenous languages of Africa as opposed to English, French or Portuguese. Wa Thiongo would in his crusade for the exclusive use of African languages in African literature go as far as abandoning English in favour of his native Gikuyu. In recent times, however, he has gone back to writing in English (Jeyifo 2004) even if only in translation.

Written Nigerian literature is limited to a handful of the indigenous languages that have been reduced to writing such as Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa among others that have become literary languages (Jeyifo 1988). The vast majority of the other languages of Nigeria are only spoken. A point of significance here is that of the few that enjoy the technology of literacy, the earliest such as Hausa and Yoruba were initially written in Arabic and Roman scripts or a combination of both. This was the case with Hausa that was written in Ajami, a hybrid of Arabic and indigenous Hausa and Boko which was a script that combined Hausa and Roman scripts (Yahaya 1988).

The earliest literature in Hausa written in Arabic and Ajami, mostly poetry, was according to Yahaya written right about the seventeenth century by Islamic scholars such as Abdullahi Suka who wrote *Riwayar Annabi Musa* in Ajami, and Wali Danmasani Abduljalil who wrote the Hausa poem *Wakir Yakin Badar* also in Ajami, etc. Literary writing in Hausaland would come to its height in the nineteenth century during the period of the Islamic Jihadist, Shehu Usman dan Fodio, who wrote hundreds of poems in Arabic, Fulfude and Hausa. Hausa literature in Boko script were mostly novels that have since become classics, published from the winning entries of a writing competition in the 1930s. These include *Ruwan Bagaja* (Abubakar Imam), *Shehu Umar* (Abubakar Tafawa Balewa), *Gandoki* (Bello Kagara), *Idon Matambayi* (Mohammadu Gwarzo) and *Jiki Magayi* (M. Tafida and Dr. East). *Six Hausa Plays* edited by Dr. R. M. East and published in 1930 were the first plays to appear in Hausa. *Kidan Ruwa*, *Yawon Magi* and *Kalankuwa* are traditional forms of drama among the Hausa (Kofoworola 1981). After the pioneering efforts of these writers, Hausa literature has continued to flourish becoming one of the most vibrant strands of Nigerian literature in the indigenous languages.

Written Igbo literature, no less illustrious than Hausa literature, is of much younger provenance than either Hausa or Yoruba literatures. The development of this literature was pioneered by missionaries of the Church Missionary Society, particularly the freed Yoruba slave, Rev. Samuel Ajayi Crowther who transformed Igbo, like he had done Yoruba, into written form (Emenyonu 1988: 35). It would be several decades later, precisely in 1933, that Pita Nwana would publish *Omenuko* the first novel in Igbo. The 1960s would usher in a few works in Igbo such as *Ije Odumodu* (Leopold Bell-Gam) and *Ala Bingo* (D.N. Achara). More literary works would appear all through the 1960s and 1970s with the literature, according to Emenyonu, attaining her maturity with the works of Uchenna Tony Ubesie the leading novelist in Igbo language. Ubesie's works include *Ukwa Ruo Oge Ya Odaa*, *Isi Akwu Dara Nala*, *Ukpaka Okpoko Buuru* and *Juo Obinna*. While drama, especially in its modern sense, has not been the most popular art form among the Igbo, the people had dramatic and theatrical forms such as the *egwu amala* dance theatre (Quoted in Ogundeji 2003).

Yoruba literature on its part has quite a distinguished pedigree having attained its maturity in the first three decades of the twentieth century. Although Yoruba did not become a written language until 1842 and Isaac B. Thomas' *Itan Emi Segilola Eleyinjuege, Elegberun oko laiye*, the first novel in Yoruba, would not be published until nearly a century later, precisely in 1930 (Isola 1988), there is evidence suggestive of the fact that the Arabic script was used in writing Yoruba as far back as the seventeenth century (Falola 1988). The obvious implication of this point is that Yoruba literature could also have been written in the same Arabic script, given it a much longer provenance than available evidence would suggest. Thomas' socially relevant, realistic novel, first serialised in 1929 in *Akede Omo*, was not the first attempt at novelistic writing in Yoruba. But his novel was the first that exhibited features of the modern novel. His effort would spawn further attempts in that direction, opening the way for other literary works such as Daniel Olurunfemi Fagunwa, the best known Yoruba novelist, whose *Ogboju Ode Ninu Igbo Irunmale* (1938) is arguably the most popular literary work in Yoruba. *Ogboju Ode* has since been translated into English by Wole Soyinka as *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons* (1968). Fagunwa's picaresque novels which usually centre around a lone heroic figure would inaugurate the magical-realist tradition in Yoruba novelistic writing. This would serve as inspiration to a generation of Yoruba novelists including among others Ogundele (*Ejigbede Lona Isalu Orun*, 1956) and (*Ibu Olokun*, 1956), Omoyajowo (*Itan Odeniya-Omo Odelelu*, 1957) and Fatanmi (*Korimale Ninu Igbo Adimula*, 1976) (Isola 1988:80). Others written in more realistic tradition are Delano's *Aiye D'aiye Oyinbo* (1955), Afolabi Olabimtan's *Kekere Ekun* and Adebayo Faleti's *Omo Olokun Esin*, etc. Oladejo Okediji and Kola Akinlade pioneered the genre of the detective thriller in the Yoruba novel even as novelistic writing in Yoruba increases exponentially and gets more sophisticated as the years go by.

The Yoruba have a very vibrant theatre and drama tradition that dates back to the pre-colonial Alarinjo Agbegijo performers (Adedeji 1981) and other cultic/ritualistic theatres. This may account for the relative popularity of drama and the theatre, of the genres of literature, among the Yoruba. The modern era has, however, seen the publication of such popular and critically acclaimed works as Adebayo Faleti's *Basorun Gaa* and *Efunsetan Aniwura* and *Koseegbe* by Akinwumi Isola. Other pioneers of Yoruba theatre, forerunners of today's film and home video producers, include Hubert Ogunde, Duro Ladipo, Ishola Ogunmola and Oyin Adejobi who variously employed their theatre as tools for social mobilisation and conscientisation in the anti-colonial struggles and struggles against despotic rule in the country.

Poetry written in Yoruba has a far longer origin than Yoruba literature in the other genres. The earliest poetry, written in the form of religious hymns, was published in a collection by Henry Townsend in 1848. Moses Lijadu published *Kekere Iwe Orin Aribiloso* in 1886. He followed this with the publication of *Awon Arofo Orin ti Sobo Arobiodu ati ti Oyesile Keribo* both performed in the *arungbe* poetic form of the oro cult of the Egba (Isola 1988). Yoruba poetry has certainly come of age with many practitioners of modern Yoruba poetry (*ewi*

iwoyi) such as Olanrewaju Adepaju and Olatubosun Oladapo working side by side much older practitioners of the older forms.

Despite the attempts at cultural recuperations of indigenous art forms, Nigerian literature written in the indigenous languages is a syncretic enterprise that combines indigenous cultural forms with imported Anglo-western forms. The mimetic character of this literature, especially in its earliest incarnation, is not limited to its adoption and appropriation of imported literary forms. It also consists in its explorative riffling of the treasure troves of indigenous oratures and other traditional sources for thematic and stylistic experimentation.

Nigerian Literature in English

Although there are far more speakers of indigenous Nigerian languages than there are speakers of English, Nigerian literature of English expression is the far more influential category of the three strands that constitute Nigerian literature. It is also one of the most influential centres of African literature. The hegemonic and assimilationist policy of British educationists who imposed English as the language of instruction in schools (resulting in what has been referred to as the “hybridisation of power and discourse” in a different but related context) ensured the dominance of English as the language of official communication, prestige and high culture. One such policy came via an 1882 Ordinance that proclaimed English as the language of instruction in schools (Awonusi 2004). The literature spawned by policies such as this began within the matrix provided by western imperialism and colonialism and its earliest practitioners were Europeans and returnee slaves of Nigerian origin such as Olaudah Equiano (*The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa*) and Samuel Ajayi-Crowther (who translated the English Bible into Yoruba and Igbo) among others. Most of them wrote against the background of slavery and their experience as freed slaves determined to spread the light and benefits of western civilisation to the local population while interrogating the colonialist representation of the indigenous people of Nigeria. Reconstituting Nigerian indigenous cultures and ways of life was a central agenda of this somewhat revisionist literature that was set against the canon of Imperial Britain. Nigerian literature, due partly to this early influence and the more expansive influence of indigenous oratures with its communitarian ethic that thrives on audience participation, has ever since had an activist, socially-grounded, slant that is often defined under the broad rubric of (politically) committed (or, perhaps less respectably) agitation / propaganda literature. Opposed in more ways than one to the self-referentiality of the Anglo-western arts-for-arts-sake movement, literature in this Nigerian context operates on the principle that literary aestheticism is coextensive with social relevance or functionality.

The activist temper of early Nigerian literature of English expression would gain more valence in the hands of the nationalist leaders (Nnamdi Azikiwe, Dennis Osadebey, etc) that upheld the liberation struggles and fought against British rule in the wake of the Second World War. In concurrent existence with the serious concerns of the nationalist literature was a popular literature of largely romantic preoccupations which flourished in the commercial city of Onitsha in the 1940s. Onitsha Market Literature as this forerunner of contemporary Nigerian literature is called stirred the popular imagination for nearly three decades, spawning over 200 titles that spanned themes as varied as love (its main staple), politics, biography and fiction (Darah 1988). *Jagua Nana* and *Jagua Nana's Daughter* novels of

Cyprian Ekwensi, one of the most celebrated writers of post-independence Nigeria, had their predecessors in the Onitsha Market literary school with the publication in 1947 of Ekwensi's *When Love Whispers* and *Ikolo, the Wrestler and other Igbo Tales*. In spite of this initial efforts, Nigerian literature in English would only gain serious international recognition upon the publication of Amos Tutuola's *Palmwine Drinkard* in 1952. Written in a highly domesticated English (more or less a transliteration from Yoruba) which Dylan Thomas called "young English", Tutuola's story came directly from Yoruba folklore (Lindfors 1982). *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* (1952), *Simbi and the Satyre of the Dark Jungle* (1955) were other titles in Tutuola's magical-realist/fabulist oeuvre. But Nigerian literature would enter a new epoch in 1958, the same year Tutuola released *The Brave African Huntress*, with the publication of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, the landmark novel that was a couple of years back voted one of the most influential novels of the twentieth century.

With *Things Fall Apart*, Nigerian literature attained such recognition as directed attention to African literature as a vital part of the literatures of the world. Unlike the case with previous practitioners who tended to be more grounded in one of the three genres of literature, Nigerian writers of English expression are far more versatile and sophisticated, with several of the better known ones writing with expert competence in the three genres of literature. Nigerian writers of English expression are, in the post independence era, often divided into three broad generations in terms of their emergence, thematic concerns and stylistic predilection. The first generation were those who wrote in the period immediately before or after independence in 1960. These included those who provided counter-discourses to colonialist (mis)representation of Nigerians and Africans in texts such as Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson* and *African Witch*, Rider Haggard's *She, King Solomon's Mines* and *Allan Quartermain*, and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, etc. These writers focussed on themes of cultural alterity, recuperation, urban versus rural life and encounters between the indigenous and imported cultures of Nigeria and Europe while calling for an end to colonial rule. The cultural agenda of these writers which found expression in the Negritude Movement led to their adopting an overtly romantic and often uncritical view of the ambiguous contradictions and contraries of the pre-colonial societies of Nigeria. Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, Ekwensi's *People of the City* and *Jagua Nana* and T.M. Aluko's *One Man One Wife* belong in this group. With the departure of the colonialists, Nigerian writers turned inwards, raising questions on issues of governance and corruption among the indigenous politicians that took over. This period would witness the publication of highly critical novels like *No Longer At Ease* and *A Man of The People* (Chinua Achebe), *The Interpreters* and *Season of Anomy* (Wole Soyinka); plays like *A Dance of the Forest* (written by Soyinka to commemorate Nigeria's independence), *Kongi's Harvest*, *Madmen and Specialists* (Wole Soyinka), *Song of a Goat* and *The Raft* (J.P. Clark-Bekederemo) and such poems as *Path of Thunder* (Christopher Okigbo), *Casualties* (J.P. Clark-Bekederemo) and *A Shuttle in the Crypt* (Wole Soyinka). In terms of language the literature of this period was highly individualistic and stylised, tending towards the elitist end of the language spectrum (Jeyifo 1988).

The critical tone of the literature of the first generation of Nigerian writers would be sustained by writers of the second generation who entered the literary map in the mid 1970s to the late 1980s. These writers credited with initiating an *Alter/Native* tradition in terms of their adopted themes and styles (Aiyejina, 1988) wrote socially-relevant, highly critical (some of them with a Marxist-proletarian bent) literature in highly accessible, people-oriented language. Ola Rotimi, Femi Osofisan, Wale Ogunyemi, Bode Sowande, Tunde Fatunde, Olu Obafemi (playwrights); Femi Fatoba, Niyi Osundare, Odia Ofeimun, Funso Aiyejina, Tanure Ojaide (poets) and Festus Iyayi and Eddie Iroh (novelists), etc are members of this generation of writers. The point on the relative accessibility of the language of this generation of writers can be overstated in certain cases given the linguistic density of some of the writers, mostly poets, in this group. The latter writings of Niyi Osundare (*Moonsong*) and Odia Ofeimun (*Dreams at Work, London Letter and Other Poems, I Will Ask Questions With Stones If They Take My Voice*) are proofs, if no other, of this point.

The mid 1990s to the present is the era of the third generation who grew and started writing in the period of the structural and economic disjunctions that characterised military rule. The pressures exerted by the seemingly unending crises in various sectors of the economy: labour and electoral crises, mass unemployment, decayed infrastructures and constant closure of schools and lecturers' strikes; police and military brutality - all of these constitute the themes of the writings of this generation of writers. There is a lot of experimentation, both thematic and stylistic, in much of these writings. The dearth of publishing avenues which has been identified as impairing the quality of work produced in this period has never dampened the enthusiasm of the writers who continue to garner accolades against all odds.

Some of the more prominent members of this community of writers are Akin Adesokan (*Roots in the Sky*), Maik Nwosu (*Invisible Chapters*), Helon Habila (*Waiting for An Angel* and *Measuring Time*), Chimamanda Ngozi-Adichie (*Purple Hibiscus* and *Half of a Yellow Sun*), Sefi Attah (*Everything Good Will Come* and *Swallow*), Adimora-Akachi Ezeigbo (*House of Symbols*), Biyi-Bandele (*The Sympathetic Undertaker and Other Dreams, The Man Who Came in From the Back of Beyond, Burma Boy*), Zainab Alkali (*Stillborn*), Akeem Lasisi (*Iremoje: Ritual Poetry for Ken Saro-Wiwa*), Toyin Adewale-Gabriel (*Naked Testimonies*), Lola Soneyin-Soyinka, (*All the While I was Sitting on An Egg*), Ogaga Ifowodo (*Mandela and Oil Lamp*), Remi-Raji (*Web of Remembrance; A Harvest of Laughters*), Ahmed Yerima (*Hard Ground* and *Yemoja*, etc), Ben Tomolaju (*Jankariwo* and *Askari*) and Tess Onwueme (*The Reign of Wazobia*) among others. In recent years Nigerian writers of the third generation have done well for themselves winning some of the most prestigious literary prizes available in the literary world. Helon Habila (*Prison Story/Waiting for an Angel*), Segun Afolabi (*Monday Morning*) have both won the Caine Prize for Writing in Africa sometimes called Africa's Booker. E. C. Osondu's "Waiting" won the 2009 edition of the prize, making him the third Nigerian to win in the ten years since the prize was instituted. Chimamanda Ngozi-Adichie has, like Habila, won the Commonwealth Prize for Literature (first book, Africa region) as well as the Orange Prize with her novels *Purple Hibiscus* and *Half of a Yellow Sun*.

Contrary to what the division into three generations might suggest, Nigerian literature is yet a youthful literature of just about five decades. In a sense it came to the height of world

recognition in October of 1986 when Wole Soyinka was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. A major fallout of this development is the emergence of successful women writers, especially among the third generation of writers. This is a great leap from when Nigerian women saw and described Nigerian literature in the words of Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi (1988) as phallic, “dominated as it is by male writers and male critics.” This was the period between the early 60s through to the early 70s when the likes of Mabel Imokhuede (later Mabel Segun), Flora Nwapa and Phebean Ogundipe wrote, to be joined in the 1970s by the likes of Adaora Lily Ulasi (*Many Thing You No Understand, Many Thing Begin for Change* and *The Man From Sagamu*, etc) and Buchi Emecheta (*Double Yoke, Destination Biafra, The Joys of Motherhood*, etc) among others of the second generation of writers. The third generation of women writers have, arguably, gained visibility well beyond that of previous generations, broadening the discursive latitude of their thematic engagements. No more are they content with their own thirdworldisation, limiting themselves to the exploration of such ghetto topics as child upbringing and issues of male violence and domination. Politics, war and the economy hitherto seen as the exclusive province of male writers, have ceased to be a fairytale world from which female writers are either excluded or have excluded themselves. The marginality of women in written Nigerian literature is a clear departure from the role of women in Nigeria’s oratures where they are/were by far the clear leaders and champions of the various verbal art forms.

One other important subtext of Nigeria’s literary history is what some have come to see as the contemporary extraversion of the literature following the flight, due to economic divestment, of foreign publishing organisations that were instrumental to the development of the careers of the first and second generations of writers. This state of affair is compounded by a steadily growing and influential community of young Nigerian writers, resident across Western Europe and the Americas, that have added a diasporic dimension (with all the apparent disadvantages and not-so-apparent advantages) to a literature and literary culture already threatened by and in competition with other educative/entertainment media, especially the World Wide Web. The parlous state of the Nigerian economy and the supposed decline in Nigeria’s literary culture makes any prediction about the immediate future of the troubled trajectory of contemporary Nigerian literature something of a seer’s nightmare, to say nothing of a literary historian. There can be no doubt though that the ultimate destiny of this highly vibrant and resilient literature is a vertical way northward.

Conclusion

The development of Nigerian literature of English expression as an offshoot of Anglo-European or British literature that was at once reactive and revisionist in its manifold forms, hampered what would have been an otherwise smooth transition from an oral to a literate tradition. The break occasioned by this has tended to occlude the influences of the indigenous oratures of the various communities of Nigeria on written Nigerian literature. In spite of shortcomings such as this, however, a lot can still be achieved with the fusion of stylistic and thematic elements from both the oral and written modes of Nigerian literature.

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