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African-Language Literature and Postcolonial Criticism

Karin Barber

The "postcolonial" criticism of the 1980s and '90s—which both continues and inverts the "Commonwealth" criticism inaugurated in the 1960s—has promoted a binarized, generalized model of the world which has had the effect of eliminating African-language expression from view. This model has produced an impoverished and distorted picture of "the colonial experience" and the place of language in that experience. It has maintained a center-periphery polarity which both exaggerates and simplifies the effects of the colonial imposition of European languages. It turns the colonizing countries into unchanging monoliths, and the colonized subject into a homogenized token: "that most tedious, generic hold-all, '<u>the</u> post-colonial Other'" as Anne McClintock puts it (293)—an Other whose experience is determined so overwhelmingly by his or her relation to the metropolitan center that class, gender, and other local and historical and social pressures are elided. Despite intermittent claims to specificity, this model blocks a properly historical, localized understanding of any scene of colonial and post-Independence literary production in Africa. Instead it selects and overemphasizes one sliver of literary and cultural production—written literature in the English language—and treats this as all there is, representative of a whole culture or even a whole global "colonial experience." It thus negligently or deliberately erases all other forms of expression—written literature in African languages, oral literature in African languages, and a whole domain of cultural forms which cross the boundaries between "written" and "oral," between "foreign" and "indigenous"—making way for the "postcolonial Other" to emerge, defiant yet accessible, conveniently articulate in English and consolingly preoccupied with his or her relations to the center—"writing back" in a language the ex-colonizers can understand because it is a modified register of their own. Thus decontextualized, inflated, and made to bear an excessive metonymic burden, the role and significance of African literature in English can not be properly appreciated.

The Postcolonial Silence

Critics of African literature have always taken it for granted that African writers have to write in English. Commonwealth criticism enthusiastically celebrated oral traditional "vernacular" literatures in Africa,[1] but assumed that modern writers would naturally wish to write in English, in order to be able to make their distinctive contribution to the Great Tradition. But it also made it clear that they had little choice in the matter, if they wished to secure an audience worthy of the name (Larson 11; Roscoe 4; Povey 98; Adétugbọ̀ 173). The idiom of choice, in these

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discussions, is oddly blended with the idiom of compulsion: the African writer chooses to write in English because he or she has to.[2]

Postcolonial criticism, in an apparently radical reversal of the assumptions of Commonwealth criticism, represents English language and literature and indeed literacy itself as instruments of imperial domination. The genial model of Commonwealth literature, where the newcomer gladly offers contributions to a welcoming Great Tradition, is shown to mask stark power relations between the center and the periphery. Empire, to use Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's phrase, "worlds" the rest of the world, using its discourses and texts to inscribe imperial relationships on the geography, history and social relations of the colonized country ("The Rani of Sirmur" 128). In the British colonies, the imposition of English language and English literature represented claims to the superiority of British civilization which were ultimately backed by force. Postcolonial criticism, following Fanon, argues that indigenous languages and literatures were devalued and displaced, and the colonial subject culturally and linguistically dispossessed, leading to deep loss of self-esteem and cultural confidence. In Abdul R. JanMohamed's words, the colonial subject is caught in a double bind between the "catalepsy" of total self-identification with imperial cultural values and the "petrification" of adhering to a devalued, "calcified" indigenous system "whose developmental momentum has been checked by colonisation" (5). Postcolonial criticism has political bite; it turns the searchlight back on the center and exposes the agenda underlying its claims to a universal literary humanism.

Nonetheless, postcolonial criticism shares with Commonwealth criticism its effacement of modern indigenous-language expression in colonized countries. Indeed, it goes further than Commonwealth criticism, replacing a well-meaning confusion with a definitive theoretical lock-out. If Commonwealth criticism felt that African writers had no alternative but to choose to write in English, postcolonial criticism eliminates virtually all hint of a choice: the discourses of empire were apparently all-encompassing and inescapable.

Though postcolonial criticism is a field of enquiry rather than a unified theory—and a field, moreover, within which people have taken up heterogenous and contradictory positions—it does nevertheless produce a predominant theoretical effect. We can distinguish two broad bands of postcolonial theory, which take up positions that are at one level antithetical, but which at the level that concerns us here have similar implications for the study of contemporary African culture. One strand, exemplified by the work of Edward Said and Homi Bhabha, and some of the work of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, is primarily concerned with a critique of colonial discourses, from a position which claims to be neither wholly inside nor entirely outside the colonial episteme. This critique produces an oblique and ambivalent allusion to indigenous discourses, an allusion that is half-effaced by a studious avoidance of "nativism" and essentialism. Thus, though Said's *Orientalism* is not about the Orient but about the invention of "the Orient" by a homogeneous and unchanging West, there are nonetheless hints in passing that there really is an Orient and an Oriental experience which is inaccessible to the Western episteme, trapped as it is within the prison-house of its own self-replicating fabrications. When Spivak asserts that "the subaltern cannot speak" ("Subaltern Studies"), the main effect is a salutary warning against the Western-formed scholar's assumption that the voice of the oppressed Other is simply there

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to be recuperated, already articulating a fully-constituted subjectivity that corresponds to the Western subject's own—an assumption which by-passes the whole history of Western "worlding." It is a statement about the limits of Western epistemic access, rather than the limits of subaltern articulacy. But at the same time, her critique is effective precisely because it uses the idea of alterity to provide a kind of virtual vantage point outside the Western episteme, from which to gain leverage for its deconstruction. Bhabha is preoccupied with the interface between colonizer and colonized, in which he perceives the apparently solidly-constituted subjective identity of the colonizer fragmenting and splitting in the face of mimicry, repetition and parody by the colonized—a mimicry which always has the potential for subversion. While he avoids invoking a "real," other identity which can oppose and challenge the colonial discourse (he makes clear, for instance, that his notion of "hybridity" does not mean the mixing of two different cultures: it is rather "a problematic of colonial representation"), his analysis does produce a kind of aftershadow of an alterity beyond the reach of the colonizer—he speaks, for instance, of "other, 'denied' knowledges" that "enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority" (114); the dominant colonial knowledges may become "articulated with forms of 'native' knowledges" (115). He hesitates between saying that colonial inscription *produces* the simulacrum of difference and suggesting that there already *is* something different and unknown, beyond the reach of colonial assimilation. But if such discourses ever existed, he does not pretend to be very interested in them: "And what of the native discourse?" he asks, pretty rhetorically: "Who can tell?" (121).

If, then, this style of post-colonial criticism produces a counter-narrative, it is, as Robert Young observes, a narrative of how empire inscribed itself—a narrative about the imperial narrative, not about the discourses of the colonized (159). Insofar as it is invoked at all, the indigenous discourse appears only fleetingly, glimpsed out of the corner of the eye, conjured up almost inadvertently; it crosses the path of colonial discourse criticism obliquely, metaphorically, ambivalently and evasively, only to advertise its own inaccessibility. The theoretical effect is either to consign "native" discourses to the realms of the unknowable, or to imply that they were displaced, erased or absorbed by the dominant colonial discourses.

The approach of the second strand of postcolonial criticism is more direct and more optimistic. It is also much more closely related to Commonwealth criticism. It takes over Commonwealth criticism's field of inquiry—all literature written in English outside the metropolitan center—and infuses it with the table-turning critical spirit of Said, Bhabha, and Spivak. In this essay, I take as my main examples of this criticism two recent works: *The Empire Writes Back* (1989) by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, and *The African Palimpsest* (1991) by Chantal Zabus. The former is a position statement, summarizing the state of the field at the end of the eighties, which has been enormously influential; the latter is a fairly rare example of an extensive and sustained attempt to bring postcolonial analysis to bear specifically on African texts.

This style of post-colonial criticism takes the idea of the "silencing" of the native by the imposition of imperial discourses quite literally—as a statement about the native's muteness more than the colonizer's deafness. The colonial subject, it is said, was forced to learn the colonizer's language, in which he or she was (initially) trapped and constrained as by a straitjacket. According to Ashcroft et al.,

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indigenous languages all over the British Empire were "rendered unprivileged" by the imposition of English to such an extent that they became unusable for expressive purposes and in some cases even died out. "It is this concept of silence, not any specific cultural concept of meaning, which is the active characteristic linking all post-colonial texts" (*The Empire Writes Back* 187). The postcolonial silence is pictured as having been comprehensive:

> By implication, the silencing of subaltern women [discussed by Spivak] extends to the whole of the colonial world, and to the silencing and muting of all natives, male or female. (*The Empire Writes Back* 178).

Nor is this silencing to be understood purely in terms of overt political repression. The English language silences by its sheer privileged and predominating presence: "Even those post-colonial writers with the literal freedom to speak find themselves languageless, gagged by the imposition of English on their world" (84).

However, having taken linguistic dispossession as its starting point, this style of postcolonial criticism goes on from there to celebrate a vigorous come-back by the colonized. The early stage of self-denigration and espousal of British values is succeeded by a phase of rejection of colonial culture and then its radical re-appropriation. The periphery now takes on the culture and language of the center and transforms it, breaking it, infusing it with local registers, and refashioning it so that it speaks with the voice of the marginalized. Instead of one hegemonic English we get a plurality of local englishes. Thus "the alienating process which initially served to relegate the post-colonial world to the 'margin' turned upon itself and acted to push that world through a kind of mental barrier from which all experience could be viewed as uncentred, pluralistic, multifarious. Marginality thus became an unprecedented source of creative energy" (12). The literature of the margins is thus at the frontiers of postmodern aesthetics.

In this model, then, the subaltern can and does eventually speak. In speaking, he or she asserts an identity in opposition to the identities imposed by colonisation: "Those 'Othered' by a history of European representation can only retrieve and reconstitute a postcolonized 'self' against that history" (Tiffin x). But when he or she speaks, it seems, the postcolonial subject speaks exclusively in English.

Thus in postcolonial criticism of African literature, the flowering of African literature in English, which occurred in the late 1950s and early 1960s, is interpreted as the colonial subject finally "finding a voice." It is more or less implied that until this flowering took place—showing that the colonized had mastered and subverted the colonial codes—the stunned natives literally could not articulate their responses to colonial rule.

This model brings together the literature of the whole non-metropolitan English-speaking world, including Australia, Canada, the Caribbean, and even the USA—whose existence and experience as "colonies" are boldly and provocatively conflated with those of India and Africa.[3] By defining its field in this way, *The Empire Writes Back* inevitably foregrounds what these places have in common—the problematic presence of English—and relegates to the background their utterly different political, historical, cultural, and linguistic experiences. Though distinctions are made between the "monoglossic" situation said to be characteristic of Australia, Canada, and the USA, the "diglossic" situation said to

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be characteristic of Africa and India, and the "polydialectical" (sic) situation said to be characteristic of the Caribbean, the generalized model of a binary world of colonizer and colonized ensures that analysis focusses on the presence of English, imbued with the values and experiences of the center, and the problem of making it speak for the margins. This automatically assigns English, and literature in English, an enormous, almost exclusive prominence even in "diglossic" cultures. The model thus inadvertently reenacts the very erasure of indigenous languages and cultures that it takes as its initial problematic. It is the relationship with English that defines the postcolonial condition, not just for the highly-educated elite or for anglophone writers but for entire populations—for "the postcolonial subject" in general: "the whole of the colonial world . . . all natives, male or female."

What Happens to African-Language Discourses?

If the African writer has to write in English, and has to transform English in order to make it bear the burden of African experience in the era of colonialism, then it seems natural to assume that writing, modernity, and the English language go together. To address present-day experience in colonial/post-independence Africa is to write; and to write is to write in English. This was the assumption made by both Commonwealth criticism and its heir, the buoyant type of post-colonial criticism. Its effect was to relegate expression in indigenous languages into a shadowy domain of "oral traditions" belonging properly to the precolonial past. The role of oral traditions/indigenous-language repertoires in this model is as a precursor, and more importantly as a pool of linguistic and thematic resources from which the anglophone writer can draw in order to refashion the English he or she is in the process of appropriating. Indigenous-language expression is consigned to the background, paradoxically by an inflation of its role as source and resource to the anglophone written tradition.

The notion of oral tradition as precursor and background, out of which modern anglophone written literature somehow emerged or grew, was established in numerous early anthologies of Commonwealth criticism of "African literature," where introductory chapters on "the oral heritage"—descriptive and celebratory in tone—would be followed by the real business of analysis and criticism in essays on Achebe, Soyinka, Ngũgĩ, and Awoonor. If "modern African literature" had its own separate origin, then it could flow into the Great Tradition from *elsewhere*, bringing renewal. But this developmental and evolutionary frame is distorting: as Eustace Palmer robustly observed, the earliest African novels in English "could not possibly be outgrowths of the oral tale" (Palmer 5). The fact that literate authors draw on thematic elements from oral as well as from written repertoires, and may achieve the *effect* of orality through specific techniques of writing, does not mean that their work "grew out of" oral traditions any more than Keats's "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" grew out of the folk ballad: the organic metaphor, with its implications of total, unwilled process, screens literary strategies and literary politics from view. The positioning of "oral tradition" as precursor suggests a view of literary history in which the oral forms had no function other than to be superseded by the "modern," "emergent" ones. Origin is there so that history can begin, and is itself outside history and outside scrutiny.

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More persistent and pervasive—and more justifiable—was the view, entertained by both Commonwealth and postcolonial criticism, of indigenous languages and oral repertoires as a pool of resources for the anglophone writer to draw on. In Commonwealth criticism, it was this "influence" or "ingredient" (depending on whether the writer's role was seen as active or passive) that was held to impart to African writing in English its special Africanity, its ability to express specifically African experience in an alien tongue. This incorporation of indigenous repertoires could be conceived at the level of the linguistic code itself (e.g., "the interplay between the two languages, Yoruba and English," Afọláyan 61), at the level of "orality" as a general category (e.g., "the wholesale application of an oral narrative technique to written narrative," Moore 185), or at the level of a pool of specific textual elements (e.g., "drawing on West African folklore, traditional symbols and images, and traditional turns of speech to invest their writing with a truly West African sensibility and flavour," Obiechina, *Culture* 26). A two-layered model of language and culture is sometimes envisaged: the "traditional heritage" is what pushes up from underneath the smooth square paving stones of English english, cracking and re-forming it into unique new patterns. What began as a "problem" is converted not just into an advantage, but into a trump card: in wrestling with the "chosen tongue," the African writer enriches and transforms it. "Orality" has been singled out in much europhone criticism, as Eileen Julien has brilliantly and forcefully demonstrated, as a potent symbol of Africanity, an almost talismanic notion, guaranteeing the authenticity of the experience conveyed by the text.[4] The critical method implied by this model was invariably to start from the known, recognizable "Western" form of the work—the generic conventions of the realist novel, the standard forms of metropolitan English—and then assess to what extent and in what ways the text deviated from this norm, under the influence of something not so well known, something *outside* or *beneath* the contemporary literary tradition, something *other*: the oral heritage, the indigenous language. And in many cases, the depiction of the oral heritage was extremely vague: its presence was indicated rather than discussed, like a tapestry glowing dimly in the shadows in which no actual designs can be made out: "Africa's ancient oral traditions . . . the rich heritage of thought, experience, religion, custom, folklore and myth, carried down the ages in scores of African vernaculars . . ." (Roscoe 249). The oral tradition and its "values" and "wisdom" are often left unanalyzed: their function is simply to evoke alterity.[5] It is as if, with modernity, expression in indigenous languages has come to a full stop, and is to live on only in translated borrowings and echoes.

Buoyant-type postcolonial criticism greatly refines and extends the analysis of oral and indigenous repertoires as a pool of resources for written Europhone texts. Ashcroft et al. offer a sophisticated analysis of the use of Ijo structures and lexemes in Gabriel Okara's *The Voice*; Chantal Zabus investigates in detail the different ways that elements of indigenous linguistic repertoires can be made to speak within a range of anglophone and francophone novels. This sharper style of analysis goes with a sharper evaluation of the role of linguistic hybridization in African europhone literature: not to provide a distinctively African cocktail so much as to resist, recreate and subvert the dominant language.

But in the process, this style of criticism relegates expression in indigenous languages even further into the background. In *The Empire Writes Back*, even

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more strikingly than in Commonwealth criticism, the African "vernacular" (30, 42) or "tribal language" (68) comes into the discussion *only* insofar as its syntax is overlaid upon or its vocabulary co-opted into English, and African "oral tradition" only insofar as its effects are recreated in English-language written literature. Modern expression in indigenous languages is not considered to exist: as in Commonwealth criticism, African languages in this model are strongly yoked to orality and to the pre-colonial order. Black sub-Saharan Africa is credited with "extensive and highly developed oral cultures" (116), but modern, written, African-language literature is discussed only as a possibility for the future, indeed as a program of the "back to pre-colonial purity" movement whose aims are rightly dismissed. The "vernacular," "oral" culture in this model emanates from a traditional order antithetical to, and all but destroyed by, the twin irruptions of English and writing:

> the invasion of the ordered, cyclic and "paradigmatic" oral world by the unpredictable and "syntagmatic" world of the written word stands as a useful model for the beginnings of post-colonial discourse. (82)

The model is one of absolute rupture, the replacement of one world by another.[6]

Chantal Zabus is more aware of the existence of African-language writing. The preface to her book was written by Albert Gérard, the great compiler of information on African-language written literatures, and she quotes him in passing to the effect that about half of all printed works of literature emanating from Africa have been in African languages (32). At the same time her exposition denies this knowledge and buries it under a categorical assertion, from which she does not deviate:

> In West Africa, the medium of literary expression is not the writer's mother tongue but the dominant, foreign European language imposed over the indigenous African languages in the process of Euro-Christian colonisation. . . . (1)

and

> For the West African writer, the mother tongue is either a medium that has not yet been reduced to writing or is in the process of being standardised, or a written tongue he knows little of . . . the West African writer finds himself writing in a language he subsequently wished to subvert and insert in the larger project of decolonisation. (2)

In doing so, she argues, the African writer produces a literary "third code," in the "overlapping space between other tongue and mother tongue"—a palimpsest where "behind the scriptural authority of the European language, the earlier, imperfectly erased remnants of the African language can still be perceived" (3). The critic's task is to bring them to light again, to uncover the hidden traces of the indigenous, effaced by the glottophagia of the colonial language; like a chemist, the critic "makes use of critical reagents whereby s/he can 'make the effaced writing of a papyrus or a parchment visible again'" (104-05). What is almost effaced, it is implied, is the text's secret identity, its concealed capacity for resistance. The occluded indigenous repertoire, in and of itself, is held to be a site of rebellion against the all-but-victorious march of colonial linguistic domination.[7]

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Zabus's acceptance of the model in which modernity currently exists only in europhone written form, superseding the oral, traditional and African-language expression which is all but erased by colonial glottophagia, leads her to some curious elisions. She describes Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* as

> the odd and somewhat freakish "missing link" in the Yoruba literary continuum between Chief Daniel Olarunfemi (sic) Fagunwa, the master story-teller and writer of Yoruba expression, and Wole Soyinka, the sophisticated and syncretic interpreter of a double legacy. This outlandish "folk-novel" precariously straddles the world of orature and that of literature and bridges the two by translating the one into the other. (108)

The "missing link" image shows that here we are back in evolutionist territory. The suggestion is that Ṣóyínká (anglophone, the world of literature) *evolved out of* indigenous folklore (Yorùbá, the world of orature), with Tutuọla (Yorùbá-English; oral-written) as an intermediate stage. Without actually saying so, this exposition assimilates Fágúnwà to the orature/Yorùbá language side of the divide. Why is Fágúnwà described first as "master story-teller" and only secondly as "writer," while Ṣóyínká is "the sophisticated and syncretic interpreter of a double legacy"? Fágúnwà, like Ṣóyínká, was first and foremost a writer. He was an extremely sophisticated literary stylist, one of whose main influences was the Yorùbá Bible. He, no less than Ṣóyínká, was the interpreter of a double (or triple, or multiple) legacy: a cultural broker par excellence, a Christian convert, a cultural nationalist, who celebrated Yorùbá culture in the name of the "African race," while purveying "enlightenment" to the Yorùbá readers to whom he addressed his books. But the paradigm operated by Zabus draws Fágúnwà into the "orature" camp, putting him on the other side of a binary cultural divide from Ṣóyínká. Both were writers; both drew on extensive written and oral sources for their own purposes; both dealt with the hybrid shifting world of colonial and post-independence Nigeria.[8] The exposition suggests, however, that one, because he used Yorùbá, belongs to a world of tradition and orality, while the other, because he uses English, belongs to modernity, hybridity, and literature which has superseded it. The gravitational pull of the model is such that anything in Yorùbá—whatever the facts tell us—*must* belong to the oral-traditional–precolonial camp.[9]

The contradictions and elisions in the texts of Zabus and of Ashcroft et al. suggest that the paradigm that governs their interpretation is too strong for facts to resist. This paradigm's power to distort can be attributed to the fact that it is constructed from a classic set of stereotyped pairs, which could be represented in two columns like this:

African languages	English/French/Portuguese
"traditional"	"modern"
oral	written
past-oriented	contemporary
local	international
restricted audience	wide audience
homogeneous	heterogeneous
embodiment of value	object of criticism

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None of these oppositions is entirely useless in itself; but it goes wrong when, in the manner of all stereotypes, the columns get glued into permanent sets, resulting in a picture of two separate worlds of experience, one of which is in the process of superseding the other. Because the "traditional" half of the paradigm is assigned a role that is outside history and outside criticism, the absurdity of this paradigm is shielded from scrutiny. The structure of paired oppositions is never viewed as a whole; it remains below the surface of the discourse, exerting a kind of gravitational pull on it, its influence revealed in unacknowledged contradictions and in what is excluded from African literary criticism more than in what is stated.

This is not, of course, to deny that African writers, whatever language they use, do often incorporate elements of long-standing indigenous expressive registers. Nor—let me make this clear—am I taking sides in a moral debate about what language African writers *ought* to use. My point is rather that the model proposed by postcolonial criticism—the model in which colonial glottophagia silences the native until he or she masters and subverts the colonizer's language—is based on a fundamental misconception, almost a will to ignorance. By casting the indigenous as always and only outside or underneath the "mainstream" literary discourses of modern Africa, it turns a blind eye to what is in fact the actual mainstream, the cultural discourses of the majority, in most of Africa.

Dissolving the Dichotomous Paradigm

Language is undoubtedly one of the instruments of imperial domination, and all colonial regimes had language policies of one kind or another. Throughout the British Empire, English became the principal language of government, of officialdom, of secondary and higher education, and thus of access to various kinds of high-status jobs. It was a symbol of "enlightenment" and social superiority. But it is nevertheless quite untrue to say that the colonial imposition of English rendered African languages "unprivileged" to the extent of being unusable for expression and reflection on contemporary experience.

In most former British colonies in Africa, African languages are still the language of daily life in which people are born, marry and die. In many places, long-standing oral traditions of expression in indigenous languages have been recreated to address new experiences in colonial and post-independence society. Elizabeth Gunner has shown how Zulu *izibongo* (praise poetry) has been taken up by the Trades Union movement in South Africa. 'Makali Mokitimi and David Coplan have documented the transformation of *lifela* poetry by the Basotho migrant mine-workers. J. N. Paden shows how Hausa poetry was performed as electoral propaganda in Northern Nigeria in the 1950s and early '60s. Graham Furniss has perceptively discussed contemporary Hausa poetic commentaries on the oil-boom culture. In Somalia, according to John Johnson, almost every important utterance will be couched in poetic form to give it weight and effect: situations to which this applies range from settling a domestic altercation, managing a crew of stevedores, and a newsroom's handling of an election. Orature, then, is clearly not tied exclusively or even predominantly to the ethos of a lost, harmonious, indigenous world.

Even more significant is the huge domain of semi-oral, semi-written contemporary popular culture, in which materials migrate through print, speech, and electronic media in a network of allusions which brings a wide range of "literary"

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expression within the reach of the semi-literate school-leavers who make up the majority of the contemporary urban African masses. The scene of cultural production that these genres inhabit is such as to call into question the hard-and-fast distinction between "oral" and "written," and between "traditional" and "modern." Modern popular culture is a scene of metamorphoses and mutations, in which written texts are performed, performed texts can be given a written recension, and a network of allusions and cross-references enables audiences in whatever state of literacy to access texts in one way or another.

Into this domain of popular culture, where the boundaries between "oral" and "written" are erased, is inserted, in some places in Africa, a strong written literature in African languages. It is true that there are African cultures where "to write is to write in French, English or Portuguese" (Miller 69). But there are others which boast vast African-language written literatures, some of ancient pedigree. In Ethiopia, Ge'ez texts were produced as early as the fifth century A.D. (Gérard 1982:7-8); Swahili written literature dates back at least to the seventeenth century (Knappert 3). The earliest Hausa and Fulani written poetry extant today dates from the period of the jihad (early nineteenth century), but it is believed that a much older tradition of written Hausa verse preceded it. In those cultures which owed writing to nineteenth-century European colonization, or to the traders and missionaries who preceded it, written literatures in African languages nonetheless sometimes antedated those in English.

Twentieth-century African-language written literature dealing with contemporary experience often dwarfs literary production in English. In Northern Nigeria, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe, for example, the dynamic and expanding production of African-language publications greatly exceeds literary production in English. Modern Swahili literature includes the 630 works of poetry, novels, essays, autobiography, and fables by the great Shabaan Robert, as well as numerous publications by other authors—including detective fiction which by the 1960s was being "mass produced" (Ohly 474-77). The production of written Hausa poetry expanded enormously after the Second World War, when a domain that had formerly been the preserve of Islamic scholars was entered by other social groups such as teachers, state officials, politicians and social leaders (Pilaszewicz 211). George P. Kahari estimates that in Zimbabwe, by the end of 1984, 224 literary works in Shona and Ndebele had been published, but only 42 in English (15).

The paradigm that conflates, on the one hand, indigenous-language expression with the oral, the traditional, and the precolonial, and, on the other hand, europhone expression with writing, modernity and colonial/postcoloniality, dissolves under the glare of these elementary facts. The African past was not exclusively "oral"; "oral" literature nowadays does not deal with an exclusively "traditional" world of experience; and modern written literature is not exclusively in European languages. Contemporary African-language written literature, gaining additional resonance and extension from its location in huge, heterogenous, popular cultures, is fully as capable of confronting contemporary "postcolonial" experience as European-language literature, as I shall show shortly in a discussion of one of Ọládẹ̀jọ Òkédìjí's novels.

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This leads one to question the claim that African-language literature is necessarily restricted to an insignificant "local" audience, while writers in European languages automatically secure a "wider," international readership. Without minimizing the real problems confronting authors in a multilingual continent, it is still necessary to insist that a potential audience of 30 million speakers of a lingua franca such as Hausa or Swahili cannot be described as narrowly localized. There are more Yorùbá speakers than speakers of Swedish, Norwegian and Danish put together: and no one suggests that the Scandinavians "have no choice" but to stop writing in their own languages forthwith. Many of the Yorùbá millions are not fully literate, but the nature of the sphere of literary cultural production makes it possible for most of them to participate in an innovative, modern domain informed by written texts nonetheless.

The Colonial Scene of Literary Production in Yorùbá

It would be equally absurd to imagine that historical agency in Africa was erased by colonialism as that it was engendered by it. If colonial domination did not automatically, uniformly, or universally erase, efface, or render useless the indigenous languages of the colonized, then it is necessary to look more closely at actual historical conjunctures and scenes of cultural production. What is immediately clear is, first, that colonial language policies were heterogenous, uneven, and often self-contradictory, and that, second, what people actually did, linguistically, could not be encompassed by any colonial policy. Gérard draws a strong distinction between "two utterly different patterns" in relation to African-language expression: repression by French, Portuguese, Spanish, and Italian colonial powers, and encouragement by British and German powers (176); Johannes Fabian has shown that in Zaire, colonial intervention was dedicated not to the imposition of French, which was considered too good for the natives, but upon the standardization of a local lingua franca, Swahili. The presence of Arabic is a factor which greatly complicates any binary model of colonial linguistic domination in a number of African countries. Even within the British sphere, policies varied between one colony and another, so that Ngugi's account of the suppression of Gikuyu in Kenyan schools describes a scene quite different from that of Nigerian colonial education. More important, though, is the fact that what actually happened was not only, or always, the result of colonial policies. The Yorùbá case, to which I now turn, shows how enormously local energies can exceed any government proposal.

In Western Nigeria, the colonial period saw a huge efflorescence of Yorùbá-language creativity. A popular culture came into being, deeply rooted in existing expressive genres, but nonetheless of a qualitatively new type: urban-focussed, predominantly youthful and male in orientation, produced and consumed largely by the new, amorphous, semi-educated "intermediate classes." Popular locally-printed fiction, popular music, popular travelling theater, new forms of neo-traditional chanted and written poetry offering commentaries on contemporary life: all these genres exploded into life just at the moment when the natives are supposed to have been "silenced" by "the imposition of English."

Undoubtedly, mastery of English was much desired by these intermediate classes. Desire for education gave rise to the establishment of large numbers of

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do-it-yourself schools from the beginning of the century onwards, and was the single strongest force in the electoral politics of the 1950s (see Fafunwa). But—as in the Indian case well discussed by Aijaz Ahmad—the benefits of English were paramount only in certain contexts. For creative expression—in the production of poetry, songs, plays, novels, and local histories—Yorùbá not only remained far and away the most important linguistic medium for written texts as well as oral ones, but actually underwent great elaboration, extension into new genres, and consolidation as an "ethnic national" language, rather than a congeries of related dialects, in the course of the colonial period.

Yorùbá language and literature were central in the great project of cultural nationalism which has flourished in Western Nigeria since the second half of the nineteenth century (see Peel; Farias and Barber; Waterman). Yorùbá written literature dates from the mid-nineteenth century, and one of the earliest newspapers in what is now Nigeria was the bilingual Yorùbá-English one, the *Ìwé-ìròhìn* produced under the auspices of the Church Missionary Society in Abéòkúta from 1859 to 1867 (Gérard). Extensive written recensions of Yorùbá oral texts—notably town histories and Ifá divination verses—were published by educated cultural nationalists from the 1890s onwards. The work regarded as the first Yorùbá novel—*Ìtàn Èmi Ṣègilọlá* by I. B. Thomas—was published in 1928, and was followed byD. O. Fágúnwà's *Ogbójú Ọdẹ Nínú Igbó Ìrúnmalẹ̀* in 1938 (fourteen years before Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, which marks the starting-point of the "emergence" of "the African novel" in numerous literary histories).

Since then, the Yorùbá novel has become established as a major and continually expanding and diversifying genre. Dozens of new authors have appeared in the last few years, and their work includes not only historical novels, fables, and folkloric narratives, but also modern moral comedies, detective novels, and quasi-autobiographical narratives of modern Nigeria in crisis. There are now three generations of Yorùbá authors: the long-established giants like D. O. Fágúnwà, Adébáyọ̀ Fálétí, Isaac Délànọ̀, and J. F. Ọdúnjọ who began writing in the colonial era and are still widely read; the writers of the 1960s and 1970s, like Ọládẹ̀jọ Òkédìjí, Akínwùmí Ìṣọ̀lá, Kọ́lá Akínlàdé, Afọlábí Ọlábímtán and others; and a new and prolific category of post-oil-boom newcomers. A Yorùbá literary criticism has taken shape. Yorùbá language and literature are taught as full degree courses in seven university departments, several of them operating entirely in Yorùbá medium, and producing research papers and post-graduate degrees, including PhDs, in Yorùbá.[10]

In the colonial period, Yorùbá written literature, and the huge popular performance culture in which it was embedded, was never either purely oppositional ("inverse ethnocentrism") or purely imitative ("colonial mimicry"). These categories are incapable of addressing the complexity of the relations between colonization, Nigerian nationalism, and Yorùbá cultural nationalism. Though the newly-consolidated pan-Yorùbá identity could at times be mobilized in the anti-colonial struggle (as happened, for instance, with Ògúnndé's great nationalist plays of the 1940s), the assertive efflorescence of Yorùbá-language creativity does not appear to have been seen as inherently antagonistic to or incompatible with education in English, either by the colonial authorities or by Yorùbá writers, performers and audiences. They were independent, yet curiously complicit; they served as mutual models, yet irritants, in ways that have yet to be deciphered.

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The colonial and missionary educational bodies from the very beginning fostered Yorùbá-language literacy and creative writing. Samuel Johnson's great volume, *The History of the Yorubas*, was initially rejected by the Church Missionary Society press, who did not want a long, English-language history but a short, Yorùbá-language one for use in schools (Doortmont 50). The primary school syllabus prescribed Yorùbá-language works of fiction, like Fágúnwà's novels, A. K. Ajísafẹ́'s *Aiyé Akámarà* and Gabriel Òjó's *Ọlọ́run Èsan*, almost as soon as they appeared. Competitions were held to encourage creative writing in Yorùbá. Indeed, Ọládẹ̀jọ Òkédìjí, one of whose novels will be considered further in a moment, only began to write novels in Yorùbá because of this:

> Kì í ṣe pé mo mọ̀ ọ́n mọ̀ fúnra mi pé ìtàn Yorùbá mo fẹ́ẹ́ maa kọ, bóyá Gẹ̀ẹ́sì gan-an ni ǹbá fi kọ̀wé, tí kìbá ṣe pé ní 1954, àwọn ẹgbẹ́—kí ni a ti ń pè é—"Committee" Ìgbìmọ̀ Literature ti Western Region—Western Regional Literature Committee—won wáá polongo wí pé àwọn ń wá ẹni tó bá lè kọ ìtàn àtinúdá lédèe Yorùbá, kó jẹ́ ìtàn tó jọ ti ojú ayé, tí kì í ṣe ìtàn iwin nínú igbó, ìgbà yẹn ni mo wáá wò pé àǹfààní kan leléyìí á jẹ́ láti kọ̀wé, mo wáá kọ ìwé kan tí mo pè ní *Àgbàlagbà Akàn* nígbà yẹn.
>
> I didn't know by myself that I wanted to write novels in Yorùbá, I might have written in English, if it wasn't that in 1954, an organization—what was it called—a "Committee" for literature in the Western Region—the Western Regional Literature Committee—announced that they were looking for people who could write fiction in the Yorùbá language, stories that were realistic, not stories about spirits in the forest. That was when I saw that it would be a great thing to write, and I wrote a book that I called *Àgbàlagbà Akàn* at that time.[11]

If the colonial authorities appeared to see no need to erase Yorùbá as a medium of expression, Òkédìjí likewise clearly saw no strong ideological divide between writing in English and writing in Yorùbá. He did not see English-language writing as yielding to the colonial embrace, nor writing in Yorùbá as an act of subversion. He chose Yorùbá in response to a deliberate stimulus by the colonial regime, whose "summons to modernity" (see George) promoted both English- and Yorùbá-language writing. The colonial regime's summons was replicated exactly by the new Nigerian regime at Independence. As part of the celebrations, they organized another literary competition which was a precise replay of the earlier one, with the same specifications and many of the same organizers and judges.

But if the colonial authorities and their post-independence heirs sought to encourage and direct the development of modern Yorùbá-language writing, specifying preferred generic forms such as the realistic novel and teaching other genres—narrative poems and written drama, for example—in the schools, they were not responsible for what Yorùbá people did with those genres. It was not the colonial or post-independence education authorities who generated the huge outpouring of written Yorùbá texts that ensued, nor did they have any obvious control over the content of those texts or the ways in which they were circulated and articulated into a much larger popular culture. And what is most striking about the great majority of these texts is their superabundant confidence in the value of their local subject matter and in the capacities of the Yorùbá language and Yorùbá

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verbal art. Far from betraying any sense of linguistic dislocation or dispossession, they exploit the potential of Yorùbá rhetoric with intense, often flamboyant creativity. The Yorùbá-language writers established a relationship of independent cohabitation with English. They respected great works of English literature, as transmitted through the schools system; read imported popular literature from America such as detective stories and romances; but generated new Yorùbá literary traditions which seemed, even at the height of colonial rule, intensely preoccupied with specific internal agendas defined and expressed in local terms. These agendas—which include Yorùbá history and political relationships (e.g., *Baṣọ̀run Gáà* and *Ọmọ Olókun Ẹsin* by Fálétí), gender and familial dependence (e.g., *Kúyẹ̀* and *Ọmọ Òkú Ọ̀run,* by J. F. Ọdúnjọ), wealth, trickery and personal destiny (e.g., *Olówólaiyémọ̀* by Fẹ́mi Jẹ́bọdà)—lie of course within the general purview of the "postcolonial condition"; both their expressive conventions, and the experience they represent through them, belong to a world irremediably transformed by colonial intervention. But these writings do not appear to be oriented towards the "metropolitan center" in the way that postcolonial criticism suggests all "postcolonial" texts must be. Few of them take the incursions of colonial power as a central theme.[12] And though they are deeply concerned with the theme of individual self-realization, there is no indication that what they are about is the recuperation of a "self" previously eroded or distorted by imposed colonial stereotypes.

Published by local presses, their texts were read not only by schoolchildren but by adults who formed specific reading habits and tastes. Òkédìjí, who worked as a teacher for many years, retired in order to run a bookshop in which he sold both English- and Yorùbá-language fiction. In one of the few pieces of evidence we have about popular readerships, he affirmed that before the Nigerian economic collapse (c. 1985), there was an established book-buying public with well-defined tastes. The two things they liked were imported English-language novels like James Hadley Chase thrillers (if they knew English well enough), and Yorùbá-language novels:

> Nílẹ̀ Yorùbá, kó tó di pé nǹkan bẹ̀rẹ̀sí há báyìí, ọ̀pọ̀lọpọ̀ àwọn èniyàn maa ń ka ìwé o, won ń rà á kà fúnraa wọn. Àwọn tí wọ́n ti mọ̀wé kọ tí wọ́n mọ̀ ọ́n kà. Wọ́n maa ń bèèrè àwọn ìwéè mi ní ilé-ìtàwé tá wà yẹn, àwọn èniyàn maa wá láti wáa sọ pé ǹjẹ́ ìwéè mi mìîn ti jáde? Ǹjẹ́ a rí ìwé mìíìn tí mo ti kọ tó ti jáde? Kì í ṣọmọ ilé-ìwé. Àgbàlagbà, tó tiẹ̀ pọ̀ dáadáa. . . . Kò dájú pé àwon èniyàn ń lo ìtàn ilẹ̀ wa níhìn-ín tá kọ lédèe Gẹ̀ẹ́sì, kò dájú pé àwọn èniyàn ń kà á tó ìtàn ti okè òkun tí ọ́n kọ lédèe Gẹ̀ẹ́sì, fún àpẹrẹ àwọn Hadley Chase series, àwon èniyàn maa ń bèèrè rẹ̀ púpọ̀ púpọ̀, jù pé bóyá "The African Child," "Weep Not Child", nǹkankan . . . .
>
> In Yorùbáland, before things got as tight as they are now, a lot of people read books, they bought them to read for themselves. The people that knew how to read and write. They used to ask for my books in the bookshop we were at just now [his own bookshop in Ifẹ̀], people used to come to find out if a new book of mine had come out. "Has a new book by you come out?" They weren't schoolchildren. Adults, and in large numbers .

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> . . . I don't think our people read African novels in English, I don't think they read them as much as foreign novels in English, for instance the Hadley Chase series, people ask for that a lot, more than—for instance—"The African Child," "Weep Not Child," and so on. . . .

In Western Nigeria, Òkédìjí suggests, there was a well-formed and discriminating popular reading public for Yorùbá-language texts which greatly exceeded that for English-language African literature. An examination of one of his own works shows how powerfully this tradition can address contemporary crisis, and may suggest something of what the readers get from these texts, and what they bring to them.

Narrative Horror and Linguistic Joy in the Urban Underclass

Atótó Arére (1981), Òkédìjí's longest and most ambitious novel to date, is set in the present-day world of the urban poor in Ifè. Like his two previous novels, *Àjà ló lẹrù* (1969) and *Àgbàlagbà Akàn* (1971), it has overtones of a crime thriller, and revolves around a protagonist who gets drawn into the criminal underworld. But unlike the two earlier novels—whose tone is buoyant and whose hero, Lápàdé, takes on the criminal fraternity single-handed and triumphs over them on behalf of the innocent—*Atótó Arére* is grimly downbeat. It documents with relentless detail the career of a loser. Àlàbá, the son of a laborer, is mistreated as a child by his father's second wife until he runs away from home. He becomes a vagrant, falls inexorably into bad company, is imprisoned for a crime committed by his associate Sámínù, emerges a hardened character, is drawn into the fringes of a criminal gang, and eventually commits a crime himself for which Sámínù is unjustly executed. Fear and horror multiply as one death leads to another, and Àlàbá is finally killed in a shoot-out in the bush, disembowelled by a mad dog and pecked to death by vultures.

The narrative technique used to present this harsh tale could be described as modernist. Òkédìjí makes use of cinematic cuts, stream of consciousness, and a feverish, dreamlike, at times almost surreal imagination, which at the same time is extremely precise in its social and psychological detail. The novel opens with a scene of electrifying menace. There is a mysterious gathering, a huge crowd, strangely silent and on edge. There is something frightening and unnatural about it: a crowd that behaves as no crowd might be expected to:

(a)

> Ènìyàn pọ̀ lọ jàrá; wọn lọ jántìrẹrẹ bí ọmọ eṣú, wọn ṣe salalu lọ bí omi òkun. Ǹjẹ́ kò sì yẹ kí wọ́n máa kùn yunmu-yunmu bí oyin, tàbí kí wọ́n máa ṣe gàdàgàdà bí ẹyẹ ẹ̀gà, tàbí kí wọ́n máa tàkúrọ̀sọ, tàbí kí wọ́n sì máa pariwo lásán ṣá? Bí wọn bá ń kọrin, ǹjẹ́ ó le jọni lójú? Bí wọ́n bá ń hó tàbí tí wọ́n ń sunkún, bí wọ́n bá ń yọ̀, tábí kí wọ́n tilẹ̀ máa lu ara wọn, ǹjẹ́ ì bá ya ẹni kẹ́ni lẹ́nu? Ṣebí ń ṣe ló yẹ kí wọ́n máa gbọ́ "atótó, arére".
>
> Irọ́ o. Wọ́n pa lọ́lọ́ ni, bí ẹni pé ọ̀fọ̀ gbígbóná ṣẹ̀ wọ́n. Ẹni kẹ́ni nínú wọn kò dún pínkín, ẹnì kan kan kò gbin. Kẹ̀kẹ́ pa mọ́ gbogbo wọn lẹ́nu ni. Bẹ́ẹ̀ sì ni, ewée rúmọ̀ ń yájú ni; pípọ̀ ọ̀hún pàpọ̀jù. Wọ́n ju ẹgbàágbèje lọ. Akáṣe, ẹnì kọ̀ọ̀kan ń jákọ kẹ̀hẹ̀, kẹ̀hẹ̀, nídàágbánídàágbá. Bó ṣe,

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ẹlòmíràn a ṣáná sí sìgá ọwọ́ rẹ̀ pẹ̀rẹ̀, a tì í bọnu, a máa mu sìgá rẹ̀ lọ. Bó sì ṣe, ẹlòmíràn a mí kanlẹ̀ hìn-ìn; bó tún ṣe, ẹlòmíràn a gbin kìn. Lemọ́lemọ́ ni wọ́n ń fẹjú toto mọ́ aago ọrùn ọwọ́ọ wọn. (1-2)

Innumerable people were there; they were multitudes, like a swarm of locusts, they stretched out like the sea. Wouldn't you expect them to be buzzing like bees, or chattering like weaver-birds, or making conversation, or just making a noise? If they were singing, would that be unexpected? If they were roaring or weeping, if they were rejoicing or even fighting, would it be surprising? Or surely they might be expected to be listening to a public announcement.

But it wasn't so. They were silent as the grave, like people suffering bitter bereavement. No one made a sound, not so much as a murmur. They were all speechless. And this was in spite of the fact that the many-leafed *rúmọ* tree could not be compared with that crowd for numbers. There were untold myriads of people there. Except that someone would clear his throat from time to time. Then someone else would light his cigarette, put it in his mouth and smoke it. Then someone would sigh deeply; and then again, someone else would give a little groan. Every other moment they would glance at their wristwatches.

The scene is menacing and mysterious because it is not explained. It is presented like a puzzle to which the reader has no clue. Periodically a figure, left unidentified, barks a command, and other figures stamp on the ground. Then a specific consciousness enters the narrative, together with the first inkling of what the crowd is there for: "It was a long time before Labalábá realised that they were soldiers." The soldiers' outburst of activity makes the crowd so tense that they can hear the ticking of their own watches, and the thump of their own racing hearts. But "Labalábá" is different; he is isolated, in a more peculiar state even than they are:

(b)

J̀innìjìnnì kò bo Labalábá, bẹ́ẹ̀ sì ni Labalábá kò gbọ́ nǹkan kan. Kò gbọ́ ṣẹkẹṣẹkẹ aago tó so mọ́ ọrùn-ọwọ́; kò gbọ́ kì, kì, kì, tì ọkàn rẹ̀ ń lù; kò tilẹ̀ sì wáá gbọ́ àṣẹ tí akígbepàṣẹ ń pa. Ọ̀kánkán ni gbogbo ayé ń wò, òkè ni Labalábá gbójú sí, ó ń wo àwọn ẹyẹ kan tó ń fò lókè fíofío. Gúnnugún kan, àkàlà kan, ìgbẹ̀hìngbéhín ni àwòdì kán kún wọn lókè. Ǹje àṣá kan kò tún ń fò bọ̀ lọ́dọ̀ wọn? Gbogbo wọn ń fò yíká agbo. Àwọn ẹyẹ wọ̀nyí ń pòwe ni, wọ́n ń pòwe mọ́ Labalábá. Lówelówe là á lùlù àgídìgbó, ọlọ́gbọ́n ní í jó o, ọ̀mọ̀ràn ní í mọ̀ ọ́n. Àlàbá mọ̀ ọ́n ṣùgbọ́n kò le jó. Labalábá níran òwe àwọn àgbà pé ikú tó ń pa ojúgbà ẹni, òwe ló ń pa fún ni. Ó sì tún mọ̀ pé ọrẹ́ tí a bá mú na ìyáálé, kọ̀rọ̀ọ yàrá ìyàwó ni a ó fi pamọ́ sí, kí ìyàwó má ṣàfira. (2-3)

Labalábá was not trembling, but all the same Labalábá did not hear anything. He did not hear the ticking of the watch on his wrist; he didn't hear the steady drumming of his heart; he didn't even hear the commands that the commander was barking out. Everyone was looking straight ahead, but Labalábá looked upwards, he was watching a bird that was flying

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> high high in the sky. A vulture, a hornbill, and last of all a hawk joined them up there. Was that not an eagle flying towards them? All of them were flying around the arena. These birds were making a point [citing a proverb], they were making a point that applied to Labalábá. The *agidigbo* drum is played in proverbs, the wise person dances to it, the knowledgeable person knows what it means. Àlàbá knew what it meant, but he could not dance. Labalábá remembered the proverb of the elders, that the death that kills your age-mate is telling you something. And he also knew that the whip with which the senior wife is beaten is kept in the corner of the junior wife's room, so that she doesn't dawdle.

The crowd's attention is riveted on what is about to happen in front of them; Labalábá's is focused on a remote inhuman scene. But the passage hints that this strange abstraction is the result of some unexplained complicity in the day's events. Labalábá knows something the crowd does not. The proverbs he recalls signify that what is going to happen to someone else will soon happen to him too. Thus, before we know what the crowd is there for, and before we know why the thinking character is called both Labalábá and Àlàbá, or who he is, we are already in the presence of his extreme anxiety and his sense of impending doom. Then the scene snaps into focus: it is a public execution by firing squad, the victim is Sámínù, Àlàbá's associate, and the crime for which he is being punished was actually perpetrated by Àlàbá. Àlàbá is almost fainting with anxiety, doubt, pity and terror.

How he reached this state is then retraced step by step. When the execution is over and everyone else has left, Àlàbá goes home in a daze, lies on his bed and thinks about the events in his life which led up to this day. The next 180 pages of the novel trace these events as he relives them. The ominous opening scene, then, is the structural turning point of the novel, toward which and out of which all the narrative flows. The narrative voice moves continually in and out of Àlàbá's mind, and his thoughts are evoked with a fluid intensity. However, once the narrative has caught up with itself again—and the day of Sámínù's execution is described for the second time—the narrative perspective multiplies and fragments. Numerous points of view are introduced in rapid succession, and an increasing cast of characters revolves more and more rapidly in a frenzy of pursuit, flight, and deception which ends in a bloodbath. The day of the execution is experienced through the consciousness of each of the underworld characters in turn, so that there is a succession of overlapping thoughts rebounding from this central event. New characters appear even in the last chapters, and the last point of view of all is that of one of the vultures, waiting impatiently for Àlàbá to die. This rapid proliferation and alternation of consciousness—most of them obsessive, closed off from understanding others' thoughts, and bent on their own narrow purposes—heightens the intensity with which Àlàbá's own increasingly feverish thoughts are rendered. The plot not only thickens, but begins to churn and whirl, with Àlàbá becoming more and more a dislocated fragment, maddened and obsessive, finally hurled to his terrible end. The narrative technique, then, includes an intermittent dissolution of the boundaries between authorial and character's voices, marked shifts in temporal and spatial perspective, disorienting switches of consciousness, and the creation of suspense through premonitions, obsessive fears, and the piling-up of foreground detail against an empty background.

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The bleak contemporary urban habitat of this novel is the border country between poverty and crime, and Òkédìjí reveals through unostentatious coincidences how close the legitimate world—of hard work and honest business—is to the illegitimate world of big men who sleep all day and go out at night to burgle their neighbors. Àlàbá learns a trade—he becomes an expert car-mechanic—and wants to be his own man. But each time he seems set to prosper, the tentacles of a malevolent patronage drag him back into networks which he at first scarcely understands are knotted deep into the criminal underworld. In thrall to chronic dependence and gritty want, people are sour and become predatory in their turn. People are unpredictable, incomprehensible, in pursuit of their own salvation in an environment of constant struggle. Àlàbá desires trusting and productive family relationships, but he goes from one fake or failed travesty of a family to another: as houseboy to an elite University couple, whose children get him into trouble; as confederate of the young street-thief Sámínù, who repeatedly cheats and betrays him; as protege of the mysteriously rich Odiẹ̀wù, who eventually involves him in large-scale robberies; as apprentice to the car-mechanic Adékúnlé who dies suddenly and horribly, leaving a widow who uses every trick she can think of to attach herself and her children to Àlàbá; as a fringe member of Sámínù's gang, and surrogate father to Sámínù's children after the execution; as the mistrustful lover of Bọ́lá, a ruthless and volatile female gangster. All of these relationships are deceptive and barren, all of them are imposed on Àlàbá by people with ulterior motives. Àlàbá accedes to them myopically, and eventually dies completely alone.

The novel is interested in how, and why, people's lives go hopelessly wrong. In the end the narrative seems to endorse Àlàbá's own bleak view that he is just an unlucky person. The narrative makes no appeal to the consolations of philosophy. Àlàbá is not a believer, or at any rate does not explain things in terms of providential will. Things simply turn out badly because that's the way things are for him: a stripped-down version of the Yorùbá notion of *Orí*, or individual destiny. Though Orí is occasionally mentioned as an explanatory principle, the novel could not be further from a folkloric attempt to preserve or rehabilitate a "traditional world view." The bareness of the explanation corresponds to the bareness of Àlàbá's life: devoid of friendship, family, counsel, education, and success.

But though the narrative does not seek to excuse Àlàbá or explain his misfortunes in terms of society or environment, this novel is about a whole urban underclass. The increasingly frequent and vivid incursions into minor characters' consciousness have the effect of a kaleidoscopic survey of a multiplicity of human struggles. We enter into the thoughts of the night watchman at the bank, an old man who earns a pittance and resents his wife's insubordination which results from his poverty; the farmer Adéjumọ, who labors to grow yams which are then taken by thieves; and the old hunter Ògúndìran, who is accidentally killed in the final shoot-out. The thoughts of Bọ́lá show the desperation of a woman who wants to be free of men's domination but depends on exploiting them for her economic survival. Àlàbá's is not an individual tragedy: it emerges from the relentless milieu and is, the narrative hints, paralleled by innumerable other similar cases. When Àlàbá first becomes homeless and destitute, he is shown to be joining a modern underclass:

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(c)

> Ó ń ṣánwọ́ kiri ni, kò ní gá, kò ní go, kò nígbá, kò láwo. Ẹ̀wù tó wọ̀ sọ́rùn kò ní awọ̀tẹ́lẹ̀; ṣòkòtò tó bọ̀ kò dé orúnkún; dángbóró, dángbóró ló ń ṣe ojúgun kiri; kò sí fìlà lórí, kò sí bàtà lẹ́sẹ̀. Báyìí ló ṣe tó fi la gbogbo ìgboro Ifẹ̀ já. Ṣùgbọ́n kò dá yàtọ̀ sì awọn ọmọdé mìíràn lọ títí. Àwọn ọmọ òde òní! (24-25)
>
> He was walking about empty-handed, he hadn't a thing, he had neither calabash nor plate. He had no vest under his jumper; his trousers didn't reach his knees; he was going about with his shins completely bare; he had no cap on his head, no shoes on his feet. In this state he walked the length and breadth of Ifẹ. But he was no different from innumerable other kids. The kids of today!

In contemporary lower-class Nigerian society, innumerable small-time entrepreneurs struggle to make ends meet, clinging to the hope that one day they will get their lucky break and move up and out of it into a more secure and prestigious world. Repeated set-backs are the norm in this environment: people try different occupations, combine multiple strategies for survival, fail at many, and always hope that one day they will find the one that taps into the seams of contemporary urban wealth. In an economy bloated by unpredictable and maldistributed petronaira, personal destiny takes on a peculiarly seductive explanatory power. The power of *Atótó Arére* lies in its uncompromising gaze at the unacceptable fact that personal destiny does not always end up leading you to better times. The narrative's recourse to the idea of a persistently adverse personal destiny, demonstrated by Àlàbá's repeated bad luck, exposes the obverse of the optimism of a society of self-made men. Onto the violent narrative infrastructure of an American thriller is mapped the despair of the small-time and unlucky contemporary Nigerian poor.

This text, then, is about the thwarted attempts of an underdog to realize himself, to consolidate himself in the midst of forces that ultimately lead to his disintegration. It is about the modern urban world that is undoubtedly a legacy of the colonial era. But it does not situate its scene of action in relation to the colonial metropole; it does not appear to be at all interested in *writing back* to the imperial center.

The essential point is that the alienation, dehumanization, and dispossession of the underclass depicted in the novel is not understood in terms of dispossesion from language. On the contrary, what makes the novel riveting is its deeply pleasurable and empowering command of a versatile, allusive, demotic Yorùbá.

Òkédìjí said in an interview that the advantage of writing in Yorùbá was:

> láti lo èdè, lọ́nà tí mo mọ̀ pé ni wọn fi í lò ó ní àwùjọọ wa. Ọ̀pọ̀lọ̀pọ àwọn onkọ̀wée wa títí disiyìín ló jẹ́ pé èdè alákọ̀wé ni wọn ń kọ, kì í ṣe èdèe Yorùbá gidi, bí wọn ṣe é sọ ọ́, ní oko tìwa, ní ìlú tèmi, ní gbogbo láàrin ọjà, ní gáréjì . . . . Eni tó bá dàgbà ní Ọ̀yọ́, tí ó bá wọn lọ káàkiri, tó lọ sílé-ìwé lỌ́yọ̀ọ́, tó ní ṣọ́ọ̀ṣi tó ń lọ lọ́sọ̀ọ̀sẹ̀, tí wọn ń wàásù, tó n gbọ́ bí wọn ń ṣeégún bí wọn ´n ṣorò lójú ẹ̀, gbogbo èdè wọ̀nyí, á ti wà lára ẹ̀. Ṣùgbọ́n ó lè má wàá maa rántí àti mú wọn lò—á wà lára ẹ̀.
>
> to use language, in the way that I know it is used in our society. A lot of our writers up till today write in bookish Yorùbá, not real Yorùbá as it is

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> spoken in our farms, in my town, in places like the market and the motorpark. . . . Anyone who grew up in Ọ̀yọ́, and went around with people there, who went to school in Ọ̀yọ́, who had a church he went to every week, where they preached, and who listened to the way they bring our *egúngún* masquerades and witnessed the way they do rituals, all these different kinds of language will stay with him/her. But he or she might not remember to use them. All the same, they'll have been internalized.

The Ọ̀yọ́-centrism evident in this statement, though interesting in itself, need not detain us here. What is more remarkable is the conviction that real, living, creative use of Yorùbá is to be found not in the academy or in abstracted "traditions" but in the contemporary world of the motorpark and market. It is not a single language replete with value ("the tribal language"; "the African mother-tongue") but a multiplicity of registers, each of which must be attended to and internalised if the complexity and variety of present day speech is to be captured. And Òkédìjí clearly does not see the use of Yorùbá in and of itself as a gesture of resistance, or a claim to authenticity: rather, there is good Yorùbá and bad Yorùbá, and good Yorùbá is only mastered by work, practice, and attention.

In *Atótó Arére*, Òkédìjí brings his mastery of linguistic registers to an extraordinary pitch, generating a text that almost speaks itself out loud as you read. His language constantly alludes to, echoes and co-opts the idioms of the great Yorùbá oral poetic traditions of *oríkì*, *òwe*, and *ẹsẹ Ifá*. But these allusions are not folkloric or nostalgic: they are not being used to signify Africanity, authenticity or otherness, or to stand in metonymically for a mode and style of communication otherwise unfamiliar to the reader. They are not imported from *outside* the registers of daily speech shared with a culturally-endowed readership. They constitute, rather, the common cultural ground which Òkédìjí and his readers inhabit. His mode is intensely incorporative, assimilating elements from written Yorùbá texts (the Bible, the work of Fágúnwà), slang, and popular songs and chants, as well as the oral poetic genres. But incorporativeness, intertextuality and generic migration are deeply characteristic of all Yorùbá verbal art, oral and written, old and new (see Barber, forthcoming). A long-standing gift for hybridity is something that marks the whole cultural scene. Òkédìjí's extremely accomplished use of allusion and quotation creates a new texture, but it is not to be understood as the product of a writer constrained within an alien set of conventions and seeking to assimilate and refashion them by infusing elements from another, indigenous/exotic code outside them; rather, the shared registers of verbal expression in modern Western Nigeria are always already hybrid. And the popular cultural nationalist's self-conscious appreciation of "tradition" is a way of gaining distance from something that is already laid down at deep levels in the culture he or she inhabits.

Look again at passage (b) above. The birds that seem to mesmerize Àlàbá make multiple allusions that the reader will pick up even though they are not explicit. *Gúnnugún* (vulture) and *àkàlà* (hornbill) are one of the standard lexical pairs which underpin Yorùbá orature; *àwòdì* (hawk) and *àṣá* (eagle) are alternative third members, making a triad, the commonest pattern in oral texts (see Barber, "I Could Speak"). These birds, then, for someone familiar with Yorùbá poetics, go together as a set, signalling a symbolic or emblematic rather than

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purely descriptive function. Moreover, the vulture and hornbill are frequently linked in proverbs and in mythology with ritual and sacrifice. And the hawk also has another, more specific function in this context. A knowing reader will be reminded of the proverb "Àwòdì òkè kò mọ̀ pé ará ile ń rí òun" 'The hawk up above does not know that people below can see him.' In other words, evil-doers are observed even when they feel most safe: an allusion which contributes to the growing but still vague apprehension that Àlàbá is somehow guiltily implicated in the mysterious crowd scene. Still more knowledgeable readers will make a connection with one of Òkédìjí's own earlier works, *Àgbàlagbà Akàn*, a thriller where a contemporary popular song using this proverb is quoted as a motif throughout the narration of the hero's pursuit of the criminals—signifying that the criminals are under observation without knowing it. But in *Atótó Arére*, we realize, the hero himself is the criminal; and the same birds return in the last chapter to preside over his ghastly death.

The web of allusions and quotations that constitutes Yorùbá oral and written textuality is channelled by Òkédìjí to create extraordinary psychological effects. Proverbs by definition are quoted, and Òkédìjí in all his writing deploys a multitude of proverbs with sinuous ingenuity. But when Àlàbá is trying to explain his own misfortune to himself, he gets hold of a single saying and repeats to himself endlessly, so that the act of quoting itself becomes a pathology: "If you throw a fan up in the air 200 times, it will land flat on its side every time." The dreary recurrence of this proverb beats through the narrative like a dead drumbeat of despair, but when Àlàbá is strung up the words whip him like a lash. As he gets more deeply embroiled in the criminal underworld, an alternative version of the proverb, referring to a cutlass rather than a fan, takes over. Bọ́lá uses it when she is trying to reassure Àlàbá that Sámínù will be released from prison:

(d)

> "Ṣé ti Alàájì? Ọ̀run ló ti mú oríire tirẹ̀ wá. Béǹìyàn sọ àdá sókè nígbà igba, ibi pẹlẹbẹ ni yóó máa fi lélẹ̀. Kò ju bẹ́ẹ̀ lọ".
> Ààrin àtàrí Alàbá ni ọ̀rọ̀ tí Bọ́lánlé sọ yìí ti dún. Ibii pẹlẹbẹ! Kín ni Bọ́lánlé tún mẹ́nu bà yìí? Ẹ̀rù bẹ̀rẹ̀ sí í ba Àlàbá gidigidi láì le tọ́ka sí ohun tó fa ìbẹ̀rù náà. (177)
>
> "You mean Alhajji's business? He brought his good luck with him from heaven. If you throw a cutlass up two hundred times, it will always fall on its flat side. That's all there is to it."
> Bọ́lánlé's words seemed to ring in Àlàbá's brain. The flat side! What was Bọ́lánlé saying? Àlàbá began to feel terribly afraid, without being able to point to any cause.

Though Bọ́lá is applying the proverb to another person, and using it to suggest the inevitable recurrence of good luck rather than bad, just hearing the words is enough to throw Àlàbá into a panic. Finally, the proverb mutates into a terrifying image of menace. After Sámínù's execution, Àlàbá, on the verge of madness, goes to murder a treacherous confederate but finds him already dead. He returns to Ifẹ̀ ready to kill or be killed, hardly human:

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(e)

> Òfìfo Àlàbá ni ó padà sí Ilé-Ifẹ̀. Kòròfo. Ìyàngbò tí afẹ́fẹ́ ń gbé. Èèpo lásán. Àlàbá gidi kò sí níbẹ̀.
>
> Nítorí pé àdá Àlàbá kò tilẹ̀ fi ibii pẹlẹbẹ lélẹ̀ mọ́; bẹ́ẹ̀ni kò fi igun lélẹ̀. Adá rẹ̀ dógùn-ún ni! Ó fi ẹnu gúnlẹ̀, ó gbé èèkù sókè. Ta ni yóó gba èèkù yìí mú tí yóò máa fi àdá ọ̀hún bẹ́nìyàn? Àlàbá ni, àbí Alàbá ni wọn ó fi àdá ọ̀hún bẹ́?
>
> Àlàbá kò mọ̀. Kò sì bi araa rẹ̀ léèrẹ̀. (213-14)
>
> It was an empty Àlàbá who returned to Ile-Ifẹ. A hollow shell. Chaff carried about by the wind.[13] A mere husk. The real Àlàbá was not there.
>
> Because Àlàbá's cutlass had not fallen on its flat side this time; nor had it fallen at an angle. His cutlass had rusted![14] It had landed point down, with its handle in the air. Who would seize that handle and carve someone up with the cutlass? Would it be Àlàbá, or would Àlàbá be the one to be carved up?
>
> Àlàbá didn't know. And he didn't ask himself.

After the endless litany of inevitability, this reversal is a shock. The sheer violence of the image of the cutlass, like a living thing, landing vertically, stuck in the ground, waiting to be seized, gives the narrative a jolt forward towards its horrifying end. What is so striking in this novel is that the horror reaches us through the medium of Alàbá's mind, frenzied, self-deceiving, apprehensive and always acutely present and immediate. Proverbs and sayings are part of his consciousness, and are integrated, and used on the same footing, with textual materials from many other sources. They are imbricated in the layers of a highly specific contemporary situation, and are the very medium in which the consciousness of the novel moves.

This novel, then, which is part of a large, long-standing and internally varied tradition of written Yorùbá literature, does not show any consciousness of being Europe's other. It is wholly preoccupied with its own scene of action: the present-day urban lower classes in the Yorùbá-speaking area of Nigeria. Though it deliberately borrows from foreign models such as the American crime thriller, its imaginary is forged from within modern Nigerian experience and its language, precisely *because* it is inexhaustibly incorporative, is extraordinarily well adapted to the evocation of the hybrid, bitter world of oil boom cities. Its intense intertextual allusiveness presumes an audience which, if not as wide as the "international" one African writers are supposed to have to address, is certainly deeper, for it is an audience that shares a repertoire of textual competencies taking in the full range of popular and traditional literary forms as well as a number of foreign ones.

What all these forms are about, at least at one level, is language itself. Òkédìjí himself thought that his customers chose books because they enjoyed the way the author used language. A kind of linguistic *jouissance* appears to me to be at the heart of Yorùbá literary creativity and to inspire all modern written and oral Yorùbá texts. Whether or not this particular type of textual pleasure is specifically a product of the cultural nationalism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is impossible to say. What we can say is that those written and oral Yorùbá texts we have access to—because they were recorded or produced in this or the last

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century—appear to embody an immensely powerful affirmation of linguistic confidence, while at the same time displaying an impressive capacity to address the crises of colonial and post-colonial modernity. This shared linguistic *jouissance* sorts ill with theories of the silencing of the native.

Conclusion

Commonwealth literary criticism did well to take on board the "new literatures in English" from the colonial worlds, which mainstream Eng. Lit. had excluded from the canon. Given this starting point, it was obvious that what they would look at was only texts written in English, and what they would look for was only (a) the things these various "new literatures" had in common, and (b) the things that made them, severally or collectively, different from the metropolitan mainstream. This was to be expected. But the next step, which was to take these works in English, produced in widely different social and historical contexts and in distinct local scenes of cultural production, and theorize them as representative of "post-colonial experience" in general—for whole populations, and throughout the colonized world—was seriously misguided. It seems to have led to categorical assertions about the silencing of "postcolonial" cultures, and the role of colonial and indigenous languages and literatures in them, which the most cursory inspection will expose as false.

Instead I would urge, for literatures in Africa, as does Aijaz Ahmad for literatures in India, an approach to anglophone writing that places it in the context of all the other forms of cultural production going on within a specific social formation. In Africa and India, English, and writing in English, co-exists with other languages and writings, and is deployed by specific strata of the population for specific purposes. The relationships between them cannot be reduced to simple assertions about colonial domination, assimilation, appropriation or mimicry.

What goes on in the English texts can only be understood if the full presence of texts in indigenous languages is acknowledged—not as a shadowy, vaguely-delineated, value-laden "oral heritage" in the background, but as a modern, mainstream, heterogenous, hybrid and changing mode of discourse, created and recreated daily by the majority of the population. We need to think about "becoming 'inter-literary'," as Spivak puts it ("The Burden of English" 151), since "the teaching of English literature can become critical only if it is intimately yoked to the teaching of the literary or cultural production in the mother tongue(s) . . . ." Writing in English can be understood more richly if we abandon the picture of the colonial language as an all-enveloping blanket of repression, and the indigenous languages as stifled, silenced sites of muted authenticity and resistance. Instead, we should perhaps see English as one available register among others, in specific scenes of cultural production. Its mode of operation depends, then, not only on what it absorbs from the "traditional heritage," but on what it doesn't; not only on what it says and doesn't say, but on what *else* is being said, in other languages that surround it.

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NOTES

1. See for example the substantial representation of oral literature in critical anthologies by Ulli Beier, Bruce King, and Bernth Lindfors.
2. Povey, for instance, veers in a single paragraph from one idiom to the other: the African writer "chooses to employ his second language for his creativity and . . . recognises that for all his popular audiences in Africa he has to be published abroad and write at least partially for an international and therefore foreign readership" (98). He *chooses* to write in his second language but he *has to* be published abroad and write for a foreign readership. Larson does it even more concisely, in a single sentence: "the African writer has had little option in choosing the [English] language for his writing" (11).
3. For critiques of this conflation, see McClintock; Dirlik; Ahmad; Hutcheon. For a recent reaffirmation of common ground between two "colonies" as different as Australia and Africa, see Ashcroft.
4. Julien points out that effects of "orality" in written texts are a style of writing, selected for a purpose not genetically inherited; anyone could master them with sufficient practice, even a foreigner brought up entirely in a literate world. They demonstrate skill in writing rather than guaranteeing "authenticity"—a concept which Julien shows to be in any case useless as a measure of literary value, and which she proposes to replace with the notion of "accountability."
5. More detailed discussions of specific indigenous forms, analyzed in relation to the English-language texts they have "influenced" were occasionally offered by scholars working within the general ambit of "Commonwealth" criticism, but they are rare. One example is Robert Fraser's fine discussion of Kofi Awoonor's poetry in relation to Ewe oral poetry. Obiechina has also attempted to uncover the precise Igbo idioms and formulations that he thinks underlie Achebe's prose. At the level of linguistic code, Afọlayan has provided a detailed analysis of the way Yorùbá structures have influenced Tutuọla's English.
6. Ashcroft et al. do reveal a moment of hesitation about this picture. And so they should. In West Africa, four hundred years of European trade, the development of trading pidgins, and long contact with Arabic and European literacy preceded the onset of colonialism proper. Nor is it possible to picture the world of the crumbling Ọ̀yọ́ empire, the rise of military strongmen in Ìbàdàn, or the ruthless expansion of the Ashanti kingdom, in the framework of an "ordered, cyclical, and 'paradigmatic' oral world." Such a world, if it ever existed, is beyond the reach of memory. And as a destructive force, the slave trade was far more important than literacy and the English language.

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7. It should be noted, however, that this is a position which Ashcroft et al. strongly reject, arguing that the meaning of "indigenous" elements is allocated by their place within the anglophone text, not imported intact from the indigenous code.
8. Fagunwa's last novel, *Àdììtú Olódùmarè*, was published in 1961, three years before his death; Ṣoyinka's earliest plays, including *The Lion and the Jewel* and *The Trials of Brother Jero*, were written before his return to Nigeria from England in 1960.
9. Unlike Ashcroft et al., who view a hypothetical future African-language literature with suspicion, Zabus does envisage a future renaissance of African-language literature, when "dreaming in foreign languages . . . will be supplanted by a lucid vision of a new African-language writing" (7). But in her account, as in Ashcroft et al., African-language written literature is held to be, in present-day Africa, paltry to the point of complete insignificance.
10. For a comprehensive survey of the history and present extent of Yorùbá oral and written literature see Babalọla as well as Iṣọla's "Contemporary Yoruba Literary Tradition." For a discussion of the way Yorùbá literary and linguistic criticism is becoming established as a major academic field in Nigeria, see Iṣọla's "The African Writer's Tongue." According to Iṣọla, "Yorùbá literature is growing so rapidly now that it is becoming impossible for the critic, let alone the general reader, to keep track of its booming growth" "Contemporary Yoruba Literary Tradition" 84).
11. Ọládèjọ Òkédìjí, personal communication 1991. Ironically, however, the Western Regional Literature Committee lost Òkédìjí's hand-written manuscript, and his first novel, *Àjà ló lẹrù*, was not published until fifteen years later, after S. A. Babalọlá, the renowned Yorùbá oral literature scholar, and a member of the original panel of judges, had sought him out and urged him to continue writing. The manuscript of *Àgbàlagbà Akàn* was never found. He called his second published novel *Agbàlagbà Akàn* too, because he liked the title and did not want it to go to waste: however, he says the story of the 1954 manuscript was entirely different. Both were detective novels, but in the 1954 story, the hero was a police investigator; in the 1973 story, the police are derided as hopelessly incompetent, and the lone hero, Lápàdé, has to carry out his investigations impeded by them as well as by the criminals. Òkédìjí explained that his experiences of police assistance when his wife's shop was robbed had disillusioned him.
12. Exceptions are Isaac Délànọ̀'s *Aiyé d'Aiyé Òyìnbó* (1955) and T. A. Ládélé's *Igbi Aiyé N Yí* (1978).
13. I am grateful to Dr. Akin Oyetade of the Department of African Languages and Cultures, SOAS, for providing me with the translation of this phrase, and for pointing out its source in the Bible (Psalms, 1, verse 4: "Awon enia buburu kò ri be: sugbon nwon dabi iyangbo ti afefe nfe lo" 'The wicked are not so; But are like the chaff which the wind driveth away.'
14. *Àdá rẹ̀ dógùn-ún ni* ("his cutlass had rusted") means literally "His cutlass had fixed the god Ògún." Ògún is the god of hunting, weapons and war as well as of iron. Thus the idiom is more appropriate to the terrifying situation being described than it might sound in translation.

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