OXFORD STUDIES IN POSTCOLONIAL LITERATURES

WEST AFRICAN LITERATURES

Ways of Reading

Stephanie Newell

OXFORD STUDIES IN POSTCOLONIAL LITERATURES IN ENGLISH

General Editor: Elleke Boehmer

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CONTENTS

MAPS

WEST AFRICAN TIMELINE[1]

Year (AD)	Literatures[2]	History, politics and culture
300		• Opening of trade routes across the Sahara Desert linking Mali to North Africa and Europe.
610		• Birth of Islam.
800–1100		• Growth of trans-Saharan trade in gold leads to emergence of West African kingdoms of Ghana (11th century), Mali (13th century), and Songhai (15th century).
11th century		• City of Timbuktu founded in Mali. Spread of Islam southwards into West Africa. • Expansion of influence of loosely confederated city-states of Oyo, Illorin and Benin.
1235	• Early versions of *Sundjiata* (or *Sunjata*) *Epic.*	• Leader of Kangaba State, Sundjiata Keita, defeats kingdom of Susu, led by Sumanguru Kante. Mali Empire is founded by Sundjiata.
c. 1300		• Arrival of Asantes in Ghana.
15th and 16th centuries	• Medieval epics; spread of *Sundjiata Epic.*	• Timbuktu becomes centre of trade, culture and Islamic learning under expanding Songhai Empire. Decline of Mali Empire. • Early Portuguese settlements on coast.
1441		• European slave trade commences from Africa to Portugal.

(*Contd.*)

WEST AFRICAN TIMELINE[1] (*Contd.*)

Year (AD)	Literatures[2]	History, politics and culture
1450s–1480s		• Expansion of European settlement, exploration and trade, particularly by Portuguese.
16th to 18th centuries		• High period of international slave trade. Increase in rivalries between European traders. An estimated 11.7 million Africans are shipped to the Americas.
16th to 19th centuries		• Fall of Songhai Empire in late 16th century. • Benin dynasties increase power and retain importance until late 19th century.
17th century		• Fulani incursions into coastal areas. • Rise of Benin states of Hogbonu and Abomey (ruled by the Fon) as flourishing centres of slave trade. British traders increase activity.
1700–1820s		• French occupation of Senegal. • Unification and expansion of Asante Empire.
1795–1805	• Mungo Park's *Travels in the Interior Districts of Africa.*	• Mungo Park travels up River Niger, producing map.
1787	• Quobna Ottobah Cuguano's *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil of Slavery.*	
1789	• Olaudah Equiano's *Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavas Vassa, the African.*	• Rise of anti-slavery movement in England and North America.

Early 19th century		• Britain bans slave trade (1818). Sierra Leone selected by Britain as site for placing freed and runaway slaves. • Anglo-Asante wars in 1806–16; 1825–28; 1874; 1896–1902. • Islamic *jihads* spread across West Africa.
Mid 19th century	• Publication of travel and exploration narratives and missionary journals, including Samuel Ajayi Crowther's *The Gospel on the Banks of the Niger* (1859).	• Increase in European trade with West Africa. Spread of missionary Christianity. Arrival of first printing presses for production of religious material.
1847		• Independence of Liberia, founded in 1822 by American Christian anti-slavery campaigners; ruled by America as a colony for freed American slaves.
1848		• French Revolution abolished slavery.
1860s–1880s		• Rise of African-owned newspapers.
Nov. 1884–Feb. 1885		• Berlin Conference and the 'Scramble for Africa'.
1886–8	• A. Native's (pseud.) *Marita: Or the Folly of Love* serialized in the *Western Echo* of Ghana.	
1891	• Joseph J. Walters's *Guanya Pau: A Story of an African Princess.*	• Death of the Revd Samuel Ajayi Crowther.
1897	• Mary Kingsley's *Travels in West Africa.*	• Establishment of the 'Aborigines Rights Protection Society' (ARPS) in Gold Coast (Ghana), with branches in other West African colonies.
1898		• Hut tax war brutally put down by British in Sierra Leone.

(*Contd.*)

WEST AFRICAN TIMELINE[1] (*Contd.*)

Year (AD)	Literatures[2]	History, politics and culture
1880s–1900s	• Publication of histories and cultural studies of pre-colonial West Africa by early cultural nationalists and pan-Africanists, including E. W. Blyden's *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race* (1887); J. E. Casely Hayford's *Gold Coast Native Institutions* (1903); J. Mensah Sarbah's *Fanti Customary Laws* (1904); S. R. B. Attoh-Ahuma's *The Gold Coast Nation and National Consciousness* (1911).	• Increasing levels of anti-African prejudice in British colonial administration cause elite Africans to be excluded from positions of power. • Formal imposition of colonial rule throughout the region. • Defeat of Fon (Benin) by French forces who destroy the centralized Fon state and economy.
1911	• J. E. Casely Hayford's *Ethiopia Unbound*.	
1912		• Death of pan-Africanist E. W. Blyden.
1914		• Unification of Nigeria under Lord F. Lugard.
1915	• Kobina Sekyi's *The Blinkards*.	
1916		• Repression of insurrection against French in Upper Volta (Burkina Faso) and millions of migrants leave for neighbouring countries.
1918		• French and British invasion of (German) Cameroon.

1920s		• Marcus Garvey's United Negro Improvement Association gains a following in West Africa. • Increasing literacy rates in West Africa are matched by increases in anti-colonial newspapers.
1920		• Establishment of the 'National Congress of British West Africa', led by J. E. Casely Hayford.
1925		• Establishment of 'West African Students Union' (WASU) in London.
1920s–1930s	• Allister Macmillan's *Red Book of West Africa* (1928) gives biographies of leading Africans in British territories.	• Period of increasing censorship and surveillance in colonial West Africa. Suppression of Garveyite newspapers in French territories, and censorship legislation in British West Africa.
1929	• Felix Couchoro's *L'Escave* (trans. *The Slave*).	
1933	• Mabel Dove Danquah's *Us Women: Extracts from the Writings of Marjorie Mensah.*	
1935		• Establishment of the West African Youth League, led by I. T. A. Wallace-Johnson.
1930s–1940s	• Journal and publishing house, *Présence Africaine* founded in 1947 by Alioune Diop, with the support of Aimé Césaire and L. S. Senghor.	• *Négritude* philosophy formulated by African and Caribbean intellectuals in Paris; *négritude* remained influential until 1970s. • Rise of popular 'concert party' theatrical entertainment in Gold Coast (Ghana). Rise of Nigerian popular 'folk opera' under Hubert Ogunde. Increasing availability of printed texts.

(*Contd.*)

WEST AFRICAN TIMELINE[1] (*Contd.*)

Year (AD)	Literatures[2]	History, politics and culture
1936	• Bernard Dadié's *Assémien Déhylé, roi du Sanwi* (trans. *Assemien Dehyle, King of Sanwi*).	
1937	• Kwasi Fiawoo's *Toko Atolia* in Ewe (trans. *The Fifth Landing Stage*).	• Tightening of repressive colonial legislation. Banishment of I. T. A. Wallace-Johnson from Ghana to Sierra Leone.
1938	• D. O. Fagunwa's *Ogboju Ode Ninu Igbo Irunmale* (trans. 1968, *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons*).	
1939	• Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson.*	
1930s–1950s	• Rise of popular literature and popular theatre in West Africa.	• African-owned nationalist newspapers demand end to colonial rule. Nnamdi Azikiwe leads new popular journalism in Ghana and Nigeria. Rise in literacy and mass opposition to colonialism.
1940		• Death of Marcus Garvey.
1943	• R. E. Obeng's *Eighteenpence.*	
1945	• Hubert Ogunde's *Strike and Hunger.*	• General strike in Nigeria sparked by Ogunde's play.
1946		• Creation of the African Democratic Union (ADU) in French West Africa, with goal to work for independence and unity between French-controlled states.

1948	• L. S. Senghor edited volume, *Anthology de la nouvelle poésie négre et malgache* (trans. *Anthology of New Black and Malagasy Poetry*); Gladys M. Casely Hayford's *Take 'Um So*; Marcel Griaule's *Dieu d'Eau: entretiens avec Ogotommeli* (trans. 1965, *Conversations with Ogotommeli*).	
1950s–1960s	• New literary magazines established: *The Horn* (1957, ed. J. P. Clark Bekederemo); *Black Orpheus* (1957, founded by Ulli Beier and Jahnheinz Jahn).	• Acceleration of government literacy and education campaigns in anglophone areas.
Mid 1950s–1970s	• Flourishing of 'Onitsha Market Literature' in Eastern Nigeria.	
1952	• Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*.	• 1950s child mortality rate of 60 per cent in Guinea-Bissau; Amilcar Cabral starts resistance movement.
1953	• Camara Laye's *L'Enfant Noir* (trans. 1954 *Dark Child*).	
1955	• David Mandessi Diop's *Cops de pilon* (trans. *Hammer Blows*).	
1956	• Sembene Ousmane's *Le Docker noir* (trans. 1987, *Black Docker*); Mongo Beti's *Le Pauvre Christ de Bomba* (trans. 1971, *The Poor Christ of Bomba*); Ogali A. Ogali's *Veronica My Daughter*; Bernard Dadié's *Climbié*; Ferdinand Oyono's *Une vie de boy* (trans. 1966, *Houseboy*).	• Banning of People's Union of Cameroon (est. 1945): leaders organize resistance movement from British Cameroon.

(*Contd.*)

WEST AFRICAN TIMELINE[1] (*Contd.*)

Year (AD)	Literatures[2]	History, politics and culture
1957	• Mongo Beti's *Mission terminée* (trans. 1964, *Mission to Kala*); Kwame Nkrumah's *Autobiography.*	• Independence of Ghana led by Kwame Nkrumah. Efua Sutherland takes active role in Ghanaian national theatre.
1958	• Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*; Birago Diop's *Les Nouveaux Contes d'Amadou Koumba* (trans. *The New Tales of Amadou Koumba*).	• Independence of French Guinea, led by Sékou Touré.
1959		• Amilcar Cabral leads armed resistance movement against Portugal in Guinea-Bissau.
1960	• William Conton's *The African*; D. T. Niane's *Sundjata ou l'Epoque Mandiginue* (trans. 1965, *Sunjata: An Epic of Old Mali*); Sembene Ousmane's *Les Bouts de bois de Dieu* (trans. 1962, *God's Bits of Wood*).	• Independence of most colonies: Ivory Coast; Burkina Faso; Benin; Mali; Cameroon; Mauritania; Nigeria; Senegal; Togo.
1961	• Seydou Kouyaté Badian's *La Mort de Chaka* (trans. *The Death of Chaka*); Cyprian Ekwensi's *Jagua Nana.*	• Independence of Sierra Leone.
1962	• Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *L'Aventure ambique* (trans. 1963, *Ambiguous Adventure*).	
1963	• Seydou Kouyaté Badian's *Lous l'orage—Kany* (trans. *Caught in the Storm.*)	• Death of W. E. B. DuBois.

		• Foundation of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU).
1964	• Gabriel Okara's *The Voice*; Guillaume Oyônô-Mbia's *Trois prétendants, un mari* (trans. 1968, *Three Suitors: One Husband*); Kwame Nkrumah's *Conscientism*; J. P. Clark Bekederemo's *The Raft*; Raymond Sarif Easmon's *Dear Parent and Ogre*; founding of journal *Okyeame* in Ghana.	• Banning of Hubert Ogunde's popular theatre in Nigeria.
1965	• Wole Soyinka's *The Interpreters*; Ama Ata Aidoo's *The Dilemma of a Ghost*; V. C. Ike's *Toads for Supper*; Mabel Segun's *My Father's Daughter.*	• Independence of the Gambia. • Death of anti-colonial activist, I. T. A. Wallace-Johnson.
1966	• Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*; Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People*; Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine.*	• Military coups in Ghana and Nigeria. • Thirty thousand people die in riots in northern Nigeria, causing exodus and political unrest.
1967–1970		• Declaration of Republic of Biafra in eastern Nigeria leads to Nigerian Civil War. Nearly two million people are killed in the war, including poet Christopher Okigbo in 1967. Achebe acts as international diplomat for Biafra.

(*Contd.*)

WEST AFRICAN TIMELINE[1] (*Contd.*)

Year (AD)	Literatures[2]	History, politics and culture
1967	• Lenrie Peters's *Satellites*; Wole Soyinka's *Idanre*.	
1968	• Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born*; Yambo Ouologuem's *Le Devoir de violence* (trans. 1971, *Bound to Violence*); Ahmadou Kourouma's *Les Soleils des indépendances* (trans. 1981, *The Suns of Independence*); founding of journal *African Literature Today* from pre-existing bulletin.	• Military coup in Sierra Leone.
1971	• Kofi Awoonor's *This Earth My Brother*; Christopher Okigbo's posthumous *Labyrinths*. Achebe founds journal *Okike*.	• Declaration of Republic of Sierra.
1972	• Kole Omotoso's *The Combat*; Bode Sowande's *The Night Before*.	• Military coup in Dahomey (Benin) leads to name-change of country to Benin in 1975. • Military coup in Ghana.
1973	• Amadou Hampâté Bâ's *L'Etrange Destin de Wangrin* (trans. 1999, *The Fortunes of Wangrin*).	• Assassination of Amilcar Cabral by Portuguese agents in Guinea-Bissau; independence of Guinea-Bissau from Portugal.
1974	• Sembene Ousmane's *Xala* (trans. 1976, *Xala*; film 1975).	• Economic boom throughout 1970s: local millionaires emerge. Inflation and price rises hit salaried workers.

1975	• Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*; Chinua Achebe's *Morning Yet on Creation Day*; Efua Sutherland's *The Marriage of Anansewa*.	• Independence of Cape Verde Islands, former Portuguese colony.
1976	• Wole Soyinka's *Myth, Literature and the African World*; Cheikh Anta Diop's *The African Origin of Civilisation*; Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price*.	• Rise of Pentecostal and charismatic Christian churches around urban centres. • Alex Haleys's book, *Roots*, draws attention to the Gambia as a tourist destination.
1977	• Ama Ata Aidoo's *Our Sister Killjoy*.	
1979	• Aminata Sow Fall's *The Beggar's Strike*; Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*; Ayi Kwei Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons*; Festus Iyayi's *Violence*.	• Global economic slump hits West Africa for duration of 1980s.
1980	• Mariama Bâ's *Une si longue lettre* (trans. 1981, *So Long a Letter*); Syl Cheney-Coker's *The Graveyard Also Has Teeth*; Massa Makan Diabaté's *The Barber of Kouta*; Camara Laye's *Le Maître de la parole—Kouma Lafôlô Kouma* (trans. 1980, *The Guardian of the Word*).	• Coup in Liberia. • Beginning of era of 'structural adjustment plans' (SAPs), led by IMF and World Bank. • Coup in Guinea-Bissau. • Hardening of authoritarian regimes, but increase in pro-democracy movements.
1981	• Wole Soyinka's *Aké*; Flora Nwapa's *One is Enough*.	• Death of Mariama Bâ in Senegal.

(*Contd.*)

WEST AFRICAN TIMELINE[1] (*Contd.*)

Year (AD)	Literatures[2]	History, politics and culture
		• Elections in Senegal. • Military coup in Ghana. • General strike in Sierra Leone.
1983	• Chinua Achebe's *The Trouble with Nigeria*; Chinweizu *et al.*'s *Toward the Decolonisation of African Literature*; Anne-Marie Adiaffi's *Une Vie hypotéqué* (trans. 1983, *A Mortgaged Life*).	
1984	• Ken Bugal's *Le Baobab Fou* (trans. 1991, *The Abandoned Baobab*).	• Fourth military coup in Nigeria.
1985	• Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy: A Novel in Rotten English*; Kofi Anyidoho's *Earthchild* and *A Harvest of Dreams.*	
1986	• Wole Soyinka awarded Nobel Prize for Literature. B. Kojo Laing's *Search Sweet Country*; Buchi Emecheta's *Head Above Water.*	
1987	• Calixthe Beyala's *C'est le Soleil qui m'a brûlée* (trans. 1991, *The Sun Hath Looked Upon Me.*)	• Military coup in Burkina Faso. • Cocoa prices drop by 50 per cent on international markets between July and October.
1988	• Calixthe Beyala's *Tu t'appelleras Tanga* (trans. 1996, *Your Name Shall be Tanga*); Chinua Achebe's	

	Hopes and Impediments and *Anthills of the Savannah.*	
c. 1989–2003		• Civil war in Liberia.
1990s		• Period of 'Afro-Optimism' with end of several military dictatorships, democratization of politics.
1990	• Niyi Osundare, *Waiting Laughters*; Syl Cheney-Coker's *The Last Harmattan of Alusine Dunbar.*	
1991	• Ben Okri wins Booker Prize for *The Famished Road*; Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes*; Femi Osofisan's *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels.*	• Military coup in Togo.
c. 1991–2002		• Civil war in Sierra Leone.
1992	• Véronique Tadjo's *A Vol d'oiseau* (trans. *As the Crow Flies*); Calixthe Beyala's *Le Petit prince de Belleville* (trans. 1995, *The 'Little Prince' of Belleville*); Mame Younousse Dieng's *Aawo bi* (trans. *The First Wife*).	• Multi-party elections in Cameroon marred by government fraud, increased repression, corruption and torture of political opponents. • Annulment of legislative elections in Nigeria. • Economic crisis in Europe hits West African economies.
1993	• Niyi Osundare's *Midlife*; Kofi Anyidoho's *Ancestral Logic and Caribbean Blues.*	• Victory of Moshood Abiola in first multi-party elections in Nigeria. Result contested by General Babangida: Abiola imprisoned until his death in 1998. General Sani Abacha seizes power in Nigeria.
1994	• Mongo Beti's *L'histoire du fou* (trans. 2001, *The Story of the Madman*); Buchi Emecheta's *Kehinde.*	

(*Contd.*)

WEST AFRICAN TIMELINE[1] (*Contd.*)

Year (AD)	Literatures[2]	History, politics and culture
		• Devaluation of the CFA by 100 per cent in the French franc zone. • Military coup in the Gambia. • Formation of the West African Economic Monetary Union (WAEMU).
1995	• Lemuel Johnson's *Carnival of the Old Coast* and *Highlife for Caliban*; Tess Onwueme's *Tell it to Women.*	• Execution of Nigerian author Ken Saro-Wiwa.
1996	• Calixthe Beyala wins the Grand Prix du Roman de l'Académie Francaise.	• Death of Nigerian nationalist and president, Nnamdi Azikiwe.
1997		• Death of Nigerian author Amos Tutuola.
1998	• Amma Darko's *The Housemaid.*	• Murder of Burkinabe journalist, Norbert Zongo; mass protests against the killing continued into 1999. • Civil war in Guinea-Bissau.
1999	• Bole Butake, *Lake God and Other Plays.*	• Miliary coup in Guinea-Bissau. • General elections in Nigeria.
2000	• Véronique Tadjo's *L'Ombre d'Imana* (trans. 2002, *In the Shadow of Imana*); Ken Bugal's *La Folie et la Mort* (trans. *Madness and Death*); Boubacar Bors Diop's *Murambi: le livre des ossements* (trans. *Murambi: The Book of the Stacks of Bones*)	• Falling global commodity prices and fiscal crises threaten governments in West Africa. Western governments consider debt relief packages as part of Millennium Development Goals. • General elections in Ghana. • Death of Nigerian playwright Ola Rotimi.

2001	• Monique Ilboudo's *Le Mal de peau* (trans. *Colour Complex*).	• Death of Léopold Sédar Senghor. • Introduction of Sharia law to Muslim states in northern Nigeria.
2002–present	• Kofi Anyidoho's *Praise Song for the Land* (2002); Niyi Osundare's *Pages from the Book of the Sun* (2002); Helon Habila's *Waiting for an Angel* (2002); Romanus Egudu's *Prayer of the Powerless* (2002); Amma Darko's *Faceless* (2003); Tanure Ojaide's *God's Medicine-Men and Other Stories* (2004); Wale Okediran's *Strange Encounters* (2004); Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche's *Purple Hibiscus* (2004).	• Civil war starts in the Ivory Coast, and many migrant workers return to their countries. • The OAU is replaced by the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD). African countries promise political transparency and accountability in exchange for financial aid. • General elections in Sierra Leone. • Election results contested in Togo. • Military coup in Guinea-Bissau. • General elections in Nigeria marred by fraud. • General elections in Togo marred by fraud.

1. For comprehensive African timelines with further links, see: http://www.cocc.edu/cagatucci/classes/hum211/timelines/ (owned by Professor Cora Agatucci) http://courses.wcupa.edu/jones/his311/timeline/ (owned by Professor Jim Jones)
2. The 'literatures' column of this timeline is biased towards print culture in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and does not reflect the ebb and flow of oral genres in West Africa.

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1

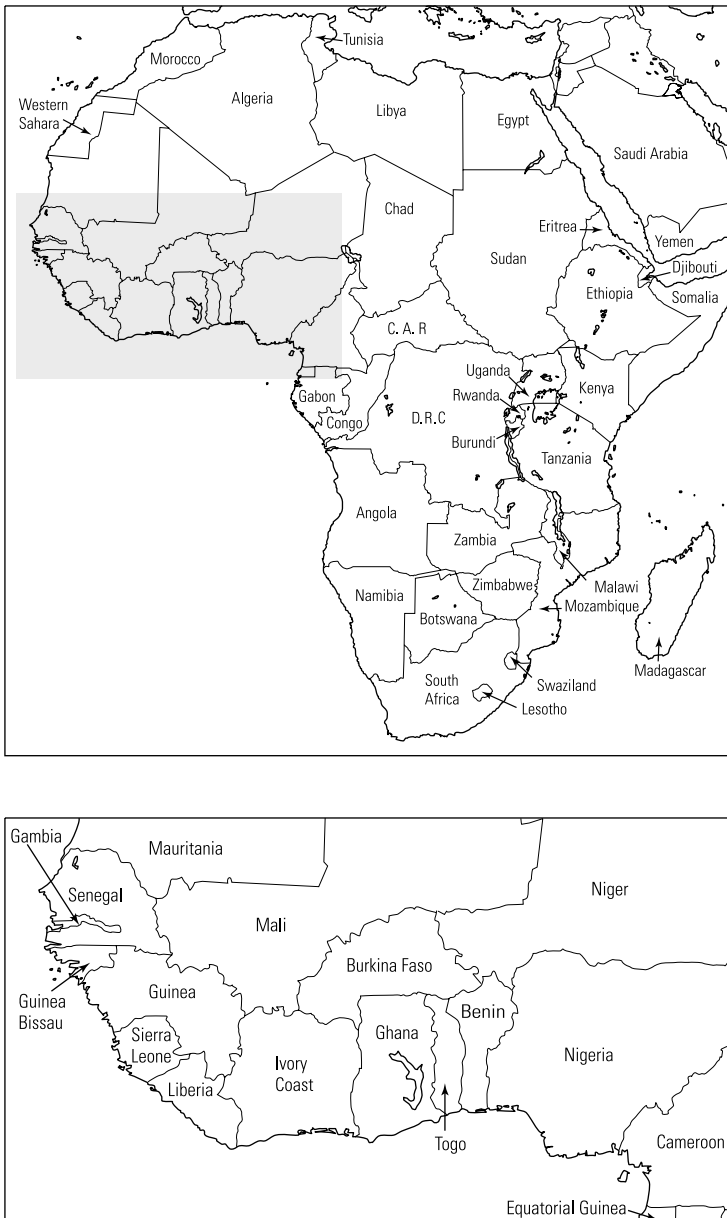
Introduction

Where is 'West Africa'?

On the pages of a world atlas, it is relatively easy to recognize the vast land mass which faces the Atlantic Ocean in the south and stretches inland towards the Sahara Desert in the north (Map 1.1). The region known as West Africa is composed of approximately a dozen states with clearly demarcated national boundaries. Edged by sea and desert, the postcolonial countries that make up this region are linked together by their shared history of slavery and European colonial rule: names such as 'Freetown' and 'Liberia' testify to these aspects of their collective history.

Even at the simplest level of geography, however, several questions arise when one takes a closer look at this map. Where does 'West Africa' start and finish? Should it include countries such as Nigeria and Cameroon in the east, even though both territories are excluded from 'West Africa' in several major atlases? Where do the region's northern limits end: at Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, or in southern Algeria? Should we ignore the many national boundaries which place checkpoints and passports in-between groups which are otherwise ethnically or linguistically homogeneous, such as the Ewe, who were split in two by the colonial border separating eastern Ghana and western Togo? To which country do nomadic populations 'belong'? Should one ignore the historical links stretching across the Sahara Desert between Muslims in West Africa and Arab-Islamic cultures in North Africa, creating powerful oral narratives and an overarching Islamic identity connecting the two regions together?

These questions indicate that the region known as 'West Africa' is fluid and indefinable, containing elastic boundaries which stretch and contract in ways that defy simple ideas about cultural or national identity. While some groups, such as the Ewe, are connected *across*



Map 1.1 Africa, with detail showing West Africa

national borders by language and culture, many of the populations *within* West Africa's individual states are immensely diverse, practising different religions and speaking numerous different languages from one another. In Nigeria alone, for example, the population of just over 130 million people speak 250 distinct languages, plus numerous additional dialects. Perhaps more surprisingly, over 200 different languages are spoken in Cameroon, Nigeria's smaller neighbour to the east, which has a population of only 16.5 million. As a consequence of this internal heterogeneity, the 'national identity' of each country continually escapes easy definition, dissolving into local differences and extending into wider pan-African or transnational connections. Given the fluidity of these formations, how can the region's literatures be considered in a single volume, and what are the distinctive features of West Africa's 'postcoloniality'?

1.1 Defining the terms: 'post-colonial', 'postcolonial(ism)' and 'neocolonial'

Recent theorists have tended to use the hyphenated term 'post-colonial' to signify the historical period following the end of European colonialism. Meanwhile, the unhyphenated word 'postcolonial' has come to be used in a much broader manner to signify the wide range of discourses, ideologies and intellectual formations which have emerged from cultures that experienced imperial encounters. In *Postcolonialism: Theory, Practice or Process?* the Ghanaian-born scholar Ato Quayson gives a clear-cut definition of the function of the hyphen in this discourse: 'The hyphenated version was first used by political scientists and economists to denote the period after colonialism' (2000: 1). By contrast, the 'unhyphenated version' is preferable when one wishes to consider 'the discourse and ideology of colonialism' alongside 'the material effects of subjugation under colonialism and after' (p. 2). 'Postcolonial' and the '-ism' that it generates therefore include events that occurred prior to the end of formal political rule by Europe over its colonial territories. This more expansive '-ism' pays attention to intellectual and cultural responses to the colonial encounter alongside political transformations: 'post-colonial(ism)' thus includes terms such as resistance, desire, difference, and 'responses to the discourses of imperial Europe' in its remit

alongside the facts of slavery, migration and political independence (Quayson, 2000: 2).

Hyphenated or otherwise, 'postcolonial' must mean more than 'after the end of colonialism' in West Africa, not least because of the ongoing presence of western governments and multinational companies in the region. Patterns of commerce, business, investment, aid, military intervention, oil extraction, education, and migration, as well as cultural patterns such as the publication of novels and the exchange of literature and films, all reveal the complex ways in which colonial history continues to shadow daily life in West Africa without fully dominating or dictating it. If 'postcolonial' is taken to refer only to the condition of independence from European imperial rule, how are we to explain the fact that French and British premiers tend to visit only 'their' ex-colonies in tours of the region to discuss trade and aid? Similarly, the ex-colonial powers will send troops to protect vulnerable governments predominantly in 'their' ex-colonies: British forces have been operating in ex-British Sierra Leone since 2000, while as recently as 2004 France intervened in the Ivory Coast to prevent civil war between the north and the south, and to preserve the ex-colonial boundaries of the country. For strategic and economic reasons, the United States has also played an increasingly prominent role in these military operations.

In analysing these political and cultural patterns, many intellectuals, especially those of a nationalist and Marxist orientation, see the ex-colonies as living under the ongoing domination of the ex-colonial powers, and one frequently finds the term 'neocolonial' used in preference to both 'post-colonial' and 'postcolonial'. The 'after' implied by the word 'post' simply has not happened. According to this view, West Africa continues to be *over*shadowed—rather than simply shadowed—by the old colonial regimes, with the added menace of North American intervention. As Chapter 11 will debate in more detail, a strong current in West African cultural theory holds that the ex-colonies must be regarded as *neo*colonial countries rather than as *post*colonial nation-states: regarded from this standpoint, West African states are clustered together for better or for worse in continuing subservience to European and North American governments and corporations.

This anti-colonial perspective is fuelled by a clear sense that global economic inequalities have been kept in place deliberately in the

decades since independence in order to serve the interests of western governments, multinational companies, and a small minority of ruling national elites within each country. In the field of literature, these real economic imbalances between North and South have led African authors towards European and American publishing houses and away from their own national publishers: as we will see, leftist critics, including Nigerian poet Niyi Osundare and Ghanaian poet Kofi Anyidoho, regard this move as adversely affecting the content and style of West African literature (see Osundare, 2002; Anyidoho, 1989; Huggan, 2001; Lazarus, 1990).

'Postcolonialism' is an expansive umbrella-term which describes these different, often conflicting, discourses: the term accommodates critics such as Osundare and Anyidoho, who are sceptical about the extent to which Europe's ex-colonies have achieved full political and economic independence, and critics such as Quayson, who use the term 'postcolonial' to signify a wide range of cultural currents and ideologies. The term also includes well-known postcolonial theorists such as Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak, who represent particular trajectories within the overall discourse. 'Postcolonialism' is an intellectual field which is buzzing with debates and disagreements, and this book will show how West African authors and critics have contributed to the field in significant ways.

With these debates about postcolonialism in view, *West African Literatures* interweaves the analysis of fiction, drama, and poetry with an exploration of the broader cultural, intellectual, and political contexts within which West African writers work. In chronological terms, the book moves from a discussion of nationalist and anti-colonial writing in the decades before and after independence, through to the more experimental writings of contemporary authors such as Véronique Tadjo (Ivory Coast), Ben Okri (Nigeria), and Kojo Laing (Ghana). All along the way, however, the book aims to break out of linear, evolutionary models of West African literature. My aim is to situate these different texts and authors in relation to the complex cultural and political history of West Africa. Canonical, internationally well-known writers such as Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka are positioned in relation to the literary cultures and debates which surrounded them when they first produced their seminal texts; the discussions and disagreements which have grown up around their work in subsequent decades are also considered.

Additionally, emphasis is placed on West Africa's diverse oral and popular cultures, and the ways in which local intellectuals and readers have responded to the most prominent authors through the aesthetic frameworks generated by these forms. In this manner, my aim is not to provide an authoritative, evolutionary, or encyclopaedic account of the history of West African literatures but to consider a selection of the region's literatures in relation to prevailing discussions about literature and postcolonialism.

Numerous influential studies of West African literatures have been published since the 1980s, often dedicated to particular countries, themes, languages, authors, or genres, including nationalism, women's writing, theatre, and poetry: the extensive list of secondary texts at the end of this book reflects the impressive array of studies. One of the distinctive features of *West African Literatures* is the wide range of regional and historical locations it visits within a single volume in order to highlight the diversity of West African literatures, contexts, and cultures: oral genres are discussed in detail; the themes and preoccupations of Islamic literature are considered; *négritude* is assessed as an anti-colonial movement, and then reassessed from the perspective of contemporary postcolonial theory; 'experimental' works of literature by francophone and anglophone authors are discussed and contrasted; disagreements between Marxist and non-Marxist intellectuals are considered; and women's writing is analysed in relation to West African debates about feminism. Local literary production—including oral, popular, and vernacular material—is also investigated alongside the more 'elite', international literature by authors such as Wole Soyinka and Chinua Achebe from anglophone Nigeria, and Sembene Ousmane and Mariama Bâ from francophone Senegal.

One particular name surfaces repeatedly in this book for the simple reason that his texts, particularly his best-known novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1958), remain immensely popular in West African literary criticism and theory. Achebe's first novel sets central 'postcolonial' themes in place: it tackles many of the stereotypes to be found in British colonial literature and insists that pre-colonial Africa was not a land requiring the 'civilizing' influence of missionaries and colonialists. Set in a community on the brink of colonization, *Things Fall Apart* considers the cultural losses and gains that occurred under British rule. Achebe is also a seminal figure because his fiction moves

with history: he absorbs and processes political and social currents in West Africa, as demonstrated by his condemnation of postcolonial violence in *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987), a novel that was written in response to the corruption and militarization of Nigerian politics in the 1980s. All along the way, Achebe has produced voluminous quantities of essays containing lively commentaries on African and British culture, setting topics in place for students of postcolonial literature and helping to define the field of postcolonialism. This successful combination of fictional and non-fictional writing has conferred the status of trend-setter and figurehead on Achebe, status which is reflected in the number of times his name surfaces in different chapters of this book.

West African Literatures aims to discuss a selection of literary material in relation to the region's long history of local intellectual production, and to communicate a sense of the complex, plural nature of the label 'postcolonial' in West Africa. The emphasis on the 'local' in this book is not intended to mark out a space of West African authenticity, however, against which international readings are judged to be true or false. Rather, my intention is to highlight the enormous literary dynamism within West Africa without losing a sense of the region's most important writers and intellectuals as core contributors to debates about postcolonialism, and as arbiters between the global and the local. In this way, the chapters that follow aim to inspire readers to 'think locally' as well as theoretically about West African literatures. In highlighting the plural term, 'literatures', above the singular term, 'literature', the book draws attention to a seminal aspect of West Africa's postcolonial identity, or its 'postcoloniality': the heterogeneity of cultures and literatures within each West African nation means that the term 'postcolonial' must account for the diversity of literary currents within each country, as well as the shared historical experiences of slavery and colonial rule in the region.

Several intellectuals have tried to find ways of discussing West Africa's diverse fields of cultural and literary activity without privileging the European metropolitan culture over the ex-colonial location. Since the 1990s, for example, a group of 'cosmopolitan' postcolonial theorists has emerged in the United States, including Arjun Appadurai, whose theory of '-scapes' is discussed and developed below, and the Ghanaian-born philosopher, Kwame Anthony Appiah, who seeks

models of African culture and identity which will give equal status to each of the continent's many languages, faiths, traditions and literary genres. Appiah's seminal work, *In My Father's House* (1992), establishes this position, and much of his subsequent work develops these themes.

'Cosmopolitanism' is celebrated in Appiah's work, over and above the problems of 'neocolonial' domination and exploitation. Influenced by the multiculturalism debates in South Africa and the United States, his book opens with the statement that none of his father's multiple identities—Asante, Ghanaian, African, Methodist, Christian—ever seemed to come into conflict with the others, or to cause the alienation and psychological distress which many theorists would suppose of such an inflammatory bundle of different 'selves' (1992: xi). From this starting-point, Appiah develops a model of African identity in which he insists on the concepts of hybridity and plurality above ideas of cultural authenticity or antagonism, which he dismisses under the label 'nativism' (1992: 74–115). For the ordinary person located in West Africa, he argues, local responsibilities to the extended family or clan often form an integral part of an individual's regional or national identity; this national identity may, in turn, feed into and be inspired by a regional 'West African' identity, which itself may be influenced by a pan-continental, pan-African, or global connection. It is impossible to see 'cultural imperialism', 'alienation', or 'mental colonization' at work in a world where such harmony exists between one person's disparate identities.

In My Father's House therefore begins by breaking with the premises of anti-colonial and Marxist criticism, which I discuss in more detail in Chapters 10 and 11. Africa cannot be regarded as a homogeneous neocolonial entity with a singular historical and cultural experience, Appiah insists, and 'cultural nationalist' or 'nativist' critics who believe that Africa's precolonial traditions can be retrieved intact from the past into the present are promoting ideas which are both dangerous and flawed (p. 251). 'Africa' is a great deal more difficult to define, he argues, than the terms set by the world atlas. Rather, as he indicates, the region must be recognized for its enormous cultural and linguistic diversity: its literature follows routes that may have been opened up by colonialism, but have subsequently developed along paths of their own.

West African Literatures largely agrees with Appiah's model, but certain caveats are inserted in order to modify his celebratory

approach towards the hybridity of African cultures. Crucially, Appiah's liberal, multicultural vision fails to acknowledge, or account for, the impact of neocolonial power-relations upon Africans. He emphasizes individual rights and celebrates cultural pluralism without fully acknowledging the implications of political hegemony. If one looks too closely at contemporary West Africa through Appiah's multicultural spectacles, the region risks disintegrating as an entity or an idea, losing its colonial history, collapsing into a myriad of harmonious cultures, identities, histories, religions, languages, and literatures, all perfectly equal and barely caught up in broader cultural struggles or political relationships. The historical inequalities that preoccupy leftist and nationalist critics tend to be ignored in favour of an ideal of equality and diversity.

As Appiah emphasizes, cultural flexibility is one of the defining features of West Africa's 'postcoloniality'; but economic and political 'neocolonialism' cannot be ignored in these national formations. Each country in the region is post-colonial (with a hyphen) to the extent that it has undergone, and emerged from, the imperial encounter with Europe: across the region, imperial regimes have been ousted and national governments have been set up in its place. But, as the chapters that follow make clear, this was no easy liberation from imperial power structures.

The debate about the extent to which West Africa is 'post-colonial' or 'neo-colonial' may be seen as one of the central intellectual contexts for literary debates in the region, and it is played out at many levels in the critical positions presented in this book. As the argument between Soyinka and his Marxist detractors demonstrates in Chapter 10, 'neo-colonial' may be used by both sides against one another in the argument about African culture.

Many West African perspectives exist in the intellectual spaces that open up between the multicultural and the anti-colonial schools of criticism. *West African Literatures* focuses on this array of critical approaches to literature and culture, exploring West African literary theory and local debates about cultures and texts, as well as the themes and styles to be found in the primary material. Given the complexity of 'postcolonialism' in relation to West Africa, we therefore need to seek a model for our analysis of the region's literatures and cultures which allows for the multilayered, dynamic aspects of cultural identity in the region, as Appiah emphasises, but without

losing a sense of the neo-colonial economic and political power relations that continue to shape individual lives in the wake of the region's history of slavery and colonialism.

1.2 West African '-scapes'

Arjun Appadurai's ([1990] 1994) concept of '-scapes'—as in landscapes or mindscapes—helps us to appreciate the complexity of culture in postcolonial West Africa. In his essay 'Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy', Appadurai introduces the suffix '-scape' to account for the sheer mobility of people and ideas around the world. 'Scapes', he suggests, are 'the building blocks of ... the multiple worlds which are constituted by the historically situated imaginations of persons and groups spread around the globe' (p. 329). In other words, his interest lies in the global movement of people and ideas, and the ways these influence the lives of 'historically situated' individuals and groups in national or regional communities.

The '-scapes' that Appadurai defines include *ethnoscapes*, that is, the international flows of human beings in search of work or pleasure; *mediascapes*, or the 'repertoire' of stories and images circulated through literature, television and electronic texts, and local people's responses to these versions of reality; *technoscapes*, or the movement of high-speed technology and multinational companies across national boundaries in a manner that ignores those boundaries; *finanscapes*, meaning the rapid movement of capital around the world; and, finally, *ideoscapes*, referring to the global circulation of ideologies and oppositional discourses, which might include two of the '-isms' to be discussed in this book, feminism and Marxism (pp. 329–31; see Chapters 9 and 10). For Appadurai, these five global '-scapes' exist in dynamic interaction with one another: they are never transparent, nor easily grasped, nor the same in different global locations. These '-scapes' are 'deeply perspectival constructs', he writes: the specific location of each person is central to the set of '-scapes' they inhabit at any one time, for each '-scape' continually intermeshes with other, broader and narrower constructs (p. 329).

The central feature of Appadurai's theory is his redefinition of global culture away from static, binary, national or linear models: he

rejects the idea, popular among anti-globalization activists, that a neocolonial or First World 'centre' dominates and dictates cultural realities in 'peripheral', 'dependent', or 'Third World' countries. While he acknowledges global economic and political inequalities, Appadurai's notion of the '-scape' challenges this prevailing 'centre–periphery' model of postcolonial relations. Such a model, he implies, gives an over-simplistic image of the ways in which people experience cultural life on the supposed 'margins' of the world. In place of this model, he highlights 'the fluid, irregular shapes' of the five '-scapes' as they intermesh and inform people's identity (pp. 328–9). From this standpoint, people are not the passive recipients of imported ideologies, even in the most extreme situations of global cultural domination. An American cultural text is re-imagined afresh by its new users, in Appadurai's view: people will absorb the new material into their own locally grown discourses and interpret it through their own particular sets of '-scapes'. The movement of cultural products from a North American to a Third World '-scape' therefore involves a series of vital transformations to the 'original' material, for it will be changed in the process of local absorption.

Appadurai limits his theory to global cultural flows from North to South in the contemporary, postcolonial world. For good reason, he specifies that the five '-scapes' operate in conditions that have arisen *since* the introduction of high-speed computer technology, through which traditional national border-controls and boundaries have been erased by the transfer of capital and labour. At the touch of a button, people, goods, and money can be shifted between countries in search of the cheapest temporary base. The operation of power in this new world order is 'disjunctive' like no previous world order (p. 332).

With slight modifications, Appadurai's theory of '-scapes' is well suited for assessing economic and cultural flows in West Africa since at least the sixteenth century. Albeit carried out at a much slower pace, and at a trans-local rather than a transnational level, West African traders and migrants also ignored conventional maps and 'national' border controls (where these existed) in the pre-colonial and colonial periods. Travelling along well-established routes, entering and opening up zones of culture along the way, West African populations were in continual movement long before the arrival of the European colonial powers in the mid to late nineteenth century. Similar cultural flows can be found in several other pre-colonial

formations, especially in South Asia, but each region possesses its own particular configuration of '-scapes' through which its distinctive cultural patterns can be traced. For example, from the eleventh century onwards in West Africa, trade routes opened through the Sahara Desert, bringing goods, ideas, and religious literature into the Sahel from North Africa and Arabia (see Chapter 3); meanwhile, Senegambian 'griots' and commercial travellers plied the southern, coastal countries of West Africa, learning many languages and transmitting literary forms across different cultures (see Chapter 4).

Operating within their own disjunctive cultural and economic '-scapes', West Africans exchanged narratives, ideas, doctrines, music, and news along with commodities and currencies. In moments of violent expansion, such as the Islamic *jihads* of the early nineteenth century, these cultural and economic exchanges were more forceful, creating an Islamic-scape which continues to grow southwards into the region, permeating West African oral and written literatures (see Chapter 3). Other '-scapes' were more organic, following the expansion and decline of West Africa's ancient empires: throughout the pre-colonial and colonial periods, for example, West African women were particularly mobile as traders or as brides, leaving their own localities for exogamous marriages which sealed connections between clan-groups and villages. The mobility of West African women suggests the existence of a specifically gendered '-scape' alongside the region's other '-scapes' (see Chapter 9). Christian missionaries and the European colonial powers often moved into these established inter-African zones of culture and trade. While the conventional wisdom is that colonialism disrupted and transformed existing social and economic relations, the colonial powers *also* made use of existing West African '-scapes' (including the Islamic-scape) in order to spread Christianity and impose new laws and languages (see Chapter 3).

West Africa's dynamic map is filled with leaders and fugitives, migrants, traders, storytellers, and people caught up in intricate local power relationships. What the idea of '-scapes' makes possible is an understanding of West Africa that is characterized by physical and cultural *mobility* above all: from the most intimate, individual story of a woman's marriage through to the most traumatic and collective narrative of slavery, West Africans have existed for centuries in a condition of trans-local mobility, their identities characterized by what Carole Boyce Davies, in her study of black women's writing,

calls 'migratory subjectivity' (Boyce Davies, 1994; see also Boehmer, 2005). The popular image of a remote African village tucked away in a forest, bound by tradition and untouched by external influences, is a myth invented by colonialists and cultural nationalists to serve their own ideological purposes. Unlike the ossified occupants of the mythical village, human beings are constantly on the move in West Africa, whether willingly, as travellers, traders, migrants, and marriage partners, or unwillingly as bonded labourers and reluctant brides. Whether we are discussing culture and history in general or literature in particular, it is therefore essential to appreciate the cultural and economic vitality that pulses through the region, challenging the firm national boundaries that are described by the map.

1.3 From slave-scape to African presence: West Africa in the world

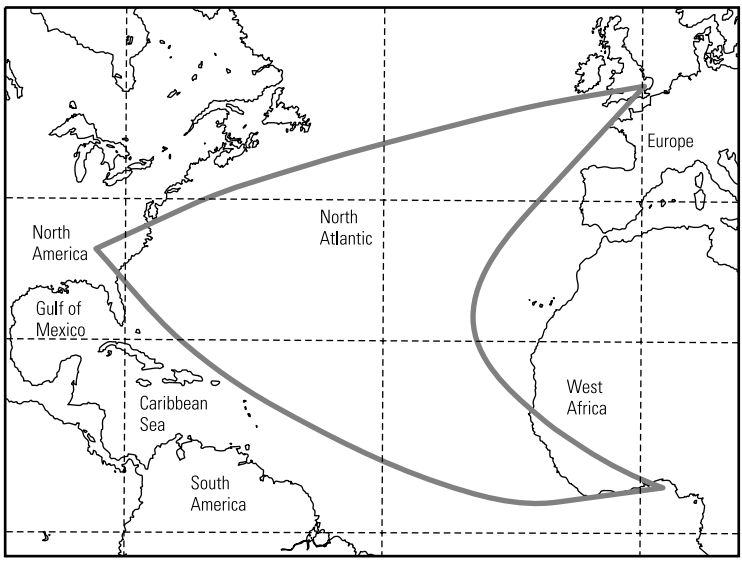
The story of contemporary West Africa as displayed in the current world atlas started between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries with the expansion of international commerce. Europe's contact with West Africa increased substantially in the seventeenth century, when the transportation of African slaves from the interior of the continent to the coastal regions commenced.[1] Many of the earliest maps of the region reflect the major slave routes used by European and African traders: all along the 'slave coast', as the seaboard was known, European and North American ships dropped anchor and waited, slowly filling up with human cargoes—resistant, rebellious 'cargoes' who fought continually against captivity—destined for markets and plantations in the West Indies, the Americas, and Britain. This coastline is still peppered with slave fortresses, marking the major centres of the trade: in slave forts at Elmina and Cape Coast in present-day Ghana, for example, airy governors' rooms face out to sea above dungeons where people from diverse African language groups were imprisoned together for weeks on end in cramped conditions, forced to develop their own mutual languages in the process. These fortresses marked the sites which, in turn, took their place on the colonial and post-colonial map as administrative centres or urban developments.

A powerful slave-scape connects African diasporas with one another across the world, knitting together individuals and groups

who occupy their own specific histories. The fact of slavery in West African history requires the concept of 'West Africa', and also the physical map of the region, to be imaginatively extended to include black populations in North and South America as well as in Britain and the Caribbean. Indeed, strong residues of West Africa—particularly Yoruba and Akan cultures—can still be found in the folktales, religious practices, proverbs, and performance genres of communities in the African diaspora as far afield as Jamaica, Brazil, Haiti, and the United States (Gates, 1988; Hall, 1994). For these people, dispersed centuries ago, Africa is simultaneously a forgotten or a repressed region and also 'present everywhere' in cultural life (Hall, 1994: 398). Conversely, many contemporary West African writers assert their own connections with the diaspora, and slavery remains an important theme in West African literature (see Osundare, 2002; Hunter, 1982; Awoonor, 1992). Other writers find stylistic inspiration in African-American and Caribbean art forms: thus, the Ghanaian poet Kofi Anyidoho acknowledges the influence of the Caribbean intellectual Kamau Brathwaite and other pan-Africanist thinkers, while also drawing from his own Ewe oral and vernacular traditions.

For Paul Gilroy, whose book *The Black Atlantic* (1993) initiated a re-thinking of West African as well as African-American identities, those who were made absent from the continent through slavery must be given a spatial and geographical presence again, readmitted onto the pages of the world map. Were a map to be drawn to reflect the region's history of displacement and diaspora, rather than simply to reflect colonial territorial conquests, a slave-scape would emerge, encompassing the global rivers and oceans used by European and American vessels as they moved from port to port collecting human cargo and distributing commodities (see Map 1.2). This 'fluid' and international map offers a strikingly different story of West Africa to the well-bounded narrative that is created by existing world maps. According to Gilroy's 'Black Atlantic' model, then, the terrain of 'West Africa' cannot stop at the southern coastline of the region: it must be extended to include cultures, languages, and literatures from diasporic communities around the world.

People in the African diaspora share a narrative of transportation and displacement, and a history that is as mobile as the ocean. However, their global locations and multiple languages generate diverse world literatures and numerous cultural and political



Map 1.2 The Black Atlantic

differences. With a broadly shared history in the slave-scape, West Africa's diasporic populations nevertheless exist in different social and cultural settings, frequently sharing less with one another than their history implies. In Gilroy's well-known formulation, it is 'routes' that are shared by the African diaspora, rather than 'roots' (2002: 1–40). In spite of these differences, what his theory of the 'Black Atlantic' reveals is the necessity for us to extend any literary study of 'West Africa' beyond the conventional limits of the land as laid out in the atlas. Gilroy's model reinserts diasporan Africans into the continent's history, while allowing for intercultural differences; meanwhile, Appadurai's model reminds us of the different ways in which global ideas and identities are taken up in different, historically specific settings. Combined together, Appadurai's theory of global '-scapes' and Gilroy's theory of the 'Black Atlantic' offer useful strategies for the analysis of West African literatures, helping us to appreciate the cultural and intellectual mobility of the region's creative writers without neglecting slavery, colonialism, the New World, and an individual's current geographical location.

1.4 The colonial-scape

The West African slave trade declined in the early to mid nineteenth century under pressure from liberal abolitionists in Britain and America. These anti-slavery movements helped to facilitate the publication of slave narratives by the first West African authors to find their way into print, including Olaudah Equiano (or Gustavus Vassa) (1745–97) and Quobna Ottobah Cuguano (1757–91). The fascinating story of another, later ex-slave, the Anglican missionary Samuel Ajayi Crowther (1808–91), is discussed in Chapter 3. With the abolition of slavery, many European and African traders simply shifted their commercial specialism away from humans, and the type of trade known as 'legitimate commerce' commenced. Often using the *same* storage facilities, trade routes, staff, contacts, and networks, they would barter imported commodities such as guns, ammunition, cloth, alcohol, cowries, metal currency, and beads, not for humans but for African raw materials, including ivory, gold, timber, rubber, and palm-oil. For many decades, the map of West Africa told the story of this transformation from one lucrative trade to another, for each portion of the old 'slave coast' was renamed after its major export product: in later years the 'Grain Coast' became Liberia, while the old 'Gold Coast' was renamed Ghana at independence; the francophone 'Ivory Coast' retains its name to this day.

With the rise of steamer transport in the early 1850s, increasing numbers of European businessmen moved into the profitable West African trade in raw materials, joining and eventually displacing the many successful African merchants and chiefs (often ex-slave-traders) who had established powerful networks along the rivers between the interior and the coast. While they produced some fascinating memoirs and novels, these white, working-class men were generally regarded as 'ruffians' with loose morals and little respectability. They created ripples of anxiety at home about the ideas and practices they were introducing to 'primitive' Africans (see Newell, 2006). As a result, increasing numbers of Christian missionaries trailed the low-class 'ruffians' along the rivers and trade routes of West Africa: all along the way, these missionaries set up schools, churches, and printing presses for the production of Christian texts in African languages. Some of the region's earliest creative writers, including Nigerian authors D. O. Fagunwa (1903–63),

Amos Tutuola (1920–97) and Chinua Achebe (1930–), were the products of this missionary activity.

Finally, and often reluctantly, European governments became formally involved in West Africa in the late nineteenth century when bickering and trade disputes became unmanageable between their own nationals. Intense and murderous rivalries often developed between German, French, and British traders in territories over which the European powers had no jurisdiction. In addition to these inter-European conflicts, increasing numbers of trade routes became blocked by powerful African rulers who demanded tolls from passing traders, or waged war on their neighbours in order to secure lucrative trade routes to the coast (Lynn, 1997; Martin, 1988). Throughout the nineteenth century, for example, the Asante empire in central Ghana threatened the coastal Fante community to such an extent that the latter sought protection from the British, who assisted them in four wars. This move for British protection came to be regretted by Fante intellectuals in the late nineteenth century, however, for it threw the door open to colonial rule and prevented the country's attainment of a federal, inter-African political structure. The era of so-called European 'protection' truly commenced in the 1880s and 1890s as governments stepped into the shoes of European trading companies, establishing 'colonies' and 'protectorates' to the extent that, by the end of the century, the contours of the current West African map had largely taken shape.

As we have seen, maps do not present neutral accounts of places. Rather, they are loaded with their own historical narratives, telling their own biased stories about local struggles and victories on the ground. The emergence of a colonial-scape in the late nineteenth century is a case in point. The partitioning of Africa at the Berlin Conference of 1884–5 provides a stark illustration of the power relations that are embedded in maps. Using the straight edge of a ruler for guidance, and creating some serious anomalies in the process, the European governments 'scrambled' for Africa at the Berlin Conference, dividing it up between themselves in an effort to prevent further cut-throat competition amongst their traders over the region's rich natural resources (see Pakenham, 1998). With chunks of British-controlled territory coloured red on the map, French-controlled territory coloured blue, and with spots of yellow and orange for Portuguese and German possessions, the imperial map of West Africa

set in place administrative units that were inherited largely intact by West Africa's new governments at independence in the 1960s.[2]

One unforeseen consequence of the consolidation of European rule at the Berlin Conference was the emergence of new, region-wide 'West African' identities and political networks based upon Africans' shared new European languages, education systems and experiences of foreign domination. In the area known as 'British West Africa', for example, elite, educated Africans set up their own English-language newspapers after the 1880s and liaised with one another, often using their publications as mouthpieces for region-wide, anti-colonial organisations such as the 'Aborigines Rights Protection Society' (est. 1897), the 'National Congress of British West Africa' (est. 1920), the London-based 'West African Students Union' (est. 1925), and the 'West African Youth League' (est. 1935), amongst many others.

The African-owned newspapers played an unparalleled role in the political and literary culture of the colonial period in West Africa, providing educated Africans with the means to generate counter-positions to the policies of colonial states. The English-language press published numerous new poets and authors, and helped Africans to forge connections with anti-colonial movements in India, as well as with race activists such as W. E. B. DuBois (1868–1963) and Marcus Garvey (1887–1940) in North America.[3] The British colonial-scape established at the Berlin Conference therefore facilitated the emergence of potentially subversive alliances amongst people who found themselves connected together by the fact of their shared colonial status.

The English language, which has been described by the Kenyan author Ngugi wa Thiong'o as oppressive and 'mentally colonising', actually *made possible* these early anti-colonial networks (see Ngugi, 1994). Colonial officials watched in consternation as members of the West African intelligentsia disseminated 'inflammatory' publications from North America and India through African newspapers and oral networks, influencing literate and illiterate people alike (see Boehmer, 2002). Up and down the West African coast, educated Africans made use of the printing press to exchange ideas: thus, the Ghanaian nationalist and writer J. E. Casely Hayford (1866–1930) absorbed the ideas of his mentor, the Liberian-based race activist, Edward Wilmot Blyden (1852–1912), and in 1902 he founded his own newspaper, the *Gold Coast Leader*, for the development of his ideals; meanwhile, 'troublemakers' like the outspoken Sierra Leonean secretary of the

West African Youth League, I. T. A. Wallace-Johnson (1895–1965), plus the cantankerous writer and leader of the Aborigines Rights Protection Society in Ghana, Kobina Sekyi (1892–1956), and also the American-educated nationalist in Nigeria, Nnamdi Azikiwe (1904–96), all gave continual headaches to British colonial administrators by publishing 'libellous' and 'seditious' articles in the English-language press (see Newell, 2002). Beyond the territories of West Africa, in London, 'British West Africans' who were studying and living in the metropolis met up with Caribbeans, African-Americans and fellow African activists to exchange ideas and texts and to form pan-Africanist organisations (Adi, 1998).

While the French colonial-scape developed rather differently from 'British West Africa', French colonial policy also allowed West African students from diverse locations to mingle together at school in Senegal, and to form cultural and political networks in Paris with fellows from the 'francophone' colonies. Indeed, French-language education was a cornerstone of colonial policy, with the school syllabus set centrally from Paris. So effective was this education system that by the 1930s black intellectuals from colonies as far-flung from one another as Martinique and Senegal could claim to share a common language, education, and culture as members of a colonial black elite. Out of their common culture emerged one of West Africa's most important literary movements to date: '*négritude*', discussed in Chapter 2 and reassessed in Chapter 14.

The creation of cultural and political identities in West Africa has involved throughout a great deal of literary activity. Journalists, authors, poets, and intellectuals have played especially prominent roles in the political history of the region since the 1880s, occasionally becoming presidents, as with Léopold Sédar Senghor (1906–2001) of Senegal, but more often risking imprisonment or death at the hands of colonial and postcolonial regimes, as with Wole Soyinka (1934–) and Ken Saro-Wiwa (1941–95) of Nigeria. The involvement of writers in the production of resistant and oppositional identities is a key feature of West Africa's cultural history, emerging out of traditional griot and praise-singer roles (see Chapter 4). Political activism and creative writing have been inseparable in West Africa since at least the 1880s, when the first known novel was serialized in the *Western Echo* of Ghana. Written under the pseudonym 'A Native', the novel, entitled *Marita, Or the Folly of Love*, contains a vehement critique

of the colonial 'Marriage Ordinance' of 1884 which imposed monogamy on Christian couples and forbade them from embarking on traditional marriages (2002). As with the so-called 'first generation' of West African authors writing many years later in the 1950s and 1960s, 'A Native' attacks the colonial government's intervention in Africans' social and domestic lives, revealing, in the process, the manner in which a colonial regime could invade the most intimate areas of daily life with its legislation, including marital and sexual relationships.

West African creative writers and journalists have taken on leading political roles in anti-colonial and nationalist struggles. Senghor, the poet-president of Senegal from 1960 to 1980, is perhaps the best-known example, but he is preceded by a long line of writer-politicians dating back to Casely Hayford, Azikiwe, and the other nationalist newspapermen mentioned above. One need only consider the execution of Nigerian author Ken Saro-Wiwa in 1995 for his role in the Ogoni people's struggle for land rights, or the continuing political harassment of Soyinka by successive Nigerian governments, to perceive the ongoing active role played by writers in West African politics. Even when the literary text itself is highly experimental and *avant garde*, as in the case of much of Soyinka's writing, an author might use his or her status to condemn authoritarian regimes and demand social justice (see Chapter 10). In consequence, until recently, one of the central tenets of West African literature has been its political orientation, and authors' concomitant reluctance to condone the idea of 'art for art's sake'.

1.5 **Postcolonial West Africa: anglophone and francophone zones of culture**

When a wave of independence movements spread through the region in the 1940s and 1950s, the West African map contained a combination of clearly defined colonial states whose boundaries encircled many complex and internally heterogeneous cultures. In the years since then, the success of each state's efforts to fill out its contours with a coherent 'national' identity has been reflected in the degree of stability or conflict in the region. As part of the process of national self-realization, several countries changed their names upon, or after, achieving independence: thus, the Gold Coast became Ghana at

independence in 1957; Dahomey became Benin in 1975 after a military coup ousted the neocolonial elite; and Upper Volta became Burkina Faso in the early 1980s. Interestingly, there have been very few cross-border conflicts between postcolonial West African states. To rethink the national boundaries at independence would have created unmanageable border disputes between countries, introducing regional insecurities at precisely the historical moment when a solid sense of national identity was required to deliver each plural community into the future. Through creative writing, newspapers, sport, politics, and popular culture, as well as through cross-border military cooperation, as in Sierra Leone during the recent civil war, West Africans have worked hard in the decades since the 1960s to fill out their boundaries and imagine new national communities for themselves.

The beginning of the twenty-first century finds West Africa's colonial boundaries in a remarkably stable condition despite the bloody and long-drawn-out civil wars that have, at different times, shattered Nigeria (1967–70), Liberia (*c.* 1989–2003), Sierra Leone (*c.* 1991–2002), and the Ivory Coast (2002–present). Ongoing border disputes include that between Cameroon and Nigeria over the oil-rich Bakassi Peninsula; in 2006, the Peninsula remained under the occupation of Nigerian forces despite a ruling in Cameroon's favour at the International Court at the Hague in 1998.

In not radically altering their boundaries, and in preserving the 'official' languages that were introduced by the colonial regimes, West African governments have kept in place distinctive zones of culture in the region. In the field of literature, so-called 'anglophone' and 'francophone' authors—who choose to write in the ex-colonial languages of English and French, rather than in their African mother tongues—often remain firmly divided from one another, following different educational, intellectual, and creative paths, writing in languages which bring separate readerships, separate publishers, and separate styles of literary criticism. It is only in recent years, with the work of bilingual scholars such as Abiola Irele and Alain Ricard alongside the pioneer translation work of Wangui wa Goro, that a portion of the wealth of francophone West African literature has been introduced to English-speaking audiences.

While the primary focus of this book is on anglophone literature, francophone literature is not ignored; nor is it assumed to follow the same historical trajectory as anglophone literature. Chapters 2 and 13

in particular will show that West African writing continues to bear the marks of a linguistic-cum-colonial divide. From the powerful *négritude* poetry of the 1940s to the experimental work of new writers since the 1980s, literature composed originally in French is frequently inscribed with a series of differences from the work of anglophone authors from the ex-British colonies. These separate francophone and anglophone zones of culture are reinforced by the ongoing strength of economic and political links between the ex-colonial powers and West African governments. These variations are not absolute, and they do not supersede other shared themes, but they are particularly marked in the different approaches to language and literary style taken by authors from the two zones.

1.6 A note on terminology

If 'West Africa' is a concept which defeats easy geographical definition and extends through many disjunctive '-scapes' into the Caribbean, the Muslim world, Paris, London and North America, the region's francophone and anglophone (or 'europhone') literature *does* manifest certain common features deriving from the specific colonial and postcolonial experiences of West African authors. Many critics have identified distinctive epochs, or 'generations', in West African literature, in which particular themes take priority over others, and I will tend to follow this form of categorisation (see Fraser, 2000; Lazarus, 1990). Critics have identified a 'first-generation' of writers in the 1950s and 1960s who tackled colonialism head-on, dramatizing the tragic consequences of European intervention in West Africa: these narratives include, most famously, Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), Ferdinanad Oyono's *Une vie de boy* (1960; *Houseboy*, 1966), Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *L'aventure ambiguë* (1961; *Ambiguous Adventure*, 1963), and much of the early work of Mongo Beti, including *Le pauvre christ de Bomba* (1956; *The Poor Christ of Bomba*, 1971) and *Mission terminée* (1957; *Mission to Kala*, 1964).

In what has come to be labelled the 'literature of disillusionment', a 'second generation' of authors has been identified, emerging between the late 1960s and early 1970s, led by Ayi Kwei Armah with his scatological and cynical novel, *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968). Writers in this 'second generation' fictionalized their loss of confidence in the postcolonial governments of West Africa, and

expressed despair at the political corruption and violence spreading through the region (see Lazarus, 1990). Beside them, a parallel 'second generation' embraced Marxism and socialism in a more optimistic literature of combat and revolution (see Chapter 10). Finally, in this generational model, the new voices of 'third-generation' writers have been identified recently by literary critics. Since the 1980s much francophone and anglophone writing has broken away from literary realism in favour of styles that have been labelled 'experimental' and '*avant garde*' (see Deandrea, 2002; Nfah-Abbenyi, 1997).

This book adopts the 'generational' terminology to discuss francophone and anglophone writers: however, the categories and limits set in place by literary overviews of the region must not be allowed to obscure the sheer openness and dynamism that are the key features and the strengths of West African literary culture. Rather than clustering authors into generations with shared themes, I try to move around a different axis: the theories and debates which are inspired by literature in West Africa, or West African 'ways of reading'. What drives the representation of West Africa in the chapters that follow is my sense that 'West Africa' is a radically *open* space defined by its plurality, and that the geopolitical boundaries displayed on the current map are continuously placed under pressure by the dynamism of the region's trans-local and global networks of culture. West Africa's postcolonial identity, or its 'postcoloniality' as a region, stems as much from these interconnections between countries and cultures as from the work of national elites in their struggles to establish distinctive nation-states.

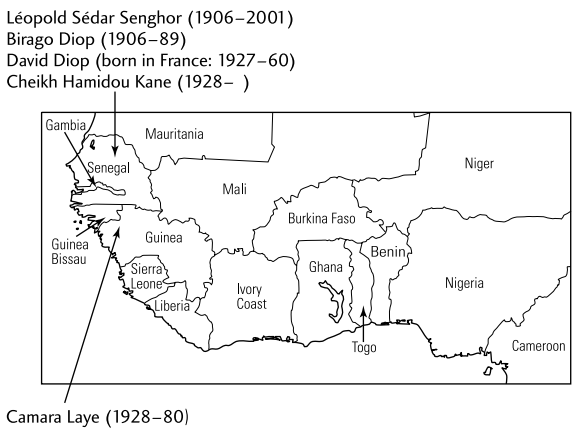
2

Négritude

> Black consciousness really begins with the shock of discovery that one is not only black but is also non-white.
>
> **(Lewis Nkosi; cited in Moore and Beier, 1963)**

On the Left Bank of the River Seine in the 1930s and 1940s, a powerful theory of racial difference emerged among students and intellectuals immersed in French culture. What distinguished this movement from the many previous theorizations of the African's racial characteristics was that the proponents of '*négritude*' were themselves black. Gathered together from diverse colonial lands, including 'French West Africa' and the 'French Caribbean', these young intellectuals had been selected by the French administration to complete their studies in Paris and enter the ruling elites of their countries as bureaucrats and state functionaries. On discovering how poorly they were regarded by the French, however, they discovered what Frantz Fanon later termed 'the fact of blackness', seeing themselves as others saw them and suffering a massive failure of recognition and belief (Fanon, 1986: 109–40). In response, they formulated a vehement, defensive new identity in their poetry and philosophy, which had a profound influence on African literary debates in subsequent decades.

This chapter considers the impact of the *négritude* movement on West African literatures, for this cosmopolitan moment in Paris was cardinal to the formation (and politicization) of West African identities in the inter-war and immediate post-war periods. *Négritude* represents a foundational moment in West African literary culture: it is one of the few formal literary 'schools' to emerge from the region, although its multicultural membership reminds us, once again, that the map of 'West Africa' reaches far beyond African geographical boundaries to the West Indies, the United States, and France.



Map 2 *Négritude*

The *négritude* movement was spearheaded by the Guyanan poet Léon Damas (1912–78), alongside the radical Martiniquan poet and politician Aimé Césaire (1913–) and the rather more conservative Senegalese poet and politician Léopold Sédar Senghor (1906–2001). Other key figures in the movement were the Senegalese poet, Birago Diop (1906–89), who helped to establish the journal *Présence Africaine*, and the younger, French-born poet David Diop (1927–60), whose parents had emigrated to France from Senegal and Cameroon. The Senegalese author, Cheikh Hamidou Kane (1928–), was also associated with the movement, as was Camara Laye (1928–80) from Guinea, author of *L'enfant noir* (1953; trans. *The African Child*, 1954) and *Le regard du roi* (1954; trans. *The Radiance of the King*, 1956).[1] Gathered together from diverse locations in the French colonial world, with a particularly strong Senegalese contingent, these cosmopolitan young writers demonstrated the powerful truth of Caliban's words in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*: 'You taught me language, and my profit on't | Is, I know how to curse' (I. ii. 363–4). Unlike Caliban, however, the *négritude* poets did not proclaim in nostalgia and regret, 'The red plague rid you | For learning me your language!' (I. ii. 364–5). Rather, they revelled in the French language, profiting on't, stretching its grammar with experimental new forms inspired by French *avant garde* culture, American jazz, and African oral genres.

Educated locally in colonial schools that were modelled on the French *lycées*, the *négritude* poets had been taught to read and write in French and, as the popular cliché ran, they had learnt to think in terms of 'our ancestors the Gauls' rather than 'our ancestors the Africans'. Unlike the British in West Africa, who spent many decades insisting upon the specificity of local traditions and languages, and adhered to the policy of 'indirect rule' instead of the Westminster model, the French had a different attitude toward the governance of their colonies. They tried to implement a policy of 'assimilation', aiming for uniformity across different locales and for the communication of French standards and ideas, in French, rather than the preservation of local languages and institutions. Against the British model of racial and cultural difference, then, the French operated according to the humanistic ideal of a shared, 'universal' civilization and a shared French national identity. Consequently, francophone writers developed along a rather different trajectory from anglophone West African authors: in particular, as Chapter 13 suggests in relation to recent women writers, francophone authors inherited an easier, less confrontational relationship with the European philosophical tradition than authors from 'British West Africa'.

As the *négritude* poets were quick to point out, however, in the colonial period 'universal' in fact meant 'European'. 'The Europeans claimed that they were the only ones who had thought out a civilization to the level and dimension of Universality', wrote Senghor in 1961, adding that the move was then swift 'from this to maintaining that European civilization was to be identified with the Civilization of the Universal' (1965: 72–3). Seeking a true universal, a universal which accommodated global cultural diversity, the *négritude* poets opposed the French policy of assimilation and celebrated racial difference in its place. They were cosmopolitan, united from all corners of the world in a group that worked towards what Senghor called 'a new African-inspired humanism' which would accommodate different local cultures side-by-side, without preference for one or discrimination against the other (p. 77). For, as they realized, the French had omitted one vital problem from the humanistic syllabus of their colonial schools: how could the Republic's post-revolutionary ideals of 'liberté, egalité, fraternité' be applied in a colonial context which depended upon the domination of one group by another based on

the supposed inferiority of the colonized cultures? In their essays and poems, particularly after the Second World War, the *négritude* writers made much of this fundamental contradiction in the French humanist tradition, defining their own African humanism in its place, and insisting upon respect for non-European values instead of the false universal imposed by colonial Europe.

Nevertheless, by the time they left their homelands for Paris, these black students were fully immersed in French literature, philosophy, and history, regarding it as a vital part of their intellectual heritage and fully identifying themselves as citizens of France. Senghor, Damas, Césaire, and their colleagues in the 1920s and 1930s were thoroughly assimilated to French culture: so great was Senghor's love of the French language that in 1956 he described it as 'a language of graciousness and civility . . . a language of the gods' (1965: 95).[2] One can understand why Christopher Miller supposes that 'the colonial school is the material cause of this [*négritude*] literature' (1990: 16), and why John Reed and Clive Wake suggest that 'Senghor's life has been largely a working out of the inevitable if unforeseen logic of the French colonial policy of assimilation' (Senghor, 1964: ix).

The *négritude* poets were gathered together from a loosely connected francophone zone of culture which stretched across the French colonial world from Martinique to Senegal, and they were poised to experience a rude awakening to the concept of race in the metropolis. As Césaire remembered in 1967, during his time in Paris, 'We lived in an atmosphere of rejection, and we developed an inferiority complex' (cited in Nkosi, 1981: 10). Overriding their specific regional and personal differences from one another, their shared francophone heritage combined with this experience of racism to provide common ground for their collective opposition to colonial oppression. The 'common ground' upon which the *négritude* poets staged their struggle was a powerfully imagined continent, for they created—or invented—an African landscape that could accommodate them all, in all their diversity, in Paris. The first stanza of David Diop's famous poem, 'Africa', reveals the remoteness of this landscape from his actual memories and experiences of Africa:

> Africa my Africa
> Africa of proud warriors in the ancestral savannahs
> Africa my grandmother sings of,

> Beside her distant river
> I have never seen you
> But my gaze is full of your blood
>
> (Moore and Beier, 1963: 111)

Paradoxically, Diop gazes upon an *unseen* land, and the grandmother's song is distant, unheard, intoned from a remote riverine place. At the very moment of claiming an affinity with the continent, this poem reveals the exile's blindness to and dislocation from his homeland. Africa exists in his imagination as a myth of his own subjectivity.

The proponents of *négritude* were interested in poetics as much as in politics: they set up salons, soirées, and a number of literary journals in Paris, the most famous being *Présence Africaine*, founded by Alioune Diop (1910–80), which first appeared in 1947 and went on to become the artistic and cultural mouthpiece of the francophone black world (Irele, 1981). From these literary platforms, Senghor and his colleagues produced a powerful theory of racial difference which continues to inspire both controversy and creativity in contemporary West Africa.

Journals such as *Présence Africaine* demonstrated the manner in which, Caliban-like, black writers from the colonies used their literacy subversively to glue themselves together into a coherent group, to produce a binding mythology, an aesthetic, and a shared past to authenticate their new community. They used print to establish a public forum for anti-colonial action, protesting in the name of the black man's culture—and gender is not neutral in the case of *négritude* (see 2.2, below)—against colonial racism and the lack of equal rights throughout the imperial world. As in anglophone West Africa, where the international circulation of English-language newspapers and pamphlets helped to inspire anti-colonial protest at the local level, so too the activity of printing, writing, and reading in the French language-zone helped to generate African identities that were oppositional and worldwide, connecting Martinique with Senegal, Paris with Cameroon, the West African oral *griot* with the poets of the Harlem Renaissance.

Césaire coined the word *négritude* in his long poem, *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (*Notebook of a Return to My Native Land*, 1939), but literary scholars tend to cite Senghor's various definitions of the term above Césaire's, for Senghor became the major spokesman for

the movement. He produced numerous essays and lectures on the subject between the 1940s and 1960s in addition to several volumes of poetry. Senghor's immense literary output is striking, not least because it helps to reveal the cultural and ideological underpinnings of his long period as Senegal's president between 1960 and 1980. His many volumes of poetry and prose display the metaphysical expression of his 'African Socialism' which, he insisted, stemmed from traditional African communitarian values and a belief in the power of the ancestors: these differed in fundamental ways from European Marxism with its dependence upon class categories and industrialization (see 1965: 57–9).

Senghor defined *négritude* in broad terms as 'the sum total of the values of the civilization of the African world' (1965: 99; see also p. 35). He regarded it as a 'true myth' which made possible an expression of 'the awareness, defence and development of African cultural values': in turn, these values would contribute to 'the *Civilization of the Universal* … human Civilization' (1965: 97; emphasis retained). This overview of the African's cultural difference from other races shares features with the Pan-Africanism and black nationalism that spread through the anglophone world between the 1890s and the 1940s, carried by influential spokesmen such as Edward Wilmot Blyden (1852–1912), W. E. B. DuBois (1868–1963) and, later, Marcus Garvey (1887–1940). Many of these 'race thinkers' regarded Africanness as complementary to Caucasian culture, existing *alongside* it in a condition of difference (see Irele, 1981: 85–104; Elimimian, 1994). Later Afrocentric thinkers have found inspiration in this open, dynamic model of cultural identity, which seeks wholeness in the face of fragmentation and formulates an 'African presence' to help the black world to cohere in its cultural '-scapes'.

When Senghor turns to the specific details of black identity, however, *négritude*'s most problematic features become apparent, setting it apart from the other pan-African ideologies of the period. According to Senghor, it is Africans' '*emotive attitude* towards the world which explains the[ir] cultural values' (p. 35; emphasis retained). While Europeans are dominated by the Cartesian principle of, 'I think therefore I am', Africans, by contrast, 'might say, "I smell, I dance the *Other*. I am" ' (1965: 32; see Irele, 1981). Scientific reason and categories based on visible difference make up the European's mode of knowledge, but rhythm, dance, emotion, touch, and a belief in the ancestors

form the foundation of African systems of knowledge (1965: 32). The rigidity and rationality of the European is set against the fluidity and sensuous presence of the African, who does not thrust away the Other but moves with and alongside difference without assimilating it.

Senghor's problematic 'Europe versus Africa' opposition is strikingly similar to the contrast between Man and Woman in the French feminist theory of the 1970s and 1980s, and a brief comparison of the two reveals much about their shared philosophical bases. For Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray, Man is 'phallogocentric' and governed by Cartesian logic, while Woman speaks, writes, touches, and dances her body in a heterogeneous space outside the logic of masculinity which revolves around eyesight and the phallus (see Cixous, 1998; Irigaray, 1998). Curiously, both sets of responses to oppression make use of (without transforming) one foundational opposition: the division between reason and intuition. This division has been central to European systems of knowledge since the Enlightenment, used repeatedly in descriptions of the civilized white man's Other, including the 'savage', the 'feminine', the 'working class', and the 'insane': each of these groups is regarded as more spontaneous, intuitive, and uncontrolled than bourgeois man. In retaining this core opposition between reason and intuition, both *négritude* and French feminism play subversively and also dangerously with the very logic that has been used to keep them in a place of subordination. This may be inevitable, of course, for it is impossible fully to break free from the structures and systems which determine one's identity in language. Nevertheless, while they expose the operations of unfair, hierarchical systems of domination, both *négritude* and French feminism seem to *desire*, or at the very least require, the binary between reason (Europe, Man) and intuition (Africa, Woman).[3]

One effect of the preservation of this binary is that Senghor's prose writings between the 1940s and 1960s tend to suggest that black aesthetics derive from unalterable biological features in the African.[4] A genetically 'real' African performs his or her culture *only* through intuition, rhythm, emotion, and dance. Additionally, in his poetry one often finds a romanticized, static vision of pre-colonial Africa, frequently incarnated in a feminine form (see below). Many critics of *négritude* have pointed out that Senghor's position almost precisely mirrors the racist, colonial stereotypes that circulated around elite and popular culture at the time he was writing (Amuta, 1989: 45–6;

Chinweizu *et al.*, 1983: 256–7; Kerr, 1995; Awoonor, 2002). In cartoons about Africa and the Caribbean, in exploration narratives, in colonial movies and adventure stories, 'the African' is regarded as a homogeneous entity with no complexity or individuality and few cultural differences from other Africans. Senghor does not escape from this colonialist legacy simply by inverting the negative valuation of Africa and making it into a positive quality: he only turns the qualities that were labelled 'bad' into 'good' characteristics, without contesting the terms of the discourse itself (see Gikandi, 2001b; Irele, 1981).

Perhaps the greatest problem with Senghor's definition of the African personality relates to his use of supposedly 'scientific' evidence to support his cultural claims. Unlike the French feminists, who were part of a generation to cut the ties with empirical science, Senghor's manner of using empirical data places his writing firmly in the post-war period in Europe, when there was more faith in the objectivity of science than today. He refers repeatedly to 'contemporary physics' (1965: 29), and to studies in 'physio-psychology' to demonstrate the essential racial differences between Europeans and Africans (p. 36). Supposedly objective data are used to give authority to *négritude*, which is presented as a physics rather than a metaphysics. In this way, Senghor constantly seeks to reinforce his theory of cultural identity by turning to the totalizing vocabulary of science: in so doing, however, he creates for himself a 'new prison' (Chinweizu *et al.*, 1983: 257).

At this stage, however, two important caveats must be inserted into the critique of *négritude*. First, Senghor was a relatively conservative thinker who was surrounded by more radical colleagues, and as such he did not exercise exclusive rights over the definition of *négritude* (see Gikandi, 2001b). In particular, the protest poet David Diop—a younger and more vociferous man than Senghor—supported a revolutionary model of anti-colonial violence. Unsurprisingly, African Marxist literary critics have selected David Diop and Césaire above Senghor as the heroes of *négritude*, dismissing Senghor's 'quasi-mythical and romantic' consciousness as ahistorical 'mystification' and 'falsification' of African realities, 'no longer relevant' to the postcolonial world (Udenta, 1996: 33–4; Amuta, 1989: 35–8). Indeed, the most prescriptive Marxist critic, Udenta O. Udenta, states that if *négritude* is to survive as a relevant discourse, its familiar figurehead must be deposed in favour of the more ardent poetry of recognizably left-wing, activist writers for, as he puts it, 'the history of Senegal

since flag independence is an eloquent testimony of the emptiness of Senghor's *Négritude*' (Udenta, 1996: 42).

A second caveat is that Senghor's definition of *négritude* changed over time. In essays composed after he became President of Senegal in 1960, he slowly shifted position, starting to emphasise cultural and contextual factors above the biological dimensions of his theory. It is worth noting that this shift occurred with his return to West Africa, indicating the difference between global and local, or diasporan and West African, constructions of identity. The sheer diversity of people on the ground when he returned to West Africa prevented any distillation of them into a pure essence: 'Man is not without a homeland', Senghor admitted in 1961:

> he is not a man without colour or history or country or civilization. He is West African man ... precisely determined by his time and his place: the Malian, the Mauritanian, the Ivory-Coaster; the Wolof, the Tuareg, the Hausa, the Fon, the Mossi; a man of flesh and bone and blood, who feeds on milk and millet and rice and yam, a man humiliated for centuries less perhaps in his hunger and nakedness than in his colour and his civilization, in his dignity as incarnate man.
>
> (1965: 59)

Senghor's fiercest critics have tended to dwell upon his more abstract, essentialist writings to the exclusion of these detailed re-locations of 'African man' to his national, ethnic, and regional contexts. Given the longevity of Senghor's writing career it seems unfair to sideline these revisions to his own first principles.

Additionally, when one turns from the prose to the poetry of *négritude*, the expression of black personality is far less biologically determined than implied by some of Senghor's critics.[5] Many of the *négritude* poets celebrate racial solidarity by acknowledging black diversity, and call upon a multitude of genres ranging from the West African *griot*'s praise-song and West African musical rhythms to the jazz sounds of the Harlem Renaissance. West African instruments, particularly the kora and the balafong, are scripted into poems which are inspired by American jazz, or by Southern African history (see Senghor's *Éthiopiques*, 1956). In Césaire's work, the syntax and sounds of the French Caribbean infuse poems which celebrate African history. Many younger West African poets have followed this model for their European-language poetry, introducing African instrumentation and grammar into pan-African verses, and insisting

upon the *performed*, oral qualities of poetry from the continent (see Chapter 8). In this way, the *négritude* poets recognized the manifold locations and genres that circulate around the global African diaspora. Such a recognition served to moderate, and to pluralize, their own more ardent pronouncements about the African's singular racial difference from the European.

Many scholars have pointed out that the French cultural influences upon *négritude* must be acknowledged if the movement is to be fully understood. Such influences include, in Senghor's case, the verse of St John Perse and Paul Claudel, both of whom are regarded by critics as 'conservatives' and a source of Senghor's lack of artistic vigour (Fraser, 1986: 45–9; Innes, 1991). However, the nineteenth-century decadent poet, Charles Baudelaire (1821–67), must also be added to the list of French influences upon Senghor, who clearly exhibited very little regard for the incompatible ideological positions of these mentors. In Nkosi's words, '*négritude* is a bastard child whose family tree includes, apart from the living African heritage, Freudianism, Marxism, Surrealism and Romanticism' (1981: 27). What links these four Western '-isms' is their status as anti-bourgeois or anti-rational movements which posited that 'deep truths' lay *beneath* perceived surface realities and relations (see Irele, 1981).

What is perhaps most interesting in the context of *négritude* is that Senghor and his colleagues were surrounded on all sides by French surrealist poets and *avant garde* painters who sought the essence of reality through symbols and word-associations. Many of these artists were inspired by the masks and carvings entering Paris from West Africa, as well as by newly published anthropological studies of 'primitive' societies.[6] Painters such as Picasso and Modigliani incorporated African masks and anthropological references into their work. Throughout Europe at this time, Modernist artists and writers were attempting to recreate the 'primitive' and the 'primal', while psychoanalysis explored what came before 'civilization'. Senghor was therefore justified in commenting that his French artistic influences do 'not belong entirely to Europe', for West Africa had influenced Europe *prior* to the European *avant garde*'s influence upon the *négritude* poets (p. 90).[7] Prior to the binary opposition between Europe and Africa, then, one can sense a deep intimacy between the two poles.

Nevertheless, the problems of the binary oppositions in *négritude* are not overcome by these caveats. The group of voluntary exiles

who created *négritude* operated within a sphere of Africanity that was thoroughly mediated by French art and culture. Their 'African presence' was shot through with European ideas about Africa. What differentiated them from their *avant garde* contemporaries in Paris, however, was that they formed a distinctive colonial group with a shared political agenda. Combining French literary and philosophical models with genres drawn from their own home cultures, they put their French influences to new and original uses. Making use of the infrastructures that the French had put in place for the smooth running of far-flung imperial regimes, these 'angry young men' presented a fiercely anti-colonial front in their writing and circulated their work through the French-speaking colonial world. In this manner, they simultaneously operated within and also generated an 'African-scape', making use of French colonial networks to map the limits and features of an exclusively black world. Working *within* the colonizer's language—seeing no reason to relocate to its 'outside'—each of the *négritude* poets made the perfect 'postcolonial' move in his poetry by gesturing *beyond* colonialism, putting up 'posts' that marked out a new, self-defined territory in opposition to the boundaries imposed by the old regime.

2.1 *Négritude*: a new humanism?

> We must in fact create on the soil of Africa a new man and a new humanism
>
> (Senghor, 1965: 57)

Many critics, particularly from English-speaking circles, rejected *négritude* for its 'racist' construction of the African's biological essence (see Mphahlele, 1962; Awoonor, 2002; Kerr, 1995). What these critics failed to recognize, however, was that *négritude*'s racial 'essences' were not necessarily permanent and autonomous. The 'African man' promoted by *négritude* was an extremely leaky vessel, whose 'essences' were conferred from the outside, in the process of his 'becoming' African in the eyes of the colonizer, as much as they stemmed from the inner recesses of his essential being.

The Nigerian author Wole Soyinka seemed to recognize this point even while uttering his devastating comment on the manner in which *négritude* played to the colonial master: 'a tiger does not have

to proclaim his *tigritude*', he famously declared during the heated debate which erupted between pro- and anti-*négritude* scholars at a conference in 1962 (see Nkosi, 1981). In his typically witty and dismissive style, Soyinka makes the point that any creature which is comfortable with its own autonomous identity will not spend a lifetime justifying its skin-type to others, especially when those others would prefer to hunt it down and stuff it with their own home-grown filling, making it as domestic as possible.

Absent from Soyinka's pithy comment is any recognition of the power of imperialist representations over Africans in the colonial period, especially over people living in the metropolis and the diaspora. Soyinka ignores the fact that every individual is 'always-already' positioned *within* discourses, ideologies, and power-structures which contribute to that individual's identity and sense of self. Crucially, upon arrival in the imperial metropolis, the soon-to-be *négritude* poets stepped directly into a deep pool of racist discourses. The reflections of black humanity they found in Paris necessitated a defensive reaction, an assertion of their own form of 'tigritude' in the face of the 'Other'. It is imperative, therefore, to situate the *négritude* poets in relation to the political and intellectual discourses which circulated around them in imperial France between the 1940s and the 1960s.

Not all of these discourses were negative: in particular, the existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre seems to have inspired Senghor more than any other contemporary thinker. So solid was the two men's intellectual connection that Sartre's influential essay on race and colonialism, 'Orphée Noir', first appeared as the preface to Senghor's edited collection of poetry from the francophone world, *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache* (1948). In 'Orphée Noir', Sartre positions *négritude* within a Hegelian and Marxist dialectical model, arguing that the movement is a form of 'anti-racist racism' which responds directly to colonial racism: *négritude* is thus the second stage in the three-fold movement toward a future, non-racist world.[8] In Sartre's view, *négritude* was an assertion of anti-colonial culture which was triggered by the policies of imperial France. Despite the movement's declarations of authentic Africanness, then, *négritude* depended upon Europe. Viewed dialectically, the African 'Self' asserted by the poets *required* its European 'Other', prior to the Self, in order to make that Self thinkable.

Senghor's *négritude* forms part of a philosophical tradition dating back to Hegel and Marx, in which the intimate relationship between the Other and the Self, or the 'master' and the 'servant', is explored. For Hegel, the Self–Other relationship involved mutual dependency and agency on both sides: it also involved a struggle to the death. Self-consciousness, he suggested, is conferred only through the recognition shown in the eyes of the Other: the Other is therefore essential to the Self, outside the Self looking at it. In order to achieve selfhood, however, the Other must *impose* his or her own existence on the Self: this transforms the Self into a servant, or object, dominated and eliminated by the Other's demand for recognition. For Hegel, self-consciousness therefore involved a continuous power struggle: the relationship between Self and Other was one of mutual recognition, mutual dependence and, ultimately, annihilation. So subtle had the dialectic become by the mid-twentieth century that, under Sartre, and later Fanon, merely to gaze or glance momentarily at another person constituted an act of appropriation and mastery (see Fanon, 1986). In consequence, as Sarah Nuttall points out, 'the issue of recognition, and the lack of it, has dominated and even generated much postcolonial theorizing' (2001: 393).

Senghor's own writings on colonial identity and race can be firmly located within this existentialist tradition which dates back to Hegel and Marx. In locating him thus, one can perhaps move away from the simple 'either-or' terms of the argument about essentialism in *négritude*. In one of his most controversial essays, entitled 'The African Apprehension of Reality', Senghor describes the European as 'a man of will' who 'distinguishes the object from himself ... freezes it out of time and, in a way, out of space. He fixes it, he kills it.' The African, by contrast, 'does not begin by distinguishing himself from the object, the tree or stone, the man or animal or social event' (1965: 29). These dangerously essentialist—even racist—contrasts between 'the European' and 'the African' can be seen afresh in the light of Senghor's immersion in French existentialist philosophy. In the language of French existentialism, the colonial 'master', or 'Self' *requires and causes* its object, the 'Other', to be frozen out of time and space, fixed and killed. Meanwhile, the 'servant' or 'Other' struggles to achieve subjectivity under the force of the colonial gaze: reduced to objecthood, the 'Other' experiences his or her otherness as an immersion in the world of objects where it is impossible to distin-

guish the self from the 'tree or stone, the man or animal or social event' (op. cit.). What needs to be retrieved is the relational process by which these entities mutually construct one another. Viewed thus, the African and the European need not be regarded as static, eternally fixed positions in a racially divided universe, but, in existential terms, as part of a historical process, a colonial power-relationship between a 'master' and 'servant' in which neither party occupies a static or a privileged position within politics and representation.

In naming Europe and Africa instead of the more abstract, dislocated 'master' and 'servant', Senghor locates the dialectic in a colonial historical framework. Rather than interpreting his ideas as dangerous and essentialist, then, it is possible to regard his essays more politically, in the historical context of colonialism, as the effort of the 'servant' in the existential relationship to name and to liberate his or her otherness from the crushing struggle described by Hegel and Sartre. Admittedly, this is to read against the grain of Senghor's more ardent assertions of the African's ontological difference from the European.

French existentialist philosophy can also help to explain the *négritude* poets' statements about the African's capacity for emotional expression above the exercise of will and reason. Senghor wrote, 'the African is as it were shut up inside his black skin. He lives in primordial night … Subjectively, at the end of his antennae, like an insect, he discovers the *Other*. He is *moved* to his bowels, going out in a centrifugal movement from the subject to the object on the waves sent out from the *Other*' (1965: 29–30; emphasis retained). Using the existentialist vocabulary of Self and Other, Senghor seems to be trying to break away from relations based on sight, on the gaze, which is the primary sense through which the 'Other' is classified in the colonial relationship (see Fanon, 1986). In so doing, he does not simply borrow from or imitate Hegel's and Sartre's models: he *develops* the 'master–servant' dialectic away from its fascination with the gaze, towards a new ethical relationship based upon touch and movement.

Sight is white, Senghor suggests. Sight is the sense which is exercised in the process of colonial assimilation. In this, he anticipates Frantz Fanon's writings on the operation of colonial power and its effects on individual identity (1986). Fanon was one of *négritude*'s most ardent critics, but the two francophone philosophers are

umbilically connected through their use of, and efforts to move beyond, the sight-bound 'master–servant' dialectic. As a black man within this dialectic, 'I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects', Fanon wrote: 'Sealed into that crushing objecthood, I turned beseechingly to others ... But just as I reached the other side, I stumbled, and the movements, the attitudes, the glances of the other fixed me there ... I burst apart' (p. 109). Fanon's solution to this existential crisis is to refuse to return the gaze, and thus to obstruct the dialectic in which the black man is always fixed in objecthood. Anyone looking at him now, he declares, will find in his eyes only a 'perpetual question ... neither recognition nor hate' (p. 29).

Writing from the position of the 'Other', already constructed and fixed in place by the colonial gaze, Senghor also seems to be seeking an ethical alternative for relations between the self and the other. He seeks a model not predicated upon the recognition, assimilation, or objectification of a body, but based upon movement, fluidity, touch, and non-visual exchanges. In the essay quoted above, he suggests that there can be no colonial gaze in the 'primordial night' typified by the African. In the primordial night, out of sight, one touches 'antennae' with the other, dances with the other, 'feels' the object in a relationship where touch takes precedence over visible markers of race. The blindness conferred by night and blackness thus marks the beginning of the new ethical relationship where 'recognition' has been abandoned.[9]

2.2 **The feminist critique of *négritude***

Interviewed shortly before her death in 1981, the Senegalese novelist Mariama Bâ (1929–81) criticized male African writers for their 'nostalgic songs dedicated to African mothers', and insisted that African literature should start to recognize women's political and economic contributions to their societies (cited in Innes, 1991: 129). Rejecting 'Mother Africa' as the symbolic figure of a male nationalist fantasy, Bâ wished instead for a literature that would recognize the heroic role of real, ordinary African mothers with water and firewood to collect, land to farm, children to raise, and important roles in social and political organizations. Clearly, for Bâ, the gap between the symbolic and the real had widened too far in African literature, leaving the nationalist icon, 'Mother Africa', stranded on a pedestal,

frozen rigid, far above the land which men fought for in her name (see Boehmer, 1991).

While Bâ did not name a particular male author as the source of these distorted representations of African women, the literary critic C. L. Innes has persuasively applied the remarks to Bâ's compatriot, Senghor. In making her case, Innes focuses on Senghor's famous sensual poem in celebration of Mother Africa, 'Femme Noire' ('African Woman', also known as 'Black Woman'). In translation from French, the poem opens:

> Naked woman, black woman
> Clothed with your colour which is life, with your form which is beauty!
> In your shadow I have grown up; the gentleness of your hands was laid over my eyes.
> And now, high up on the sun-baked pass, at the heart of summer, at the heart of noon, I come upon you, my Promised Land,
> And your beauty strikes me to the heart like the flash of an eagle
>
> (1964: 6)

This visionary mode continues in subsequent verses, where Senghor compares the naked woman to 'firm-fleshed ripe fruit', to 'savannah shuddering beneath the East Wind's eager caresses',[10] and to a 'Gazelle limbed in Paradise' (p. 6). In her own pragmatic, counter-visionary response, Innes questions the patriarchal foundations of the poem, arguing that it 'epitomises that convergence of mistress, mother and land which becomes the focus of the poet's nostalgia and desire' (1991: 131). Women's bodies are used by Senghor as symbolic vessels for African men's anti-colonial nationalism.

Senghor is not alone in his feminization of the continent. In a poem that echoes 'Black Woman', his younger colleague, David Diop, praises 'Mother Africa' in the following terms:

> Negress, my warm rumour of Africa
> My land of mystery and my fruit of reason
> You are the dance by the naked joy of your smile
> By the offering of your breasts and secret powers . . .
> You are the idea of All and the voice of the Ancient.
>
> ('To a Black Dancer', in Moore and Beier, 1963: 59)

The problem for Innes, as for other feminist critics, is that when anti-colonial nationalist poets idealize femininity to such an extent, they mask the exclusion of women from positions of political and

economic power in the postcolony (Boehmer, 1991; Stratton, 1994). Nationalist men may admit to their respect, or sexual desire, for 'Mother Africa', but once independence has been gained, they refuse to admit women into their circles of political power. African woman remains confined to the zone of fantasy and ideality in nationalist discourse: she remains a 'mystery', an 'idea', a 'secret', as Diop's poem says, revered for the very qualities which keep her in a remote, untouchable space.

Senghor's and Diop's images of African womanhood are not an exclusive product of the *négritude* movement, nor is the 'Mother Africa' figure confined to francophone African literature. Innes calls to account two Ghanaian authors, Ayi Kwei Armah (1939–) and Kofi Awoonor (1935–), for their similarly problematic representations of African women (1991: 132–3); meanwhile, in an ardent attack on the foundations of African literature, the feminist scholar Florence Stratton lines up *all* of anglophone Africa's 'big men' for criticism, including Kenya's Ngugi wa Thiong'o alongside Nigeria's Wole Soyinka and Chinua Achebe, who are criticized amongst many others for their 'sexual-textual' misrepresentations of African women (1994: 158–70). When male nationalists write or fight for liberation in the name of 'Mother Africa', she insists, they run the risk of excluding real women from the struggle, and they set in place a host of limiting feminine stereotypes against which African women writers have to struggle, or 'write back', in subsequent decades (see Boehmer, 2005).[11]

Senghor's own ideas about the role and place of African women are revealed in his essay 'African Society' (first published in 1959). Despite the sociological implications of its title, this essay shows more interest in world mythologies and cultural representations of gender than in empirical facts. 'In Africa', Senghor writes, 'woman occupies the first place; perhaps we should say, once occupied it, for Arabo-Berber and then European influence … has continuously reduced her role' (1965: 44). In spite of these layers of foreign occupation, he continues, all traces of a genuine African womanhood have not been erased, for in traditional African society the woman remains 'the giver of life'; she exists in local mythologies as 'the source of the life-force and guardian of the house, that is to say, the depository of the clan's past and the guarantor of its future' (ibid.). Clearly, Senghor is interested in mythological beliefs and processes outside the stream of history, rather than the status of women in the 'real' world of power

inequalities, work, and motherhood. In the light of this, a sympathetic reading of 'Black Woman' would regard it as part of Senghor's mythopoeic project to 'retrieve' and reinstate the matrilineal sources of African culture, over and against the invading, patriarchal forces of Islam and Christianity, which bring their symbols of masculine rule, and distort the woman-centred mythologies of African societies.

In the light of this, one may question the relevance of the feminist critique to the poetry of *négritude*. Do the feminist scholars ignore, or misunderstand, the movement's surrealist, mythological and symbolic style in order to apply their economic and sociological models of 'real' women's lives? To regard *any* literary text as the accurate, pristine reflection of society is to ignore the author's creativity as well as the textuality of the work, the fictionality of the characters, and the literary qualities of the language. To apply a sociological model of literature to *avant garde* poetry seems, however, to be deliberately pushing against the texts, for *négritude* is a heavily aestheticized and non-realist movement with little interest in representing the world 'out there'.

Nevertheless, Innes's re-reading of 'Black Woman' is important for its challenge to existing scholarship on *négritude*, which has tended to pass over the question of gender ideology in order to focus upon the movement's controversial claims about race. The Marxist scholar Udenta criticizes the poem 'Black Woman' for its 'escape and mystical shamanism', for its 'mystical exploration of African ontology,' for its 'ahistorical understanding of the African social dynamics', and for its ignorance of the 'process of revolutionary transformation', but he fails to make any reference to the poem's obvious gender politics (Udenta, 1996: 38–9). By contrast, Innes's analysis calls into question the gender ideology of the entire *négritude* movement, helping to reveal the ways in which its emancipatory nationalist ideals and its investment in the 'universal' are fuelled by a deeper masculine perspective which operates to the exclusion of women. Nationalist laments to 'Mother Africa' distort and misrepresent the contributions of real African women to nation-building, and are no longer relevant to postcolonial society.

The feminist perspective adds an extra layer to the existing literary commentaries on *négritude*. Can *négritude* survive this critique as a relevant movement, or should we relegate it to the dusty shelves of history? I will return to this question of relevance in the final section

of this book when the different 'ways of reading' discussed in *West African Literatures* as a whole will feed into a reassessment of *négritude*. For now, it is important to recognize that *négritude* inspired many offshoots, including the Nigerian journal *Black Orpheus*, founded by Ulli Beier and Jahnheinz Jahn in 1957 in order 'to create an *entente cordiale* between two linguistic camps' and to host francophone and anglophone African writers (Fraser, 1986: 69–70). Francophone novelists such as Cheikh Hamidou Kane and Camara Laye have probed the ideology of *négritude* in their work, while West African critics have been influenced by the movement's powerful aesthetic of Black identity (Irele, 1981; 2001).

One of the most interesting offshoots of *négritude* has occurred in recent years, for in 2002 *négritude* poetry 'came home' from Paris to Dakar in the shape of a popular movie by Senegalese film-maker Moussa Sene Absa. In her research into Senegalese cinema, Ellie Higgins (2004) has usefully shown how Absa's film, *Ainsi meurent les anges* (*And So Angels Die*, 2002) quotes and reworks the poetry of David Diop, as well as that of Birago Diop. Absa makes a curious choice, here, for despite his local surname David Diop knew little about West Africa and even less about Senegal. The poem that Absa selects as the leitmotif for the film is David Diop's 'Africa', a poem which, we have seen, reveals a lack of concrete memories of Africa and a nostalgia for a place which the poet has never actually visited.

Ainsi meurent les anges is the story of a failed diasporan journey, for its protagonist, Mory, returns home from France jobless and separated from his French wife (Higgins, 2004). It is also the story of the failure of 'West Africa' as an idea, or a construct, however, for Mory's is a postcolonial homecoming which tests the nostalgia and longing expressed for Africa by *négritude* poets such as David Diop. In one vivid, violent scene, we are shown how Mory's father has sold his soul to neocolonial values to such an extent that he violently cuts his feet in order to force them into a pair of European shoes; the same man orders his son back to France (Higgins, 2004). The beloved 'Africa' of David Diop's dream cruelly fails the test of this cinematic homecoming: fifty years on, *négritude*'s constructed continent is shown to be falling apart.

The *négritude* poets are simultaneously quoted and critiqued in the film, which offers a postcolonial response to the poets' ideals. Absa attaches Mory's story to the poetry of David Diop, updating the

setting from post-war Paris to the opening of the new century in West Africa; in the process, Absa tests the limits of *négritude* while also keeping it in place as an ideal for the future. Diop's poem 'Africa' permeates the film, recited by fathers to their sons, and by father-figures to surrogate sons. The poem becomes the sign of the father in his complexity and ambiguity: it stands in for the figure of Senghor, beloved and also loathed as 'father of the nation'; it stands in for the *négritude* poets themselves, idealistic and geographically remote fathers of Senegalese literature; and it stands in for ordinary fathers like Mory's, who abandon the ideals of *négritude* and succumb to materialistic values, only to be judged by the terms of Diop's 'Africa'.

Many West African authors have felt compelled to comment upon *négritude* at some point in their careers. Just as *négritude* required the presence of its European 'Other' to define its limits, so too the anti-*négritude* critics who emerged in the early 1960s, spearheaded by the South African-born Ezekiel Mphahlele, showed an intimacy with Senghor's writings, touching his body of work even as they pushed it away. Irele points to the irony that the most dismissive and durable slogan against *négritude*—relating to its 'tigritude'—was first uttered by Soyinka, the man 'whose writing seems in all modern African literature to be most profoundly penetrated with the conscious traditionalism associated with *Négritude*' (1981: 111). The West African critic Eldred Jones agrees that Soyinka's work 'exhibits all that *négritude* was essentially about, bar the shouting' (cited in Elimimian, 1994: 22). The central difference is Soyinka's refusal to acknowledge a 'white–black' dialectic: as Irele notes, Soyinka aims to break the colonial Self–Other dialectic in which *négritude* appeared to be enmeshed, a dialectic 'which gives an apologetic character to any African idea' (p. 112). Such a breakage with 'white–black' oppositions is a major theme of the remainder of this book.

This chapter has considered one of the most influential and yet controversial literary movements to be inspired by West African intellectuals. An extensive discussion has been necessary because the ideas and identities launched by Césaire, Dumas, Senghor and their colleagues in the 1930s and 1940s provided models which have been endorsed or rejected, applauded and debated, throughout West Africa in subsequent decades. Indeed, so influential was *négritude*

that one critic has suggested, controversially, that *all* subsequent literary debates in West Africa stem from the seminal period in Paris when these francophone intellectuals formulated their aesthetic (Harney, 1996). Whether or not one agrees with this position, the *négritude* movement offers us a series of literary encounters with several seminal francophone West African '-scapes', ranging from the slave-scape and the colonial-scape to the gender-scape of Senghor's romantic nationalism.

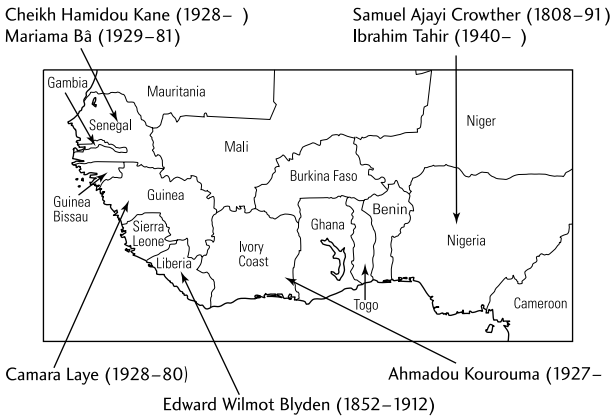
3

Facing East
Islam and Identity in West African Literature

> What I would like are large lines, large navigational canals across the desert. Wearing the desert out, denying it, gathering Africa together, creating the continent.
>
> **(Frantz Fanon, cited in Tissières, 2002: 40)**

A vibrant, multicultural patchwork of Muslim communities can be found in West Africa, living in countries ranging from the wholly Islamic Mali to countries such as Benin and Ghana in which Christian, Islamic, and customary religious communities coexist side by side, often within the same village or extended family group. West African Muslims are nearly as diverse in their beliefs and practices as the different Christian denominations in the region;[1] many people belong to small-scale, localized Sufi orders or to larger Sufi brotherhoods; some have close alliances to African 'traditional' religions; others support particular local *imams* and *marabouts* who may have political ambitions at a regional or national level.[2] In tension with these groups, at the opposite end of the scale, increasing numbers of West African Muslims—especially educated young men and Muslims in northern Nigeria—participate in the large-scale and radical Islamic reform movement which works for the implementation of Shari'a law at the national political level, and looks towards the Arab world as a religious reference point (Brenner, 1993).

This chapter looks at the ways in which the Islamic-scape generates distinctive forms of literature in West Africa, for one strong thread binds Islamic communities together more firmly than their Christian neighbours: in spite of the wide range of different Islams in West Africa, people living in countries as far apart as Senegal and Nigeria



Map 3.1 Facing East

often assert a shared identity *as Muslims*. Such an identity tends to represent an ideal, rather than a politically workable solution to the fissures and power-struggles within Islamic communities at the grass-roots level, but their common religious observances, Arabic literacy, and Qur'anic knowledge do help to generate transnational identities, linking West Africa with the rest of the Islamic world (Brenner, 1993: 14). Additionally, for more affluent believers in West Africa, the pilgrimage (*Hajj*) to Mecca allows the individual to bring home a wealth of new contacts, texts, practices, and tales for dissemination at the local level. Arriving back from Mecca as an *Al-Hajj*,[3] and gaining enhanced status in the local community as a consequence, the returnee will have ample opportunities to discuss the views and concepts generated at Islam's holiest and most multicultural place where millions of people gather in shared, intense expressions of faith.

Those who cannot afford to undertake the journey to Mecca are not excluded from the ideal of a global Islamic identity, for they often share another fundamental vehicle of the faith: the Arabic language. Throughout the Islamic world, at state-run or independent Qur'anic schools, children learn to read and recite the holy book in Arabic.[4] In northern Nigeria, students learn Arabic alongside Hausa and English, while in Mali students are more likely to become literate in Arabic than French (Brenner, 1993: 14). It is here that a fascinating new perspective emerges on the 'great language debate' that has raged in

African literary circles since the 1960s, exemplified by the argument between Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Chinua Achebe about the merits of abandoning or retaining the English language (see Chapter 5).

3.1 The Arabic language

In contrast to western-educated Africans such as Ngugi and Achebe, who passed through the Christian mission-school system and for whom the foreign script carries heavy ideological burdens, most Muslims consider the Arabic tongue to be global, divine, and culturally neutral. Arabic is the language in which Allah communicated the Qur'an directly to the Prophet Mohammed in the sixth century. It is therefore regarded by most Muslims as anything but colonial or colonizing. Quite the reverse: some African Muslims propose that Arabic should become the pan-African *lingua franca* to replace French, English, and Portuguese (see Brenner, 1993: 13–15). Arabic is, in their view, a language with the power to resist western secularization and neocolonialism. One proponent of this position is the controversial East African intellectual, Ali Mazrui, who regards Islam as an *African* religion, originating in Africa and representing a fresh starting point for Africans otherwise immersed in European colonial history: 'Greater Africa', he argues, 'includes the Arabian peninsula', making the Prophet Mohammed an African (2002: 13). In Mazrui's view, Islam has been rendered 'Arab' by the European map-makers, who manipulated African geography at the Berlin Conference: he writes, 'it is an accident of imperial history, rather than a fact of physical geography, that the Koran is not a work of African literature—as well as the word of God to Muslims' (p. 13).

Non-Muslim intellectuals, including the Nigerian Wole Soyinka, express alarm at these propositions, regarding Islam as an external colonizing force which exercised similar strategies to Europe in the erasure of indigenous cultures. 'Islam is not an African religion, any more than Christianity is', Soyinka stated bluntly in 1975 (Jeyifo, 2001: 66). Islam, in Soyinka's view, negates African cultures in the *same* manner as Christianity: unlike African-Americans in the United States, for whom Islam has been a 'militant' and 'cleansing' force, Soyinka insists that 'for us on the Mother Continent, [Islam] has always been a kind of half-way house, a station through which the

Brothers had to pass before finding their true, authentic Black soul in Africa' (in Jeyifo, 2001: 65; see also Soyinka, 1993: 124).

Intriguingly, however, in the face of these statements, Soyinka has several times declared that Swahili should become the continental *lingua franca* in place of the ex-colonial languages (see Jeyifo, 2004). Swahili is an Arab-African trade-language from the East coast of Africa which developed its own written, Islamic-oriented 'ajami' literature in the seventeenth century. In his promotion of such a hybrid, Muslim-influenced language above an indigenous African language, the Nobel Laureate therefore reveals his credentials as an accommodationist rather than a cultural nationalist or purist. Unlike Chinweizu and other arch-conservative cultural nationalists, on the matter of 'preserving' African traditions Soyinka is a pragmatist who welcomes the revision of traditional deities and concepts to suit contemporary conditions (Jeyifo, 2004). What he opposes are overtly 'foreign' cultural imports which aim to convert people away from long-established African traditions. In Soyinka's homeland, Nigeria, and elsewhere in West Africa, radical Islamists certainly possess such desire for 'conversion' away from African traditions in their attacks on local Sufi brotherhoods and other eclectic, culturally hybrid forms of Islam on the continent (see O'Brien, 2001; Harrow, 1996).

The Arabic language is regarded by millions of African Muslims as a tongue that has not tasted human politics. This is not to deny that Arabic literacy carries political consequences, for it helps African communities to face East, rather than West, in their attitudes and values; it enables West African Muslims to read and recite from religious and political tracts, newspapers, stories, and poems brought into their communities by Islamic teachers and traders from the furthest corners of the Islamic world. Over the decades, such Eastern-oriented literacy has aroused the anxiety of European colonial administrators, Christian missionaries, and postcolonial governments alike.

Many governments in the colonial period tried to harness Islam to their own preferred languages. 'The study of a living Christian language is the most effective remedy to Muslim fanaticism', reported a French educationist in 1908, adding that 'the Mahommetans [*sic*] who know French or English are less fanatical and less dangerous than their co-religionists who can only speak Arabic, Berber or Turkish' (cited in Harrison, 1988: 64). Political agitation in one part

of the Islamic world was seen by those in power to lead to an increase in turbulence in other parts of the world, caused especially by the numbers of Arabic-language newspapers and other documents entering the colonies along the established trade routes and cultural corridors (Harrison, 1988). This Islamic-scape continually eluded efforts to recontain it within the boundaries of the colonial state. In response, officials sought to dilute the Arabic language with less 'fanatical' languages: as French administrators advised in 1910, 'Knowledge of the French language is the most effective antidote against the danger of retrograde Islam' (cited in Harrison, 1988: 64). In their view, the teaching of French in French-approved schools for Muslim students, called *medersas*, would help to capture the minds of Islamic scholars and refasten them to a European system of knowledge (Harrison, 1988). Education was thus a vital tool for the transformation of West African Muslims into agreeable colonial subjects.[5]

Arabic literacy also caused some concern amongst Christian missionaries and educators working in British-controlled areas of West Africa. While a Muslim was always preferable to a 'heathen', being regarded as better educated and more self-controlled, the problem for British missionaries was how to nudge Muslims 'up' the ladder towards Christianity, which was regarded as the highest stage of 'civilization' and the end-point of African 'development'. However, as the famous pan-African activist, Edward Wilmot Blyden (1852–1912), asked in the late nineteenth century: why should a Muslim wish to leave the faith behind when 'what really took place, when the Arab met the Negro in his own home, was a healthy amalgamation, and not an absorption or an undue repression' (1971: 287)? In Blyden's view, Islam could be accommodated and absorbed into African societies far more easily than his own faith, Christianity: 'local institutions were not destroyed by the Arab influence', he wrote, for indigenous societies 'only assumed new forms, and adapted themselves to the new teachings' under Islam (1971: 287). This harmony between Islam and 'local institutions' can be discerned at the most basic level of marital practices in West Africa, for polygyny was common both to Islam and to many traditional African formations, while it was reviled by Christian missionaries and legislated against by European colonial regimes.

With the rise of European imperialism in the 1880s, and the concomitant rise of racist ideologies against Africans, Blyden and other

Black intellectuals started to recognize that Islam offered Africans an identity that was simultaneously trans-local and not colonized in the same way as the identity of African Christians. Arabic literacy was not tainted with the 'mental imperialism' attributed to European languages by later generations of anti-colonial writers (Ngugi, 1986). While the Islamic faith was conveyed using similar tools to Christianity—especially literacy and the study of a holy book—Muslim readers seemed to Blyden to be emancipated from the curse brought down upon Africans by the colonial languages. Decades before Achebe reached the same conclusion, he recognized that the teaching of literacy in Christian schools involved giving Africans caricatures of themselves, and 'lessons of their utter and permanent inferiority and subordination to their instructors' (1971: 288). By contrast African Muslims were not influenced by 'Aryan art', and exhibited a 'superior manliness' which Christians would do well to emulate in their own independent African churches (p. 289).

3.2 **Samuel Ajayi Crowther's Islamic encounters**

Blyden was not the first African Christian to confront the success of Islam in West Africa and to recognize the power of the Arabic script. Since the early nineteenth century, Christian missionaries had been pressing northwards into the continent, conveying the Christian word along the routes opened up by traders travelling inland from the Atlantic coast. They encountered Muslims all along the way, who would often express intense opposition to the establishment of mission stations and schools in their areas.

One of the most famous missionaries to explore this 'idolatrous' interior in the nineteenth century was the Reverend Samuel Ajayi Crowther (1808–91), a Yoruba ex-slave who had been rescued from bondage in the early nineteenth century and sent to train for the Church Missionary Society (CMS) in London. In 1864 Crowther was the first African to be ordained a Bishop in the Anglican Church, and his life is characterized by ground-breaking translation work, including a Yoruba translation of the Bible and the first extensive Yoruba vocabulary (see Gérard, 1981). Crowther's several journals describe his expeditions up the River Niger in the mid nineteenth century to establish mission stations and to 'work for the conversion of the

heathen from idolatry' (1968: 7). These journals provide a captivating record of early missionary activity in Islamic areas of West Africa during a period of political turmoil and fragmentation in the region.[6]

A brilliant linguist and an active transcriber, or 'reducer', of African languages to the Roman script, Crowther was hyper-sensitive to the ideological effects of the written word in Africa. Anticipating (post-)modernism by a century, he recognized that the *form* of a text was of equal value to its content. In consequence, he carried copies of an Arabic Bible around on most of his journeys. 'Judicious arrangements should be made', he wrote in 1859, 'so as to induce a spirit of inquiry after the way of arriving at the truth, through the only channel they have, *viz* the reading of the Arabic Bible' (1968: 100–1). Crowther cleverly utilized people's literacy in the language of the Qur'an to 'host' the new message of the Christians. In the process, he carefully accommodated Islam within his own discourse. A cynical interpretation of this African missionary's behaviour is that he mimicked the postures and gestures of Islamic teachers, subverting their message with his careful parody of their style. Such an interpretation can readily be made when one reads his description of public meetings with local chiefs: for instance, in the town of Gbebe on the River Niger, he writes, 'I carefully placed my books on the mat, *after the custom of the mallams*' (p. 59; emphasis added); 'I carefully introduced myself to him *as a mallam* sent by the great mallams from the white man's country', he writes later of an important meeting to negotiate a site for a mission house and European trading station (p. 86; emphasis added). Whenever the opportunity arose, he also inserted stories from the Qur'an into his speech, anchoring Christianity to Islam (p. 229).

Crowther's subversive but intensely careful and self-conscious imitation of Islamic practice provides an excellent example of what postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha describes as 'mimicry' in colonial discourse (1994: 85–92). Mimicry describes the recognition on the part of the colonial authorities that the 'reformed, recognizable Other', is *'a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite'* (p. 86; emphasis retained). In other words, mimicry revolves around the perpetual problem that the mimic is 'almost the same, but not quite'. The greater the mimic's skill, the greater is the colonial anxiety, for colonial discourse paradoxically requires the 'native' to be both entirely Other and also 'almost the same', both incapable of being civilized and also fully available for domestication. As a result

of its inherent doubleness, mimicry is ambivalent, continually producing splitting, excess, and difference which disrupts and disturbs the authority of the very discourse that is mimicked.

Crowther's strategic mimicry is equally ambivalent to that described by Bhabha, but more complicated in its relation to power and domination. The colonial relationship described by Bhabha is one of simultaneous desire and repulsion on *both* sides in a context of colonial rule. Crowther, meanwhile, is a black missionary pushing into Muslim-controlled areas where there are sophisticated Islamic state systems in place. While missionary Christianity was part of the European colonial project, this particular missionary arrives in towns where he is forced to take up the position of the subordinate and to mimic the existing 'dominant discourse' of Islam.

The Christians accommodated Arabic by learning to speak and write it, rather than by forcing new scripts and languages upon the communities they encountered. From this position, Crowther expresses feelings of revulsion even as he imitates the gestures of Islam and shows great familiarity with the Qur'an. 'Mallams are the people Christian missionaries have to withstand and oppose', he writes in his journal: 'their false doctrines have to be exposed, their errors corrected' (p. 236).[7] Crowther's mimicry of the mallams is thus designed for self-protective ends.

The moment of true ambivalence occurs when, in order to achieve his ends and 'tell them to go away', Crowther adopts the very qualities he abhors in the Islamic Other. Crowther's subversive mimicry of the mallams is a form of sabotage, but it *also* becomes a form of self-sabotage, for he uses 'subterfuge', 'artful cheating', cunning and dishonesty to achieve his goals (p. 56). He also recognizes that 'a Mohammedan can never be brought round by his religion being quarrelled with, but by kind treatment he may be led to read and study the Christian's Bible, which by the blessing of God, may lead him from the error of his way' (p. 88).

The Christian missionaries appropriated Arabic, using it to print a Bible: in this way, they exposed the Holy Qur'an as one printed text amongst many. As Crowther openly stated, if the Arabic alphabet is in common usage it will be deprived of its holiness, and Muslims' 'artful cheat would be laid open' (p. 56). Simultaneously, he worked to transcribe the Hausa language into the Roman script, gently 'converting' it away from the Arabic 'ajami' script in which it had appeared, and

in so doing, reorienting it towards western genres and narratives. Using the Roman Hausa script, he printed copies of the Christian scriptures to be used in the classroom for the teaching of Hausa literacy. This effort to marginalize 'ajami' literature continued into the twentieth century, when creative writing competitions run by colonial officials at the Translation Bureau in Zaria, Northern Nigeria, introduced the first prose fiction to the area in 1933–34 (see Furniss, 2002).[8]

Crowther, his fellow missionaries, and their contemporaries in West Africa's colonial administrations, all recognized that the Arabic language signalled the presence of a vast alternative Islamic-scape in West Africa: it demarcated a field of texts and identities, as well as military, political and commercial encounters.

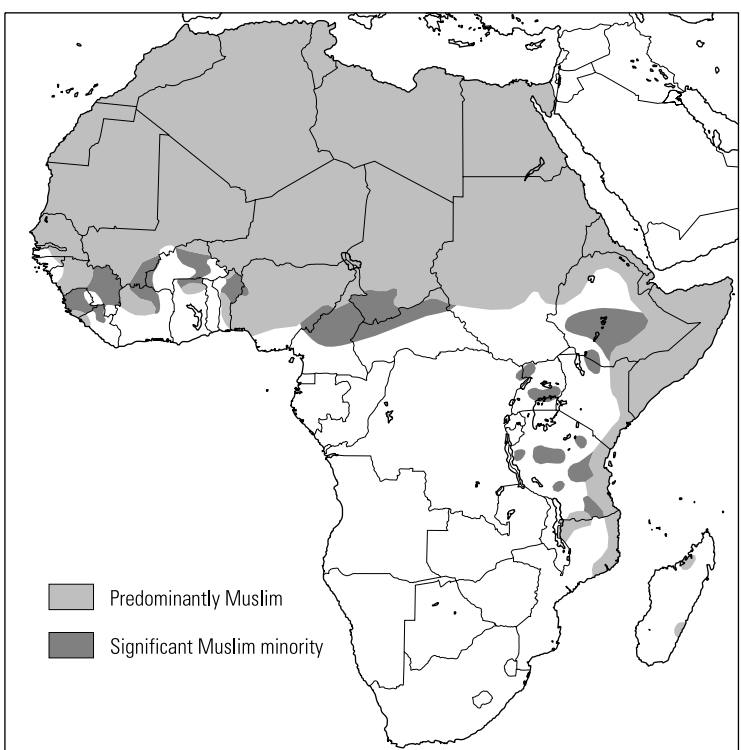
3.3 **The Islamic-scape**

Large portions of West Africa face the Arab world in trade and cultural identity, as well as in prayer. Economic activity between West Africans and Muslim foreigners dates back many centuries, connecting the region with North Africa, East Africa, Egypt and the Middle East (see Gérard, 1981). As far back as the eleventh century, Muslim trade routes passed through ancient Ghana (Robinson, 1991); by the fourteenth century, routes for the transport of livestock and slaves passed through Sudan and Timbuktu.[9] Slavery was a central feature of Arabic and North African encounters with West Africa, generating much colonial commentary and disapproval from France and Britain (see Harrison, 1988). As Harrison points out, however, the European colonial authorities themselves made use of 'free' African labour in the construction of roads and railways in the early twentieth century, long after the official abolition of slavery in Europe (1988: 50).

Muslims continued to arrive in West Africa well into the period of European imperial expansion, particularly from Syria and Lebanon, seeking their fortunes as traders and entrepreneurs. Throughout many centuries of economic activity between West Africa and the Islamic world, trade was intertwined with politics, and politics was intertwined with the transmission of culture and literature in oral and printed forms. When a wave of *jihads* spread through West Africa in the early nineteenth century, for example, it is not surprising to

note that Islamic poets and scholars led the struggle for political power and initiated debates about the cultural purity of African Islam (see Harrow, 1996). With this in mind, Soyinka's equation of Islam with Christianity as an 'imperialist' religion requires some modification, for until the *jihads* of the nineteenth century, Islamic conversion was a slower, more plural and less aggressive process than Christianity, generally occurring in harmony with the expansion of African social formations and in tandem with indigenous economic and cultural activity (see Bowles and Hale, 1996; Diop, 1996).

If one imagines an *Islamic* map of West Africa, an entirely 'new' (but centuries-old) geographical zone emerges in which the southern



Map 3.2 The Spread of Islam

coastal states form the periphery of a vast sphere of pluralistic Islamic activity spreading into the region from the North and the East, rather than upwards from the Atlantic Ocean from which the Europeans arrived (see Brenner, 2000; Tissières, 2002). This map, shown in Map 3.2, coexists with the postcolonial map of West Africa discussed in earlier chapters. Crucially, the Islamic map of Africa displays a dimension of African cultural, economic, and religious activity that is erased by the postcolonial map, and it reinstates the region's complicated history of Islamic conversion, migration, conquest, and scholarship from the North and the East. Far older than the history of European contact with West Africa, this heterogeneous Islamic-scape presents a further challenge to the conventional (post)colonial map of West Africa. This is not to deny the extensive 'reconfiguration of space' that occurred under European colonialism in the region (Robinson, 1991: 119); a sensitivity to Islam in West Africa does, however, serve to expose what Christopher Harrison describes as 'Africa's patently nonsensical [contemporary] boundaries' (1988: 2).

3.4 **Ambiguity, experiment and faith in Islamic fiction**

Many West African authors have explored the contradictions and ambiguities caused by the desire for Muslim survival in postcolonial Africa. Indeed, one of the best starting-points for an exploration of the tensions between the ideal of Islamic unity and the practical realities of postcolonial life is West African literature, for since the 1960s many Islamic novelists have focused on the faith, including Cheikh Hamidou Kane from Senegal (1961; trans. 1963), Camara Laye from the Guinea (1954; trans. 1956), Ahmadou Kourouma from the Ivory Coast (1968; trans. 1981), Mariama Bâ from Senegal (1980; trans. 1981), and Ibrahim Tahir from Nigeria (1984).

Senegalese authors have shown particular interest in the 'Islamic survival' theme, perhaps as a consequence of the combination of a vibrant indigenous culture that was highly responsive to Islam, and the active French colonial presence in their country which was for decades the administrative centre of the vast territory of 'French West Africa' (see Harrow, 1996: xv). Military assaults were launched from Senegal using African troops on African chiefs and *jihad* leaders in the interior, and colonial schools for the training of African elites

were established in Senegal to serve the entire region (see Harrison, 1988). In such a context, the survival of Islam became a political issue in the country.[10]

Interestingly, many of Senegal's postcolonial Islamic authors have chosen to write in French rather than in Arabic or African languages. Such a decision helps to dramatize an underlying theme in their work, that the desire for a coherent Islamic identity is permanently affected by—or refracted through—the region's colonial and post-colonial encounters. One of the most powerful examples of this postcolonial quest for Islamic identity can be found in *Ambiguous Adventure*, by Cheikh Hamidou Kane. This seminal work of West African literature is the francophone equivalent to *Things Fall Apart*, matching Achebe's influence over subsequent generations of authors and establishing its own distinctive set of themes for francophone African literature. Written in highly allusive and symbolic language, *Ambiguous Adventure* tells the story of Samba Diallo, a Muslim child of chiefly Diallobé lineage who is sent to a Qur'anic school run by a tender but authoritarian old man, known only as 'the teacher'. Meanwhile, leading members of the boy's community, influenced by the 'Most Royal Lady', debate the tricky question of whether or not to send their children to the new French colonial school. 'We must go to learn from them the art of conquering without being in the right', insists the Most Royal Lady, over and against those who wish to keep their children in the Islamic school, away from French influence (1972: 37). The Diallobé elders decide pragmatically to give Samba Diallo to the French, sealing his fate.

The ambiguity of Samba Diallo's adventure is not that he is stranded in-between two cultures in a state of alienation, as is the typical protagonist of anglophone West African literature in the post-independence period of the 1960s and 1970s (see Fraser, 2000). Nor is he facing both ways from a location within the cosmopolitan 'third space' that is celebrated by migrant intellectuals and authors as the source of creativity (see Bhabha, 1994; Rushdie, 1991). Rather, this is the story of an African youth who is thrust into a '*fatal space*' of spiritual and cultural ambiguity (1972: 92; emphasis added).

Kane explores the ways in which education positions a subject within particular discourses, 'interpellating' West Africans in webs of reason which may seem natural or common-sensical but are, in fact, thoroughly ideological and biased (see Althusser, 1971). For

example, in moving from the Islamic school to the French colonial school, Samba Diallo loses the platform, or foundation, of his identity. He continues to state 'I am a Moslem', but has stopped *being* a Muslim as soon as he forgets to pray (p. 109). The outcome is a radical, fatal twoness at the core of his identity (ibid.). Towards the end of the novel, he recognizes his own 'strange nature', stating that:

> I am not a distinct country of the Diallobé facing a distinct Occident, and appreciating with a cool head what I must take from it and what I must leave with it by way of counterbalance. I have become the two. There is not a clear mind deciding between the two factors of a choice.
>
> (pp. 150–1)

As the Sufi teacher makes clear in the novel, the Islamic starting-point does not comprise an absolute set of rules. It is fluid, non-absolute and indefinite, illustrated by the teacher's most frequent reply to those seeking advice: 'I don't know' (see pp. 36, 84–5). Such a refusal of knowledge shows humility to God and demonstrates submission to the ambiguous but creative space of faith: here is an instance of *positive* ambiguity, in which the believer trusts God to determine the course of his or her life. A (Sufi) Muslim starts from the knowledge that 'life is only of a secondary order . . . Life is only in the measure and of the fashioning of the being of God' (p. 95). This is a distinctly non-binary view of the world. Samba Diallo's father therefore expresses extreme alarm when his son suggests that the ideal and the real, or prayer and life, are opposed to one another. 'I am the only one who could have this bizarre idea of a life which could be lived, in some fashion, outside the presence of God', Samba Diallo realizes (p. 94). He has been reading French metaphysics and has internalized the dualistic mode of thinking which is typical of European Enlightenment philosophy, and which permeated Senghor's writing. For Samba Diallo's father, by contrast, the underlying ideal of *being* Muslim is part and parcel of daily life: devotion and ordinary life are not separated into the sacred and the secular, or into spheres of faith and work. As the novel shows, steady flows of religiosity and prayerfulness permeate even the most ordinary daily tasks, transforming life's ambiguities into a positive expression of faith.

Ambiguous Adventure echoes a central theme of Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart*, in which Okonkwo's son, Nwoye, severs his connection with Igbo custom when he chooses to join the side of the

missionaries and to work for change from the outside of society (see Chapter 6). Death (cultural, spiritual and physical) permeates both novels, signifying the erasure of one culture by a more dominant power. In this, both novels are typical of their time.[11] The central difference between these two foundational texts is that Achebe's anti-colonial nationalist structure, in which traditional African societies are eradicated by a culturally blind British colonialism, is made into a *triangular* structure in Kane's novel, for Islam is inserted into the dualistic 'anti-colonial' framework that, even today, remains popular in anglophone West African literature (see Harrow, 1991). By contrast, *Ambiguous Adventure* is a philosophical, mystical novel, drawing from a tradition of Islamic Sufi contemplative literature and helping to set in place a speculative, experimental trajectory in francophone West African writing (see Cham, 1991; Harrow, 1991).

In this chapter, we have dwelt within a powerful alternative '-scape'. This Islamic field is distinct from the colonial and postcolonial '-scapes' generated by Europe's engagement with the region. Often unrecognized or marginalized by western historians, and ignored until recently in studies of African literature,[12] the '-scape' occupied by West African Muslims poses a particular challenge to the supposed objectivity of the world atlas with its well-defined postcolonial nation-states and regional divisions. Once again, then, our concept of 'West Africa' must be opened up to enable the consideration of other cultural circuits which coexist with regional and national expressions of identity.

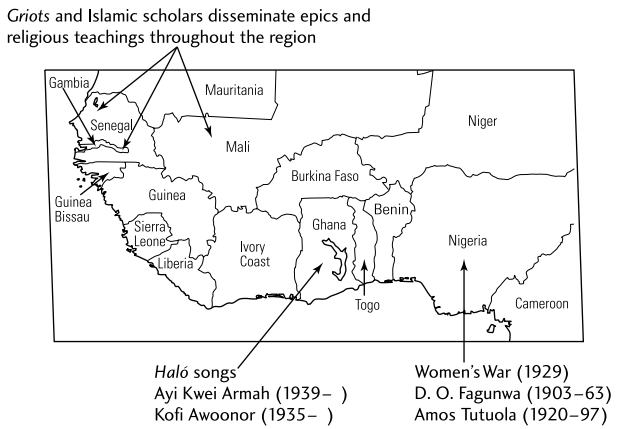
4

Oral Literatures

> Cultures are neither entirely and exclusively oral nor singularly literate.
>
> (Julien, 1992: 22)

European-language writers like Senghor, Kane, Achebe and Soyinka are not the only professional authors in West Africa. The region is also dense with '*griots*', who fulfil vital social and cultural roles as performers and interpreters, as praise-singers, oral historians, storytellers, singers, dancers, and drummers. Alongside these professional *griots*, ordinary people also frequently participate in oral performances, singing a person's praises, or, as we will see, publicly abusing an individual for bad behaviour. West Africa is filled with the noise of these performances to such an extent that a study such as this cannot limit its definition of 'literature' to the relative silence of the printed page. A book-bound definition of literature excludes the great mass of literary genres in West Africa; it also silences the majority of audiences, for West African audiences participate noisily and bodily in some genres, commenting upon the poet's style and the behaviour of fictional protagonists; in other genres, they are required to be silent while drummers set the rhythm and the syntax for performers to follow. Printed books in English and French have a place within these wider cultural circuits (see Ezenwa-Ohaeto, 1998; Deandrea, 2002).

This chapter discusses the ways in which oral performances were—and are—a vibrant, vital part of West African cultures. Far from the critical norms which govern literary appreciation in contemporary western locations, African oral genres reveal a great deal about local literary values and expectations. For example, oral performers often insert current affairs and moral debates into historical narratives without ruffling the audience's sense of 'history'; meanwhile, audiences often reserve their literary appreciation for the manner in which



Map 4 Oral Literatures

an individual *griot* re-assembles familiar elements and reworks the well-known genre.

4.1 *Griots*

Griot is a French word which has come to be applied by scholars to oral performers in West Africa: it describes many different types of narrator, including 'spokespersons, ambassadors, masters of ceremony, tutors, praise-singers, historians, genealogists, musicians, composers, town-criers, and exhorters of troops about to go into battle' (Bowles and Hale, 1996: 77). Great varieties of oral literature are produced by *griots* within single language areas. In the Mandinka-speaking (or Malinké) part of West Africa alone, different types of *griot* include 'the *mansa jali*, and his counterpart among the Bamana, the *jeliba*, [who] are master *griots*, not to be confused with an ordinary *jali* or *jeli*' (Bowles and Hale, 1996: 78). These *griots*, in turn, are not to be confused with the type of performer who is a light entertainer with no patron, or with another category of narrator, 'the *jelimuso*, or female *griot*', who also has many different manifestations (Bowles and Hale, 1996: 78; Innes, 1974: 2). Each

griot possesses different literary specialisms and skills. Some are highly localized, working within the immediate community, or working for a particular family of patrons; others are more mobile and widely travelled, moving around large language-zones and earning money along the way (Okpewho, 1988). Given this vast, dynamic field of creativity, it is not possible to produce a catch-all definition of West African orality.

'My impressions of oral literature', commented the Ghanaian author Ama Ata Aidoo in an interview, 'are [that it is] multi-dimensional, multi-generic, multi-this, multi-that. It seems to me a much more holistic way of dealing with life and art ... Life is never just a song or a dance or a drama' (in Deandrea, 2002: 17). If we are to appreciate oral literary production in West Africa, then, Eurocentric literary labels must be abandoned, or radically opened up, in order to accommodate the 'multi-this and multi-that' of locally defined genres and aesthetic frameworks.

One of the more controversial aspects of orality, as the section on 'oral literature and the problem of truth' will reveal, is that *griots*' performances are often *directional*: performances take full account of important figures in the community. Even in the narration of centuries-old historical epics such as the *Sunjata*, the *griot* tends to adjust and modify material to accommodate the immediate, contemporary audience (see Ricard, 2004). In narrating this thirteenth-century epic, and in describing the defeat of Sumanguru at the hands of the hero, Sunjata, the *griot* might downplay particular historical incidents if this places the ancestors of important audience members at a disadvantage; or a specific military leader in Sunjata's army may be singled out for praise if the *griot* knows that his descendants are present in the immediate audience, or are 'big men' who command respect and loyalty in the local community (Innes, 1974). While the historical setting is approximately seven hundred years ago in the ancient Malian empire established by Sunjata, the narrator's current conditions strongly affect the content of the tale. A canny *griot* adjusts each performance to accommodate audience members and, in the process, earns a greater sum of money for his or her narrative, and also gains a reputation for sensitivity and eloquence. Not all oral genres are performed by professional *griots*, however, nor do they always revolve around respect for important members of the community.

4.2 The song of abuse

For centuries, oral genres have been used by ordinary people, or 'commoners', in West Africa to express protests and complaints against people in positions of power. This practice is not limited to West Africa: in their study of southern Africa in the colonial period, Leroy Vail and Landeg White (1991) reveal the ways in which powerless individuals—women and youths in particular—made use of the *licence* provided by certain oral genres to make complaints against powerful figures in society. These complaints would be veiled, rather than overt, expressed through allusion, fiction, simile, and analogy rather than through the direct naming of a target in the real world.

In West Africa, the popular 'song of abuse' is the hidden underside of the praise-poem. When particular individuals or groups feel that their social rights have been violated, they may visit the culprit's house and perform a song of abuse, publicly calling attention to his or her poor behaviour. Another venue for the song of abuse is the funeral, where mourners who are expected to sing the praises of the deceased might decide, instead, to draw attention to the 'bad life' lived by a person. Women's groups in particular possess the power to turn praise into abuse at a funeral, using the licensed performance space conferred on them at funerals to construct a forceful commentary on the life of the deceased. In this way, the good name a person has built up in the community can be reinforced or shattered by the oral performances of different groups of mourners.

As a genre, the song of abuse is a powerful weapon which enables ordinary members of society to express themselves in an effective manner. Individually or collectively, singers can make demands upon chiefs and leaders, even insult them without fear of punishment, for the genre protects them like a suit of armour. The singer's words have force and effect, for in many West African cultures, the spoken word has the power to alter the quality of a person's life: thus the subject of a praise-song grows bigger in public stature, while a cursed person *is* cursed in reality. The material conditions of a verbally abused individual are altered by the offending words, which often have to be dealt with formally and officially (Okpewho, 1979).

The European colonial authorities were often unable to comprehend the sheer licence conferred by these abusive and often bawdy oral genres, especially when the performers violated basic Victorian notions

of gender and propriety. When the 'Women's War' spread through eastern Nigeria in the late 1920s, for example, as Igbo and other eastern women led protests against colonial taxation, corruption, and escalating commodity prices, the well-organized groups of abuse-singing women were regarded by white onlookers as 'hysterical mobs' (Clough, 1972: 112). The singing, dancing, body-painted women were exercising their right to stage their protest through a locally recognized literary genre which licensed their actions and conveyed their demands (see Amadiume, 1987). The failure of the British authorities to recognize the women's use of the abuse song had disastrous consequences. In the township of Olomo in 1929, when negotiations failed to 'have a sobering effect on the hysterical mob' with their dyed bodies and militant, confrontational clothing, the District Officer ordered troops to open fire (Clough, 1972: 110–15). Carnage followed among the 'singing and dancing mass of several thousand women' (p. 100).

Other abusive genres were banned by colonial and postcolonial governments, who feared the chaos or violence that might result from performances. Thus, the spectacular songs of insult—called '*haló*'—performed between rival groups in Anlo-Ewe areas of Ghana after 1912, were officially banned in 1962 (Avorgbedor, 2001). As Daniel K. Avorgbedor argues, these abuse-songs were 'live' in all senses of the word, generating new words and phrases, occasionally leading to violence and arrests as a consequence of the anger stimulated by a particularly well-executed insult (pp. 18–20). Above all, the *haló* revealed the power of the word to cause real, lasting damage to a person's reputation.

In some oral genres, words are used to protect an individual, chanted to ward off evil or written down and placed inside amulets on the body. *Haló* songs reveal the same force and power of the word, put to opposite effect. If 'the pen is mightier than the sword' in western Europe, the word can *be* the sword in West Africa. As the Ghanaian poet Kofi Anyidoho says of Ewe culture, the word is 'a natural cosmic force with a potential for creative and destructive ends' (cited in Deandrea, 2002: 115). In the words of the narrator of Gabriel Okara's *The Voice* (1964), a novel which is discussed in detail in Chapter 8, 'Spoken words are living things like cocoa-beans packed with life', and 'spoken words will not die' (p. 110). With this in mind, it is hardly surprising that Anyidoho makes use of the *haló* against Christianity and postcolonial political targets in his own poetry,

subversively reinstating the forbidden genre against the very authorities who censored it in the 1960s (Deandrea, 2002: 141).

West Africa possesses an abundance of oral genres which are locally recognized as vehicles to convey approval or insults and criticisms of others, often at the highest level. The potential for abuse always lurks beneath the praise-laden form as an alternative mode of addressing 'big men' and elders (Brown, 1995). Efua Dorkenoo of Ghana remembers in her childhood 'songs being sung by Asante children and adults alike, songs that were seemingly innocent but which were laced with subversive lyrics spreading awareness of Asante discontent with [President] Nkrumah' (in Wilkinson, 1992: 183). Nkrumah himself employed a praise-poet to build a wall of positive words against such subversive practices (see Yankah, 1989). People who would not be allowed publicly to voice their opinions in ordinary life are licensed by these genres to speak ill of their elders and rulers, to air grievances using phrases that would otherwise be regarded as libellous or indecent, to use 'unspeakable' language, to issue threats where necessary, and to insist upon transformations to their living conditions.

What songs of abuse share with other, less confrontational, oral texts such as the *Sunjata*, is that they are all carefully controlled discourses in which the audience's social relationships are recognized and organized. After each oral performance, audiences continue to work on the narrative, chewing over particularly good stylistic devices, commenting on the skill of the performer, and generating meanings which are relevant to the world outside the performance space: such meanings may have the capacity to transform society.

While it is difficult to generalize about the multiplicity of oral genres in West Africa, a broad overview of audiences is therefore possible, for throughout the region, audiences assess *griots* for the manner in which they embellish an old tale with new elements, and for the ways in which they decorate well-known characters and scenes with newly-coined or surprising phrases and proverbs designed to inspire moral debate, contemplation, and linguistic appreciation of the performance. African audiences are carefully trained in this art of interpretation, and hold each new performance accountable to previous versions of the same tale, comparing notes on the quality of the rendition and assessing the quality of the performer's assemblage of elements (see Barber, 2000).

4.3 Oral literature and the problem of truth

Observing the payments from 'big men' to *griots* and the flexibility of performances, which vary in relation to who is present in the audience, some western scholars have suggested that oral narratives are always biased and never neutral: in consequence, oral genres cannot be relied upon to provide accurate historical or sociological evidence (Innes, 1974; Goody, 1987). If *griots*' stories change with the ebb and flow of economic and political power in a local community, how can one trust the tale they tell as an accurate representation of the past? In addition, a key feature of oral genres is their capacity to incorporate new elements and expand, continually absorbing additional material (see Starratt, 1996). For example, several versions of the *Sunjata* epic include references to shotguns, horses, and other items which were introduced to the region long *after* the decline of the Malian empire which the epic describes (Innes, 1974).

The untrustworthiness of one medium should not, however, generate faith in the reliability of another medium. In seeking an 'objective' view of history, scholars of orality have tended to regard written texts as superior to oral texts: written texts are often treated as a source of stable, unbiased evidence. In consequence, a distorting dichotomy has arisen between the oral and the written, and this dichotomy has, until recently, tended to dominate comparisons of oral and printed literatures in West Africa. While there are, of course, many distinctions to be made between oral and written modes of literary creation and reception, once this basic division has occurred, a series of additional and more problematic assumptions tends to develop around each field. For instance, the oral is seen to mark a field of creativity that is 'traditional', pre-colonial and vernacular, while writing is regarded as 'modern' and European, introduced by the colonial school system and requiring literacy in the colonial languages. Such an assumption ignores the *modernity* of orality, the fact that the so-called 'oral tradition' is continually updated with additions from printed and audio-visual sources, as well as with the innovations of *griots* (Julien, 1992; Irele, 2001: 7–8; Ricard, 2004).

An especially blatant example of the assumption that orality signifies 'pre-colonial' culture can be found in Brenda Cooper's book, *Magical Realism in West African Fiction* (1998). Cooper suggests that 'oral' genres are 'pre-industrial, and hence pre-colonial' in her study

of Amos Tutuola, Syl Cheney-Coker, Kojo Laing, Ben Okri and other anglophone West African writers (p. 38). 'It is almost irrelevant that the writers under discussion hive from very different backgrounds', she states, for they all make use of oral genres in order to prove 'that literature and art are not the preserve of the West' (p. 39). Cooper looks for a quality that will unite her selected West African authors, despite their vastly different backgrounds and contexts, and she finds the source of their African specificity in orality. This is not, however, a living, modern, changing orality, but a pure, filtered pre-colonial version, for in her view West Africa's major writers try in their work to 'excavate an African mythology, uncontaminated by Western influence' (p. 53). Cooper needs this dualistic model in order to set up the contrast upon which her book depends, between 'cultural nationalist' writers and 'cosmopolitans': she argues that the former are conservative and nationalist in orientation, resident in Africa, and the latter are migratory, well-travelled intellectuals who live abroad and reject nationalism in favour of irony and magical realism (see pp. 53–5).

Cooper's work illustrates the problems which arise when literary critics invest in a binary division between orality and writing. Modes of narration and deliberate authorial choices about style rapidly become separated into absolute essences. An author's narrative strategies become associated with 'naturally' African, supposedly 'traditional' qualities, and before long a writer *must* refer to the oral tradition in order to *be* African (see Julien, 1992). As Eileen Julien argues in her persuasive attack on the 'orality versus writing' dichotomy, the critic's search for continuity between printed literature and oral traditions often transmutes into a search for 'African' authenticity. The idea of authenticity, in turn, is premised on the juxtaposition of two mutually exclusive worlds, one pre-colonial and African, the other modern and European (1992: 3–6).

Elite writers are often regarded by critics as growing organically from oral sources: indeed, they often present themselves in precisely these terms, positioning themselves within the doctrine that, to quote Irele, oral literature is 'the "true" literature of Africa' (2001: 31). Oral literature is a fundamental reference point for the African imagination, Irele argues, for the oral tradition serves as 'a central paradigm' and 'the basic intertext' for African literary expression (2001: 10).Two Ghanaian writers from the 1970s, Ayi Kwei Armah and Kofi Awoonor,

both uphold this unproblematized dichotomy between orality and writing, and suggest—in their printed texts—that African cultures are essentially oral. Taken together, these positions represent a deliberate 'griotization' of writing for political reasons, a rooting of literature in African cultural traditions in order to reject European cultural imperialism (Deandrea, 2002).

Writers who uphold the dichotomy between orality and writing do so for political ends: theirs is a cultural nationalist response to the failure of postcolonial governments to break away from the ex-colonial culture in the years after independence. The reconnection with 'traditional' oral culture they promote is a culturally restorative gesture. Seen in this light, Armah's first two novels, *Two Thousand Seasons* (1973) and *The Healers* (1978), can be described as 'oral novels' which attempt to create new mythologies for postcolonial Africa (Deandrea, 2002: 8–15). Armah's narrators are ancestral *griots* and communal, first-person plural voices. In *Two Thousand Seasons* he oralizes the narrative to such an extent that critics have labelled it 'oral utterance to be heard', or 'the kind of "novel" that a *griot* would have written if he had access to literary form' (Deandrea, 2002: 11; Derek Wright, cited in Deandrea: 9).

Armah oralizes his forms in a manner that seems to mask the strategic quality of his narrative choices and to assert an essential orality beyond, above, and behind all African writing. Likewise, Awoonor fuses Ewe dirges and Ewe metaphysics with the English language in his early poetry and prose, and evokes a collective oral voice in the narration of his material (Deandrea, 2002; Senanu and Vincent, 1988: 209). As Stewart Brown points out, however, 'quite how the influence of the one tradition is expressed in the other is not always clear' (1995; 60; see also Julien, 1992; Barber, 1994). The emphasis upon oral 'sources' ignores the many texts which cross *between* the oral and the written, in violation of the supposed boundary.[1]

In the West, the chief architects of the division between 'oral' and 'literate' cultures were the anthropologists Jack Goody (1987) and Walter J. Ong (1982). Their influential studies of orality in the 1980s set a model in place whereby the movement from orality to literacy was regarded as part of the development of a society towards the condition of literacy.[2] Goody's and Ong's developmental and binary views of orality and literacy have been criticized and rejected by later scholars, especially Ruth Finnegan (1988) and Brian Street (1985).

Nevertheless, their work set in place a common attitude toward writing which persists today amongst many readers of African literature: what makes writing superior to orality, in this view, is its capacity to fix material in time and space, whereas the same material is continually modified in oral cultures to suit present circumstances and shifting power relations.

Goody states this position clearly in *The Power of the Written Tradition* (2000): there are in the world 'purely oral cultures', he argues, which remain distinct from 'written cultures' (pp. 152–65). Writing enables the latter type of culture to gain power over non-literate communities. People in purely oral cultures possess a fundamentally different mentality from people in scribal cultures, for they practise different methods of remembering, recording, and narrating history. Writing is a 'technology of the intellect' which alters the way people think about themselves and the past: thus, the storage of historical documents in archives and libraries allows one to remember the past accurately and objectively, without the distortions of oral systems which do not preserve texts in their entirety (pp. 26–46).

Goody maintains that the recollection of history in so-called 'oral cultures' is determined by a community's current power structures and its vested ideological interests. In this, he certainly accounts for the manner in which *griots* transform texts to suit particular configurations of power in the immediate audience, as described above in relation to the *Sunjata*. Goody argues that writing, by contrast, has a glue-like capacity to fix an individual's words permanently on the page (ibid.). In the light of these arguments, it is difficult to challenge the assumption that writing is fixed whilst orality is fluid. Such a dichotomy is common-sensical to scholars and authors who are immersed in scribal cultures.

The central problem with the 'orality versus writing' dichotomy is that it does not account for the fact that *writing is not neutral*: the pen is just as biased as the spoken word. Writing is not an external force, de-linked from human society or agency: it does not impact upon cultures without human mediation or ideological struggle. Writing may indeed 'fix' and stabilize oral histories, as Goody and others suggest, but it is also necessary to address the important issue of precisely *who* does this textual 'fixing'. One need only read *La mort de Chaka* (1961; trans. *The Death of Chaka*, 1962) by the Malian playwright Seydou Badian, or Léopold Sédar Senghor's long poem

'Chaka' (from *Éthiopiques*, 1956), to witness the way in which imperial, written accounts of African history are problematized and opened to question. Both versions of the story of the Zulu king re-present him in a heroic light: in so doing, they expose the ideological bias of the colonial archives.[3] In their versions of the story, both Badian and Senghor implicitly ask: Who is responsible for the transcription and storage of documents in the archives, and who reads them as 'objective' historical texts?

4.4 The bias of print

Most of West Africa's earliest authors to appear in print, from J. E. Casely Hayford in the early twentieth century to later authors like Mongo Beti, Wole Soyinka, Gabriel Okara, and Kofi Awoonor, were educated for many years at Christian missionary schools, where the Bible and scriptures formed a major part of the curriculum.[4] There students were encouraged to write and perform poetry, stories and drama using western and Christian genres. The writing they produced, like the writing they consumed, was spiced with particular beliefs and ideologies. Indeed, Achebe's father was so 'inscribed upon' by this ideological system that he named Chinua 'Albert' after the late husband of Queen Victoria (Achebe, 1988). For many decades before decolonization, literacy in French or English signified Christianity and membership of a small, privileged group of Africans selected for special training by the Church or the colonial regime. The act of writing was therefore inextricable from imperial ideologies and the struggle for power among African elites.

When literate Africans sought out printed literature for learning or for pleasure in the colonial period, they encountered school libraries and public libraries that were filled with European books (see Achebe, 1988). Some of these books were commissioned especially for West African readers in European or vernacular languages, while others were selected from the European literary 'greats', often reduced to a size considered adequate for African readers: thus the majority of Charles Dickens' novels arrived in anglophone West Africa in the form of bowdlerized pamphlets designed to suit the different grades of elementary school (see Newell, 2002). These texts were not neutral objects: they were vehicles for the organization of specific power relations.

Meanwhile, in another domain of writing, during the colonial period the governmental archives filled up with material collected and translated by and for the regime. Historical documents in the archives of West Africa are saturated with colonial power relations, revealing a great deal about policy and ideology, but making it impossible to retrieve a pristine, objective 'history' from the documents stored there. What can be retrieved—and what is perhaps less easy to obtain from the oral texts produced by West African *griots*—are ideas and perspectives which have not been updated in the manner of oral narratives. Past attitudes and values are perhaps a little easier to encounter on the printed page. As with the *griot*'s performance, however, each encounter with a historical text is saturated with the current attitudes and values of the reader.

An excellent example of the elusiveness of writing can be found in the work of the early Yoruba-language author, Daniel Olurunfemi Fagunwa (1903–63), whose supernatural stories drawn from Yoruba folktales inspired both Tutuola and Soyinka. Fagunwa opens his novel, *Ogboju Ode Ninu Igbo Irunmale* (1938; trans. *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons*, 1968) with an encounter between an oral narrator, the old hunter Akara-Ogun, and a scribe who is asked by the hunter to record the story for posterity. Significantly, at the end of the novel, Akara-Ogun simply disappears, as if erased by the scribe's writing activity, leaving behind him a piece of paper with words which translate as, 'when we try to grasp him we grasp nothingness' (Barber, 1997: 122). The very inscription that Akara-Ogun demanded for the preservation of his tale has brought about his erasure and, as Karin Barber suggests, radical doubt is cast over the supposed 'fixity' and permanence of writing as a result (1997: 122).[5]

Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1952) develops Fagunwa's concerns. Unlike Fagunwa's work, however, this novel was composed in English and published by Faber and Faber in London (see Chapter 5). In it, Tutuola stages the scribe's attempt to harness the uncontrollable forces of orality into a written text. A striking feature of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* is the manner in which Tutuola personifies 'Drum', 'Song' and 'Dance' as creatures of the forest with the power to hypnotize and control human bodies. 'We followed the three fellows and were dancing for a good five days without eating or stopping once', the narrator says of his encounter with these creatures, adding, 'N.B. We did not want to follow them up to that place, but

we could not control ourselves as we were dancing along with them' (pp. 38–9). On the final appearance of Drum, Song and Dance, in a place called Red-town, their oral performance raises the dead and summons the creatures from the bush to join the townsfolk, all of whom are compelled to participate and 'none of them could stop for two days' (p. 84). The sheer energy of Drum, Song and Dance finally impels them out of the human world, so that 'since that day nobody could see the three fellows personally, but we are only hearing their names about in the world' (p. 85).

In this mythological representation of orality, oral performance is not comfortable or consensual, a relationship from which spectators can withdraw by choice. Rather, Drum, Song and Dance are charismatic performers who exist beyond human agency and outside human speech. Unleashed from language, these incarnations of orality are excessive and exhausting, and they haunt the remainder of Tutuola's text as the noisy and mobile residue of orality, reminding the readers of this printed book that no boundary is permanent and texts can easily become infested with noise.[6]

As the examples of Fagunwa and Tutuola reveal, over and above the neutrality or otherwise of writing, the fundamental problem with the dichotomy between the 'oral' and the 'written' in West Africa is that it does not allow adequate space for the multiplicity of 'literacies' in particular cultures. Literacy is *always* situated within complex social, economic, and political relationships between people, and these relationships determine the ways in which writing is regarded locally.

Few societies are so cut off from the rest of the world that they have never encountered the printed word, and few 'purely oral' communities escape the impact of the newspaper and the pamphlet (Finnegan, 1988). The presence of one or two book-reading individuals in a small community is sufficient for textual interpretations and printed opinions to circulate widely among non-literate people. For example, in her detailed study of John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* in Africa, Isabel Hofmeyr (2004) shows the ways in which non-literate audiences responded to performances—or oralizations—of the Protestant text and incorporated references to it into their own oral genres. Non-literate people also make use of technology such as radio, video, audio-cassettes, and CDs, which function in a similar way to the forms of writing Goody describes, being infinitely replicable and

providing repeatable 'texts' which can be replayed over long periods of time (Finnegan, 1988). The quest for a pure orality is thus idealistic and flawed.

The oppositional nature of the debate about orality masks the many other ways in which the two fields merge into a continuum of literary production. In particular, what is hidden is the manner in which West Africans in different regions and language groups have developed their own indigenous forms of writing to assist in the transmission of texts (see Gérard, 1981; Ricard, 2004). In south-western Nigeria, for example, the Yoruba *babalawo* (praise-singers) developed a system of mnemonics for their *oriki*, or praise poems: these inscriptions assisted the *babalawo* to recall the genealogies and praise names which made up the thousands of verses in the *Ifa* corpus (see Barber, 1994). Oral historians in many other African societies use similar techniques (Ricard, 2004). Meanwhile, long before the arrival of European literature, areas influenced by the spread of Islam and Arabic literacy developed their own *ajami* literatures, in which West African languages such as Hausa were transcribed into the Arabic alphabet for the creation of local-language literatures (see Gérard, 1981). Since the fifteenth century, and particularly since the nineteenth century, Arabic texts spread southwards through the Sahel and westward into the region from the Arab world, inspiring local poets and performers who made use of the Arabic script to write their own *ajami* literature. As Chapter 3 suggested, in the struggle for West African souls that ensued between Christianity and Islam, many Christian missionaries attempted to re-transcribe *ajami* scripts into their own alphabetic systems for African languages. In both senses of 'graphic', this struggle graphically illustrates the ways in which the written word was used by the 'religions of the book' to exercise power in local communities.

Printed literature in French and English was a relatively late arrival to the scenes of writing and narration described in this chapter, and it coincided with the continent's colonial experience. The indigenous systems of writing were not erased, however: indeed, on at least one occasion, the spread of Christianity inspired the development of a new African alphabet. In Liberia, speakers of the Vai language developed their own script in the 1830s as a direct response to the colonial alphabet. Vai-speakers had noticed the social and political power obtained by individuals who had passed through the mission school

system and entered the African elite: in response, they decided to create parallel power structures of their own and developed a writing system to complement and compete with the colonial alphabet (see Gérard, 1981).

If a boundary exists at all between oral and written texts, it does not relate to structure and form, but to the different ways in which these genres interact with their audiences. Oral texts invoke or imply the accompaniment of musicians and dancers, and the presence of live audiences who participate in events. Oral forms are distinguished from print by the manner in which, in the former, 'the audience breaks into the performance with their additions, questions and criticism' (Bodunde, 2001a: 1). Even this division between noisy and silent audiences is unstable, however, for several oral genres require absolute silence from audiences (see Innes, 1974: 10); and printed texts are regularly performed aloud, incorporated into oral literature, or re-oralized by authors and poets (see Chapter 8).

In this chapter I hope to have demonstrated that non-literate communities must not be neglected as creators of literature in West Africa. Today, oral performers remain as politically and artistically active as ever, and they innovate with established literary genres. The major drawback of a study such as this, written in English, in which 'writer' tends to mean 'scribe', is the narrowing of our sense of 'West African literatures' to the printed page. Such a bias towards print carries with it a fundamental misrecognition of West Africa's literary culture and erases a vital field of creativity in the region.

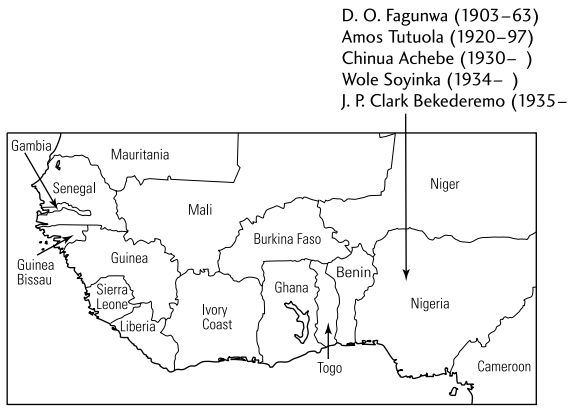
5

Lost and Found in Translation

> The survival of the oral heritage in modern African poetry is guaranteed not by the forced transfer of physical form but by an imaginative deployment of symbols.
>
> (Okpewho, 1988: 24).

In 1964 Chinua Achebe insisted that his use of the ex-colonial language did not, in itself, exclude African readers from consuming his work. Rather, his choice to write in English served to widen readers' access to literature across regional and national boundaries, and did not limit texts to localized ethnic groups (1994: 434). Adopting a pragmatic rather than an idealistic position, he wrote, 'for me there is no other choice. I have been given this [English] language and I intend to use it' (ibid.). The use of a European language was not an act of cultural desertion or desecration in Achebe's view: rather, he said optimistically, 'I see a new voice coming out of Africa, speaking of African experience in a world-wide language' (p. 433). The task of the African writer, in consequence, was to 'aim at fashioning out an English which is at once universal and able to carry his peculiar experience' (ibid.). Many other postcolonial authors—from Derek Walcott in the Caribbean to Nayantara Sahgal in India—would endorse this liberal view of the ex-colonial language (see Walder, 1998).

English-language authors such as Achebe and Soyinka are known and respected throughout Africa, especially in the school classroom, but their work is *not* accessible to the majority of their compatriots as Achebe implies. In spite of Achebe's support for European languages at the 'official' level, the majority of people continue to speak their own mother-tongues, with the addition of 'pidgin' or Creole languages developed for trade and urban living. It was with these populations in mind that the Kenyan author Ngugi wa Thiong'o rejected Achebe's argument and insisted, in 1986, that African literature should be



Map 5 Lost and Found in Translation

written in African languages. 'By our continuing to write in foreign languages', he argued, 'are we not on the cultural level continuing the neo-colonial slavish and cringing spirit?' (1994: 449–50). The ex-colonial languages have had a negative and alienating effect on local populations, Ngugi insisted, for language is the carrier of culture, and the imperial languages continue to convey neo-colonial values which include the image of Africans as simplistic, imitative and backward (p. 450).

In this chapter we turn to a vibrant area of West African literary creativity: African-language (or vernacular) literature and the debates surrounding the ways texts are translated from African to European languages. Following Achebe, we explore the way in which English can be dynamized by African vernacular forms and, following Ngugi, the way some African-language literature resists or frustrates the effort to translate it into English.

Achebe's monolingual model of national culture must be contextualized to be understood, for his essay was published just four years after Nigerian independence and just two years before the Biafran civil war was triggered by a massacre of Igbos in northern Nigeria. The exodus of survivors back to eastern Nigeria in 1966 and their sense of ethnic and political alienation generated an Igbo-dominated secessionist movement which fought a bloody civil war with federal

troops between 1967 and 1970. Achebe's essay of 1964 was therefore written when, as a nation, Nigeria stood poised between unity and fragmentation. Perhaps as a consequence of the country's fragile unity at this time, he regarded African-language literature as 'ethnic' and local, rather than national (p. 429). Much has changed in the decades since then: for Ngugi in the 1980s, such texts *are* 'national', for Ngugi's model of national culture is multicultural and polyphonic, without the requirement that postcolonial African countries should adopt single national languages.

In spite of their fundamental disagreement over the language in which African literature should be written, both Achebe and Ngugi recognize that large quantities of texts have been published in African languages since the first printing presses were installed on the continent by missionaries in the mid nineteenth century. Since then, at local mission stations, at African-owned newspaper presses, and at the many small printing shops that sprang up after independence, a steady flow of vernacular literature has been produced on the continent for local markets. This African-language literature is not a small-scale enterprise: it circulates around language groups with many millions of speakers. With the increase in literacy levels since the 1930s in West Africa, an ever-expanding readership has provided a potential local market for new and classic vernacular texts. In Nigeria alone, there is a large readership for Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa literatures. Africa's 'known homogeneous language communities often have more speakers than many European language communities', and there are in excess of 20 million Yoruba speakers today (Ricard, 2004: 3). For cultural and historical reasons, often to do with their homogeneity, certain language groups in West Africa have long-established traditions of vernacular authorship and publishing (see Gérard, 1981). In consequence, as we shall see, these groups possess sufficient quantities of readers to generate a flourishing market in vernacular literature.

The success of the local publishing industries in Yorubaland and Hausaland defy Achebe's cynical comment that 'there is no other choice' than to write in English (op. cit, p. 434). The problem is that, as Alain Ricard points out, 'too few poets have occupied themselves with translating their people's texts; too few have taken the trouble to listen to the bards, the *griots*, the poets and the storytellers, in order to transcribe and translate their texts' (2004: 36). Meanwhile, prominent Western critics continue to ignore the long history of vernacular

publishing activity in West Africa: Charles Larson could not have been further from the facts when he asked of 'early' writers like Tutuola, 'What was it like to be a writer in a society where there were no published writers?' (Larson, 2001: 12).

5.1 Oral texts: transcription or translation?

The most loyal form of translation is transcription, in which the precise grammar and style of one text is transposed as literally as possible into another language. Annotations are frequently employed to bridge moments of untranslatability between languages or media. Additionally, in cases of transcription from oral narratives to the printed page, translators also have to face questions about whether (and how) to retain the *griot*'s ellipses, repetitions, digressions, songs, and responses to audience interventions (Bassnett and Trivedi, 1999). A literal transcription of an oral narrative such as the *Sunjata Epic* may actually result in a text that is so densely annotated, so heavily referenced and elliptical, that it appears to be 'postmodern' in style, full of fragments and quotations: such a text may be inaccessible to non-academic readers (see Okpewho, 1988).

Against the model of literal transcription, many West African authors regard translation as a creative act occurring between the poles of pure transcription and free interpretation. Inspired by the oral perfomances of his Ijaw people, the Nigerian playwright and poet John Pepper Clark Bekederemo (1935–) played with these degrees of creativity in his several translations of the *Ozidi Saga*. First of all, he produced *Ozidi* (1966), a heavily adapted version of the Ijaw saga. In this version, he creatively translated between Ijaw and English, reducing the 'saga of Ozidi, told in seven days to dance, music and mime', to a five-act stage play (1966: n.p; see Kerr, 1995; Ricard, 2004). Eleven labour-intensive years later, Clark Bekederemo produced a literal transcription of *Ozidi* from the Ijaw language, making use of the full range of academic tools to annotate and classify the text (see Ricard, 2004). Other versions of *Ozidi* by the same 'author' exist in the form of Clark Bekederemo's recordings of the saga on cassette tape and film, as he attempted to capture the spectacle of the performance in the original language for the benefit of future audiences. The translation of this one oral text therefore encompasses a panoply of

creative interventions, ranging from the exact transcription of a text to its adaptation into new genres and media.

The Nigerian author and Nobel Prize winner, Wole Soyinka (1934–), was faced with similarly delicate decisions about language in his English translation of D. O. Fagunwa's *Ogboju Ode Ninu Igbo Irunmale* (1938). Soyinka's own work is famous for the inclusion of complex Yoruba mythologies in English-language texts, and Soyinka himself has a reputation for his fierce and polemical opinions about politics and art. How would he tackle the problem of translating Yorubaland's most famous literary father-figure into a tongue which did not recognize the themes, styles, and references of the original? In the short Translator's Note to the book, newly entitled *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons* (1968), Soyinka confronts the impossibility of ever achieving true transparency between tonal Yoruba and non-tonal English: 'the most frustrating quality of Fagunwa for a translator is the right sound of his language', he explains, for 'the experience of sheer delight in his verbal adroitness is undoubtedly a great loss in translation' (n.p.). Soyinka also echoes Ngugi's repudiation of English for its inherent neo-colonial bias: words such as 'devil' and 'demon' have connotations which do not fit Fagunwa's fictional universe, he explains, making it necessary to retrieve the archaic word 'daemon' in place of the Christian terminology. 'The spelling [of daemon] is important', Soyinka explains in the preface: 'These beings who inhabit Fagunwa's world demand at all costs and by every conceivable translator's trick to be preserved from the common or misleading associations which substitutes such as *demons*, *devils* or *gods* evoke in the reader's mind' (n.p.).

Where Ngugi abandoned the ex-colonial language altogether, Soyinka is more playful: he tests the limits of English and invents new words to circumvent its inherent bias. In order to avoid the association of devils with evil, for instance, he creates new words such as 'ghommid', 'dewild' and 'kobold'. These nonsense-words help him to expose and avoid the ideological implications of the English language for the translator. More radically, however, he also abandons many of Fagunwa's original Yoruba words which, in his view, look over-exotic and stranded without context in the translated narrative (n.p.).

True to the conventions of much African literature in English, a glossary is provided in *The Forest of A Thousand Daemons*, defining

the Yoruba terms that have been retained in the main narrative and anchoring the story to a Yoruba world. Indeed, the very existence of the translated world is invoked by the glossary, which appears at the start and looms over the main narrative as its referential pivot. One suspects a heavy dose of satire or good humour in Soyinka's glossary, however, especially in the free intermingling of Yoruba words with his invented terms for the creatures of the forest. Soyinka seems to parody the serious spirit with which many publishers make use of the glossary to inject a dose of non-fictional 'authority', or anthropological authenticity, into the text. Publishers try to translate the untranslatable in their glossaries, enforcing a degree of transparency which is defied by the existence of the stiff, resistant, 'foreign' words within the body of the text itself.

Evidence of Soyinka's parody may be found in such playful touches as: '13. Dewile (ewele): Close in appearance to the gnom, *below*, but far more dangerous and unruly; 14. Gnom (egbere): A close relation to the dewile, *above*, but a little more substantial ... ' (n.p.). Comically, neither definition stops at itself, for the dewile refers to the 'gnom, *below*' and the gnom refers to the 'dewile, *above*', which in turn refers to the gnom, and so on. This hall-of-mirrors effect works against the conventional concept of the glossary, which is set in place to give substance to shadows and, in its worst manifestations, to render accessible the most untranslatable and specific elements of other cultures.[1] In his translation of Fagunwa, then, Soyinka makes a clever ideological point about translation: the glossary, he seems to be saying, must not be regarded simply as a repository of 'authentic' words, from which readers can extract cultural truths about a world which exists for them only in translation.

Soyinka's rendition of Fagunwa reveals the ways in which a translator's integrity is tested at every turn, and he decides to rework and re-interpret his material rather than to 'transliterate' it in the manner of Gabriel Okara, whose poetic novel *The Voice* (1964) is discussed in Chapter 8. Unlike a monolingual writer, the translator can rapidly take on the role of a cultural intermediary, serving as a dynamic figure who moves between the two spaces of the home and host languages (see Bassnett and Trivedi, 1999). Regarded thus, the translator exists in a space where cultural foundations and stopping-points have been erased by a continual exchange between two: 'home' melts into 'host' in a cross-fertilization that may also be cross-polluting.[2]

5.2 West African translators and mistranslators

Deliberate mistranslations, or translations without integrity, have had major consequences in West African literary history. Until the 1930s Christian missionaries and colonial employees (African and European) were responsible for the bulk of transcriptions of African folklore from oral sources into printed African-language texts. One by one, the major vernacular languages in the region were rendered into writing by missions and governments. Alongside translations of the Bible and devotional material, missionary presses also produced collections of African folktales to help local literacy campaigns. Educational publishers added to this material, commissioning transcriptions of folktales to assist primary school students to learn their mother-tongues (see Newell, 2002).

The transcribers of these tales were often African men from the language group in question, but their literacy had been gained from an education in mission schools. Upon leaving school, these men obtained employment in devotional or educational work for the church or the government (see Griffiths, 2000). A consequence of their ambiguous status as African Christian converts employed by the colonial regime was the removal of bawdy, seemingly 'offensive' content from the folktales they transcribed and translated. In one case from the Gold Coast (Ghana) in the late 1920s, for example, the Special Commissioner for Anthropology, R. S. Rattray, noted the omission of vulgar and coarse material from transcriptions of folklore in the north of the country. 'The European collectors of these tales,' Rattray wrote, 'being generally ignorant of the language, were in consequence dependent for their data upon literate Africans trained since childhood in the environment of some mission school' (1927–8: 4–7). The consequence of the local men's embarrassment in front of their white bosses was the production of bowdlerized material, for the transcribers excised material which exploited the 'period of licence' provided by the oral performance, especially satirical, libellous references to chiefs, and sexual references to sacred areas of ordinary life (pp. 4–7). In so doing, a vital area of West African culture was censored from the books.

The process of transcribing African languages into alphabets, grammars, dictionaries, and pamphlets, was known to the missionaries as 'reduction'. In the case described by Rattray, 'reduction' is

more than accurate to describe the way in which much oral literature was recorded. The mis-translations arising from the translators' Christian modesty have deprived literary historians of important sources of West African folklore, leaving deliberately distorted texts in their place.

Many postcolonial West African authors have made it their task to reintroduce scatological and bawdy elements from the oral into the literary sphere, to transform the printed page into a 'licensed' space, to make the postcolonial book ready to receive the abusive and bodily references that were excised in the past. Their task is made more difficult by West Africa's relatively recent history of mission schooling, for until the 1950s and 1960s, the great bulk of printed material was devotional and uplifting in orientation: the printed word was sanctified from the start in West Africa, ring-fenced against 'abuse' and 'dirt'. It took Ayi Kwei Armah (1939–), in *The Beautyful Ones are Not Yet Born* (1968), to break through these moral fences and—in the manner of Rabelais in the sixteenth century and Cleland in the eighteenth century—to confront 'polite' literary forms with the anus, the penis, the vagina, piss, puss, dirt, and disease, references which are abundant in the licensed domain of traditional abuse-songs.

West African governments lack the financial resources for a cross-communication to occur *between* African-language literatures in translation, and only a small percentage of vernacular material finds its way into English or French. Nevertheless, translation projects such as Soyinka's rendering of Fagunwa's *Ogboju ode Ninu Igbo Irunmale* help to provide non-Yoruba-speaking readers with samples of African literature which reveal a great deal about local literary traditions.

Printed vernacular literature tends to be ignored by literary critics, in favour of creative writing in French and English. This emphasis upon European-language writing, Alain Ricard comments, 'may obscure other linguistic dynamics operating in the literary and cultural field' (2004: 3). The most famous instance of such distortion is the western critical reception of Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, a novel which took the British literary establishment by storm on its publication by Faber and Faber in 1952. Hailed by Dylan Thomas and other western critics as a unique intervention in the European modernist tradition, Tutuola's material in fact shadowed the work of the Yoruba-language author, D. O. Fagunwa, so closely as

to constitute 'plagiarism' in the eyes of some Nigerian critics (Nnolim, 1989).

Both critical responses to *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* were valid, but neither was sufficient in itself. Tutuola's novel *did* break new ground in English-language literature, awakening readers to an original talent which was new and alien to anything that had gone before. *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* also borrowed heavily and directly from Fagunwa's bestselling Yoruba novels, which Tutuola read as a youth. To accuse Tutuola of plagiarism is unfair, however, for his transposition and translation of Fagunwa's material into an English format involved new and conscious decisions about content, language, and grammar, decisions which Fagunwa did not confront in the same way in his Yoruba-language work. In a similar manner to Gabriel Okara's experiments with Ijaw grammar, discussed in Chapter 8, Tutuola forced the English language to accommodate Yoruba syntax and subject matter alongside a multitude of clippings from English literary culture. In so doing he became a 'translator' in the most creative sense of the word, reworking Fagunwa's oral and folkloric material into English, as well as borrowing items from English literature, updating and embellishing Fagunwa's own models while also abandoning the older man's didactic Christian framework in favour of a more secular and amoral universe. Above all, then, *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* reveals the porosity and elasticity of Yoruba literature: in this confident and robust West African culture, oral and written genres are not pure, well-bounded forms but infinitely expandable rag-bags of innovations and multicultural borrowings (see Barber, 1997; Quayson, 1997).

If Tutuola is neither a European modernist nor a Yoruba plagiarist, how are we to position him? In fact, he bears many similarities to the West African *griot*, who quotes from familiar repertoires of material and earns praise or criticism for the skill with which his popular narratives are expanded and developed (see Chapter 4). 'Stories in the tradition are under constant revision for renewal and development', commented the Ghanaian playwright Efua Sutherland of the traditional Akan narrator: 'also', she added, 'contemporary interest inspires the composition of completely new stories to replenish the repertoire' (1989: 4). Like the Akan storyteller in Ghana, Tutuola innovates with familiar Yoruba themes and forms: *inspired* by Fagunwa's texts and also by Yoruba folktales, he imbues the borrowed

material with his own special wit and style, updating his material to include contemporary references.[3] *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* is a remarkable instance of what Ricard cleverly calls '*déjà dit*', that is, 'the inexhaustible productivity of language that is imprinted on previous utterances ... and formalized by ethical and aesthetic intentions' (2004: 45).

This comparison with the oral narrator is not intended to attribute an essential 'Africanness' to the figure of the *griot*, nor to authenticate Tutuola's writing with reference to a static oral tradition. Rather, it is an effort to account aesthetically and culturally for the way in which Tutuola approaches the matter of authorship, for he shows no apparent concern for the originality of his material, and exhibits a dynamic, fresh, often playful attitude towards the narration of his tales. His work shows all of the 'absorptive flexibility' that typifies Yoruba oral literature, as he assembles the fragments and reorders them according to his own imagination (Quayson, 1997: 13). The *griot* symbolizes this act of re-assemblage and creative translation *par excellence*, taking up well-known material for re-narration and embellishment (see Chapter 4).

In the vibrant space of West African literary creativity, there are no simple oppositions to be made between 'traditional' and 'modern' modes, nor should 'traditional' refer simply to pre-colonial, oral, African-language genres and 'modern' to written or printed Europhone literature. This chapter has demonstrated that, in their innovative structures and experiments with language, West Africa's European-language writers show a dynamic interaction between so-called traditional and modern forms, between oral and printed modes. So free is the movement between African and European models in this literature that the language in which it is composed seems irrelevant to the sources which inspire it.

African-language literature, in Karin Barber's view, 'arises out of the oral domain', over and against francophone and anglophone literature which 'appears to be decisively cut off from this productive engagement with orality' (Barber, 1994: 89). Whether or not one agrees with this claim, translations of African-language literature afford European-language readers the opportunity to sample a little of the region's vernacular literature in a highly mediated form. The different types of translation discussed in this chapter allow such readers to begin to

comprehend the indigenous genres and styles which have inspired African- and European-language authors alike. An increase in translation work will help non-speakers of West Africa's many languages to appreciate the rich literary contexts from which both vernacular and European-language literatures have emerged in the region: this can only help to prevent misunderstandings like that generated by *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*.

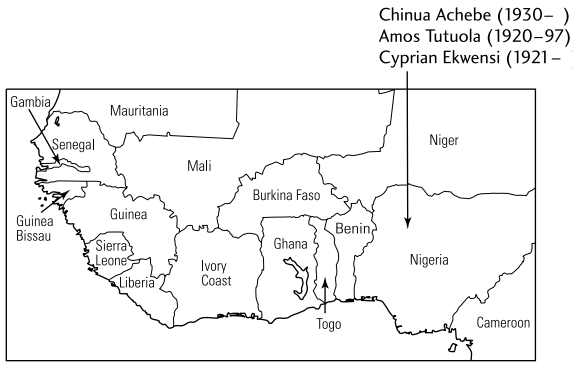
6

Things Fall Apart
Presence and Palimpsest in the Colonial-scape

> The story of this man who had killed a messenger and hanged himself would make interesting reading. One could almost write a whole chapter on him. Perhaps not a whole chapter, but a reasonable paragraph at any rate.
>
> (Achebe, 1958: 147–8)

Chinua Achebe's life and work encapsulate key areas of colonial and postcolonial experience in West Africa. Born in Igboland in 1930, at the height of British imperial rule in Nigeria, Achebe followed the educational pathways opened by Christianity and colonialism for African youths: he attended mission school and government school in eastern Nigeria, and in the early 1950s progressed to University College, Ibadan, in the Yoruba-speaking west of Nigeria. All around him from the 1930s to the 1950s, increasing numbers of educated Nigerians were questioning missionary and colonial 'civilization' projects, and nationalists were calling for self-rule.

After Nigerian independence, Achebe's successful career at the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation was cut short when he took up the role of international diplomat for the self-declared 'Republic of Biafra' in the Nigeria–Biafra war of 1967–70. His writing career is caught up in these colonial and postcolonial processes, and his themes closely shadow political events in West Africa: to that extent he is a—perhaps the—foundational figure for anglophone West African literatures. Achebe's first novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1958), is internationally renowned and locally admired: the implications of its global canonical status are discussed in this chapter.



Map 6 *Things Fall Apart*

6.1 **The concept of 'presence' in Achebe's writing**

In his discussion of the effects of colonial history upon cultural identity in the African diaspora, Stuart Hall writes, 'Where Africa was a case of the unspoken, Europe was a case of that which is endlessly speaking—endlessly speaking *us*' (1994: 399; emphasis retained). Hall seeks to understand the representations of Africa by people of African descent in relation to the ongoing presence of Europe as a powerful producer of identities, ideas, and images. In the process of defining this relationship, however, a subtle but revealing grammatical shift occurs in the above quotation which breaks the binary opposition between silence and speech. Hall uses the past tense to describe Africa's silence and the present tense to describe Europe's speech, settling finally upon a timeless, 'eternal-present' tense for the contemporary situation: thus Africa has found the speech but not the language to prevent Europe from '*endlessly* speaking us'.

These shifts in tense and timescale reveal the corrosive and complex effects of the power exercised by a dominant culture when it takes up another culture's 'reality' and makes it present—re-presents or inscribes it—within its own discursive structures.[1] Even though the period of direct colonial rule is now over in Africa, Hall implies, the 'absence' imposed by the colonial discourse continues to shadow African self-representations, binding the postcolonial self into a difficult relationship of Self and Other, of speaking in the face of being spoken-for.

Hall's sense of the ongoing difficulty of finding speech when one is already 'spoken-for' and inscribed upon by another's language, provides a framework to interpret *Things Fall Apart*. In what he powerfully termed 'my Middle Passage', Achebe also recognized the importance of speech, presence, and literary representation in sustaining colonial power: 'in the colonial situation *presence* was the critical question, the crucial word', he wrote in a short autobiographical essay, adding that it dawned upon him at university, during his English Literature degree in the 1950s, that the denial of African 'presence' in European discourse 'was the keynote of colonialist ideology' (1991: 4; emphasis retained).

In recognition of the role played by narrative in the construction of the 'native' as Other and in the erasure of his own African *presence*, Achebe wrote *Things Fall Apart*. This novel fills the 'absent' space marked out for Africa in English texts with strong local voices, reinserting Igbo eloquence and Igbo literary genres and, in the process, 'setting the record straight' with the British and their literature (see Innes, 1990). Written in English and published in Britain just two years before Nigerian independence, *Things Fall Apart* represents, in a condensed form, the long historical process whereby Africa was 'overwritten' by Europe. From his position as an English-speaking youth living in a country on the threshold of political independence, Achebe looked back one hundred years to his new nation's past, and his novel holds what he finds there to account.

One reason for its popularity is that, on the level of plot, this is a 'culture conflict' novel *par excellence* with its linear, ideological storyline, and numerous dichotomies between Africa and Europe. Achebe carefully delineates the historical tragedy caused by the arrival of the British in Igboland, in eastern Nigeria. Local culture is presented in pristine form in the first part of the novel, shown to be complex and dynamic, but untouched by Europe; the second section reveals the social transformations brought about by early imperialists and Christian missionaries; the final part dwells in detail upon the theme of African silence as a direct effect of British rule. The story of the protagonist, Okonkwo, is caught up in these broader historical circumstances, for he is a 'tragic hero' whose psychological flaws combine fatally with the preventable historical tragedy of colonialism. In this manner, two distinct senses of tragedy interplay in the novel, for if Okonkwo's flawed personality is fated to a disaster

beyond his control, the political transformation of Igboland is shown to be a result of European agency, and not an act of the gods.

Things Fall Apart contains numerous scenes of African silence, or absence, in the face of Europe's speech, or presence: Okonkwo's eventual suicide, the derobing of the ancestral masquerade, and the silencing and imprisonment of the elders are all examples of the steady process of cultural erasure depicted by Achebe. Over and against these acts of silencing, the novel as a whole works in the opposite direction, pulling against colonialism with its celebration of the noisiness of the uncolonized Igbo world, which is shown to be filled with lively oral forms, including proverbs, folktales, ceremonies, debates, gossip, and conversations, overseen by the ubiquitous 'talking drum'.

In the stark opposition between the first and final parts of the novel, Achebe comments on the historical process whereby African chiefs and elders were disempowered by British colonialism; indeed, the troubled hero of part one commits the ultimate act of self-abnegation at the end of the novel. 'You drove him to kill himself', Okonkwo's friend Obierika tells the District Commissioner at the end of the novel before lapsing into silence himself (1958: 147). In the background of the narrative, translators and messengers—cultural in-betweeners who represent the principle of creativity for some theorists (see Bhabha, 1994)—are shown as they *fail* to communicate between languages, often with comic results.[2]

In all these aspects, *Things Fall Apart* is a 'cultural nationalist' novel, operating firmly within the colonial/anti-colonial dichotomy described by Fanon as the first requirement of African art forms in the historical process of emancipation from Europe ([1963] 1994: 40). Unsurprisingly, anti-colonial readers since the 1950s have admired the politics of *Things Fall Apart*, and West African students continue to praise the cultural pride it inspires in them.[3] It is an ideological novel, caught up in the 'Self versus Other' dichotomy which dominates 'first-generation' literature from West Africa (see also Oyono, 1966; Conton, 1964). As Fanon recognized, these narratives assisted in African political struggles against Europe, and served the purpose of cultural self-affirmation (1994: 40).

Alongside its nationalist assertion of African cultural integrity, however, *Things Fall Apart* is also saturated with a series of metropolitan cultural and literary encounters. While these encounters fuel Achebe's nationalist rejection of colonial discourse, they also firmly

position *Things Fall Apart* within the parameters of English literature. Achebe does not hide this fact. In numerous essays, interviews and lectures since the 1960s, he insists repeatedly that he wrote his first novel in order to take on a branch of English literature that is dense with stereotypes and misrecognitions of African culture (see Achebe, 1988b, 2000). The task, as he saw it, was to set the record straight and teach readers that 'there is nothing disgraceful' or 'savage' about Africa (1988b: 30). In Achebe's view, stories and novels such as Joseph Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness' (1899), Edgar Wallace's *Sanders of the River* (1911; film 1935), and, above all, Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson* (1939), all produce formulaic visions of an Africa dominated by dense, 'primitive' forests and by mobs of disorganized 'savages' (1991: 5–6).[4] Arching over these misrecognitions as the transcendental sign of Africa's otherness is the pagan fetish or shrine, shown by imperialist authors to be lurking in the shadows of even the most 'civilized' African dwellings and minds.

Alongside popular adventure stories set in Africa, these 'African' narratives were consumed avidly by readers in Europe. Together these texts produced potent myths which, in turn, helped to spawn imperial realities, helping to justify Europe's ongoing political interference in the continent.[5] For many decades, this 'primitivist' discourse dominated the images of Africa circulating around elite and popular culture in Europe and America, influencing modernist art and inspiring popular Hollywood movies about African savagery. For Achebe in Nigeria, the shame of these racist texts was not so much their emergence from an imperialist moment in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries but that they continued to be included on the English literature syllabus when, in his view, they ought to have been expunged (see Innes, 1990). So unconcerned were the British about these texts that, in the 1950s, 'Heart of Darkness' and *Mister Johnson* were included without apology on the English Literature syllabus of many African universities, including the University of Ibadan where Achebe studied for his degree. With a sense of alarm, Achebe realized that the 'African' on the pages of these texts was a version of himself (1991). Concurrently and more subtly, two decades before Said's *Orientalism* made the same point, Achebe also recognized that 'Africa' is a *narrative construction* to the *same* extent that it is a set of maps, popular novels, and identities produced by imperial regimes to justify colonial rule (Achebe, 2000: 24).

For all its cultural nationalist ideology, *Things Fall Apart* does not contain simple dichotomies between speech and silence, or presence and absence. In such a binary model, silence and absence risk becoming dangerously disempowering terms for Africans, for if one is always 'spoken' by the dominant power, one enters colonial discourse in the form of a radical silence, an excluded element without agency; or one enters discourse in the form of a subservient 'shower of treasures' to the master (Fanon, 1994: 41). While the plot of *Things Fall Apart* contrasts pre-colonial and colonial cultures in cultural nationalist fashion, the language and form of the novel reflect Achebe's status as a highly literate, anglophone, young writer of the 1950s, who is a product of colonial rule and alert to the creative, potentially empowering dimensions of colonialism for new social groups. In his choice of language and form, Achebe produces a very different narrative from the typical cultural nationalist text with its oppositions between Africa and Europe. Unlike cultural retrieval projects which seek to rescue 'non-colonized' forms from the cultural wreckage left by colonialism, Achebe seems to foreground the tragic impossibility of such aspirations. Indeed, *Things Fall Apart* is so dense with cross-references to European canonical texts and imperial writings that Achebe appears to be deliberately avoiding an assertion of cultural 'authenticity' in order to debate the more complicated issue of Africa's inscription into colonial discourse.

Frantz Fanon perceived the double-bind faced by 'native intellectuals' who attempt to retrieve 'cultural treasures' and display them to the world in pride, but who manage only to present outworn 'mummified fragments', the flotsam and jetsam of dynamic cultures which escape even as writers reach out to pull the lost culture into the field of representation (1994: 41). 'At the very moment when the native intellectual is anxiously trying to create a cultural work he fails to realize that he is utilizing techniques and language which are borrowed from the stranger in his country', Fanon wrote, adding that the native intellectual 'wishes to attach himself to the people; but instead he only catches hold of their outer garments' (1994: 41). Achebe avoids these pitfalls in *Things Fall Apart*, for if Umuofia village appears to be 'untouched' by colonialism in the first part of the novel, the narrative itself is thoroughly intertwined with the English language and English literature.

After or *alongside* its rejection of racist imperial literature such as *Mister Johnson* and 'Heart of Darkness', this is a text which openly flaunts a more friendly and familiar relationship with metropolitan literature (see Mudimbe, 1988). Particularly in his references to poetry, Achebe finds 'a means of bridging the gap between languages, of going beyond the Logos—the authoritative, self-enclosed and self-validating discourse—of each culture' (Innes, 1990: 36). Achebe seems to recognize, from his 1950s position on the historical threshold of postcoloniality, that African expressions of 'self' cannot break free from their 'endless' inscription into imperial discourse (Hall, 1994: 399). Starting with the title and epigraph, which are taken from W. B. Yeats's poem 'The Second Coming', through to the final pages, which parody colonial anthropological writings about Africa, *Things Fall Apart* declares its own 'endless' and complicated relationship with British culture. Achebe claims the right to quote from this heritage: thus he includes citations from Tennyson and references to the Bible within paragraphs about the precolonial village (Innes, 1990: 35). Paradoxically, then, English literature is imagined through this Igbo framework. In the process, from the title of the novel onwards, Achebe *admits* the colonial encounter and highlights the intimacy of the colonial relationship. At this deep structural level in the text, Achebe incorporates English literature as a whole, turning the tables on the dominant discourse in order to 'speak' it, or translate it, through an Igbo grammar (see Innes and Lindfors, 1978).

Interestingly, this structural and linguistic intimacy with English literature is echoed in one area of the plot of *Things Fall Apart*. A degree of ambiguity enters the anti-colonial narrative when one considers the precise social groups, or 'classes', shown to be disempowered by colonialism. Achebe is careful to show that not all Igbos experienced colonialism in the same way. In the novel, the silencing of one particular group opens up spaces or gaps into which emergent groups insert themselves, finding voice for the first time through the new regime. Thus in *Things Fall Apart*, it is the elite men—chiefs and elders—who are degraded and imprisoned by youths without social status in the community; likewise, the ancestral masquerades, which symbolize and enforce chiefly power, are desecrated by social 'upstarts' who have gained status and power through the new religion; also recognized by colonialism are outcasts, 'madmen', lepers,

mothers of twins, and other individuals who are regarded as the 'excess' or 'filth' of the community, illegitimate actors on the social and political stage.

This is not to suggest that Achebe applauds colonialism on behalf of oppressed indigenous classes or emergent elites: the sheer arrogance and violence of Britain's invasion of Igboland are exposed repeatedly in the novel. What he does offer, however, is a partial explanation for *why* mission Christianity and the new government 'stuck' in Nigeria without countrywide resistance until the 1940s. Indeed, throughout British West Africa between the 1880s and 1930s, the colonial administration codified a Victorian, Christian-orientated ideology which operated to the advantage of new and emergent African elites. Particularly in the arena of marriage, new criteria were introduced into West African society which challenged and transformed existing marriage models to the benefit of women and individuals who wished to choose their own partner in adulthood (see Mba, 1982; Mann, 1985).[6] Clearly, colonialism operated to the benefit of some social groups, although qualifying to claim those legal rights was quite another matter (see Mann, 1985).

6.2 From presence to palimpsest

By responding to imperial representations of Africa in the form of an English-language novel, Achebe acknowledged that printed narratives are potent vehicles for speaking the Self and reinterpreting the past. A frequently cited instance of this recognition of narrative potency occurs in a scene at the end of *Things Fall Apart*, when the District Commissioner attempts to understand the local community's response to Okonkwo's suicide. Gazing at the 'new material' literally 'dangling' before him, the District Commissioner contemplates its place in the 'book which he planned to write', an anthropological study entitled *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*:

> The story of this man who had killed a messenger would make interesting reading. One could almost write a whole chapter on him. Perhaps not a whole chapter but a reasonable paragraph at any rate. There was so much else to include, and one must be firm in cutting out details.
>
> (1958: 147–8).

Centuries of European (mis)representations of Africa are condensed into this colonial officer's writing project, particularly his desire to reject the figure of the go-between, and to edit out 'details' in favour of a broad, universalist, view of Africa.

For readers, the body of Okonkwo represents the insistent presence of one irreducible detail. In juxtaposing the hanged man and the anthropological text, Achebe shows how the specific characters and cultures in *Things Fall Apart* are strangled by colonial ethnography, expunged from their own social histories and written into the deadening stereotype of 'primitive' Africa. With searing anti-colonial irony, and in a proleptic echo of Stuart Hall's grammatical shift toward the 'eternal-present' tense, described above, the last pages of the novel highlight the way in which imperial power keeps itself in place 'endlessly' through the production of knowledge about the 'dark continent'. The District Commissioner's response to Okonkwo's suicide reveals the manner in which a 'dominant discourse' can set images in place which overshadow the other culture and become permanent realities which compete with the other culture's self-representations. *Things Fall Apart* thus plays out the process of *discursive* colonization as much as it demonstrates the political and economic disempowerment of West Africans.

Achebe shows how the colonized culture is transformed from a 'presence', with its own specificity, not so much into an 'absence' or a 'silence', but into a *palimpsest*. In other words, Igbo values and practices are pushed out by the imperial culture, not quite erased, but rendered barely touchable beneath the dominant discourse. The word 'palimpsest' is useful in this respect, for it is defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* in two important but different senses: first, it refers to paper, parchment, slate, or similar materials that have been prepared for writing on and wiping out; second, it refers to paper or parchment on which the original writing has been effaced specifically to make way for further writing. This second sense of 'palimpsest' has been used to great effect by postcolonial theorists, most notably Gayatri Spivak in her essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?': Spivak focuses upon the 'traces' of colonized cultures which subsist within colonial documents, disturbing their coherence from irretrievable positions behind, or below their logic ([1988] 1994: 66–111).

Things Fall Apart illustrates *both* senses of palimpsest: firstly, it reveals the ways in which the colonizer—in the form of the District

Commissioner—'wipes out' the specificity of the local culture like a slate, and writes it into a new, British imperial relationship. Achebe then 'wipes out' the colonizer's text by quoting from it, including it as a pivotal text at the end of his own narrative: the two authors thus compete in textual battle over the *same* cultural slate. Alongside this process of effacement and re-inscription, the second sense of palimpsest can be found in *Things Fall Apart*, for the novel also reveals how local, irretrievably Igbo systems of representation remain in place, flickering in and out of view behind the colonizer's discourse.

Several recent critics have noticed this dimension of the novel and commented on Achebe's 'need to show the colonized culture as unknowable' (Gikandi, 1991: 22; see Innes, 1990; Huggan, 2001). Numerous 'unknowable' zones occur in the novel, from the unexplained use of chalk and kola in the opening pages to the untranslated song of Ikemefuna on his way to execution, from the language of the talking-drum to the behaviour of the priestess, Chielo (Gikandi, 1991: 22). All of these unexplained Igbocentric practices take place in the realm of secondary, 'off-stage' characters, revealing the teeming cultural life in Umuofia and the society's ability to interpret itself meaningfully (Irele, 2001). Achebe articulates 'African modes of knowledge' within, or beside, the English language of his novel, in a manner that restores the authority of Igbo aesthetic codes while avoiding 'the epistemological contexts of colonialism and postcolonialism' (Gikandi, 1991: 9).

These palimpsestic cultural traces are never fully erased by the District Commissioner's acts of 'writing on and wiping out', nor are they fully represented and explained by Achebe's English-language narrative. In the second sense of palimpsest, Igbo culture appears in this 'untranslatable' material to be rational, individualized, eloquent, intellectual, self-critical and capable of historical change without the assistance, or explanatory frameworks, of Christianity and colonialism. Through these structural features of *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe permanently undermines the District Commissioner's anthropological project and challenges readers (who may, in turn, be tempted to indulge in anthropological explanation at these irretrievable moments) to remain open to the areas of alterity and non-transparency within his anglophone project.

Pockets of cultural specificity therefore persist within the text, defying reduction to the colonial logic, confronting 'the Western model reader', as Graham Huggan calls the consumers of postcolonial

literature (ignoring local readerships in the process), 'with the limits of his/her cultural knowledge and interpretive authority' (Huggan, 2001: 43). If *Things Fall Apart* encourages an 'anthropological' understanding of other cultures, then, the type of practice that it seems to recommend is one in which the untranslatable, or unrecoverable, elements of a culture are kept as such, without being filtered through 'global' explanatory frameworks (Gikandi, 1991). In a recent essay Achebe hails this mode of writing, praising the appearance of 'new ways to write about Africa' in which authors are 'reinvesting the continent and its people with humanity, free at last of those stock situations and stock characters, "never completely human", that had dominated European writing about Africa' (2000: 44). With this in view, as Innes points out, 'Achebe rarely lets his reader forget the otherness of Igbo culture and the language which embodies it'. In her probing study of Achebe's work, Innes notes how 'his use of Igbo words is one means of insisting on this otherness, of bringing the reader up against the barriers of non-English sounds and concepts' (1990: 34). For Achebe, it seems, the palimpsest is preferable to the act of making fully present, especially if the vehicle for communication is the English-language novel.

6.3 **The 'anthropological exotic'**

Things Fall Apart was not an isolated instance of literary engagement with West Africa's colonial encounter, nor was it Achebe's only contribution to West African literatures. Many other authors addressed the tensions within colonial culture, often in radically different ways from Achebe. As the discussion of Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure* in Chapter 3 showed, and of Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* in Chapter 4 , other early West African authors offered influential alternative visions to *Things Fall Apart*. Achebe himself shifted away from the subject-matter of *Things Fall Apart* in his later work, some of which is set in urban postcolonial contexts (see Achebe, 1966; 1987): however, *Things Fall Apart* occupies a seminal place in the canon of West African and postcolonial literatures. Over and against Achebe's later works, the subject matter of this one short novel produces new readings with each new generation of literary critics. Here is a novel that postcolonial critics refuse to put down.

A great deal of recent critical debate addresses the 'anthropological' material in *Things Fall Apart*, for Achebe has been regarded by past generations of literary scholars as furnishing international and local audiences with privileged access to 'precolonial' Igbo values. Perhaps as a result of the freshness of his cultural vision and the wise, eloquent voice of his narrator, many readers took (and continue to take) his representation of the past to be an authentic commentary on Igbo morality, or a 'reenactment of the past' (Gikandi, 1991: 29). This assumption barely takes account of the author's status as a modern, English-speaking, mission-schooled Nigerian with his feet firmly planted in postcolonial West Africa.

Things Fall Apart has been regarded as an 'objective' view of Igbo society in all its difference from the West (Killam, 1977: 14). This response is not confined to readers in Europe and America. *Things Fall Apart* remains the defining 'African' novel for many West African readers. Of the many Ghanaian students who named Achebe as their favourite author in a reader survey carried out during the late 1990s, the majority praised his ability to 'educate' them about 'traditional ways of life' (male student, 1998). Ghanaian readers repeatedly pointed out that in his first novel Achebe 'writes about true African society and the true culture' (male student, 1998). 'He relates his stories to real life stories', said another man, adding that Achebe's novels 'help us to know the cultural roots of our people' (male student, 2002). 'His stories are non-fiction', insisted another man, 'they tell about real life situations' (male, 1998).

Does the ongoing international 'bestseller' status of *Things Fall Apart*, and readers' celebrations of its 'real life' status, reveal an exoticization of West Africa, as Graham Huggan (2001) argues in his persuasive but cynical study of postcolonial literature? Huggan points out that when readers extract anthropological 'truths' or 'evidence' from *Things Fall Apart* in the manner of these Ghanaian students, they fail to appreciate Achebe's clever 'ethnographic parody' and 'ethnographic counter-narrative' (2001: 40–1). From the very first pages of the novel, Huggan suggests, Achebe's narrator in fact *parodies* readers' desires for cultural facts and information by offering them a sly 'invitation to read anthropologically', an invitation which the final pages of the novel expose and explode as a fraudulent way of approaching 'other' cultures (p. 41). The novel 'might be a trap for one kind of reader [i.e., European] while providing for another [i.e.,

West African] a pleasurable, if inevitably mediated, recognition of familiar cultural codes', Huggan argues (p. 41).

While Huggan does admit that Achebe's anthropological invitation affects different readers in different ways, depending upon their global location, he does not consider the different aesthetic values that prevail in different localities, conditioning readers' literary expectations and causing many, as in Ghana, to *expect* to extract both truths and lessons from a text (see Chapter 7). Whether readers are located in Africa or Europe, however, Huggan makes the important point that, as a narrative, *Things Fall Apart* contains sophisticated discursive 'traps' designed to ensnare readers in the District Commissioner's flawed way of reading. Hence, when Western scholars attempt to 'translate' every last Igbo gesture and word into English, assuming universal clarity—as Robert Wren (1980) does in his extensive and problematic analysis of the 'alien cosmology' in *Things Fall Apart*—they fall directly into Achebe's trap. Wren's book is fascinating for the manner in which it performs its own failure as a project, for the book fragments into numerous prefaces, glossaries, and explanatory texts which highlight the impossibility of cultural transparency even as they try to render 'Igbo mysteries' visible to non-Igbo readers.

6.4 What if *Things Fall Apart* had never been published?

Many critics comment on the 'paradigmatic' or 'archetypal' status of *Things Fall Apart* (Ngaboh-Smart, 2004; Appiah, 1992; Gikandi, 1991; Irele, 2001). It is regarded as a 'watershed' African novel which 'set the pattern and standard for [subsequent] literary enquiry and achievement' (Ogbaa, 1999: xv; Killam, 2004: ix). More generally, Achebe's works have a central place on the postcolonial literature syllabus: Gikandi notes that his novels 'have come to constitute important interpretative spaces in the development and critique of the postcolonial condition and its aesthetic' (1991: 1). For many critics, *Things Fall Apart* marks the beginning of modern African literature, for it immediately entered the canon of African literature as a foundational text (Irele, 2001). Fifty years on, it continues to be the most mainstream, most frequently taught, and most written-about African novel ever produced, having sold over eight million copies worldwide and gone into countless new editions. It has been translated

into more than fifty languages, spawning critical perspectives with each generation of literary scholars in the manner of Shakespeare's work.

What if it had never been published? The overseas publication of *Things Fall Apart* made all the difference to its status and reception: if one 'withdraws' it temporarily from the shelves of West African literature, what picture emerges of the literary scene in the 1950s and preceding years? What stylistic and thematic shapes would scholars attribute to West African literature without the presence of this much-loved novel?

These historically impossible questions are necessary because the writing of West African literary history has for a long time been affected, if not actually distorted, by the foundational, canonical status of *Things Fall Apart*. Critics have tended to condense the decades *before* Achebe's emergence into an expectant, Achebe-shaped pause. Indeed, in some cases, commentators have used *Things Fall Apart* to dismiss Achebe's predecessors as irrelevant, flawed, or half-fledged as writers. Exemplifying this dismissive attitude, Jonathan Peters (1993) describes Cyprian Ekwensi's work in the early 1950s as failing to be sufficiently 'serious', while Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* is described as 'a cul-de-sac in African literature' (Peters, 1993: 14).[7] Similarly, the early Ghanaian novelists J. E. Casely Hayford (1911) and R. E. Obeng (1943) are dismissed by Peters for not being 'stylistic trendsetter[s]' (p. 16). Time seems to be suspended while this critic waits for the archetypal 'African' novel to appear and for the 'trend' to begin (p. 18).

Peters' work on West African literature is inspired by the search for continuities, patterns and a tradition for 'first-generation' African literature, but such an approach presupposes an exceedingly narrow set of criteria for defining the styles and themes of the West African novel. By Peters' own account, the novel must not be popular, experimental, or non-realist in the manner of literature from other continents. For Peters and many other critics, thematically and stylistically *Things Fall Apart* exemplifies all that is 'best' in African literature. From its attention to generational conflict between fathers and sons to its use of ironic narration, from its rejection of Eurocentric representations of Africa, to its critique of mission Christianity, *Things Fall Apart* has come to be regarded as the West African *ur*-text, containing the region's literary themes in perpetuity. One might add to this list Achebe's engagement with the themes of honour and masculinity in pre-colonial culture and his meta-commentary

on the production of history, topics of especial relevance to the recent work of Africanist historians (see Iliffe, 2005).

If elite authors in the empire were 'writing back' to the colonial centre at this time, as Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin claim for 'first generation' authors such as Achebe, many other West African writers were also writing novels, poems and plays for their own local communities, not primarily for metropolitan markets. As we saw in Chapter 5, and will find again in Chapter 7, these other 'first-generation' authors produced a great deal of literature for their own consumption, not designed for—nor acceptable to—European publishing houses. The Yoruba novelist, D. O. Fagunwa, who gained fame among Yoruba Nigerians for his work in the 1930s and 1940s, exemplifies the *localism* of this literature. Fagunwa's style of writing in the 1930s and 1940s inspired later international novelists, including Amos Tutuola, whose *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* drew many themes from Yoruba-language texts and tales (see Barber, 1997; Quayson, 1997).

Published six years before Achebe's anti-colonial *Things Fall Apart*, Tutuola's novel breaks all the rules set in place by the theory of 'writing back', and for that reason it has failed to achieve recognition from critics until recently. Yet Tutuola was of the same literary generation as Achebe and his work offers a fascinating counterpart—or counterpoint—to the 'postcolonial' themes of his better-known compatriot. As I will suggest in Chapter 12, the sheer localism of Tutuola's writing opens up a neglected pathway in our appreciation of West African literatures, and it reveals a different perspective on 'first generation' writing.

Many other West African authors in the late colonial period also defied the 'empire writes back' model. One immensely influential branch of West African literature that tends to be neglected by literary scholars is the booming local market in self-help pamphlets, popular fiction, and religious literature by African authors writing in French and English, discussed in the next chapter. Unfortunately, however, the 'starter' status conferred on *Things Fall Apart* tends to obscure the literary contexts in which Achebe was situated when he started to write.[8]

Literature in French and English provided a vehicle for political protest against colonialism, and against subsequent postcolonial regimes, particularly during the so-called 'first generation', when

Achebe, Ferdinand Oyono (1929–), Mongo Beti (1932–), and other writers provided African readers with frameworks for 'thinking beyond' their colonial identities towards a culturally authentic, non-imitative future which drew inspiration from the pre-colonial past. The canonical status of *Things Fall Apart* derives in large part from the novel's anti-colonial nationalist sentiments in combination with the author's refusal simply to set white against black, colonizer against colonized, in his portrayal of the colonial encounter. As a consequence of the success of his first novel, Achebe rapidly became a figurehead and spokesman for the cultural agenda of newly independent West African nations.

Things Fall Apart seems to represent pre-colonial Africa in a way that contemporary, international readers can 'hear' and relate to. At the same time as 'setting the record straight' and highlighting the irretrievable elements of Igbo culture, Achebe's novel occupies a place within the framework of European literary expectations, making it a very different type of text from Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* or Ekwensi's popular novels about Nigerian prostitutes and urban life. As we have seen, in theme and form, and in the author's declared intentions, *Things Fall Apart* directly addresses the 'unspoken', or 'written upon' condition of Africa *in relation to* Europe. Other West African writers have no such interest in Europe or colonial history. Precisely these writers are hidden by the long shadow of Achebe's short novel over postcolonial literary studies, and in the remainder of this book I aim to highlight a selection from this rich range of literatures.

7
Popular Literature

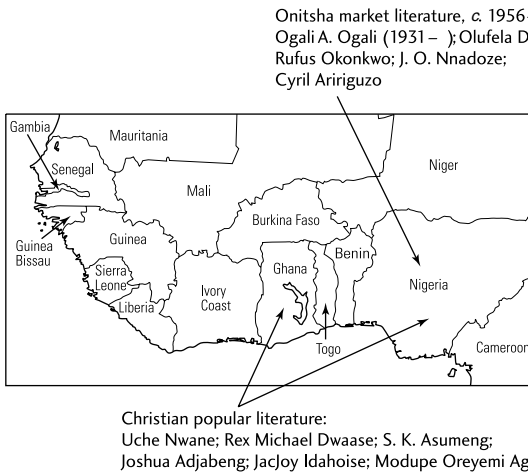
> This booklet contains good advice … It serves as a dictionary of wisdom for boys and girls and at the same time serves as a private adviser to ladies and gentlemen.
>
> (Abiakam, 1964: 4)

West Africa's international and canonical texts are often less important to local readers than the popular texts which are produced by local publishers and have been a feature of the region's literary culture since the 1940s. This chapter considers this large body of popular literature, paying particular attention to the tastes, preferences, and aesthetic sensibilities of West African readers between the 1950s and the present day.

7.1 Popular literature in the 1950s and 1960s: 'Onitsha market literature'

In the 1940s and 1950s a new, influential type of reading material was imported in bulk into Nigeria: cheap Indian pamphlets in English started to arrive in large quantities, with 'flashy "romantic" pictures of glamorous women being kissed by he-men on the covers' and advertisements on the back covers (Nwoga, 2002: 37). In other 'British West African' territories such as Ghana, romantic movies from India started to be screened in urban cinemas in the 1940s and 1950s, influencing youth culture and popular theatre (Larkin, [1997] 2002).

While the reasons for this special cultural connection between India and anglophone West Africa have yet to be established by historians, there are several possible explanations for the heightened receptivity of West Africans to Indian material. Firstly, Gandhi's Non-Cooperation movement and the political problems he encountered were followed closely in African-owned newspapers in the 1920s and



Map 7 Popular Literature

1930s. Readers received regular reports of Gandhi's activities and tribulations, gleaned from British and Indian newspapers: West African editors consistently praised the anti-colonial movement in India and called for similar levels of mass organization in their own countries. Colonial India was therefore a relatively familiar site for African political identification.

Secondly, it is likely that the increased literacy levels in West Africa after the Second World War combined with the shared anti-colonial agenda in both parts of the world to nurture cultural networks for the dissemination of literature and films. The Second World War contributed to the connection in other ways: when West African ex-servicemen who had fought in Burma and India returned home at the end of the war, they brought back minds filled with cosmopolitan ideas (and movies, songs, and literatures) gathered during their years of foreign service with the British Government. These war veterans were regarded with great animosity by local young men in Nigeria, for their salaries and severance payments made them relatively wealthy by local standards: they had what Felicia Ekejiuba describes as a 'phenomenal' impact upon the local economy in eastern Nigeria, causing inflation and competition especially in the marriage market where they were willing (and able) to pay almost any amount of bride price to the fathers of beautiful young women (1995: 146).

A third possible reason for the connection with India lies in the rise of an intriguing form of 'orientalism' in West Africa in the 1930s and 1940s: throughout these decades, local anglophone newspapers carried increasing quantities of advertisements from gurus and mystics in India offering exotic charms, pamphlets, predictions, and potions, all for sale by mail order to West African consumers. Clearly, West African newspapers were finding a market in India, if only to attract Indian advertising revenue. The appearance of pamphlets and films in local West African markets represented a branch of this cultural-cum-commercial activity.

Alongside the Indian material, British and American popular romantic magazines and B-grade movies were imported into 'British West Africa': magazines such as *True Romances* and *Woman's Own* were read avidly in West Africa, while Victorian romantic novels by Marie Corelli and Bertha Clay became widely available in urban department stores and bookshops. As early as 1937, adverts on the front pages of West African newspapers read, 'This book offers *Sex Secrets* to men and women married or unmarried! No such book has ever been offered to the public! Secrets hitherto known only by doctors now laid bare to all!' (*African Morning Post*, 3 Dec 1937: f.p.; emphasis retained). All of this international anglophone literature was keenly consumed by newly-educated Africans and school-leavers in search of stimulating literature (Obiechina, 1973: 95).

To attract readers, local authors had to formulate new stories which would appeal to the film-going public with an interest in 'sex secrets', but also, perhaps, help to warn them about the moral dangers of such pursuits. In the big towns of eastern Nigeria in the 1950s, young men started to write their own texts. Just as Amos Tutuola, John Pepper Clark Bekederemo, Wole Soyinka, and Chinua Achebe all composed their first stories in the 1950s, so too large numbers of less well-educated Africans were inspired to produce their own texts, for the climate in which Achebe worked was one of opportunity and ambition for *all* newly-educated Nigerians.

The literature these young men produced came to be known as 'Onitsha market literature', named after the Igbo market town in which most of the publishers and printing presses were located. For many decades, Onitsha had been the hub of economic activity in eastern Nigeria, and by the 1950s it possessed one of the largest market areas in West Africa. People came from far and wide to buy and sell

goods in Onitsha, making the town a centre of cultural intermingling and exchange as well as a place of trade and economic rivalry. Missionaries from the Roman Catholic Mission and the Church Missionary Society were active in the region from the late nineteenth century, setting up schools for local youths and producing textbooks in Igbo and English for their pupils. Meanwhile, in the early twentieth century the British colonial administration set up its regional headquarters in Onitsha. This combination of commerce, Christianity, and colonialism created a lucrative climate for the African printing presses which sprang up throughout Onitsha in the 1940s and 1950s for the production of reports, greetings cards, headed stationery, exercise books, invoice books, and pamphlets by local authors.

The new Igbo writers found a local reading public keen to accept their authority, and eager to purchase their didactic, sensational, English-language material. In response to the local demand, they produced vast quantities of romances and 'how-to' booklets in the 1950s and 1960s on subjects such as love and marriage.[1] Authors offered techniques for dealing with the problems of 'harlotry' and excessive bride prices in eastern Nigeria; they counselled readers on how to propose marriage to a 'lady', how to succeed in gaining white-collar work, and how to resolve many other personal matters affecting urban youths in Nigeria. Nothing could be more different from Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*.

As in other parts of 'British West Africa', the secondary school system had expanded rapidly in the Nigerian towns in the 1950s, creating a new, literate generation of youths who were conscious of their educated status and ambitious for salaried white-collar employment. They were anything but the 'oppressed' victims of mission schools and colonial mass-education programmes: inspired to write by the nationalist press, which promoted the egalitarian ideal of mass-participation in the creation of the nation, these young men picked up their pens and started to interpret their world in writing, creating new popular forms and formulas to contain their expressions. Like their contemporaries throughout 'British West Africa', they were conscious of their status as an emergent, power-seeking, English-speaking class.

Ogali A. Ogali was one of the earliest and most popular authors, producing a 'popular classic' with his pamphlet, *Veronica my Daughter* (1956), published two years before *Things Fall Apart*.[2] Ogali's was the first publication to depict the struggles of an educated young

woman who insists upon marrying the young man of her choice against the wishes of her father, an illiterate chief. In this, his pamphlet represents an ideological counter-text to Achebe's first novel, which depicts the tragic disempowerment of the 'illiterate' chiefly class and also shows the details of an arranged marriage involving a beautiful and *compliant* girl (see Achebe, 1958: 49–50).

Ogali began writing after completing his secondary education, and used the money earned from *Veronica My Daughter* to fund his vocational training as a journalist and film-maker (Dodson, 2002). Other writers, including Thomas Iguh and Olufela Davies, published their pamphlets while still studying at secondary school: Davies, for example, was only nineteen when he wrote his novelette, *Born to be a Flirt* (1962), and attention is drawn to his youth in the preface, where he is described as a 'boyish looking young school leaver' (n.p.). Hundreds of pamphlets were produced by this youthful, newly educated class of men, and in the majority of texts authors offer advice, opinions, and warnings to their peers, especially about the dangers accompanying marriage and relationships. These authors return repeatedly to the subject of deviant feminine behaviour, classifying women using moral concepts deriving from the mission-school classroom. In particular, unmarried young women living alone in the cities are frequently labelled 'harlots' and 'money mongers'. Such a Victorian, Christian construction of sexually self-determining women reveals the ideological impact of the Christian educational system in Nigeria, which seems to have endowed young men with the authority to pigeon-hole women according to a rigid typology.[3] By typecasting these deviant femininities, narrators attempt to fix women into roles and disarm them.

Nigerian pamphlet writers also interact with a stockpile of characters and situations drawn from oral literature, embellishing and adapting the familiar stories, using them to recreate masculine and feminine roles. West African folktales often warn against marrying strangers, attractive as they might be on the surface. Yoruba, Igbo, and Akan stories tell of how the Most Beautiful Stranger, or the Complete Gentleman, seduces a girl whose parents have warned her against strangers and either left her at home alone, or sent her to purchase goods in the local market. Disregarding the warnings, the young girl follows the Stranger into the forest beyond the village limits, where he is transformed into a sexually voracious, maggot-eating monster from

whom she has to be rescued before order is restored. The suspicion towards strangers manifested in Nigerian market literature—where beautiful exteriors often conceal monstrous interiors—clearly shows the influence of such narratives.

Other folkloric character types entered these popular urban texts, undergoing transformations in the process. Crucially, however, the gender of folktale baddies seems to have been up-ended and updated by the Nigerian narrators. If the beautiful stranger was a male monster in folktales, 'he' has become 'she' in the popular literature of 1960s postcolonial towns. In the realm of locally published texts, externally seductive women are now the monsters, corrupting young men and refusing to reproduce future citizens.

Another immediate difference from oral narratives is that the last words of Onitsha pamphlets are far less clear than the morally educative and structured outcomes of folktales. At the end of pamphlets, one finds ambiguous and indeterminate 'solutions' to relationship dilemmas, often offered in the form of simple ditties or lists of aphorisms; alternatively, unduly violent punishments are meted out to the text's erring woman.[4] No neat narrative knots can be tied in characters' lives at the end of pamphlets, and texts regularly offer unjust or confused endings, structurally testifying to their own inability to construct coherent interpretive frames around the world.

There is a widespread preoccupation in Onitsha market literature with the difference between women's beautifully painted exteriors and their lethal schemes. Perhaps this manifests male authors' sense of uncontrol, even powerlessness, within urban contexts where salaried employment is hard to come by and educated women compete with men for formal and informal sector jobs. In addition, for many young men arriving in Nigerian cities from outlying villages in the 1950s and 1960s, new social codes had to be interiorized or formalized. While he might lodge with townsmen or members of his family, the new migrant's neighbours might be literally incomprehensible if they came from different ethno-linguistic groups. In the light of this, perhaps the young authors' highly suspicious attitudes towards women can be comprehended as a psycho-literary response to the process of rapid urban expansion occurring throughout southern Nigeria in the 1950s and 1960s. One author, Cyril Aririguzo (1963), gives voice to this dislocated urban masculinity in the Preface to *The Work of Love*: 'There is no doubt that readers today have an insatiable

curiosity about other people's private lives and things around us', he writes, promising that his narrative will penetrate those unknown city lives and make sense of them (n.p.).

Female infidelity is the key theme of this popular literature, recurring across pamphlets. The stereotypical 'harlot' is trailed by condemnations. For example, in his stream of accusations, *What Women are Thinking About Men: No. 1 Bomb to Women*, J. O. Nnadoze (1971) tries to fathom the intricacies of the feminine mind. Ironically, his project is confined to such a narrow band of (un-)representative feminine types that it can never move into the complex and ambiguous world of urban women existing beyond its ideological enclosure. He warns men repeatedly to 'Beware', for Nigerian women are money-grabbing, and unable to say, 'no Panky Nyanky' (i.e., hanky-panky) (Nnadoze, 1971: 25). The reality behind women's fluttering eyelashes is that, as Highbred Maxwell writes, 'they only love your wealth but not you' (Maxwell, 1962: 6).

It would be unjust, however, to discuss the representations of women in Nigerian market literature without mentioning the small group of assertive, independent-minded female characters who feature in the bestselling romances such as Ogali's *Veronica my Daughter* (1956). Shown in the act of rebelling against their illiterate, authoritarian fathers, these heroines select their own marriage partners in the face of paternal opposition. This type of young woman, who has fallen in love with a literate but poor young man, represents the positive face of the educated, 'modern girl': she is the counter-image of that other type of 'educated' girl who is shown to exploit her new-found autonomy, reject marriage, and run sexually wild in Nigerian cities (e.g., Ogali, 1960).

Of particular concern to young, marriageable Igbo men in the 1950s and 1960s was the excessively high bride price set by senior members of a young woman's family—men like Okonkwo and his friend Obierika in *Things Fall Apart*. In 1956, the colonial government had tried to ease the young generation's difficulties by setting an upper limit of £30 plus £5 expenses on Igbo marriage payments (Uchendu, 1965: 56). However, supposedly 'greedy' parents, who were keen to recuperate the money spent on a daughter's upbringing, would simply bypass the legislation and demand more than the legal fee from young suitors; or they would exploit loopholes in the law and continue the well-established custom of receiving expensive

commodities as *gifts*, including refrigerators, cars, and cookers, which often amounted to more than £300, in addition to the fee stipulated by the government (see Ekejiuba, 1995: 134). The legal fee therefore came to be regarded as a tokenary, largely symbolic sum.

The authors of Onitsha market literature, nearly all of whom were young, unmarried men, tended to promote and applaud any colonial legislation which protected a poor young man from the financial demands of a young woman's father. 'To marry without love is very dangerous', a Court Clerk tells the illiterate Chief Bombey in Rufus Okonkwo's *The Game of Love* (1964?), 'You know that it is law that parents should not accept more than N100 for the bride price of their daughters who are educated and N50 for the illitrates [*sic*]' (p. 47). Similarly, in *Veronica my Daughter*, the school teacher who represents the literate, white-collar class tells Chief Jombo:

> My friend, it appears you do not know what is going on in this country. Let me tell you that one part of this matter has been solved and that is the question of Mike marrying Vero. According to the recent Law passed by the Government, Mike is entitled to pay thirty pounds nothing more nothing less ... The old order, I assure you has changed and anything more than thirty is illegal.
>
> (1956: 32–3)

In a similar manner to Nwoye, Okonkwo's son in *Things Fall Apart*, the authors of Onitsha market literature break away from customary practices by rejecting their parents' generation. The moral of these pamphlets is that, 'you can't and must never impose a stone age life on any body in this atomic age. The game of love has come to stay and no amount of persecution can send it back' (Iguh, 1960: 31). Heroines' fathers are 'not educated enough to know that in a civilized world, it is a great mistake to think that a teenage girl would not think of love, courtship and marriage' (Davies, 1962: 61); 'If my father Chief Jombo had attended even infant school as to be able to read and write simple English', Veronica states bluntly on the first page of *Veronica my Daughter*, 'he would have known that girls of nowadays choose their own husband[s] themselves' (Ogali, 1963?: 5). This young girl offers a kind of negative commentary on the 'traditionalist' position represented by Okonkwo's generation in *Things Fall Apart*. As Ogali explains in the preface to *Veronica my Daughter* and repeats throughout the pamphlet, the alternative marital ideology that young authors are seeking to institutionalize revolves around the 'truth' that 'we are no

more in the age when girls are forced to marry contrary to their wishes', in conformity with 'traditional' fathers (n.p.).

Ogali's *Veronica my Daughter* was the first to attack the 'traditional' authority of elders and chiefly men towards their wives and children. The word 'choice' and choice-related concepts occur eleven times in the first two pages of Ogali's pamphlet, and every subsequent line reinforces the new ideology. *Veronica my Daughter* enacts a young man's ideal and, at the end, it optimistically portrays the conversion of Chief Jombo to the new moral order represented by the educated generation. By creating stock father figures and fixing them up as laughable others, however, these young authors are deriding and subordinating the power of chiefs in order to increase the status of their *own* class of men. They represent the positive face of the Christianized, newly educated 'upstarts' shown to be responsible for the destruction of chiefly power in *Things Fall Apart*.

In the 1960s, unemployment levels rose among male school-leavers in Eastern Nigeria, increasing sharply after 1966 when violent anti-Igbo sentiments in Kano led to thousands of deaths and forced the mass return of easterners to their overcrowded homeland (see Nafziger, 1983: 103–4). Struggling to make ends meet in a competitive urban economy and often earning less than £100 per year, young bachelors found it difficult to accumulate enough savings to pay the bride price. Their problems had increased after 1945, when demobilized African soldiers returned from Burma, India, and East Africa carrying 'allotment' payments in British currency, obtained on discharge from the army (see Ekejiuba, 1995).

These socioeconomic details enable a historical contextualization of the robust, bestselling core of texts about the love-choices of 'emancipated' heroines such as Veronica. It becomes easier to understand why the authors of market literature should promote the ideal of Christian monogamy, combined with romantic love between young people. Christian and colonial marriage values can be identified clearly in the standpoints taken by young, literate couples in this type of pamphlet. Authors stem from the very social groups described by Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* as gaining status and power through colonialism and Christianity. Unlike the more conservative 'traditional' society represented in Achebe's novel, however, in Onitsha pamphlets wives speak against their husbands and young heroines have the audacity to stand up to their fathers. Such audacity

stems from ideological and legislative support of the Christian Church and the colonial government for the newly emergent social groups represented by the authors of market literature.

Critics have often noted the excessive emphasis on 'Western modernity' in the pamphlets and their unquestioning promotion of European life- and love-styles in opposition to 'traditional' African sexual moralities (see Obiechina, 1972, 1973). From this perspective, a cultural re-colonization is occurring, using market literature as its tool. This view, which tended to dominate the earliest studies of West African popular literature, caused critics to dismiss this mode of writing for the way it uncritically endorsed Westernization and brought about a new 'alienation', especially when set against cultural nationalist, affirmative novels by elite authors. I would prefer to see Onitsha market literature as depicting the non-elite man's experience of Nigeria at a time of immense social and economic change, a period to which Achebe and his elite peers reacted by addressing, and often reaffirming, the status of pre-colonial chiefs over and against the structures of colonialism and Christianity.

7.2 The readers of Onitsha market literature

The figure of the pamphlet author is pivotal in each text. He—and it is usually 'he'—interrupts the fluid, ambiguous world to interpret it and to make it mean something definite to the young male reader. Several commentators have remarked on the all-male reading constituency assumed by the producers of market literature. Donatus Nwoga notices that there is a gender bias rather than a gender balance in the pamphlets, which operate according to the assumption that 'the man is always right' (1965: 27). 'The greater bulk' of texts, he continues, are 'addressed to the masculine section of the population. The writers are men and most of their readers, after all, are men' (ibid.). Cavan M. McCarthy (1984) also observes that 'Onitsha pamphlets themselves were usually written by men, for men' (p. 23). Numerous pamphlets contain sections headed, 'Advice to Men', 'Warnings to Men', or 'My Advice to Men Against Women' (e.g. Njoku, 1960: 13), and few pamphlets invert the flow of accusations to warn women readers against men's duplicitous behaviour. Rather, authors address a community of young male readers, promising to

'guide you to find a good girl to marry. It is no[t] easy to know those who love you or hate you. Without doubt you will get more sense when you read this book' (Eze, 1964: n.p).

Unfortunately, reader responses to market literature have been recorded only rarely and except for one woman's comment noted down by Anita Kern (1973)—that the pamphlets manifest an 'unrealistic attitude towards women' (n.p.)—it is impossible to retrieve any women's responses to the popular literature produced in West Africa in the 1950s and 1960s. In their studies of locally published pamphlets in Nigeria, both Kern and Don Dodson (2000) confine themselves almost exclusively to male readers' comments. Nevertheless, their interviews reveal some fascinating details about readers' expectations and preferences, giving great insights into the ways West Africans responded to locally published, popular literature in the 1950s and 1960s.

The students interviewed by Kern found the character types and fictional situations in market literature to be 'true-to-life' (1973: n.p.). During a debate about the representations of women in Onitsha pamphlets, one young man told the gathered group that 'after reading these novels he had come to the conclusion that women were fickle and unpredictable and that this was his attitude towards women' (ibid.). The pamphlets were considered by another young man to be 'ways of studying women', while another commented, 'they serve as corrective measures to the women who might have the attitudes depicted' (ibid.). Dodson's interviewees also extracted truths from the popular literature they had read, applying the pamphlets' 'lessons' about women to their own lives. Indeed, the readers he spoke to had copied love-letters faithfully from pamphlets and keenly absorbed the wisdom offered by the authors. Reacting to the counsel offered in a pamphlet, one cosmetics trader told Dodson that 'Since I read *Money Hard* ... I have learnt to beware of women with stricted [*sic*] measure. Women are generally after money. One must know this in order to succeed in business' (2000: 49).

Women's exclusion from the reading communities accessed by Kern and Dodson can be understood in the context of formal education policies in Nigeria in the first half of the twentieth century. Despite the colonial government's mass-education programmes in the 1950s, by 1967 only one third of the Nigerian labour force was literate and less than one per cent had a university education (Bienen

and Diejomaoh, 1981: 315). Women in particular were excluded from the literate class and thus from the real economic rewards to be gained from acquiring literacy skills. Biased attitudes about the sexual excesses of 'over'-educated women often prevented (and continue to prevent) West African girls from gaining access to equal academic training. The prejudice against literate women was perceived by the British anthropologist, Sylvia Leith-Ross, as early as 1939 in her study of women in Eastern Nigeria. All of the Igbo men she interviewed in the late 1930s 'agreed that only those [women] who meant to be teachers or nurses' should enter the final year of primary school (Leith-Ross, 1965: 271). Leith-Ross found a preoccupation among men with the question of literate women's moral laxity: educated girls in particular caused constant anxiety. As one Methodist catechist said, newly literate young women 'come home at the end of their schooling no longer in tune with native life' (p. 265).

The interpretations of market literature that emerge from Dodson's and Kern's surveys in the early 1970s are intriguing for the sense of unanimity that emerges among male readers about the function of printed literature, about its role in resolving their relationships dilemmas. These young readers frequently wrote advice-seeking letters to the publishers of their favourite pamphlets, addressing 'Mr. Author' as a kind of Agony Uncle who could offer wise counsel about their romantic problems: 'please advise me', they plead (Okonkwo, 1964?: 21). Okonkwo reprints many of these letters in his pamphlet, *The Game of Love* (1964?), accepting the authority conferred on him by readers and responding to each request for guidance about 'how to know the type of girl [to] marry' (p. 19). 'Thank you very much Mr Christopher for seeking advice from me', he replies to one correspondent, counselling the young man not by offering specific comments but by recommending the purchase of another of his publications: 'Have you read the New Pamphlet in the market entitled *Never Trust All That Love You*?', he asks (p. 24).

7.3 Contemporary popular literature: pentecostal and 'born-again' publications

No analysis of West African popular literature would be complete without some discussion of the pentecostal and evangelical literature

which has gained a massive following since the late 1970s. This popular genre generates a great deal of debate within literate and non-literate communities alike. Given the negative treatment of Christianity in *Things Fall Apart*, however, and given that Achebe is widely believed to have set both 'African' and 'postcolonial' themes in place, it is hardly surprising that the vast local consumption of Christian literature in West Africa is often treated as an embarrassing secret, rarely mentioned in literary histories of the region.

This religious literature is disseminated widely around West Africa by book-hawkers and market traders, opening up vital areas of popular culture and conversation: it may be read aloud to groups or studied in private, and it is regularly adapted for video, feeding one of the most popular pastimes throughout the region (Meyer, 1999; Bastian, 2005). One particular book and video on the popular subject of satanic possession and Christian rebirth by the charismatic Nigerian preacher, Emmanuel Eni, entitled *Hidden From the Powers of Darkness* (1987), caused ripples of debate and religious conversion as far afield as Malawi in East Africa. Over and against this local literary heat and noise are the canonical texts associated with West African literature, discussed in previous chapters: these international texts are studied in schools and colleges, but often have less relevance with ordinary readers in contemporary West Africa.

Religious reading is not an isolated 'private' activity, set over and against the 'public' religious domain. The 'public versus private' dichotomy in West Africa, like the 'orality versus writing' dichotomy discussed in Chapter 4, may obscure more than it reveals in relation to the consumption of popular religious pamphlets, for reading itself can be communal. Many people read, share, and discuss the most popular Christian publications and, in formal and informal study groups, readers regularly undertake the activity of relating texts to daily life in a way that is strongly reminiscent of the Nigerian pamphlet-readers in the 1950s and 1960s. 'We study literature based on the Bible and relate what we learn to everyday life', commented a young woman in Accra (female student, Legon, Accra, 1998); 'We discuss every aspect of life and give advice based on Bible principles', remarked another (female reader, Accra city centre, 1998). Other readers agree: 'We discuss the Word of God and how we each understand it. For instance, after reading a verse from the Bible, we are made to explain what we have read in our own understanding'

(female reader, Accra city centre, 1998); 'We study the text of the Bible, its importance to the church and the life application of the text in the Christian life' (male student, Legon, Accra, 1998); 'We discuss things like knowing the Bible, how to avoid evil deeds. We also discuss issues concerning our future' (male trainee teacher, Tamale, 1998). These comments reveal that reading is not an isolated, private event. During the group-reading process encouraged by different Christian ministries in West Africa, participants develop and discuss lessons about alcohol, sex, marriage, social behaviour, and money (see Gifford, 1994).

Religious movements in West Africa cultivate an interpretive mode which draws directly from the aesthetic expectations that we observed among the readers of Onitsha market literature, in which readers apply the lessons contained in a text to their day-to-day lives and learn to interpret their mundane experiences through the framework provided by their reading. In this manner, new subjectivities, or new types of selfhood, are constituted through the activity of reading, as readers make use of printed material to redefine themselves in relation to the world (see Martin, 1995). As Ruth Marshall argues in her study of contemporary Lagos, pentecostal and 'born again' Christians produce freshly empowered selves who feel able to understand the divine and the diabolical workings of their worlds (Marshall, 1993; see also Ellis and ter Haar, 1998).

West African readers often seek texts that will enlighten them spiritually and offer practical guidance on specific problems in their daily lives. Asked if they would purchase pamphlets released by 'rival' churches, the customers in the Methodist Book Depot, Accra, were unanimous in the view that, as one married woman said, 'I buy the one that can answer questions in my life. It will help me to understand issues I am facing' (personal communication, July 1995). 'These books are not asking me to leave my church', another woman explained as she purchased a Church of Pentecost pamphlet about marriage to give to her daughter, who belonged to a different church: authors 'know the kind of problems we face today in Ghana. They help in achieving peace and harmony in the home.' Another customer in the Methodist Book Depot in Accra, a young man, was well aware that some authors are claiming to communicate the Word of God directly: 'I must judge the author for myself and find out if he has received the Word of God. Some of the writers try to deceive you.'

Rather than seeking to change his religious affiliation, writers in his view are revealing truths and, providing they are genuinely inspired by God, they can assist his personal quest for salvation (personal communication, July 1995). Customers' literacy has released them from the teaching of a single church, allowing them to construct a personalized, relevant form of faith. They pick-and-mix and move between different religious literatures, apparently perceiving few doctrinal differences between the pamphlets they purchase. Such receptivity to the writings released by diverse Christian movements, small and large, is demonstrated by the fact that many bookshops and book stalls in West Africa sell a plurality of publications by 'rival' churches.

Like the authors of market literature in the 1950s and 1960s, contemporary Christian authors acknowledge that readers expect to receive knowledge that can be applied directly to their own life situations, and their pamphlets offer explanations for failure and unhappiness, giving divine and practical solutions to problems occurring in everyday life. A short selection from the abundance of examples demonstrates the manner in which authors position their publications in an advice-giving niche that is shared with other local popular genres in West Africa. In the introduction to Uche Nwani's *The Challenge of Marriage* (1988), the book is offered as 'an effort to seek realistic and workable solutions to a number of matrimonial problems ... It also attempts to advise the reader on how to surmount the many obstacles which generate anxieties and frustrations within modern marriages' (p. 4); the preface to Rex Michael Dwaase's *Falling in Love* (1990) reveals, 'This book aims at helping young persons to learn how to overcome immorality' (p. v); the preface to Stephen K. Asumeng's *The Game of Marriage and How to Play It* (1993) defines a broad constituency of readers who will benefit from the advice it contains, including unmarried youths, married couples, and spouses experiencing difficulties with their partners. 'One only has to follow the steps and guides given here', Asumeng writes, for the printed word in his pamphlet is 'analogous to a medical doctor who prescribes drugs for a particular disease' (p. iv).

Considering the multiplicity of religious movements in West Africa, there is a surprising degree of uniformity among the 'how-to' texts that are published locally on the subject of marriage. While the dramatic, often shocking, satanic possession and 'born again' testimonials have attracted the most attention from scholars to

date, the more humdrum topic of marriage is the prevailing theme in popular 'how-to' literature in West Africa. Numerous pamphlets offer readers a range of strategies for resolving domestic conflicts and establishing a stable home life. Many authors publish their own theologies, producing intricate and individualistic biblical exegeses and spiritual autobiographies, but when they turn to the subject of marriage, nearly all contemporary Christian writers offer a unanimous body of opinions about how to solve relationship problems: they describe the minutiae of domestic housekeeping arrangements, laying out ways to settle disputes over money; they define God-given gender roles for husbands and wives; and they detail the exact procedures for organizing weddings, from the proposal and engagement to the format of invitation cards and thank you letters. Whether Pentecostal or Anglican, Ghanaian or Cameroonian, all of these pamphlets display a problem-solving orientation which is intimately connected with the reader's own domestic needs.

As with Onitsha market literature, contemporary Christian marriage guidance pamphlets are inextricable from the ongoing, active construction of a 'dominant' gender ideology in West Africa. Counselling tends to be weighted against wives, backed by biblical quotations which are often interpreted in a literal way to support female subordination. One particular Christian metaphor from Ephesians (5: 22–4) is quoted repeatedly by authors, interpreted in a way that sustains the masculine bias of these publications:

> Wives, submit yourselves to your husbands as to the Lord, for a husband has authority over his wife just as Christ has authority over the Church ... And so wives must submit themselves completely to their husbands just as the Church submits itself to Christ.
>
> (cited in Asumeng, 1993: 34)

This, Asumeng informs women, 'is one of the most important rules given by God who is the architect of marriage ... Do not for any reason challenge or question this order from God' (ibid.). Backed by the Book, husbands are instructed to be strong leaders, while wives, in the separate, more lengthy sections addressing their behaviour, are guided into attitudes of passivity and domesticity that would impress the most conservative of British Victorian missionaries.

In the sections of 'how-to' pamphlets focusing on husbands' behaviour, men are informed, 'Right from the initial stages, make it

your aim to train her and shape her the way you like' (Asumeng, 1993: 46); and, 'for you young man, how well do you know your girl? Have you had the opportunity to eat a meal she cooked?' (Nwani, 1988: 17). A different, more admonitory tone is adopted for women, who are told:

> You, as a wife, have a responsibility to protect your husband from sexual immorality. You must blame yourself if because of negligence or other preoccupations, you have handed over your husband and children to the maid ... Be observant, dear wife, and protect your dear husband.
>
> (Adjabeng, 1995: 40)

'Forget about yourself', Asumeng tells wives: 'In anything at all you do, ask yourself, "Will this please my husband?"' (1993: 40).

As in so many popular representations of a husband's infidelities in West Africa, moral blame lies with the wife in these male-authored pamphlets. Wives are blamed repeatedly for their husbands' extra-marital affairs (e.g. Dartey, 1993: 13; Asumeng, 1993: 33). By neglecting her physical appearance, by nagging, by failing to keep herself and the home clean, the woman forces her husband into the arms of a mistress: 'It is very possible that you have made your once happy home a disturbed unhabitable place for your man', Nwani tells wives, writing himself directly into his text to ask in disgust, 'When did you look in the mirror last? Did you see your shabby, dirty, unkempt self that I am seeing now? That you are breeding children like the pig is not an excuse for being as dirty as the native pig' (1988: 79, 82). These authors differ in the strength of their conviction that wives should be subordinate to husbands, but few Christian male writers challenge the principle of female subordination itself. 'The lordship of your husband in the home is a command by God that cannot be compromised', Adjabeng writes (1995: 45); Dartey adds that 'A wife should accept her husband's role as the leader of the home' (1993: 14).

Christian discourse has given male authors a vocabulary, a logic, and an ideology with which to assert control over women in the home. Vindicated by select quotations from the Bible, they insist repeatedly on women's subordinate status in the nuclear family structure. They find masculine power to be supported by the Bible and produce a version of Christianity in which 'ideal wives' are utterly subservient creatures. Of course, few real West African wives will embody this behavioural ideal, which is divorced from the socioeconomic realities

of a world in which women work and control their own income as a matter of course.

Rather than reflecting 'real' situations, these shared yearnings for masculine control can be seen as reactions to, and efforts to rationalize, perceptions that gender relations have become disordered in the authors' present societies. Ironically, one source of this disorder may be the charismatic churches themselves, with their emphases on familial responsibility and the necessity for men to renounce 'fornication', alcohol consumption, gambling, and other 'male' social activities (see Martin, 2001). Perhaps the very 'unreality' of Christian masculine discourse reveals men's difficulties in asserting power within the relationship models promoted by their own churches (ibid.). In response, they create obedient and beautiful 'ideal wives' in their pamphlets in order to exemplify a new and bizarre social model: 'be your husband's ideal companion', women are told, 'for that is what God wants you to be' (Nwani, 1988: 31). The good wife 'has her home. Her home is her world. Her world is in her home. She lives for her home' (p. 125). It does not seem to matter to authors that these ideal housewives exist only on the printed page, staying at home, addressing husbands as 'master', obeying severe behavioural restrictions and instructions. Such figures are neither fictional characters nor real social beings: they are behavioural models for a future, male-ordered Christian world. The contradictions which are expressed through this fantasy seem to matter far more than the empirical reality or applicability of the gender model (see Meyer, 1995; Martin, 2001).

Contrasting Onitsha market literature, which was generally aimed at young male readers, almost every contemporary 'how to' pamphlet from West Africa is divided into two separate spheres of advice, one containing behavioural guidance for wives and the other containing guidance for husbands. Several pages of 'Advice to a Young Wife' will be followed by 'To my Son: on his wedding day' (Nwani, 1988: 28, 42). If married couples are advised to enrich their relationship by praying together, their individual prayers will be gender specific: amongst other things, a husband must pray 'how to understand women [and] ... how to handle a woman when she tries to take over' (Owusu-Ansah and Owusu-Ansah, 1995: 81). Kneeling beside him, his wife will be praying 'to be submissive, respect [her] husband and care for [the] home' (p. 82). In separating male and female readers from one another,

authors presuppose that readers occupy distinct positions and require distinct guidance on the shared institution of marriage.

7.4 Gender and popular literature

How do women respond to the behavioural commandments issued to wives by male writers whose authority is sustained by the selective application of biblical quotations? There are few detailed studies of marriage guidance pamphlets in West Africa, and interview material is especially scarce. Texts themselves yield little information about women's interpretive bias, because the majority of locally published 'how-to' pamphlets in Nigeria and Ghana are written by men who tend to read the Bible from 'masculine' interpretive standpoints. Research into reader responses in West Africa is inadequate, making it difficult to specify how women's gender identities might affect their reception of religious literature.

Most of the women readers I spoke to in Ghana and Nigeria in the late 1990s were purchasing Christian 'how-to' pamphlets in order to empower themselves or their children within nuclear households. These women felt that authors were addressing them directly, showing them strategies for attracting good husbands and dealing with unfaithful partners, showing them how to resolve conflicts and see off rivals: 'Such books tell me about how to make the right choice with regards as to a life partner' (female, Accra city centre, 1998); 'I really like reading them because they teach me a lot about "man" and "woman" and how they can be able to live peacefully when married and not only peacefully but also happily' (female student, Lagos, 1998); 'It can help to teach me about the task ahead in marriage. It will also help to teach me to know the right steps to take to get an ideal man. And it will also guide me as to how to leave my life as single before marriage' (female trainee teacher, Tamale, 1998).

From this small sample of responses, we can start to speculate about the shifts in emphasis that might occur when the Bible and religious pamphlets are interpreted from a 'feminine' perspective. As Bernice Martin (2001) points out, an intriguing paradox surrounds women's participation in popular Christian debates about gender, for pentecostal and 'born-again' women have to make use of the *same* conservative gender discourses to be found in men's pamphlets; they have

to redeploy Pauline strictures in ways that 'rewrite the moral mandate on which sexual relations and family life rest' and 'domesticate' their men to the same degree that they themselves have been 'returned to the home' (Martin, 2001: 54). Pentecostal women have, however, noticed one crucial dimension of their religious movements which affects husbands more than wives and resolves the 'gender paradox': if the household represents the moral core around which Christianity revolves, then *women's* domestic concerns rise to prominence above men's, forcing the menfolk to abandon their sexual 'double standards' in favour of 'mutual responsibility and interdependence' (ibid.). In consequence, when women enter the interpretive process and read or write religious literature, the location of blame for marital problems is likely to shift away from wives and towards husbands.

Working from within a shared religious framework and dwelling on the virtues of feminine passivity, pentecostal and 'born-again' women writers do not rebel against the model of future perfection produced by male authors and exemplified by the ideal Christian wife. The major difference concerns these writers' positionality as 'readers' of religious discourse. They interpret biblical quotations differently from their male colleagues and the marital models they extract from the Bible deny husbands ultimate authority in the household. Women's submission is rationalized differently and the wife's role is explained from a perspective which includes pleasure, romance, and sexual fulfilment alongside domestic duties. In a pamphlet entitled *The Building of a Home of Fame and Glory* (1987?), for example, the Nigerian writer Modupe Oreyemi Agboola does not reiterate the biblical commandment from Ephesians (5: 22–4), 'wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord'. Instead, she attempts to rationalize and justify the principle itself. As with other Christian women writers, Agboola does not simply *apply* the biblical quotation to popular opinions about men's divine right to domestic power. Rather, the quotation itself becomes the object for analysis, as she struggles to explain the spiritual reasons why good Christian wives should empty themselves of all personal longings and defer to the authority of their husbands.

'Women, can you hear?' she entreats, after quoting the familiar passage about wifely submission: 'The husband is the head of government in the home. This is God's pattern' (1987?: 8). What follows her plea is an attempt to reread and account for a commandment

which cannot be rejected, for it is viewed as God's word to humankind, but which renders women's subordination an everlasting prospect. Having stated that 'there was never a time when they [women] were inferior to men', Agboola tackles the offending passage:

> We are saying that a woman should recognise and ACCEPT that the woman is equal to the man anywhere and everywhere EXCEPT in her home where she ACCEPTS the rulership, the authority, the directing and the controlling of her husband because that is the way the creator set it out. Our God is a wise God. He is infallible.
>
> (1987?: 8; emphasis retained)

Unable to escape the clarity of the commandment, Agboola transforms it into an exception to the rule of female equality in West Africa. Only in her home must the wife accept the exceptional and defer to her 'ruling', 'directing', 'controlling' husband. Only by separating the public from the domestic realm can Agboola rationalize a gender paradox that, read otherwise, would deny West African women the freedoms of expression and economic independence to which they are accustomed (see Marshall, 1993). Agboola has reinterpreted the familiar quotation from Ephesians by isolating it from society at large and limiting its applicability. Christian behavioural codes have been contained, for according to her logic the woman might be a 'wife' in the home, but she is a 'person' in public, equal in status to all others. The doctrine of submission is reconceptualized in the process.

The models of feminine perfection to be found in this literature as a whole can be viewed as expressions of men's and women's efforts to reconcile religious teachings with the practicalities of contemporary relationships. These texts are important social documents, assisting in what David Maxwell describes as 'the recovery of the role of Africans as agents' from discourses and archives in which they are silenced (2001: 503). Christian authors make use of the printing press to 'make history and themselves' (ibid.). At the same time, in Onitsha market literature as in contemporary Christian literature, the printed text allows authors to be detached from the 'real' and to enter the 'ideal': writing gives them the opportunity to imagine and objectify utopian marriage models which, because they are ideal, are not likely to be challenged or modified by experiences in the off-page world. These models for ideal marriages are created and validated through the application of quotations from the Bible. It is probably only in

this idealized, highly print-mediated realm that West African Christians will find themselves encountering the circular figure of a 'wifely wife' who 'takes delight in living because as a wife, mother and mistress of her home, she has ample opportunity to express those feminine and wifely qualities that make her a wife' (Nwani, 1988: 125).

Taken together, the West African popular texts considered in this chapter all generate new types of selfhood and new marital practices, enabling local readers to transform their personal worlds for the better in ways that might have political potential (Ojo, 1988). When people read this popular literature, they seem to participate in the text in active ways, reconstructing their individual selves through the self-empowering act of reading. The authors of pentecostal and 'born-again' literature, like the authors of Onitsha market literature decades earlier, seem to be using literature in order to reassert control over readers' relationships and emotional lives. Perhaps, in a postcolonial political context, they regard this as one of the few areas of contemporary life that it remains possible to transform: by 'saving' the heterosexual married couple, authors can offer salvation to the nation itself, preventing it from falling further into political chaos.

Such a gesture of salvation is not feasible in practice, however: as several scholars emphasize, simple links between domestic order and national political stability are too reductive to be persuasive (Ellis and ter Haar, 1998; Martin, 2001; Marshall, 1993). Rather, husbands and wives occupy specific, highly situated positions at the interface between intimacy and ideology in their societies: in this space, ideological confusion, paradox, and contradiction abound, and decisions are not always explicable or politically rational (see Martin, 2001).

The continuous and at times extreme attention to domestic relationships in West African popular literature since the 1950s may be regarded in Ruth Marshall's terms as a 'setting to work', or activation, of social values and attitudes, without necessary or easy resolutions (1993: 215). Nevertheless, real economic and emotional problems are addressed in West African popular literature. It is possible to see a clear expression of 'civil society' in this literature: such an expression may be conservative and reactionary or progressive and liberal, wholeheartedly patriarchal or subversively feminist. Crucially, this literature enables emergent social groups—youths in particular—to participate as the producers of literary forms that are always changing

and cannot, for that reason, be appropriated at the 'official' level, or by elite groups in positions of power (see Barber, 1987). For its sheer democratic inclusivity and its refusal to 'write back' to the metropolitan centre, this type of material therefore merits a place beside the more canonical works of West African literature.

8

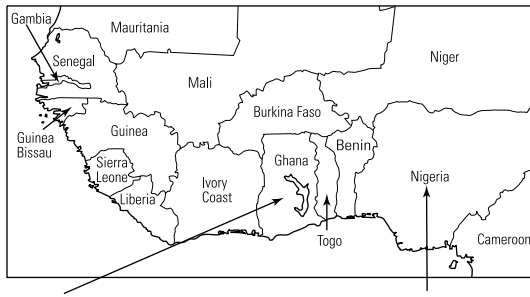
Griots with Pens in their Hands
Literary Experiments with Oral Genres, 1960s–1990s

> Times like these call for a reaffirmation of our life through Art.
>
> (Osundare, 2002b: 10)

Writers who choose to publish in the European languages are not cut off from their oral and vernacular literary heritage simply by their choice of linguistic medium. Focusing on Ghana and Nigeria, this chapter will discuss the ways in which, rather than existing in oppositional relationships, oral, vernacular, and Europhone literatures often interact with and inspire one another in West Africa. This is especially the case in the work of 'second-generation' English-language writers, including Ghana's Kofi Anyidoho (1947–), Kojo Laing (1946–), and Atukwei Okai (1941–), and Nigeria's Niyi Osundare (1946–) and Ezenwa-Ohaeto (n.dat), all of whom find inspiration in local oral genres. As Ezenwa-Ohaeto put it in his study of Nigerian poetry, the writers of the 1980s and 1990s put 'new wine into old bottles', firmly embedding their English-language poetry in oral genres, incorporating vernacular phrases, chants, and choruses into what becomes, in the process, 'written but orally conscious poetry' (see Ezenwa-Ohaeto, 1998: 18, 12).[1]

8.1 **Orality and the early writers**

Anyidoho and his contemporaries follow in the wake of pioneering West African writers such as the Ghanaian playwright Efua Sutherland (1924–96), who experimented with oral genres and performance modes in the 1960s. Sutherland and her team of colleagues founded



Map 8 *Griots* with Pens in their Hands

the theatre that was to become the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ghana (see Deandrea, 2002: 185–7). Seeking a 'national' theatre with which the masses would identify, they produced versions of Ghanaian *Anansesem* ('Ananse spider stories') and made use of popular Ghanaian entertainment forms such as the 'Concert Party'.[2] Some critics have expressed discomfort at Sutherland's Edwardian 'tea-sipping delicacy' and over-dependence on western genres to frame her Akan material (see Fraser, 1986: 141–2). The central achievement of Sutherland's experimental theatre, however, was its impulse to break free from the European literary canon which dominated the school syllabus in the 1950s and 1960s. Unafraid of local and popular genres, Sutherland's inspiration came from the grassroots, even if, ultimately, her theatre did not attract audiences from these constituencies (Kerr, 1995).

Many other West African writers in the 1960s deliberately lodged their work in oral genres, particularly in their experiments with the role and function of the narrator, and in their requirements for African instrumentation. The Nigerian poet Christopher Okigbo (1932–67) positioned himself in the role of 'town crier' rather than scribe: 'If I don't learn to shut my mouth I'll soon go to hell, | I, Okigbo, town-crier, together with my iron bell', he wrote (in Maja-Pearce, 1990: 26); in Ghana, Kofi Awoonor filtered his English-language verse through Ewe grammatical structures; meanwhile, as described in Chapter 2, Senghor and other *négritude* poets frequently scripted African musical

instruments and rhythms into their work. However, the genre in which these experiments with orality were tested to the limits was the novel.

A novel by the Nigerian writer Gabriel Okara (1921–), revealingly entitled *The Voice* (1964), contains a series of unresolved conflicts between vernacular orality and English print. In a similar manner to Awoonor's early poetry, Okara attempted to transliterate—to render literally and exactly—the grammar and syntax of Ijaw (or Ijo) into English, declaring that he aimed to translate words and concepts 'almost literally from the African language' and 'to keep as close as possible to the vernacular expressions', from which, in his view, 'one can glean the social norms, attitudes and values of a people' (Okara cited in Ngugi 1994: 435). In undertaking this ambitious project, Okara created many successful lines: a small sample includes the moment when the village chief warns the hero, Okolo, 'Let me give you some teaching words ... Asking the bottom of things in this town will take you no place. Hook this with your little finger. Put it into your inside's box and lock it up' (p. 36). In a similar stylistic vein, after his banishment from the village, Okolo encounters a policeman in the capital city, to whom he tries to report a crime: 'down went the constable's eyebrows to his nose and up they went again into the peak of his cap. Then his mouth hardened stonelike' (p. 78). Many more ebullient, evocative, and comic descriptions can be found in *The Voice*. Okara's style helps to convey the character and perceptions of the hero in his quest for the elusive, metaphysical quality simply named 'it'.

African critics have been rather less sympathetic, however: *The Voice*, writes Nigerian scholar Charles E. Nnolim, is 'an unsuccessful attempt by an educated writer to use the language of the illiterate' (1989: 55). Another Nigerian commentator, the poet and playwright J. P. Clark Bekederemo, criticized Okara's effort to transplant Ijaw syntax into English: Clark Bekederemo promotes 'transfusion as opposed to transplantation' in its place (Fraser, 1986: 189). Okara's stylistic decisions in *The Voice* highlight the immense difficulty of an African author's effort to transfer local vernacular voices into English-language texts, a difficulty encountered by Soyinka in his translation of Fagunwa's work (see Chapter 5). 'Nothing is so distracting as the whimsical, undigested use of the oral tradition in current African writing,' Lewis Nkosi complained of this type of work in 1981 (cited in Ezenwa-Ohaeto, 1998: 16–17). The problem was that, alongside the successful language quoted above, Okara decided that a pseudo-Elizabethan

English best conveyed the 'Ijawness' of his material. Many lines are composed in the following style, greatly derided by Okara's critics: 'his ears refuseth nothing, his inside refuseth nothing' (p. 24); 'Your spoken words I call nothing' (p. 25); 'Okolo by the window stood' (p. 26); 'Okolo at the palm trees looked' (ibid.). Paradoxically, his African characters become *more* rather than less anglicized as a result of this archaic language.

Perhaps this failure illustrates the drawbacks of Okara's choice to write a conventional novel, for every genre, whether it is primarily oral or written, has a distinctive history of its own. Literary genres are produced within specific social and political communities. Several scholars of African literature have argued that, of all the genres to be introduced in the colonial period, the novel was the most 'alien' form to enter the continent. Novels are 'a wholly imported form', states Dorothy Blair (1976: xi); 'the novel may be the genre that is most alien to African cultures' agrees Simon Gikandi, adding, 'but it is also the most amenable to representing the historical transformations and contradictions engendered by the colonial enterprise' (1991: 22). 'The form itself would seem to bear examination as a colonial creation', writes Graham Furniss, noting that in northern Nigeria in the 1930s 'there were ambivalent reactions to [this] unfamiliar category of self-expression' (Furniss, 2002: 11; see also Larson [1971] 1972: 282).

With its historical roots in the rise of the European bourgeoisie and the expansion of European empires, the novel is a vehicle for what Terry Eagleton terms 'insistently real ... ideological practices' (1982: 17). West African authors who choose to write novels in English or French are therefore subject to the pressures and tensions of this history, including an immersion in the Euro-Christian tradition and the European literary canon. According to this view, texts which are orally performed in African vernacular languages are a great deal more 'local' in their origins and audiences than texts which are composed in ex-colonial languages, in keeping with European generic categories: as Ngugi suggests, the gulf between the two may be impossible to bridge (Ngugi, 1994; see Barber, 1997).

Okara's stylistic problems in *The Voice* might thus be regarded as the inevitable consequence of an African's decision to write an 'alien' or 'foreign' genre. It is possible, however, to see his 'failures' in a different light, for the *form* of Okara's novel continually draws attention to itself, taking priority over the content. Each burdensome line

deliberately highlights its own foreignness from the language in which it appears, insisting on its cultural specificity and difference from contemporary English. Okara's narrative makes a seminal point about the politics of writing and translation in West Africa. It is not simply a matter of the novel being an 'alien' genre in itself, inherently unsuitable to African literature: Eileen Julien has shown convincingly that such an assumption ignores the 'elasticity of art forms', which can 'adapt to historical periods and cultural contexts different from those of their origins' (1992: 28). Rather, Okara's style implies that the most deceptive and culturally fraudulent novels are those which are composed in the most fluent, smooth European prose. The narrator of *The Voice* refuses to translate smoothly between cultures, and he maintains a 'lumpy', self-conscious tone. He thus makes the ethical point that any effort to render African vernaculars into English must acknowledge areas of 'untranslatability' or cultural specificity.[3] As with the models of cultural identity explored at the start of this book, Okara seems to suggest that cultural disjuncture and difference are positive qualities, to be emphasized, not negative features to be ironed out and lost in translation.

The Voice directly challenges European literary history and the history of the novel in West Africa. With some notable exceptions—Kobina Sekyi's 1915 play, *The Blinkards* (1997), Gladys Casely Hayford's poems in Krio, *Take 'Um So* (1948), Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1952)—until the appearance of *The Voice* the majority of West African authors had tended to create 'African' atmospheres in three ways: first, by inserting untranslated words into otherwise fluent prose; second, by incorporating 'African' folktales into the narrative; and third, by adjusting the syntax to accommodate proverbs translated from the mother tongue. The themes and characters therefore became 'African' while the form, grammar, and narrators retained their European pedigrees. Even in the most nationalist, anti-colonial poems and novels of the 1960s and 1970s—from the work of Cheikh Hamidou Kane to Ousmane Sembene—the majority of narratives are composed in grammatically correct French or English, peppered with local words and names to create African effects.

In spite of the many stylistic flaws in *The Voice*, and the negative critical response it elicited, Okara's experiments with language and form can be seen to open up a new vernacular space in West African literature, paving the way for the English-language poets of the 1980s,

and for later experiments with grammar and syntax, including eastern Nigerian author Ken Saro-Wiwa's powerful novel in 'rotten English', *Sozaboy* (1985). Fluent in European languages and often highly critical of postcolonial regimes, these new postcolonial writers follow in Okara's footsteps and make use of established oral genres such as the praise-poem, the dirge, and the song of abuse. They have learned from Okara's mistakes, however, and their work seems to engage in what Charles Bodunde describes as acts of 'imaginative transfer' rather than the 'mere replication of forms' (2001a: 4).

8.2 The 'AlterNative' poets of the 1980s and 1990s: Niyi Osundare and Kofi Anyidoho

Among the many talented writers to emerge since the 1980s, two of the most outstanding are the Nigerian poet Niyi Osundare and the Ghanaian poet Kofi Anyidoho. The supposed boundaries between europhone and vernacular literature, and between oral and written genres, are challenged by these poets, who make use of African instrumentation, vernacular languages, and oral styles in their English-language work. Echoing the *négritude* poets, many of their poems contain instructions for 'oralizing' the form, requiring readers to imagine, if not actually to hear, 'cheerful drumming, with gangan (talking drum) in the lead, then the song: *Enia lasoo mi* | *Enia lasoo mi* ...' (Osundare, 2002: 3); or readers are asked to imagine 'solemn, almost elegaic tune[s]', which turn, mid-poem, to 'festive, louder' music as the message becomes more positive (Osundare, 'Our Earth Will Not Die', in Maja-Pearce, 1990: 140).

These younger poets also frequently stage and record live performances of their poetry, scripting drums, dancers, and local-language choruses into their verse. Confronting the problem faced by Okara and other first-generation authors, of 'how to write an oral culture' (Irele, 2001: 16), these writers look for ways to create a form of printed poetry that evokes sound and inspires the 'earwitness' without denying the status of the printed text (Anyidoho, 2002: 16). For, without music and oral performance, poems are regarded as locked in a suffocating space of print, or what Osundare refers to as 'the prison house | of the book', a bequest of colonialism which leaves the poet 's-c-r-e-a-m-i-n-g | for an exit' (Osundare, 2002: 15).

One solution to this sense of imprisonment is to make use of audio-visual technology and to issue sound-recordings with the printed book, reasserting the position of the poet as a 'cantor', as Anyidoho does in *PraiseSong for the Land: Poems of Hope and Love and Care* (2002). 'It has become obvious to me', he writes in his introduction to this collection, 'that the word as print can no longer carry the full burden of my voice' (p. 16). The CD which accompanies this volume successfully extends the printed poems and offers an exciting way out of the 'prison house | of the book'.

In his poems, Anyidoho makes use of Ewe songs of abuse as well as dirges, and incorporates Ewe symbols and metaphysical beliefs. 'Poetry is used very much to pull the reins in on the stupidity of individuals in their private or public life', he commented in an interview, establishing his right to sing songs of abuse in the manner of the performers discussed in Chapter 4 (1992: 13). Conscious perhaps of the cultural nationalists' nostalgia for a lost pre-colonial purity, he added, 'it's not that I long for these things in a kind of nostalgic way. These remain the basic realities of large numbers of populations' (ibid.). Anyidoho insists that the majority of people in West Africa continue to follow so-called 'traditional' beliefs and participate in traditional performance modes, including the licensed domain of abuse-songs. Colonialism did not displace pre-colonial culture, elbowing it aside in favour of European values; rather, in his view, African symbols, traditions, and metaphysical systems remained robust throughout the colonial period. While Christian missionaries did their utmost to desecrate African cultures, people survived by transforming their traditions to accommodate the new structures and, as a result, they retain remarkably resilient systems of symbols (ibid.).

Unlike their cultural nationalist predecessors, these poets celebrate cultural hybridity from a firm location within indigenous literary forms. Osundare in particular calls on multiple sources, forms, and languages, and 'his poetry is inevitably about crossing boundaries' (Brown, 1995: 71). He also makes use of local oral genres, especially, as Stuart Brown comments, 'both aspects of the praise-song tradition to genuinely praise the person ... or to be bitterly ironic in debunking the subject's hypocrisies' (1995: 70).

Osundare is a member of a loose confederation of writers known in Nigeria as the 'AlterNative' literary movement: they were named as such by the playwright and intellectual, Femi Osofisan, in an article

for the Nigerian *Guardian* (Brown, 1995). These Nigerian writers are inspired by fellow West African poets, including Atukwei Okai and Anyidoho from Ghana, and for that reason I have extended the term AlterNative to accommodate West African poets from further afield than Nigeria. While not forming a 'school' with a manifesto in the manner of the *négritude* poets, these writers share a left-wing orientation and a political agenda, and 'members' include Osundare, Osofisan, Odia Ofeimun, Tanure Ojaide, and other creative writers who deliberately evoke the oral and the 'native' in their work. Concerned to be answerable to the public in West Africa, these poets are, in the words of Osundare, 'ready to match accessible elegant style with relevant content', over and against 'the first generation of Nigerian poets [who] were poets of the ivory-tower, literary cultists who monologued to each other. The people wanted to see their image; the poets' mirrors were too high above their heads' (in Ezenwa-Ohaeto, 1998: 51).

In order to break the 'art for art's sake' notion which took hold of 'first-generation' poets in West Africa, the AlterNative poets adopt the role of African *griots*, performing their work aloud at festivals and public readings: theirs is an urgent project to lower the mirror from the heights described by Osundare, and to turn it upon ordinary local people. Their aim is to make poetry into 'confession, declaration, reflection, play, struggle, vision' with local relevance (Osundare, 1993: x). Thus Anyidoho insists that as a poet, 'you are more or less a spokesperson, you pass on certain messages, [for] ... you are part of a tradition' (1992: 11). Osundare agrees: he condemns 'the spineless apologia of that superstition called "pure poetry" and its escapist post-modernist pretensions' (1990b: vi). To this end, many of his poems revolve around farmers, market traders and urban labourers, and many of his poetic forms include recognizable Yoruba phrases and genres (Ezenwa-Ohaeto, 1998: 155). In a poem about the role of poets in contemporary society, 'Telling Gifts', he writes, 'This pen breaks bread with beggars | ... Stirs little storms in the stomachs of eating chiefs | Confronts the emperor with the monster in the mirror (Osundare, 2002: 7).

The term 'AlterNative' captures the political energy and tensions in contemporary West African literatures better than the term 'post-colonial'. 'Alter' is Latin for other; it also means 'to make otherwise or different, to modify, to undergo change'. Combining both otherness

and agency, both domination and acts of resistance, 'alter' is a more positive concept than the notion of otherness, discussed in Chapter 2. Indeed, where Frantz Fanon felt himself tumbling into a void of absolute Otherness under the pressure of a white child's gaze, the AlterNative writers acknowledge their alterity but seek to alter their conditions.

'Native' contains a similarly productive matrix of meanings, signifying both belonging and enslavement. A 'native' is born in a particular place, but may not be 'aboriginal'; a native is an 'original' or 'natural' inhabitant of a country which is colonized by foreigners. To be a native, however, also carries connotations of slavery and savagery. For example, in colonial discourse, the word 'native' tended to signify all that was not European, functioning in the same way as the word 'tribal' in contemporary discourse. In British West Africa during the high period of colonialism in the 1920s and 1930s, the 'educated native' was regarded by conservatives as a dangerous anomaly, one in whom western literacy combined with African savagery in a potentially explosive mixture (see Newell, 2002). Above all, the word 'native' represents an idea about origins: to be part of an *alter*-native movement, therefore, is to propose, subversively, that there is another 'origin' to the one promoted by the dominant power.

A final and important set of definitions can be applied to the full word 'alternative'. Unlike 'postcolonial' which, as we saw at the start of this book, sometimes signifies a linear movement from the 'pre-' towards the 'post-', 'alternative' indicates oscillation between positions, turning and returning rather than linear succession, a continual dynamic thrust from one term to the other. Perhaps most powerfully for the West African writers discussed above, alternative means 'purporting to represent a preferable and cogent alternative to that of the established social order' (*OED*). The AlterNative writers therefore encapsulate the tensions of writing against the postcolonial regime in the context of colonial history; they represent the effort to be a 'native' without otherness or slavery; they present the difficulty of asserting a political position that is resistant and radical without being reactionary or assimilated by the dominant power; and they demonstrate the effort to revisit home-grown ancestral values in the full knowledge that postcolonial history *prevents* a simple 'return to sources'. The splitting of 'alternative' into its component parts, and their reconnection again, produces all these meaningful tensions

and ironies: always more than the sum of its parts, the word has great political potential, and its productive splitting perfectly captures the complexity of the West African writer's position, most especially when that writer chooses to work in the ex-colonial language.

The AlterNative poets of West Africa are highly politicized critics of the postcolonial regimes in their respective countries. Charles Bodunde associates this with their conscious and strategic adoption of 'the voice of the traditional minstrel whose art is an expression of the people's social and historical experiences' (2001a: 129; see also Okpewho, 1988). Many West African writers claim to share this vital aesthetic framework with oral practitioners. As Chinweizu and his colleagues put it in 1983, 'The function of the artist in Africa, in keeping with our traditions and needs, demands that the writer, as a public voice, assume a responsibility to reflect public concerns in his writings, and not preoccupy himself with his puny ego' (p. 252). Rejecting modernism and postmodernism as narcissistic, over-intellectual, and downright neo-colonial in an African setting, these polemical critics turn instead to *griots* for models of African authorship. Whether or not they concur with these prescriptive pronouncements—the target for attack in this instance is Wole Soyinka—numerous West African writers agree with this description of the role of the writer: 'The West ... can afford to play games with everything', commented the Ghanaian poet Atukwei Okai, 'but in Africa everything has a role to play. An African painter is always throwing stones at something, even when he paints a flower' (cited in Deandrea, 2002: 124). Deploying the very feature of orality to have caused its greatest criticism by European scholars, its historical flexibility, Anyidoho also hails the ability of oral literature 'to update the past, to make the past alive and relevant to the present, and its ability to project the present into the future' (cited in Deandrea, 2002: 138).

In addition to these oral influences, Anyidoho and Osundare both move around a wider West African '-scape' involving disaporan black art forms and an engagement with slave history. Both poets find inspiration in the emphasis upon the *word* in African-American and Caribbean cultures, and their performances reverberate with 'Black Atlantic' cultural forms such as jazz, rap, dub, and street-shout. Osundare and Anyidoho confront the legacy of dispossession which gave rise to these cultural forms in the Black Atlantic world. Their engagement with African orality must therefore include the

'orality' of this wider slave-scape, with which Anyidoho has claimed strong 'natural affinities and shared concerns' (1992: 15). 'For Five Hundred Years and More we have | journeyed into various spaces of the Earth', he intones: 'There is something of Our-Story | something of our Mystery | carved into every TombStone | in all the Graveyards of the World' (2002: 23). Similarly, Osundare writes:

> I met History
> In a diaspora of voices
> Raw, deep, insistent
> Beyond recounting!
>
> (2002: 97)

In their critical and academic work, as well as in their poems, both Anyidoho and Osundare acknowledge the powerful presence of an African slave-scape. As a result, both writers forge connections with Caribbean writers, particularly the poet and pan-Africanist intellectual, E. Kamau Brathwaite. Osundare's *Moonsongs* opens with Brathwaite's words: 'I must be given words to refashion futures like a healer's hand' (in Maja-Pearce, 1990: 142). So powerful is this 'Black Atlantic' bond that Anyidoho dedicated his keynote lecture at the 2004 African Studies Association conference to Brathwaite. Revealingly, this lecture was entitled, 'Playing GOD with WORD: LANGUAGE and POWER of SELF-NAMING', and focused on the connections between language, history, and black identity (2004; emphasis retained).

While the AlterNative poets share an anti-colonial orientation with their predecessors, they seem to be more suspicious of 'authenticity' as a concept, more alert to the dangers of nostalgic discourses which revolve around ideas of pre-colonial cultural, oral or ethnic purity. By and large, they do not attempt to 'retrieve' or 'revive' pristine oral forms in their work, preferring to playfully manipulate European and vernacular genres. 'I'm trying to show my people that you can be born in one room of the house but you use all the rooms', said Okai in an interview with Deandrea, explaining that 'you can be born in one so-called ethnic group but you embrace all the cultures' (Deandrea, 2002: 126). Okai's image of African identity as a many-roomed house echoes Aidoo's description of orality as 'multi-this and multi-that' (op. cit.).

In this chapter I hope to have reinforced the point made in Chapter 4 that we should not read contemporary West African literature for signs of an essential orality. What is more important, as Eileen Julien argues, is the textual *accountability* of a particular work (1992: 155). If the primacy of a text's 'oral roots' is replaced with a vision of its accountability, then each oral-seeming text can be seen, not as 'the concrete literary simulacrum of African essence', but as 'a manifestation of social consciousness, vision, and possibility' (Julien, 1992: 155). Given the political and ethical commitment of Osundare, Anyidoho, and the other AlterNative writers in West Africa, Julien's model provides a great deal more flexibility for literary analysis than the old sparring match between orality and writing. The AlterNative poets themselves provide the incentive for this abandonment of the old dichotomy, for they acknowledge their debt to 'the oral poetic tradition', but define the *griot* as a poet who engages dynamically with the present, globalized world in a series of 'rooted voyagings' (Osundare, 1993: x).

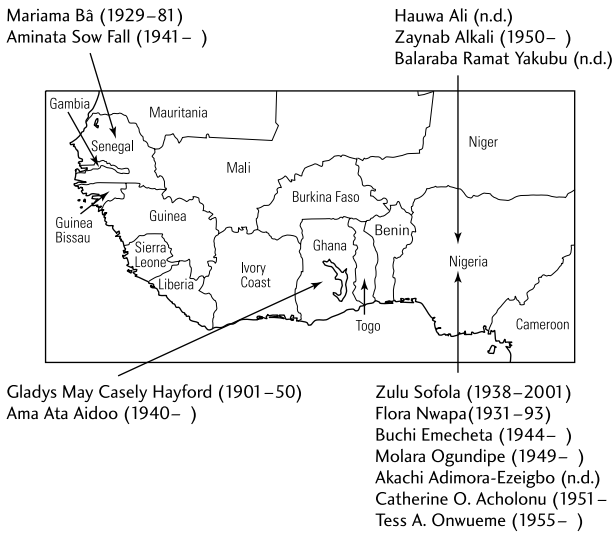
9

Feminism and the Complex Space of Women's Writing

> There can be no agreement on who is the authentic 'African woman', not even among African women. That is just as well, and truly healthy and liberating, for all women are not one.
>
> (Oduyoye, 1995: 13)

This chapter revolves around a tension, for as Mercy Amba Oduyoye observes, above, there is no 'authentic "African woman" ' available for isolation and discussion as a singular entity: as she says, 'all women are not one' (ibid.). Nevertheless, Oduyoye's refusal of African women's singularity occurs in a book entitled *Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy* (1995), in which she addresses women's shared positionality *as women* and the ways in which they have been (mis)represented in patriarchal African discourses. Similarly, in focusing on West African women's writing and on themes relating to gender, this chapter does not claim for women a distinctive political agenda, nor an exclusive absorption with gender issues over and above other literary themes. Until now I have not isolated women's creativity from men's, preferring to set men's and women's writing in the context of a wide range of different '-scapes' and topics. Yet gender surfaces as a definitive category in much West African writing, and women writers express special urgency in representing the lives of women. For that reason, this chapter takes womanhood as its starting point for, as indicated in my discussion of popular literature, men and women frequently adopt gendered positions in relation to one another, and intervene in debates from gender-specific points of view.

In the pages that follow I offer several close readings of African women's texts and ask for their writing to be read as 'fictionalized



Map 9 Feminism

theory', or as 'theorized fiction' (Nfah-Abbenyi, 1997: 10, 20). In different ways, the writers selected for discussion make use of fictional narrative to engage in a dynamic process of contestation and negotiation with gender and meaning. Many use the novel to propose new ways of perceiving womanhood in their societies and thus generate a gender-scape for the circulation of African women's perspectives. Diverse marital scenarios are explored by these novelists, ranging from balanced, egalitarian relationships involving mutual respect, through to the unhappy marriages of women whose husbands expect them to conform to the most limiting definitions of wifehood. As we shall see, their themes and political views cannot be synchronized. Nevertheless, what these authors seem to share with one another is a concern to portray the *processes* whereby women are socialized: rather than simply representing the mother as a 'natural' woman, or a national icon, many of these writers count the costs and the benefits of such cultural ideals.

9.1 Theorizing African women's writing

In the 1980s and 1990s, several feminist literary critics targeted male African writers—with the exception of Ousmane Sembene—for their production of submissive, passive female characters who hovered silently in the background of narratives as wives and mothers, rarely participating in the resistance to colonialism (Stratton, 1994; Ogundipe, 1994). In the view of the most forceful critics, such images fed into a patriarchal discourse which excluded women from positions of power in postcolonial Africa.[1] Moreover, as several African feminist historians observed, such images also misrepresented West African women's roles for, from Senegal in the west to Nigeria and Cameroon in the east, the region's history is saturated with examples of assertive and outspoken women: these women are not simply outstanding exceptions to a prevailing masculine leadership rule but are common, ordinary women, inheritors to a long history of female political and economic power stretching back through the centuries to legendary figures like Inkpi and Moremi (see Amadiume, 1987; Awe, 1992; Mba, 1992).

The male-dominated academic establishment in Africa fared little better than the authors when put under the scrutiny of feminist critics, for since the establishment of 'African Literature' as a field of study, male literary critics have tended to marginalize women's writing and to dismiss foundational texts like Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* (1966) as trivial, 'domestic' novels with no place in the region's literary canon (see e.g., Ojo-Ade, 1983).[2] By the early 1990s, feminist commentators were in agreement that for too long African literature had worn a masculine mask, operating to the disadvantage of women by rendering them invisible, or homogeneous, or voiceless. 'The nostalgic songs dedicated to African mothers which express the anxieties of men concerning Mother Africa are no longer enough for us', stated the Senegalese novelist Mariama Bâ, adding that the 'Black woman in African literature must be given the dimension that her role in the liberation struggles next to men has proven to be hers' (cited in Innes, 1991: 129). Since Bâ's comments in the early 1980s, literary scholars have shown increasing interest in African women's writing, studying the ways in which 'female identity' is constructed, and analysing the distinctive themes that characterize women's creative writing, including motherhood, female infertility, women's relationship to nationalist discourses, domestic violence, and the

education of girls (Wilentz, 1992; Boyce Davies, 1994): as increasing numbers of women writers have come to the fore, however, the unity conferred on African women by this summary of themes frequently falls apart.

The critical consensus in the 1980s and 1990s was that West African women 'wrote back' to male nationalist texts, correcting men's stereotypes of women in an echo of the manner in which African nationalists contested and corrected colonial misrepresentations of themselves (see Nasta, 1991). Just as Achebe struggled for 'presence' against the distorting inscriptions of Africa by imperial writers, so too women engaged in the project of 'recreating ourselves' from the mass of existing (mis)representations of women in West African literature (Ogundipe, 1994). Unsurprisingly perhaps, the titles of critical studies and anthologies of women's writing reflected the prevailing perception that women were marginalized from mainstream cultural and literary debates: in Nigeria alone, for example, publications included titles such as *Breaking the Silence* (Adewale and Segun, 1996) and *Beyond the Marginal Land* (Opara, 1999).

West African women's writing is of course a great deal more heterogeneous than is implied by this brief summary of feminist literary scholarship, and the reaction against African masculinities is by no means the sole motivation of women writers in West Africa. In order to accommodate the diversity of texts by women, and the plurality of discourses contained in their work, it is necessary to acknowledge gender without reproducing the reductive polarization of men from women. The complex field of writing and representation cannot be reduced to biological sex: rather, we require a model which appreciates the subtlety and nuances of West African women's writing while recognizing their positionality as women within the social and ideological formations—the '-scapes'—of their communities.

A useful model is provided by Carole Boyce Davies in *Black Women, Writing and Identity* (1994). She argues that the most creative and disturbing discourses are those which occur 'outside' dominant ideologies and genres, those which are as yet barely heard, which rise 'upward and outward from constructed and submerged spaces' in western metropolitan centres (1994: 108–12). 'Uprising textualities', she continues, are those which signify 'resistance, reassertion, renewal and rethinking', and these qualities characterize black women's writing in Africa and the diaspora (pp. 108–9). For Boyce Davies,

'uprising narratives' are those which are positioned on the outskirts of the dominant (white, patriarchal, Eurofeminist) culture: these forms and genres have not assimilated Western hegemonic ideologies, nor have they been silenced by anti-feminist critics (p. 108). This argument is persuasive, not least because black women's differences from men are accounted for by Boyce Davies in terms of their social experiences and access to power, rather than in terms of their symbolic or biological status as mothers.[3] On another level, this model allows for women's uprisings against the concept of gender itself, which tends to 'stick' to women and limit the more radical possibilities of their work (Boehmer, 2005).

West African women writers share a range of themes and settings with their male colleagues. Thus 'precolonial' and 'traditional' rural settings recur in women's writing: among many others, Flora Nwapa (1966), Ama Ata Aidoo (1970), Tess Onwueme (1997) and Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo (1996) all fill out history with portraits of empowered, economically independent women from the pre-colonial and early colonial periods. As with Sekyi, Senghor, Achebe and Soyinka, when they choose these 'traditional' settings, women writers 'defend African values' in a similar manner to male cultural nationalists. The striking difference, however, is that when they imagine 'traditional' Africa, women writers tend to abandon the Mother Africa icon that permeated male cultural nationalist discourse, in favour of portraits of women as heterogeneous social actors (see Boehmer, 1991; 2005).

9.2 Women writers from Islamic West Africa

Many West African women writers—including, most recently, Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in *Purple Hibiscus* (2004)—question the fixity of gender roles and shift the terms of popular debates about gender towards the discussion of personal fulfilment. Interestingly, more than any other group of authors, Islamic women writers focus on this topic of individual fulfilment, exploring the necessity for young women to expand their range of choices and to decrease their financial dependence upon husbands.

Internationally, the best-known women writers from Islamic West Africa are the two francophone authors, Mariama Bâ (1929–81) and Aminata Sow Fall (1941–) from Senegal, and the two anglophone

authors, Hauwa Ali (n.d.) and Zaynab Alkali (1950–) from northern Nigeria. Locally, large numbers of Muslim women writers have risen to fame, especially in northern Nigeria where the popular *soyyaya* literature has transformed the profile of Hausa-language literature, introducing love stories and domestic dilemma tales into the public sphere (see Whitsitt, 2002; Larkin, 2002). Some authors, such as Hauwa Ali and Zaynab Alkali, always write from an *unmarried* young woman's point of view, portraying schooling as the gateway to a successful, stimulating future; others, such as Mariama Bâ and many of the *soyyaya* authors, offer narratives that are more complicated than Ali's and Alkali's fables of emancipation, presenting a wider, more ideologically diverse array of female characters, ranging from the mature Islamic widow to the unmarried, westernized young woman who remains a Muslim but violates social conventions (see Bâ, 1981).

Most importantly for their Muslim readers, all of these authors work *within* Islamic codes of behaviour for, as Novian Whitsitt says, many Islamic women writers seek 'to alter cultural interpretations of certain Qur'anic codes of behaviour' and 'call for social change and female empowerment ... within the sanctions of Islamic doctrine' (2002: 121). Moreover, in a move which counters the popular representation of Islam and veiling as oppressive to women, these authors often present educated, devout heroines who enter romantic liaisons without leaving Islam behind, or who gain power within their marriages and are not afraid to separate from abusive, polygynous husbands. For these authors, the genre of the romantic novel has become what Whitsitt terms 'an explorative forum for the socially and culturally loaded issues of polygamy, marriages of coercion, *purdah* ... and accessibility of education for females' (2002: 119).

The debate about a woman's right to choose her marriage partner, so dominant in Onitsha market literature in 1960s Nigeria (see Chapter 7), has found its way north and set up residence in Islamic literature, infusing popular Hausa-language texts as well as English-language poetry and prose (Whitsitt, 2002). One particular example of the ideological complexity of Islamic literature will form the focal point of this chapter, for in *Destiny* (1988), Hauwa Ali explores the tensions between her adolescent heroine's liberation from the family through education, and the marriage her family has arranged to an ugly but wealthy old-aged man. The senior man, Wali, is described on the back cover as a monstrous partner, a 'super-rich, arrogant playboy who is

over twice her age'; but he will, we are informed, guarantee the social status and 'financial security' of Farida's extended family. This plot formula remains resonant for West African women readers in societies where arranged marriages are still practised, or have been widely practised until recently. Ali's novel plays out a key debate in Islamic West Africa, widely aired on radio programmes and in creative writing by women and men, about a Muslim girl's right to choose her own partner without obtaining parental consent (see Imam, 1991; Pittin, 1983).

Romantic love is inseparable from women's formal education in Ali's novel, and it is disconnected from the Islamic faith which conditions the attitudes of the other characters in the heroine's community. Indeed, the teacher training college where the heroine completes her education is presented as a non-Islamic space in which her romantic fantasies and desires can be freely enacted and indulged. It is here that the figure of her ideal husband, Farouk, materializes like a fairy-tale prince, remaining at the forefront of her mind for the duration of the novel.

In *Destiny*, the school represents a cultural and ideological counterpoint to the heroine's Islamic home: the woman produced by the education system is neither promiscuous nor fickle, but radically disorientated in her range of cultural loyalties and contradictory identities. For example, in the opening chapter, Farida and Farouk undergo a symbolic European marriage in the end-of-term play at the school, *The Sound of Music* : here the Muslim heroine plays the role of Christian nun-turned-bride, standing beside Farouk, who plays the white bridegroom (1988: 5). Operating within this western and Christian romantic discourse, Farouk's love for Farida is expressed through gifts of red roses and greetings cards illustrated with roses (pp. 14, 34); and Farida's longing is epitomized by the rose garden she escapes into to think, all alone, about love (1988: 21, 31).

This economy of love evokes Moghul poetry, where roses are a motif, but in textual terms it is distinctly European, containing quotations from a wide variety of Western romantic narratives, most especially *The Sound of Music*, which structures the entire text. Farouk's and Farida's love is expressed through red roses, which symbolize the spiritual, chivalric quality of their love, set in opposition to the more 'African', traditional money-gifts and jewels bestowed on Farida's family by Wali as part of the bride-price (see Kassam, 1997: 122). Through roses, the young man is positioned as an ideal partner—in

European terms at least—counterpoised to Wali as the old man's extreme opposite. Thus, Farouk features in the narrative as an embodiment of the heroine's conflict of loyalties. Through him, Farida is torn between (western) romantic love and (African) familial duty; through him, the author stages the psychological transformations that young women undergo in a non-Islamic education system that is located in an Islamic community; and his presence creates a near-tragedy for a heroine who exists within a system of 'traditional' Hausa marriage practices.

The themes and characters in *Destiny* clearly echo those to be found in Nigerian market literature, which circulated in southern and eastern areas in the 1950s and 1960s (see Chapter 7). Generational conflict is the principal theme in this long-standing canon of literature: again and again since the 1950s, West African literature has included scandalous scenes where educated heroines expose the outmoded attitudes of their elders, and speak in 'romantic' languages which dumbfound their seniors. Age hierarchies are inverted in this carnivalesque, ongoing celebration of the power gained by newly educated youths who have achieved a measure of financial and geographical independence from the family.

Francophone and anglophone Islamic women writers inherit this configuration of West African themes, debates, and character types, but a major difference emerges in the degree of respect that is accorded to the Islamic family. The hilarious insults and slapstick routines with ignorant 'chiefs' and *Al-hajis* in Onitsha pamphlets are replaced, in Islamic women's writing, by a respectful portrayal of the Muslim practice of arranging liaisons at a daughter's birth. Thus, while Wali is clearly a stock figure in *Destiny*, stereotyped according to the best conventions of popular literature, the Islamic 'traditionalists' surrounding Farida are not cast in a way that allows readers simply to criticize and dismiss Islamic patriarchy. For example, when an old woman advises Farida to be obedient and conformist, she is not set up as an ignorant old conservative, but as someone who is 'known in the town for her kindness, compassion and benevolence' (1988: 26). Nor is the heroine's romantic attitude supported unambiguously in the narrative, for Farida is often described as 'innocent and naïve' (p. 18).

To some critics, the large numbers of female-authored romances circulating around Islamic West Africa indicate that there may be a

degree of 'subversive, transformative, and even revolutionary potential' in what is typically regarded, in the west, as one of the most conservative and patriarchal of literary genres (Alidou, 2002: 147; see Radway, 1987). In his study of *soyyaya* literature in northern Nigeria, for example, Novian Whitsitt observes that the Hausa-language romantic novel 'indirectly and candidly questions the gender status quo and works to modify the social, familial, and educational position of Hausa women' (2002: 119). Ali's novel problematizes this 'revolutionary' impact of the romance, however, for although Farouk is portrayed as a suitable husband, contrasted with the grotesque figure of the prearranged partner, he is a rose-*tainted* rather than a rose-tinted hero: he is a romantic hero in strictly non-Islamic terms. By contrast, the novel is peppered with mature Islamic authority figures who advise the heroine to submit and adhere to her faith. These figures are drawn from Hausa popular tradition and echo the character types in *soyyaya* literature (Whitsitt, 2002; Larkin, 2002). Except for Mrs Attah, Farida's favourite tutor who endorses the romance (1988: 14–18), none of the adult women favours a break with Islamic custom. Instead, they present the marriage to Wali as ordained by Allah: it is the heroine's destiny. 'Allah knows best,' says Farida's aunt. 'It's only He who knows who will marry whom ... it is Allah who controls our destinies' (1988: 34); 'pray to Allah', says Farida's close friend, 'Only God knows why things have turned out this way for you' (1988: 86; see Kassam, 1997). For Farida, too, when she eventually becomes the old man's wife, deprived of self-determination, Allah is viewed as the father of hope and the controller of feminine desire in much the same manner as Ramatoulaye's view of Allah in *So Long a Letter*. In this way, the critical perception that the romance may serve a 'radical' or feminist purpose for Islamic women writers is moderated by their careful negotiation of values around the romantic scenes. Farida's isolation and despair are explored sympathetically by Ali, who, like Mariama Bâ in *So Long a Letter*, highlights the contradictions of educating young women into intellectual independence before they are 'mesmerized ... into submission' to husbands who oppose female education (1988: 54).

In a similar manner to Ali, Mariama Bâ carefully separates her critique of Islamic abuses of power from the heroine's faith in Allah. In *So Long a Letter* (1987), the space she locates for the liberation of Islamic women occurs *within* the faith, which sustains Ramatoulaye during her statutory period of mourning and contemplation.

Ramatoulaye makes regular obeisance to Allah in the novel, calling on Him for strength in her time of moral struggle and reflection. It may appear ironic to non-Muslim critics that the heroine's struggles include areas that might be perceived as critical of Islam, especially the way men and women exploit legal provisions made under Islamic law, such as the inheritance of a man's widows by his brother, the division of a dead man's property to the exclusion of his widow, and polygynous, arranged marriages between older men and young women who are withdrawn from school in order to embark on loveless unions. It is necessary to emphasize, however, that as with her compatriot Ousmane Sembene, 'it is not religion, but morally corrupt religious leaders that inspire … contempt' (Jones, 2000: 121). Human abuses of Islamic law are thus carefully separated from the divinity and the faith in Bâ's writing.

As an instance of 'West African women's writing', *So Long a Letter* is a particularly rich and complex text: Bâ's epistolary novel has attracted extensive critical attention ranging from deconstructive analysis (Nnaemeka, 1990; Walker, 1996) to feminist emancipatory criticism (Busia, 1991) and masculinist reactionary writing (Ojo-Ade, 1982; Umunnakwe, 1994). This enormous variety of readings and theoretical positions demonstrates that no simple or singular realm of women can be extracted from the novel. In a similar manner to Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, *So Long a Letter* seems to be 'open' in a way that invites and produces continual critical reassessments of its values, and as a consequence scholars seem unwilling to put it down.

So Long a Letter reveals a potential problem with ways of reading which adhere to particular ideologies, whether they be feminist, Marxist, Islamist, or Liberal. The problem is that without informed, detailed cultural and contextual information about Senegalese (post)colonial history, one can all too easily apply *any* of these ideological frameworks to novels that are as 'open' as Bâ's. Alternatively, in attempting to avoid this radical openness, one can fall into the trap of taking the social realm produced within the text to represent the 'real' of the society from which the author originates. This latter mode of reading African literature provided the impetus for Christopher Miller to write his book, *Theories of Africans* (1990), which promotes careful anthropological and historical contextualization, and it prompted Graham Huggan (2001) to write his own book opposing the construction of the 'anthropological exotic' by literary critics (see Chapter 6). Such a

mode of reading is particularly attractive to scholars who wish to extract African female identities and social values from a text.

At times, Bâ's novel seems to invite the reader to take a particular ideological thread from the text at face value, to the exclusion of other, contradictory threads. The following passage from the English translation of *So Long a Letter* provides a powerful explanation for why critics might be tempted to take this approach. Ramatoulaye writes to her friend:

> Aissatou, I will never forget the white woman who was the first to desire for us an 'uncommon' destiny. Together, let us recall our school ... To lift us out of the bog of tradition, superstition and custom, to make us appreciate a multitude of civilizations without renouncing our own, to raise our vision of the world, cultivate our personalities, strengthen our qualities, to make up for our inadequacies, to develop universal moral values in us: these were the aims of our admirable headmistress.
>
> (1987: 14–15)

How should we interpret this passage, which seems to position the narrative in a pro-colonial framework and acts as tempting bait to critics with a Eurocentric and anti-Islamic bias? Is the passage to be interpreted as a promotion of Western education as a tool to 'liberate' African women from 'the bog of tradition, superstition and custom' (ibid.)? Can we not read this passage at least in part as an ironic parody of colonial discourse, the clue to which is the heroine's apparent mimicry of colonial descriptions of Africa? Or can the passage be regarded as an ambivalent statement, containing both a parody of colonial attitudes and also a promotion of the colonial education system? *So Long a Letter* is full of such ideologically 'tricky' or 'two-faced' quotations, which reveal the complexity of the social domain as it is constructed in literary texts, especially in texts written by authors located within the social formations they fictionalize.

The complications produced by *So Long a Letter* reveal that perhaps the most sensible route towards the interpretation of West African women's writing is a combination of close reading with other contextual tools. Thus, historical information about French educational policy in colonial Senegal, and biographical information about Bâ's religious identity, would help us to avoid an over-ideological, or anti-Islamic reading of the above passage. Similarly, an awareness of debates about the education of girls in Senegal at the time when Bâ

wrote her novel in the late 1970s would help to stabilize the problematic passage and to place it in a dynamic sociological framework. Models for this type of analysis can be found in the work of Kenneth Harrow (1991; 1996) and Ousseina Alidou (2002) on Islamic West African literature. In their own ways, both critics place their chosen authors within local cultures and aesthetic frameworks without superimposing a particular gender politics on them, or reducing writers to mere 'products' or 'mirrors' of their contexts or gender ideologies.

The heroines in Islamic women's writing raise important questions about art, interpretation, faith, and politics as well as about a woman's personal freedom and rights within marriage. Writers such as Ali and Bâ retreat from a vehement critique of Islam, however: indeed, both authors fill their novels with examples of senior married women who suffer in silence, or who advise protagonists to 'forget about all our dreams and aspirations' (Ali, 1988: 86). Through these female characters, the authors problematize the process whereby girls are socialized into wifehood, and expose the ways in which the 'good Muslim wife' is produced, often against her explicit desires. The elite English- and French-speaking Islamic women discussed in this section seem, in their creative writing, to be demanding choice for their heroines without removing them from the Islamic faith. While they are perhaps a little more assertive in their critique than African-language authors, their work remains positioned within Islam, sharing a space with *soyyaya* literature and other popular Islamic texts.[4]

African women's writing is often regarded as part of an African gender-scape which is inherently oppositional and resistant to structures of domination (Boyce Davies, 1994; Wilentz, 1992). As a consequence, to outside commentators literature by Muslim women often appears to be ambiguous or conservative in its social agenda, holding back from proposing radical reform and remaining within potentially oppressive domestic structures. While undoubtedly there are many oppressive practices against Muslim girls and women in different parts of West Africa—including restricted access to lucrative forms of labour, and limited access to the cash economy and inherited wealth (Coles and Mack, 1991: 14)—to focus solely on such practices ignores the reasons why a woman might choose to remain a Muslim, or to gain power and status as a writer working within her current situation. One of the most popular and outspoken *soyyaya* authors in northern Nigeria, the self-confessed feminist Balaraba Ramat Yakubu,

declared in an interview that she 'agrees with everything Islam decrees, without trying to make any alterations to it, given that it protects the freedom and rights of women' (Whitsitt, 2002: 122). Yakubu's novels meet the demands of diverse constituencies of readers, ranging from the conservative to the feminist.[5] The analysis of Ali's *Destiny* and Bâ's *So Long a Letter* in this chapter reveal a similar array of 'multiple allegiances' to those espoused by Yakubu, for the Islamic woman writers discussed here work within the value systems of their societies in order to contest, resist, criticize, or affirm the role of women without attempting to remove Muslim women from the faith (see Whitsitt, 2002).

9.3 **Feminism**

Women's engagement with gender and power in West African literature is not simple or comfortable, and of the many '-isms' to circulate around the region, 'feminism' is probably the most contested and problematic of them all. Almost every social group in West Africa—from taxi drivers and market traders to radio commentators, students and intellectuals—participates in ongoing, often heated debates about the relevance of 'feminism' to Africa, and about African women's rights and roles. These debates are guaranteed to arouse intense feelings in the media and have provided the subject matter for extended debates about female independence on the social pages, women's pages and letters pages of West African newspapers (see Gadzekpo, 2006; Oduyoye, 1995).

The public discussion of feminism is inextricable from people's moral commentaries on postcolonial politics and personal morality. At different times in recent history, particular 'emancipated' social groups—single women, divorced or separated women, female sex-workers, and most especially young female graduates—have been isolated for moral criticism in the media, labelled 'women's libbers' and man-haters with no intentions of marriage (WIN, 1985). Of central concern in Nigeria in the early 1980s was the way in which an educated, independent-minded woman might 'seize power in the family and run the affairs of the home like a despot' (*National Concord*, 17 May 1980: 9). 'Most women do not take proper care of their children', concluded another report on educated women in the home (*Daily Times*, 18 March 1983). The 'moral depravity' of feminist

women was seen to be the cause of Nigeria's economic and cultural bankruptcy in the view of many male journalists throughout 1983 (see e.g. *Daily Times*, 2 March 1983: 7).

As one exasperated (and highly educated) female journalist commented, looking back on this discourse which ignored so much about women's social and economic roles, 'How does an extra-marital affair solve the ethnic question? In what way can the boy–girl relationship resolve the religious tension in the country? Can divorce prevent military intervention in our polity?' (*Daily Times*, 15 May 1990: 24). Perhaps the answers to her questions lie in the apparent coincidence between the most intense and sustained condemnations of 'feminist' women, and the most politically unstable periods of the region's postcolonial history. Facing censorship, financial insecurity, political authoritarianism, and government-led moral crusades against 'indiscipline' or 'corruption' in civil society, many West African male journalists resorted to an extreme form of gender conservatism. Thus, in Nigeria in the government-controlled newspapers of the early 1980s—a period marked by political instability and economic collapse—the failure of the state's social policies was often blamed on the 'fact' that 'most mothers have failed to abide with the good deeds and discipline which set standards for children to emulate' (*Daily Times*, 4 November 1983: 16). For other writers, responsibility for the national disaster was caused by 'ladies who parade on our streets [who] are either divorcees, distinguished armed robbers or never-marry-again ladies' (*Daily Times*, 18 March 1983: 16). In this way, political critique was played out on the bodies of women.

One consequence of this long history of suspicion towards 'women's libbers'—who tend to be conflated with sexually promiscuous and unmarried woman—is that many West African women 'deny being feminists or having anything to do with the ideology of feminism' (Ezeigbo, 1996: 1). As the Nigerian poet and feminist scholar Molara Ogundipe (also known as Ogundipe-Leslie) points out in annoyance, African men control the discussion of gender, and 'male ridicule, aggression and backlash have resulted in making women apologetic and have given the term "feminist" a bad name' (1987: 11). Women writers, she continues, must attempt to break free from the limited range of female stereotypes circulating in African popular and literary culture, and reinstate the story of 'being a woman in the real complex sense of the term' (1987: 8). Ogundipe's

concerns are amply illustrated in the work of literary and cultural critics: Charles E. Nnolim rails against 'The Nigerian Flora Nwapa, the Senegalese Mariama Bâ and the Egyptian Nawal el Saadawi—all are in league to push the tenets of feminism to scandalous, even criminal and murderous levels' (1999: 46). Similarly, the cultural nationalist commentator, Chinweizu, has contributed to the debate with his book, *Anatomy of Female Power* (1990), which also launches a hostile 'masculinist' attack on 'feminist' African women.

A short selection of quotations from the long catalogue of disavowals of feminism by African women writers and intellectuals indicates some of the problems perceived by women themselves. 'I'm not a feminist if that's what you mean', insisted the Northern Nigerian poet, Hauwa M. Sambo, when her interviewer remarked on the 'feminist' ideals in her work: 'I'm neither a feminist nor against feminism', she concluded ambiguously, indicating the irrelevance of the entire discourse to her work (Raji-Oyelade, 2004: 1). Similarly, the Nigerian dramatist, Tess Onwueme, whose controversial plays frequently revolve around women's issues, expressed 'strong dislike for western type feminism', labelling it a 'man-hating, family-wrecking ideology' (cited in Osundare, 2002: 70). 'I never considered and still do not consider myself a "feminist"', insisted the Ghanaian professor, Florence Abena Dolphyne, at the start of her book, *The Emancipation of Women: An African Perspective* (1991: xiii). Feminist demands for equality and parity with men are also regarded as unsuitable by the Nigerian playwright Zulu Sofola, for she pointed out that whereas 'in the European system there is absolutely no place for the women', in the African 'traditional system the roles are clearly demarcated' (1990: 150). Interestingly, even Mariama Bâ and Flora Nwapa, whose work and ideas often appear to be overtly 'feminist', dissociated themselves from this particular term (Ezeigbo, 1996). Other women whose writing has been associated with 'feminist rebellion' also question this label, including Ama Ata Aidoo and Buchi Emecheta (LaPin, 1984: 111; Emecheta, 1989: 19). While their literary texts produce meanings and gender identities that openly contest the authority of men, their ideological self-positioning involves a forceful repudiation of the one '-ism' that would seem the most appropriate to describe their work.

For Molara Ogundipe, whose voice is persistent and persuasive in this debate, such responses demonstrate the victory of a 'male-dominated'

and 'sexist' society which accuses 'women activists of being victims of western ideas and copycats of white women' (1990: 68). The Ghanaian feminist, Mercy Amba Oduyoye, agrees: 'the single woman who manages her affairs successfully without a man is an affront to patriarchy and a direct challenge to the so-called masculinity of men who want to "possess" her', she writes, insisting that '[s]ome women are struggling to be free from this compulsory attachment to the male' (1995: 5). These self-declared feminist commentators express frustration at the lack of support for an African feminist ideology through which women can struggle collectively against gender oppression in their societies.

Why should so many female creative writers take an anti-feminist standpoint when their books appear to sympathize with the ideals of feminism? As Kenneth Harrow asks, 'Why is it that whenever a feminist critique of African literature has been written for the past twenty years, it has seemed necessary to the author to apologize for the use of western feminist theory?' (2002: xi). Harrow's reference to 'western feminist theory' in fact provides the answer to his question, for what the discomfort with feminism reveals is that West African women writers do not operate outside existing social and ideological frameworks. As with the Islamic authors discussed in the previous section, their work might appear to be entering mainstream discourse from the 'margins' or the 'silent spaces' of the dominant culture, as literary scholars often suggest, but women writers share a degree of ideological involvement in the established values and debates about gender in their cultures: and revealingly, for many men and women in West African societies, feminism 'conjures up visions of aggressive women who try to be like men' (Adimora-Ezeigbo, 1996: 1).

Florence Abena Dolphyne voices the majority opinion when she states that the word feminism 'evokes for me the image of an aggressive woman who, in the same breath, speaks of a woman's right to education and professional training ... as well as a woman's right to practise prostitution and lesbianism' (1991: xiii). As a result of her association of feminism with promiscuity and homosexuality, Dolphyne develops a model for female emancipation based upon key differences between 'Western women, especially "feminists", and African women who are actively working for women's emancipation' (1991: xiii). Mary E. Modupe Kolawole also identifies western feminism with lesbianism and the rejection of motherhood, both of which

are 'completely strange to [African women's] world-view' (1997: 15; see also Amadiume, 1987).

Dolphyne's and Kolawole's comments reveal that the prevailing definition of feminism in West Africa takes the form of western 'radical feminism': this separatist and at times extreme moment in the western women's movement, occurring between the late 1960s and mid 1970s, often involved the promotion of lesbianism and utopian, women-only communities. As a result of the migration of this particular feminism into contemporary West African gender debates, 'feminism' as a whole has come to be associated with an ideology opposed to motherhood and heterosexual marriage. Clearly, these negative and at times homophobic associations cause a great deal of hostility towards feminism and lead, in Ogundipe's view at least, to the stigmatization of 'the most vocal and courageous who continue to talk and act socially and politically' (1990: 68). Given this context, it becomes much easier to understand how, despite her own careful self-positioning as a non-feminist, Flora Nwapa attracted considerable negative publicity when she commented in an interview that the central message of her writing was that 'there are a hundred and one other things to make you happy apart from marriage and children' (1990: 114–15; see Nnolim, 1999; Mojola, 1989).

9.4 **Beyond feminism**

The popular link between 'feminism' and excessive female sexuality has caused many West African women to take charge of their own naming practices in the effort to generate discourses and identities that are specifically 'African'. The rejection of feminism by West African women has opened up important spaces for the formation of locally situated gender theories which claim to be uninfluenced by Western ideas and are, therefore, more palatable to African cultural nationalists and local audiences. To this end, several new '-isms' have been generated or adapted by African gender theorists: the loss of feminism has opened up space for 'motherism', 'femalism', 'gynism', and 'gynandrism', amongst others (see Nnaemeka, 1997; Otukunefor and Nwodo, 1989; Acholonu, 1995; Kolawole, 1997). Also gaining popularity is a 'womanist' perspective, involving the adaptation of Alice Walker's theory of black women's identity to include an

affirmation of motherhood as the 'source of supreme power' (Osundare, 2002: 70; Kolawole, 1997).

The proliferation of terms besides feminism reveals the diversity of woman-centred theories currently under discussion in West Africa. The sheer abundance of new labels has attracted derision from some male critics (see Nnolim, 1999): however, they represent African women's sustained quest to establish new spaces for the expression of gender identities that are neither 'westernized' in their influences, nor complicit with the ways in which women have been idealized or stigmatized in African nationalist discourses. Forging a space for themselves outside western feminism, these gender theorists assert their cultural specificity as African women, emphasizing a common identity that is defined by its difference from women in 'the West'. Nevertheless, were one to turn to a non-radical definition of feminism, many of these writers and theorists would fit comfortably into an international model of a type of writing which 'clearly differ[s] from the work of male authors in dealing explicitly and self-consciously with the question of female identity' (Felski, 1989: 49); moreover, as with feminists worldwide, these writers and theorists clearly understand 'gender as a problematic category', and propose practical agendas to end 'women's subordinate position' (Felski, 1989: 14).

9.5 **The other Flora Nwapa: *One is Enough***

The Nigerian author Flora Nwapa (1931–93) is most famous for her first novel, *Efuru* (1966), which depicts village women's diverse ways of negotiating with rural Igbo gender roles. Working within established gender codes rather than rebelling against the role of wife, the heroine, Efuru, fails to keep successive husbands and, cursed with childlessness, finally enters the only identity remaining open to her, as a votary of the water goddess, Mami Wata. This ending is ambiguous, marked by Efuru's lament that the water goddess 'had never experienced the joy of motherhood' (p. 221), words which are taken up and ironized by Buchi Emecheta in *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979). In Nwapa's short novel, *One is Enough* (1981), however, another, rather different Nwapa emerges, rejecting husbands, celebrating the city, and unambiguously affirming single motherhood in an urban setting outside the bounds of marriage (see Ezeigbo, 1996).

One is Enough was published by Tana Press, the company Nwapa set up in 1977 to oversee the printing and distribution of her work within Nigeria. The novel, which sold 25,000 in its first year and another 25,000 the following year, has aroused increasing interest and controversy among literary critics for the manner in which it traces a path of female self-discovery which is oppositional, occurring outside heterosexual 'happy ever after' plots. The novel conforms to the model of the feminist *bildungsroman* as defined by Western literary scholars, charting one woman's journey away from restrictive gender roles. Whereas, on the first page, the heroine, Amaka, 'was going to show everybody that a woman's ambition was marriage, a home that she could call her own, a man she would love and cherish, and children to crown the marriage' (1981: 1), by the end she has found personal fulfilment in the realization that, 'as a wife, I am never free. I am a shadow of myself. As a wife, I am almost impotent. I am in prison, unable to advance in body and soul … I don't want to go back to my "wifely" days. No, I am through with husbands' (p. 127).

One is Enough cannot be read simply as a feminist *bildungsroman*, however, for when she is a wife, Amaka embodies most of the wifely virtues described in the opening section: an ambitious and successful entrepreneur in the marketplace, she is an obedient, loving wife within the home, who only fights back when provoked beyond reason. Amaka remains an uncomplaining partner for the duration of her marriage. Her moment of questioning occurs not so much in response to the duties required of a woman within marriage, but in response to the crisis brought about by the couple's childlessness. Her relationship is shown to founder on the same ground as Efuru's, in Nwapa's first novel. Unable to conceive after several years of marriage, both characters are effectively forced from their homes by intrusive female in-laws, who exercise socially sanctioned authority as mothers, influencing husbands to take 'outside wives' and prioritizing the interests of the patrilineage above the manifest virtues of the wife.

As in *Efuru*, *Idu* (1970), and Nwapa's other novels and short stories, in *One is Enough* 'barrenness' represents a crisis point in the domestic value system. It carries a dreadful plot in tow, and is employed by the author as a password into women readers' deepest anxieties about their bodily capacity to fulfil the role of wives. Having uttered the word 'barren', Nwapa's heroine enters a state of mental turbulence,

asking a series of challenging questions about herself and society: 'Was she useless to society if she were not a mother? Was she useless to the world if she were unmarried? Surely not … Was she unfulfilled because she had no child? Was a woman nothing because she was unmarried or barren?' (1981: 20–2). These questions are interrupted by a series of desperate plans, each representing a backward glance at women who achieve motherhood without complications: thus, Amaka considers adopting a child from Ghana or Zaire (D. C. R.), or asking one of her siblings to send over a child; she considers selecting and 'marrying' a young girl for her husband, or getting the maid impregnated by her husband and claiming the baby for herself (1981: 20–2). The heroine's moment of self-discovery, that she will 'find pleasure, even happiness in being a single woman' (p. 24), arises from the impracticality of each option she considers. Female infertility causes the collapse of the heroine's marriage, outweighing any other challenges to the husband's authority. Nwapa seems to be suggesting that motherhood *is* a cardinal role in Nigerian marriages. Desperate for children, her heroines willingly conform to all but the biologically determined role of mother. Ultimately they are shown to accept that, while there may be motherhood without marriage, there can be no successful marriage without biological motherhood.

Throughout her writing career, Nwapa returned repeatedly to the theme of childlessness, depicting the absence of real choices available to married women with no children. In Nigeria, Nwapa commented in an interview, 'you are oppressed at home, you are oppressed at work. Your husband oppresses you, your employer oppresses you and then your society piles upon you double, if not treble suffering' (1990: 114). Thus, in *One is Enough*, when Amaka chooses to escape to Lagos, she leaves behind a rigid domestic structure where a woman's role failure as a mother erases her achievements in all other fields. Upon arriving in Lagos, she joins the 'Cash Madam Club' in the city, becoming wealthy by exchanging her sexual services for lucrative contracts with top-level ministers. In Lagos, 'bribery and corruption [were] the order of the day', and Amaka 'was going to exploit the situation … She, Amaka, was going to tempt' (1981: 61, 53). Male military governors and chairmen of companies are shown to monopolize the national wealth, controlling the distribution of contract: they represent an exploitable economic resource for the female entrepreneurs, who use their 'bottom power' pragmatically with selected

officials. By changing her cultural and domestic environment, the heroine enters an alternative space outside marriage, in which the maternal function, while remaining a source of distress to her, no longer wholly defines her identity.

According to Gay Wilentz, all African women writers play a 'role in the community to maintain the cultural and moral order of the society' (1992: 5). Wilentz argues that the 'values of the community are stressed' in Nwapa's writing and, like her oral-storytelling foremothers, 'she passes on the life of her culture' (pp. 13, 19). Wilentz refers only to Nwapa's 'rural' or 'traditional' novels, *Efuru* and *Idu*, which should be contrasted with *One is Enough* where the female characters are ardent individualists and supporters of women's independence from the extended family. These autonomous Igbo women give the lie to the image of the 'authentic African woman' constructed by critics such as Kolawole and Wilentz in critical, theoretical, and literary discourse (Kolawole, 1997: 41–2). Nwapa's women have little sense of 'community' and they defy the homogenous category of 'authentic African woman'. Existing beyond conventional feminine roles, these city women aspire 'neither to be a wife any more, nor a mistress, or even a kept woman ... [they] wanted a man, just a man and ... to be independent of this man, pure and simple' (1981: 100). No narrator intervenes with moral warnings that will help to re-orientate the ideal woman towards marriage or what Wilentz idealistically refers to as the 'culture and spirit of the tribe' (Wilentz, 1992: 5, 13–19).

Some Nigerian critics have been shocked by Nwapa's Cash Madams, describing them as 'women devoid of moral values', living by 'avarice, selfishness, corruption and self-degradation for financial gratification' (Mojola, 1989: 22; see Nnolim, 1999). Mojola uses words with a high moral impact, such as 'debauchery' and 'self-degradation', while other critics use the language of filth and infestation (see Nnolim, 1999). In employing this language, West African critics extrapolate from the characters and use Nwapa's narratives to make their own moral critiques of urban Nigeria. By contrast, within the novel the Cash Madams remain powerful to the end, *without* a moralizing narrator offering interpretations of their behaviour. In fact, the omniscient narrator's occasional interpretations of the female characters relate to the political and social impact of the Biafran War upon Igbo communities, rather than the impact of promiscuous women upon the morals of urban Nigeria.

9.6 The Biafran War (1967–70)

The Nigerian Civil War features as a formative (and traumatic) moment in Nigerian literature, often endowed with far greater significance to Nigerian history and private life than colonialism.[6] After 1970, Nwapa's stories return repeatedly to the experiences of women during the civil war years, referred to by Nwapa as a period when young Igbo women were severed from their family ties and desocialized, disconnected from the moral lessons passed down through generations of foremothers (see Umeh, 1995: 26). As the narrator comments in *One is Enough*, the war forced women to survive by their wits alone: Igbo women participated in the 'attack trade', crossing front-lines to haggle with the enemy, bringing goods home to float in the scarcity economy; or they followed Biafran officers, offering them sexual 'gifts' in return for money and food (1981: 58).

If a moral lesson about women's sexual promiscuity is to be extracted from *One is Enough*, it is not that the 'emancipated' woman will receive her come-uppance for destabilizing men's marriages or exploiting her sugar-daddy. Contained in Nwapa's historical and political assessments of the war is the view that the blame for female 'immorality' in contemporary Nigeria can be traced directly back to the moral anarchy, displacements, and political instabilities brought about by the Biafran conflict. Set during General Gowon's regime in the immediate post-war period, *One is Enough* portrays the persistence of women's wartime survival strategies in a dog-eat-dog society.

'I was not out to create a role model in Amaka', Nwapa commented in an interview with Ezeigbo (1996: 93). When asked about the heroine's self-reliance, she replied: 'I was simply creating a woman who found herself in a corrupt society and struggled to exist there in the way she thought best' (1996: 93). In consequence, Lagos is not portrayed as an evil city where women are corrupted, nor as the epitome of a culture of violence and insecurity, but as a place where political corruption provides opportunities, where a single woman can 'look for her identity, start all over again' (1981: 45). The novel is about postcolonial political corruption to the same extent that it is about female sexuality. The author shows how, by exercising sexual independence, urban businesswomen such as Amaka achieve economic power, creaming off a layer of petro-naira for themselves and

gaining social status by purchasing large cars and plots of land. Successful in a world without men and free from restrictive or conflicting gender roles, these heroines demonstrate that, without children, women remain unfulfilled on a social and personal level; without husbands, however, they can become free and fulfilled. In a similar manner to the Islamic women discussed above, and like more recent women writers such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Nwapa therefore raises questions about a woman's personal freedom and rights, albeit in an extreme and rebellious form.

In this chapter, I have tried to balance a sensitivity towards the eclectic character of West African women's writing with an awareness of the gender-specific issues they address in their work. The writing of Muslim women encapsulates the model I am seeking to create, for their work forms part of a broad Islamic-scape which overlaps with, and draws material from, other West African '-scapes', interacting with these other discourses in ways that may be complicitous and ambiguous, or critical and transformative, but which rarely move away from an affirmation of Islam. Womanhood does not exist outside these other discourses. Rather, the Islamic-scape combines with other '-scapes' to inhibit the operation of a clear-cut political logic in Islamic women's writing.

Chapter 13 will develop the topic of gender complexity in more detail, focusing on recent francophone women writers whose work is much 'queerer' than allowed for by the '-ism' of feminism or the polarized discourse of 'male' versus 'female'. What we have encountered in this chapter are texts in which women writers provide their readers with commentaries and characters, inviting them to participate in debates about gender: positioned as women between the local and the global, they highlight the ideological tensions affecting African women without necessarily promoting easy solutions or cures.

10

Marxism and West African Literature

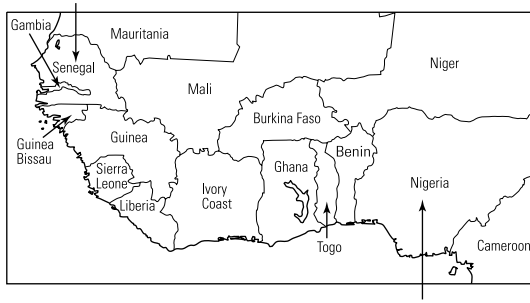
> Literature matters not only because it provides us with diversion and pleasure, but also because it creates positive dreams which can serve as alternative—and antidote—to our pervasive nightmare.
>
> (Osundare, 2002b: 4)

10.1 **Soyinka and the Nigerian Left**

A fierce disagreement broke out in the late 1970s between Wole Soyinka and the 'Ibadan-Ife Group' of Nigerian intellectuals and writers, who criticized Soyinka for failing to demonstrate sufficient class awareness in his work (Jeyifo, 2004: xiii–xiv). The Ibadan-Ife Group, composed largely of young, 'second-generation' writers seeking ways to transform the political disaster-zone of post-Civil War Nigeria, called for a class analysis of African cultural production and criticized earlier authors for failing to secure genuine post-colonial freedom (Jeyifo, 2004).[1] In reply to their sustained critique of his literary work, over the next decade the senior man wrote several major essays attacking their politics and responding to their comments.[2] It was as if the spectre of Karl Marx had risen between these once close cultural allies, re-focusing the lenses through which they viewed one another.

This chapter addresses the range of Marxist perspectives to emerge in West African literary criticism, from the prescriptive criticism of scholars in the 1970s to the more subtle humanism of recent intellectuals. As a result of his own vocal participation in the debate, Soyinka is an exceptionally useful figure for an exploration of African Marxists' literary rules and values, for he has come to represent everything that West African Marxism *is not*. As Soyinka himself put it in the

Léopold Sédar Senghor (1906–2001)
Sembene Ousmane (1923–)



Wole Soyinka (1934–); Femi Osofisan (1946–); Niyi Osundare (1946–); Tanure Ojaide (1948–); Odia Ofeimun (1950–); Olu Oguibe (1964–); Festus Iyayi (1947–); Kole Omotoso (1943–); Bode Sowande (1948–); Tunde Fatunde (1955–); Molara Ogundipe (1949–); Tess Onwueme (1955–)

Map 10 Marxism and West African Literature

early 1980s, 'one of the favourite fodders for the "commitment machine" of these critics happens to be me' (1993: 98).

In an exaggerated form, the confrontations between the Nobel Laureate and his political detractors epitomize the differences and disagreements as a whole between Marxist (or socialist) and non-Marxist intellectuals in postcolonial West Africa. This is especially so as Marxism is one of the discourses through which the 'first generation' of postcolonial authors—Achebe, Bekederemo, Soyinka, Armah, Okigbo, and others—are held to account by their successors for the failure of independence in the region.[3] Interestingly, this debate also reveals the emergence of internal differences between Marxist critics in different locations and at different times. Indeed, several left-wing intellectuals, most famously Léopold Sédar Senghor, prefer to use the term 'socialism' above Marxism, in order to emphasize their lack of dogmatism and flexibility in borrowing from long and diverse traditions of socialist and humanist philosophy rather than simply 'applying' Marx to Africa (see Senghor, 1964; Nkrumah, 1970).

In the opinion of the Ibadan-Ife Group and its successors, the period of intense political crisis following decolonization in West Africa was no time for art to be divorced from politics. This is especially the case when art takes the form of Soyinka's preferred genre, drama, with its capacity for direct, didactic communication

with grassroots audiences in order to 'conscientize' them against oppressive regimes.[4] Nigerian Marxist intellectuals demanded far more from their continent's most famous playwright than his satisfaction of the 'bourgeois' desire for stylistic experimentation and aesthetically pleasing forms. Taking their lead from the African Marxist theorist and leader of the revolution in Guinea-Bissau, Amilcar Cabral (1924–73), as well as from other African socialists, these critics argued that in a postcolonial African context a work of art should be accessible, forward-looking, and committed to positive social and economic transformations (see Osundare, 1990b; Jeyifo, 1985; Osofisan, 1996). This 'second generation' of West African writers and intellectuals was—and remains—'a generation with live coal in their palm: they have no time for *iregbe* (dilly-dally, idleness)' (Osundare, 2002b: 65). For these writers, to be meaningful the textual world *must* engage with the African world beyond the text.

In the decades since the Ibadan-Ife Group launched its critique, Soyinka has faced a barrage of criticism, occasionally highly personalized, from West African cultural nationalists and Marxists. In spite of his lively confrontations with successive Nigerian regimes since the 1960s—confrontations which have led on occasion to his imprisonment, house-arrest, and hurried escape from the country (see Jeyifo, 2004; Olayebi, 2004)—Soyinka's literary work continues to be seen by critics on the left as both apolitical and inaccessible, irrelevant to the majority of ordinary West Africans. Many of his plays, particularly *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975b) and *Kongi's Harvest* (1967), are regarded as problematic by the critics, firstly for their sheer difficulty, and secondly, for their endorsement of an apparently mythological, fatalistic world-view (Amuta, 1989; Jeyifo, 1985). Moreover, when leftist critics examine Soyinka's 'radical' political projects in the real world, they find him to be too maverick and individualistic to be politically useful (Jeyifo, 2004).

The bipolar positions taken up by these two camps conceal as much as they reveal. Particularly in his satirical plays and travelling theatre work, Soyinka has recognized the capacity of drama to stir up political opposition amongst the masses: this is demonstrated by his political satires, bravely performed by the Guerilla Theatre Unit outside government offices during the volatile months of the late 1970s after the assassination of Murtala Muhammed, when General Olusegun Obasanjo headed an increasingly corrupt and violent regime. Soyinka

deliberately made use of the techniques of Nigerian grassroots theatre and popular drama at this time, including small, portable sets, short scenes, dialogue in pidgin English and African languages, popular song, comedy, and satire (see Jeyifo, 2004).

Soyinka's highly mobile, agitprop theatre has been ignored by the severest of his critics until recently, because some opponents seem to require him to be all-bad in order to sustain the moral force of their critique. Geoffrey Hunt typifies this position in one of the most forthright attacks on the playwright: 'The writings of Soyinka contain a particularly sophisticated ideological elaboration of the class position of the neo-colonial agent class', Hunt wrote, adding that Soyinka's 'militant nationalism on the surface [belies an] underlying conservatism' (Hunt, 1985: 83; 85). In a move that characterizes the entire debate, Soyinka responded in kind with a devastating essay, wittily entitled 'The Autistic Hunt; or, How to Marximize Mediocrity' (1993), in which he defended the dynamism of his representations and insisted on the necessity for retaining models of African identity based on race rather than class.[5]

The manner in which Soyinka represents African 'tradition' has generated a powerful response over a forty-year period and, as a result, a socialist aesthetic for West African literature has emerged from the disagreement.[6] Here we have one of the few cases of a West African literary school, or movement, emerging slowly, in a relatively integrated manner, as a consequence of a long-term intellectual engagement with West African literatures and Marxist theory.

Responding to Soyinka's drama in the mid 1970s, the Nigerian playwright Femi Osofisan stated the shared aesthetic in a way that reveals a great deal about what socialist literary critics expect from African art: 'Art that stubbornly weaves around the old mythologies, unmediated, prolongs the enfeebled past and is anti-progress' (cited in Soyinka 1993: 74). Twenty years later, in a retrospective account of the work of 'second-generation' Nigerian authors, Osofisan remained of the same opinion: 'our focus was on the present state of our society,' he commented, 'on unmasking the class forces at play within it, revealing the material sources of exploitation and injustice, demonstrating how the masses could liberate themselves' (Osofisan, 1996: 16).

Clearly, Marxist critics have got specific ideas about the ways in which 'tradition' should feature and function in African literature. In the words of Soyinka's most tenacious (but also his most sympathetic)

Marxist critic, Biodun Jeyifo, 'How far back do you go to "recover" the absolute pristine values and matrices of the African "racial" heritage in culture?' (2004: 67). For Jeyifo, Osofisan, and their allies, any artistic representation of 'traditional' culture in Africa should acknowledge that religion and culture are dynamic, produced by people within a historical dialectic and not by some external, transcendent force. Oppressed people are capable of analysing, resisting, and transforming this environment. Literary representations should not therefore suggest that the source of one's cultural identity is cut off from human reason and historical change: such a suggestion serves a neo-colonial purpose in helping to persuade the masses that political action is neither possible nor effective (Amuta, 1989: 39).

The primary problem for socialist critics since the 1970s is that Soyinka's writing appears to be inflexible in its representation of indigenous culture: the Yoruba beliefs and practices he portrays in his plays and essays are seen to occupy a fixed framework with little to offer audiences in terms of political resistance or revolution. Second, his work is judged by critics to promote individualism and apathy above collective action and optimism for the future (Gugelberger, 1985: 12). This goes against a central tenet of socialist thought, inscribed in the very name of this '-ism', that people must act together to bring about sustained political change. Soyinka's work, by contrast, is said to exhibit an overarching fatalism, presenting tragedy as an inevitable fact of life rather than a consequence of the social and economic inequalities brought about by neocolonialism (Hunt, 1985). Finally in this catalogue of clashing literary and political values, Soyinka is regarded with suspicion for his apparent adoption of European *avant garde* art forms (Ngara, 1990). An 'art for art's sake' aesthetic seems to prevail in his work, over and above a more 'African' (or Achebe-ist) conception of the role of the postcolonial writer as a 'teacher' and guide. Cultural nationalists join Marxists on this last point in the list of complaints against Soyinka, although the former group tends to avoid 'class' and 'capitalism' as analytical categories: to this end Nigeria's most maverick commentator, Chinweizu, has produced streams of colourful insults and epithets around Soyinka's name, epithets which have been returned with equal force (see Lazarus, 2002).

Over a period of more than forty years, Soyinka has not wavered in his suspicion of ideology-driven discourses which are capable, in his view, of producing terror whether they stem from the political left or

the right, from Europe, from Africa, or from the Middle East. As a critical position, Marxism is too easy and dogmatic, he insists, adding that on the metaphysical plane it fails to account for human perceptions of death, the incompleteness of power, and a person's need for rituals and mythologies through which social contradictions can be filtered and expressed, but not necessarily resolved (1993: 70–3, 115–16).[7] Additionally, in defence of his cultural vision of Africa, he insists that his idea of 'the African world-view' is dynamic rather than stagnant as his detractors suppose (1992: 53–4).

How accurate is Soyinka's repudiation of the leftist critical camp, and how accurate is the left's response to him? Published originally in the 1970s, Hunt's essay on Soyinka contains numerous prescriptive statements and assumptions about art, such as: 'Of course, there is no reason why Soyinka should explicitly "mention" imperialism, but still one would expect a realistic philosophy of art to make social dynamics intrinsic to the form and content of a work' (1985: 72). Of the play *Madmen and Specialists* (1971) Hunt writes in disappointment, 'there is nothing specific in the play in point of space or time to enable us to identify causes and seek solutions' (1985: 71). This reductive mode of analysis, in which the critic appears to hold forth from the moral high ground, decides what African literature *should* be about, and dismisses everything which fails to reflect the revolutionary ethos, certainly plays out Soyinka's opinion about the 'enthronement of dogma' in Marxist criticism (1993: 62).

In creative writing, too, an overly didactic Marxist agenda can cause non-Marxist critics to recoil, particularly when high doses of 'protest' politics are not diluted by 'literary' language and a sensitivity to form. For example, the work of the Nigerian socialist poet, Tanure Ojaide, causes Stewart Brown to remark that 'his poems are blunt "messages from the front", sacrificing imagistic complexity or formal musicality for a rhetorical outrage that overwhelms the "poetry"—insofar as we equate poetry with subtlety, ambiguity and linguistic cunning' (1995: 61). A poet himself, Brown hopes for a little less sloganeering and a little more stylistic care from West Africa's politically confrontational poets, particularly the socialist poets Tanure Ojaide, Olu Oguibe, and Odia Ofeimun who form part of the 'Alter-Native' tradition discussed in Chapter 8. 'The artless predictability of the sentiments and the clichéd language of "protest",' Brown writes,

'undermine … the force of so many of these poems *as poems*' (1995: 61; emphasis retained).[8]

To take Hunt's critical work, or Ojaide's poetry, as representative of the 'Marxist' tradition in West African literature, however, would be the same as regarding Chinweizu as typical of African cultural nationalism, or radical feminism as typical of Western feminism as a whole.[9] Marxism has proved to be a resilient West African discourse for over half a century for other, subtle reasons relating to the complex interrelationship between literature, history, politics, anti-colonialism, the concept of 'tradition', and the aesthetic expectations of audiences in the region. Also, while reductive Marxists such as Hunt and Amuta have made the most noise, a far more subtle, complex socialism can be found in the intellectual culture of West Africa, providing a powerful humanist framework in which much of the region's postcolonial literature can be situated (see, Chapter 14).

10.2 Socialist creative writers in West Africa: Ousmane Sembene and Femi Osofisan

Contrasting the reductive theory discussed above, many of the region's socialist creative writers highlight the capacity of ordinary Africans to analyse and transform their own societies without needing outsiders to intervene as intellectual leaders. Such an approach is exemplified by the work of the francophone Senegalese author and filmmaker Ousmane Sembene. In his most famous novel, *God's Bits of Wood* (1960), Sembene takes as his theme the railway workers' strike that spread through French West Africa in 1947–8. He fleshes out the historical record of the strike and condenses the time-scale to add a sense of urgency to events (Jones, 2000: 117). Of particular interest from a Marxist perspective is the manner in which he focuses upon the role of African women in the labour movement, giving them central, vocal leadership roles in the organization of the strike. In this manner, Sembene gives personality and agency to a social group that is almost unrecoverable from the official records of West African history.

'The artist is here to reveal a certain number of historical facts that others would like to keep hidden', Sembene commented in an interview (cited in Jones, 2000: 119). He thus uses his imagination to reinsert the most marginalized and silenced—what Gayatri Spivak terms 'subaltern' (1994)—elements back into the official account of anti-colonialism in French West Africa. At other times, as in his remarkable novel *Xala* (1974; trans. 1976), filmed in 1975, Sembene 'rediscovers' the agency of beggars and vagabonds, scripting them into key roles in the development of the narrative and setting them against the neo-colonial class.[10] Unlike historians, then, creative writers can open up the colonial archive and insert ordinary people's voices into the many silences that confront researchers into Africa's past. Marxist creative writers, additionally, highlight the political agency of neglected and oppressed figures in history.

The Nigerian playwright Femi Osofisan also focuses upon vagabonds, lepers and other social outcasts in his work, exploring the political potential of people on the margins of the neocolonial economy (see e.g. 1991). Unlike Sembene, Osofisan makes regular use of Brechtian theatre techniques in combination with African oral storytelling devices (see Brecht, 1964). Using many different strategies, including interruptive song and male actors in female roles, Osofisan continually draws the audience's attention to the artificiality of the performance, highlighting mechanical details that naturalistic theatre always tries to hide, and preventing viewers from losing themselves in the spectacle of the drama.[11] 'Please watch well', the characters tell the audience at the start of one performance, 'and let us have your comments after the show' (1991: 3–4). When Yoruba deities appear on the stage in *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels* (1991), working miracles and magic on the characters, Osofisan insists on demystifying and derobing them at key points in the performance: as one character tells the audience at the end of the show, 'What else are we, but metaphors in a | Fading tale | Just the props of a parable' (1991: 70).

This refusal to allow audience immersion in the tale in order for the *parable* to emerge precisely echoes West African readers' definition of the role of literature, described in Chapter 7 and discussed in the next section of this chapter. Unlike a novelistic narrative, in which characters are wholly imaginary, a 'parabolic' narrative will retain a vital connection with the 'real' world: it is an ethical vehicle through which social values and good behaviour can be communicated directly to audiences.

Osofisan expresses this view of literature-as-parable most explicitly in his play, *Another Raft* (1988), which rewrites a 'first-generation' play, *The Raft* (1964) by J. P. Clark Bekederemo. Three Yoruba sea-goddesses surface at the start of *Another Raft*, giving a sense of wonder and magical transportation to the show. As soon as they begin to sing, however, a critical distance is established and the magic melts away. First, male actors play the goddesses, making it difficult for the audience simply to accept their appearance for what it is. Second, each sentence is divided between the three speakers, who split the unity of the 'I' between them. Third, and above all, the content of their opening words alerts the audience to the dramatist's agenda. 'I am here to warn you about a number of things', says the first goddess, Yemosa One: 'Some of you come to the theatre expecting to see a marvellous world of dreams. A magic world, full of fantastic stunts and fabulous gadgets' (1988: 2). The goddesses then develop this theme into a comic, repetitive routine which debunks the entire concept of 'theatre' by pointing out that the characters are actors, the props are false, and the scenery is nothing like 'the actual thing' (p. 3). 'Nothing you see will be real, or pretend to be,' Yemosa One insists, 'Nothing you hear will be true. All is fiction, the story is false, the characters do not exist. We are in a theatre, as you well know, and we see no need to hide it' (ibid.).

Many other West African authors build their narratives from similar foundations, aiming to convey a parable to readers as much as to entertain them: in Nigeria alone, the roll-call of such authors includes Festus Iyayi, Kole Omotoso, Bode Sowande, Tunde Fatunde, Molara Ogundipe, Tess Onwueme, Niyi Osundare, and Odia Ofeimun. These socialist writers are preoccupied with politics and ordinary people, with power and resistance, and they view art as part of a dynamic historical process of confrontation and resistance between two opposing forces.

10.3 Are West African readers 'natural' Marxists?

We cannot complete a discussion of Marxist cultural theory in West Africa without considering the remarkable way in which it meshes with local readers' expectations about the role of writers and the function of literature. As Chapter 7 demonstrated in relation to

popular literature, West African readers repeatedly describe authors as moral educators who can resolve an individual's personal problems, offer advice on relationships, solve dilemmas, transform readers' personal worlds for the better, and communicate lessons about life: 'Literature is a microcosm of life. It must be able [to] picture life and let me know my weaknesses and be able to change them', commented one Ghanaian man, interviewed in 2001; 'Writers educate the society about the consequences of being either good or bad', stated another man. A cautious young woman from Accra said, from novels 'I've learned not to love at first sight' (cited in Newell, 2000: 50).

A well-known essay by Achebe gives further insight into these readers' literary values and expectations. In 'The Novelist as Teacher', Achebe gives a vivid account of a young Ghanaian woman who criticized his novel *No Longer at Ease* and confronted him for not allowing the hero, Obi, to marry his lover, Clara, who is taboo on grounds of her caste. Achebe's reader asked, 'did I know ... that there were many women in the kind of situation I had described and that I could have served them well if I had shown that it was possible to find one man with enough guts to go against custom?' (1988: 28). While Achebe refused to succumb to the pressures of this bold young woman, their encounter reveals a great deal about 'ways of reading' among ordinary West Africans. Indeed, on reflection Achebe wondered if he had 'squandered a rare opportunity for education' by neglecting the didactic scenario demanded by his reader (p. 28). Other West African authors have been far more willing than Achebe to accommodate the demands of their audiences. In the 1940s, for example, the 'grandfather' of Ghanaian popular fiction, J. Benibengor-Blay, encountered so much demand from readers for additional news and lessons about 'what happened after' the marriage depicted in his first novel, *Emelia's Promise* (1944), that he quickly wrote a sequel, appropriately entitled *After the Wedding* (1945). Inundated with correspondence a second time, he was tempted to write a sequel to the sequel, but by that time he had been diverted by his ideas for two popular romances, *Love in a Clinic* (1957) and *Stubborn Girl* (1958) (see Newell, 2000).

The list of similar examples is endless: whether they are commenting on canonical African novels such as *No Longer at Ease*, or popular romances by local authors, again and again West African readers express a similar set of expectations about the social and ethical

function of literature. As we saw in Chapter 7, paramount in many readers' minds is the desire for a text to be *relevant* to their current social and spiritual situations, educational as well as entertaining, enabling them to change their lives for the better. West African authors often acknowledge these literary expectations: 'ours is a story-bound society', commented Nigerian author Ola Rotimi, and 'your story must be sound. By that I mean potent in action, suspenseful, interweaving moments of comedic relief with a continuum of pathos (if you're treating a tragedy), and reflective of a message, not necessarily sententious'(Rotimi, 2002: 349). Soyinka himself is not divorced from the consensus about the role of literature: 'the artist', he writes, 'has always functioned in African society as the record of the mores and experience of his society *and* as the voice of vision in his own time' (1993: 20; emphasis retained).

Perhaps more than any other formal literary or social theory, a Marxist approach can accommodate and extend the aesthetic expectations of these local readers and authors.[12] Marxism provides what Chidi Amuta calls 'a natural anchor' for African literature, especially in the way it recalls the figure of the *griot* as a licensed entertainer with the capacity to educate listeners and criticize ruling power elites (1989: 10; see Chapter 4).[13]

'Natural' or otherwise, Marxism in West African literary analysis adds a formal political framework to the body of aesthetic expectations described above. It is a methodology which fully accommodates readers' desires for self-improving literature but emphasizes the economic place of the human subject alongside personal self-betterment. Above all, what connects it with ordinary readers is that the doctrine of 'art for art's sake' is irrelevant both to Marxist and to local ways of reading. As Chinua Achebe so delicately put it in the early 1970s, '*Art for art's sake is just another piece of deodorised dog-shit*' (1975: 19; emphasis retained).

In their own comments about the function of literature, West African Marxist writers continually pull together the threads of these two traditions, using local aesthetic values to add authority and legitimacy to their own political standpoints. For example, the poet Niyi Osundare absorbs the African consensus about the social and moral functions of literature into a Marxist perspective when he writes, 'From its very beginnings, African literature has kept up its role as the thread in Africa's loom of being' (2002b: 3). 'Who says the poet should leave the

muck | unraked?' he asks in 'The Poet' (p. 230). His fellow socialist, the Nigerian playwright Femi Osofisan, also combines self-conscious references to African oral narratives with his own Marxist aesthetic: 'Our dream here has all its eyes awake', states one of the narrator-figures in *Another Raft* (1988), for '[j]ust like on any of our ancient moonlit nights at the story-teller's feet, all we do here is an open lie, a known and visible fairy-tale, well-worn' (1988: 3). Similarly, the Senegalese socialist writer Ousmane Sembene stated in an interview, 'Wolof society has always had people whose role it was to give voice, bring back to memory, and project towards something' (cited in Jones, 2000: 119). The Marxist writer Odia Ofeimun creates similar links with *griots* and African oral genres at the start of several of his poems: 'I have come down | to tell my story | by the same fireside | around which | my people gathered', he writes in 'Prologue', self-consciously positioning himself within established oral traditions before declaring his political project: 'And I must tell my story | to nudge and awaken them | that sleep among my people' (in Maja-Pearce, 1990: 185).

The similarities are striking between these authors' aesthetic declarations and readers' views about the function of literature in West Africa. If Marxism as an '-ism' emphasizes the social, material conditions that give rise to different literatures in different cultures, these Marxist authors are exploiting *existing* seams of aesthetic values in their different West African cultures, emphasizing the socialist, materialist foundations of traditional literary genres and rooting their politics deep in local storytelling conventions.

For this reason if none other, leftist African critics cannot be regarded as the mimics or dupes of a colonizing 'Western' discourse, as Soyinka (1993) suggests in his many essays rejecting Marxism as a foreign import. Indeed, the strength of much of their work revolves around their recognition that an individual author's literary output should be considered in relation to the mediating influence of local sociological and historical factors. These local contexts are not presented as all-determining realities by African Marxists: even in the most dogmatic appeals for a 'scientific' theory of African literature, such as Chidi Amuta's *The Theory of African Literature*, sensitivity is shown towards the 'socio-economic, political and ideological contradictions' informing a literary work (1989: vii). For Amuta, as for Osundare, Osofisan, and other writers in the AlterNative tradition, process and mediation are important in

the study of literature. Whilst Amuta does not practise what he preaches in a great deal of his book, he does make the important theoretical point that African authors create active forms which are situated in specific cultural locations: their texts produce 'meanings, values and aesthetic effects from which we can *know* both history and the mediating subject's participation in it' (Amuta, 1989: 82; emphasis retained).

In a nostalgic reflection on the effect of his politics upon his drama in the 1970s and 1980s, Femi Osofisan commented, 'Marxism was there, as the open sesame to the door of Utopia' (1996: 16). The key feature of Marxist literature is this potential to offer new possibilities and utopian visions, inspiring audiences 'with a different response to the fate of our continent' (p. 13). This chapter has shown that Osofisan's utopian view of literature is echoed by Niyi Osundare and many other 'second-generation' West African Marxists who believe that literature can 'create alternative realities' and 'widen the space for our dreams and deeds' (Osundare, 2002b: 15, 10). Such a belief has arguably contributed to the tense, productive and problematic relationship between West African Marxists and the three 'posts' that will be discussed in Chapter 11.[14]

11

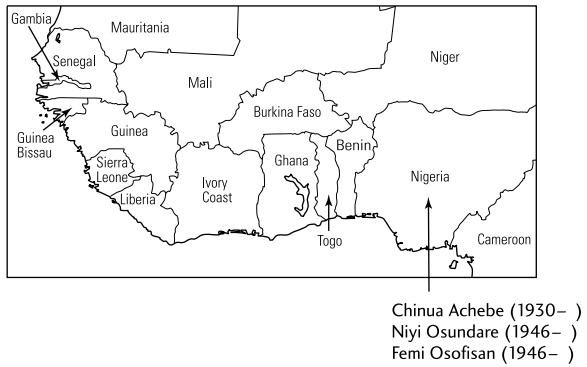
The Three 'Posts'
Postmodernism, Poststructuralism, Postcolonialism

> Count your tropes, praise the Text
> The meaningless meaning is a grand pretext.
>
> (Osundare, 'Text Worship', 2002a: 56)

Marxism is a largely humanist discourse in which history is represented as the rational, dialectical working-out of human intentions.[1] As such, it foregrounds the coherence and *presence* of human subjects, particularly people's capacity to unite and take action on the world: as Kate Soper writes, 'the categories of "consciousness", "agency", "choice", "responsibility", "moral value", etc., are indispensable' to the understanding of humanism (1986: 12). This chapter investigates the complex interaction between humanism and West African literature: in particular, it considers the contribution of socialist writers and intellectuals in West Africa to the critique of that dominant strand of postcolonialism which is headed by Homi Bhabha and influenced by French poststructuralist theory.

11.1 **Humanism and poststructuralism**

Humanism has a problematic history, especially in its long record of complicity with European imperialism. As an '-ism' it arouses a great deal of suspicion amongst radical intellectuals in postcolonial as well as European locations (see Achebe, 1975: 19–29). *Liberal* humanism has been the dominant form of humanism in Europe since the eighteenth century, when European anti-slavery campaigners asked a key 'humanist' question of Africans: 'Are they not also men?' (see Davis,



Map 11 The Three 'Posts'

1975; Blackburn, 1988). The problem with this seemingly benevolent affirmation of *all* people's right to liberty was that the 'man' evoked in liberal discourse was not only gender specific but also geographically specific: he was a European, Christian prototype whose cultural attributes were mistakenly presumed to be universal by anti-slavery campaigners. The desire to emancipate slaves from bondage was motivated by the moral project to 'civilize' the 'savage', to bring Africans 'up' to European standards in order to 'develop' them, to help them along the road towards membership of the 'universal' (European bourgeois) civilization. This is what Jean-Paul Sartre terms a 'racist humanism', based upon false universals (1990: 22).

European colonialism was a direct historical consequence of the assumption within liberal humanist circles that Africans did not possess their own civilizations; nor were Africans seen to have their own indigenous political and social systems which had emerged from long and complex processes of conflict, negotiation, and historical change. As Albert Schweitzer famously said, in 1931, of the relationship between Europeans and Africans, 'I have coined the formula: "I am your brother, it is true, but your elder brother" ' (1998: 99). Such paternalism masquerading as fraternal feeling is characteristic of liberal humanist discourse in the colonial and postcolonial periods: a central assumption was that, if they were also to become 'men', Africans should be made capable of receiving 'civilization'. Even today, the multiculturalism that is practised in the United States

presupposes that the rest of the world seeks to achieve 'U.S. manifest destiny' rather than other destinies and other goals (Spivak, 2003: 82).

Well into the twentieth century the epistemological error committed by anti-slavery campaigners was carried over, uncorrected, into European projects in Africa: colonialism, the 'civilizing mission', Christian missionary activity, and many other political and cultural enterprises operated under liberal humanist concepts of universality and 'mankind'. Indeed, as we will see in this chapter, several critics maintain that the false universal persists in contemporary discourses, including the very discourses to criticize the concept of 'mankind': postmodernism and poststructuralism. The problem is not that these theories promote universalism but that, as Biodun Jeyifo writes, 'developments in culture and critical thought in the center are "naturally" thought to be developments in *human culture* and thought in general' (1994: 25; emphasis added).

Achebe is the most vehement African critic of the manner in which Western theories and ideologies masquerade as 'general' or 'universal' truths. In his view, African literature and criticism have not escaped from the pull of colonial 'liberal' values: authors and critics such as Léopold Sédar Senghor, Ayi Kwei Armah, and Eldred Durosimi Jones were all seduced by liberal humanism and advocated the principle of universality in the 1960s and 1970s. In so doing, these writers followed a 'false and dangerous' trail which led inexorably towards the snare of Europe and the erasure of African specificity (see 1975, 1988). Since he made these critical comments in the early 1970s, Achebe has remained one of West Africa's most persistent opponents of universalism. A belief in people's shared humanity in different global locations, Achebe insists, must find expression *without* the principle of 'universal civilization' which pulls each person back to the imperial culture (2000: 85).

A sample of promotional material from early novels in Heinemann's 'African Writers Series' reveals the source of Achebe's anxiety about the erasure of African specificity by universalist values. A review of Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* (1966), appearing on the back cover of the novel, declared, 'The persons in Miss Nwapa's story have an *objective* complexity and sophistication' (emphasis retained). This reviewer seems embarrassed by the characters' African specificity and wishes to associate complexity and sophistication with an 'objective' human society, somehow removed from the Igbo communities Nwapa

describes.[2] As late as the 1980s, similar examples can be found on the covers of African novels produced and marketed by European publishers: for example, when the Women's Press in London published Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1988), they were keen to insist that this is a novel 'exploring human conditions that have a general echo for us all'. The geographical location of 'us all' does not seem to be Africa.

These statements refuse the specificity of African cultures in favour of a broad appeal to a universal 'human nature' which is implicitly located in Europe. The most amusing example of this geographical displacement of Africa onto Europe can be found in the review of Ayi Kwei Armah's *Fragments* (1969) for the *New York Times,* where the reviewer wrote enthusiastically, 'his sense of structure is worthy of a Swiss watchmaker'. When and under what conditions will the Swiss watchmaker's skill be praised using an African example?

Achebe's critique of liberal humanism is important and persuasive, but it contains significant differences from *European* anti-humanist theory. This latter body of theory requires a little explanation since it has arguably informed the work of several of the most influential postcolonial theorists, including Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, and Homi Bhabha. A brief discussion of the differences between Achebe's position and the philosophy of anti-humanism in Europe will perhaps make it easier for us to answer a persistent but controversial question asked by some Africanist scholars: why, in the words of the historian Megan Vaughan, 'has postmodernism passed by' African history? (1994).

It is necessary at this stage to insert a caveat into the discussion. Many African literary scholars would refute the tenets of Vaughan's question on the grounds that Eurocentric terms and theories such as 'postmodernism' and 'poststructuralism' are not relevant to African societies.[3] (Vaughan herself recognizes this in relation to the apparent anomaly of Africa.) From this perspective, one should seek, in the manner of Soyinka, for indigenous aesthetic rules and metaphysical classifications drawn from local languages and African cultural practices. This position risks sliding into a form of 'nativism', however: as Jeyifo points out, polemical counter-discourses, including the plea for recognition of non-western theory, are 'like Eurocentrism' in that they entail 'a *culturalist* obscuring of the systemic features' of world capitalism (1994: 25–6; emphasis retained). Nevertheless, as Jeyifo

also acknowledges, 'theories of literature and cultural production at the central and peripheral social formations respectively follow *different trajectories*, and engage *different agendas*' (1994: 28; emphasis added). In spite of its many well-known pitfalls, the search for indigenous aesthetic criteria and the assertion of African specificity can be regarded as expressions of these 'different trajectories' within African literary discourse.

European anti-humanist theory stems from a particular philosophical tradition whose key figures are poststructuralist and deconstructive scholars working in France after the political upheavals of the late 1960s across Europe. Central to this intellectual movement are four French theorists, Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, and Jacques Derrida. These theorists have, in different ways, rejected the tenets of liberal humanism, called 'universals' into question, exposed the binary oppositions upon which power and identity are surreptitiously based, and challenged the self-confidence of the 'bourgeois individual' produced by post-Enlightenment Europe.

Achebe would surely agree so far with these moves against Eurocentric orthodoxies. Major differences arise, however, over the poststructuralists' conception of the human subject and their sense of people's capacity to generate historical change. The French philosophers have overthrown Descartes' famous dictum, 'I think therefore I am', and forcefully driven out the humanist concept of the person as a unified and continuous 'being' who uses language for definite ends. In the manner of Nietzsche, they have called into question the very idea of the human 'person' as a coherent entity. In different ways, the French theorists all challenge the notion that one's identity as an 'I' provides a solid foundation for action and communication in a world 'out there'. They redefine human subjects as radically decentred, flickering between difference and identity, not naming themselves but being named by ideology and discourse, not speaking language but being 'spoken by' language itself.

Interestingly, this European philosophical reaction against humanism coincided with the period of widespread anti-colonial resistance and decolonization in Europe's overseas 'possessions' (see Young, 1990). While the anti-colonial movements spread through Asia and Africa in the post-war period, European poststructuralism emerged in the metropolitan centres, exposing and shattering liberal humanist notions of civilization and subjectivity. In tandem with this European

response, the concept of 'universal value' was challenged and dissolved in anti-colonial struggles, replaced by concepts far more appropriate to the specificity of (post)colonial societies. Almost by definition, then, the two 'posts' of poststructuralism and postcolonialism are bound together, at times splintering into one another. An intimacy exists between them to the extent that the latter has been described as a 'subspecies' of the former (San Juan, 1998: 9).

A positive interpretation of this intimacy is to see the radical moves of the French philosophers as a sign of the recognition of the Other, long ignored or obliterated by the liberal humanist quest to domesticate all signs of otherness and 'civilize' the 'savage'. Poststructuralism may be celebrated from this perspective: for the first time in two hundred years, the 'junior brother' of bourgeois 'man' has been recognized in the West in the form of radically destabilizing elements which disrupt dominant discourses, resist appropriation, and subvert identity from within. There are problems with this position, however, for Europe remains the protagonist of the piece. The Other surfaces in poststructuralist theory, not as a full human force but as the silenced, repressed element of discourse (see Gikandi, 2003). Nevertheless, poststructuralist philosophy exposes the false foundations of the 'civilizing mission' and gives space to the concept of difference.

Some of the most popular and stimulating postcolonial theory has arguably been inspired by French anti-humanist philosophy (see Young, 1990). For example, three philosophical 'marriages' took place between poststructuralists and postcolonialists after the 1970s, helping to define the discipline of postcolonial studies and resulting in groundbreaking texts which have changed the way many scholars think about (post)colonial history and identity. Firstly, in the late 1970s, Edward Said published his seminal study, *Orientalism* (1978), which drew theoretical inspiration directly from Michel Foucault's work on power and knowledge, and examined the textual production of the 'Orient' as a category of imperial thought. Said's work shifted the terms and terminology for the study of colonial discourse, but it has been criticized by Marxists for its excessive dependence on Foucault (see Ahmad, 1994). The second philosophical 'marriage' is that between Jacques Derrida and the translator of his *Of Grammatology* (1976), Gayatri Spivak. As a member of the 'Subaltern Studies Group' in India in the 1980s, Spivak composed one of her most influential essays, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', using Derrida's

deconstructive method to re-examine Indian colonial history and to highlight the subversive, but shadowy, silenced and repressed elements in the colonial archives (1994). The final and least harmonious 'marriage' is that between Jacques Lacan and Homi Bhabha. Indeed, Bhabha is rather more promiscuous in his theoretical connections, moving freely from Lacan to Fanon, from Freud to Derrida, and shuttling between other twentieth-century thinkers in his complex theorizations of postcolonial difference (see Bhabha, 1994). Taken together, however, these three alliances highlight the areas of compatibility between French anti-humanist philosophy and this particular trajectory of postcolonial theory.[4]

Alongside the positive interpretation of the intimacy between poststructuralism and postcolonialism, a second, far less optimistic view of their connection has gained ground in recent scholarship, especially in the work of Marxist literary critics and intellectuals based in African universities. This second perspective offers a forceful critique of the three major interconnected 'posts', and it helps to answer the question about the bypassing of postmodernism in African theory. At the same time, however, it must be remembered that this critique is also a part of postcolonialism, for postcolonial theory is not a monolithic discourse governed by Bhabha and Spivak. What follows, then, is a critique of that branch of postcolonial theory which is influenced by poststructuralism and anti-humanism. What emerges from the critique is a vital, highly theorized contribution to postcolonialism, a form of West African humanism which will be developed and discussed in more detail in the concluding chapter of this book.

11.2 **The rejection of 'postcolonialism'**

The problem with postcolonialism is relatively simple for West African Marxist critics, who tend to be its main detractors. Literary theories of decolonization are, in Jeyifo's view, all part of 'the exclusively and prescriptively *Western* monument of High Theory' which assumes, arrogantly, that no theory exists outside itself (1994: 18; emphasis retained). 'Whose invention or re-invention is the term "postcolonial"?' asks Niyi Osundare, answering his own question, '[it is] a "name" which finds little or no acceptance among its African objects'

(2002b: 42). This body of European theory, in Emmanuel Ngara's opinion, 'has generated an obsession with the interpretation of the text in literary circles', while excluding the critic's role as one who 'comment[s] on the value of the poet's message and how effectively it is communicated' (1990: 4). His fellow Nigerian Marxist, Femi Osofisan, agrees that a sudden removal of the meaning from the message has occurred in European High Theory: 'With the advent of post-structuralism and post-modernism', he writes, 'this privileging of meaning—especially of a moral episteme—in the literary project has become suspect, "imperialistic", and the text is supposed nowadays to be autonomous of any values' (1996: 24). Similarly, for Osundare, postmodernism is 'insufferable' for its 'effort to run away from the kind of art that means, the type that affects' (2002b: 17). In any of its manifestations, the word 'post' therefore offers a 'misleading chronology' with its linear, 'before–after' framework which ignores the multidirectional, ruptured quality of time and space in which the 'past' may not yet be 'post' (see McClintock, 1994).

A long comic poem by Osundare, entitled 'Text Worship', makes the African Marxists' case against the proliferation of 'posts' and '-isms' in contemporary theoretical discourse. Extracts from the poem give a taste of its tone:

> Post-day post-night
> Post-history post-reason
> Post-humanist post-human
> Show me the post of your post-coloniality
> [. . .]
> 'Oppression' is merely undecidable reference
> 'Poverty' is slave to the metaphysics of presence
>
> (2002a: 56)

These commentators accuse all three 'posts' of imperialism. In their view, postcolonialism, like postmodernism and poststructuralism, is a 'Western monologue' which creates a false sense of its own universality (Osundare, 2002b: 43; Jeyifo, 1991). Theory influenced by post-structuralism and deconstruction seems to disallow the validity of concepts that remain seminal to these critics' own theorizations of identity and culture: nothing is more fundamental in this respect than the ideas of meaning, moral value, and human agency. 'All the writers that I know', comments Osundare, 'are keenly concerned with

the meaning of their work, and with its ultimate value to society' (1996: 24). In spite of their rejection of *liberal* humanism, then, these literary practitioners abide by a humanist idea of the subject: concepts such as 'meaning', 'collective identity', 'nation', 'authenticity', 'freedom', 'agency', and 'morality', are central to their cultural (and political) work.

West African Marxists join forces with other Marxist critics of postcolonialism in agreeing that 'post' is too premature a term for contemporary global power relations (see also Ahmad, 1995; San Juan, 1998). 'Neo' is more suitable than 'post' to describe the coloniality of West Africa (Ogundipe, 1994; Osundare, 2002b). 'As a practitioner of literature from a corner of the world still bedevilled by all kinds of socio-economic problems, which are patently not post-anything, I do not find myself obliged to follow the post-modernist prescription', writes Osofisan from Nigeria (1996: 24). Other critics of postcolonialism agree, including the Marxist scholars Aijaz Ahmad (1992) and E. San Juan Jr (1998), both of whom attack Bhabha in particular for repeating moves made under European imperialism, namely, the denial of history of non-western peoples and an over-emphasis on concepts of cultural difference between colonizer and colonized (San Juan, 1998: 6). As San Juan writes, 'postcoloniality is a moment in this worldwide crisis of late imperial culture', in which 'a transcultural politics of difference is substituted for critique of hegemony' (1998: 15, 7).

These Marxist critics agree that leading postcolonial theorists drain a human of his or her socially situated 'being' and disallow people's ability to act consciously and collectively. Homi Bhabha is regarded as one of the worst culprits in this regard, especially in his theorizations of colonial mimicry and ambivalence in which emphasis is placed upon individual resistance above collective anti-colonial struggles. Moreover, Bhabha often describes acts of anti-colonial resistance and subversion that occur at an *unconscious* level in the psychological domain of the individual (see Young, 1990; San Juan, 1998). Such a move allegedly takes away human agency from the colonized subject at the very moment of active resistance to the regime.

Taken together, the many Marxist critics of the three 'posts' suggest that if literary scholars are too greatly influenced by the language of postmodernism, they will start to see all texts as indeterminate,

multiple, and open to infinite new configurations. These theorists are suspicious of poststructuralist theory, especially as it has influenced postcolonial theory: from a Marxist perspective, while this theory usefully avoids oversimplifications and dichotomies, terms such as 'multiplicity', 'plurality', 'polyvocality', and 'indeterminacy' can too easily erase important social and political determinants of a text, including its cultural location, its historical and material conditions of production, and its author's ideological position. European anti-humanist theory seems to 'liberate' texts from history, ignoring the fact that texts can be used in ideological ways by missionaries, colonialists, schoolteachers, or political regimes. Again and again, as a result of these reservations, both Marxist and non-Marxist West African intellectuals have drawn back from anti-humanism in order to assert their own humanist alternatives.

What must be emphasized once again, however, is that this rejection of Bhabha's brand of postcolonial theory itself represents an important trajectory of postcolonial discourse, a point that will be developed in the theory of complementarity offered in the concluding chapter of this book. The West African critics discussed in this chapter need not be positioned *outside* postcolonialism: rather, our definition of postcolonialism needs to accommodate the diverse strands of theory represented by the humanist as well as the anti-humanist scholars.

Furthermore, in spite of the prominence given to the socialist critique of postcolonialism in this chapter, by no means are the majority of African intellectuals of a Marxist or socialist orientation. An African counter-current has gained force in recent critical work in which poststructuralist theory is regarded as acceptable and admissible to West African literary studies (see Gikandi, 2003; Quayson, 2003). As Simon Gikandi writes, poststructuralism has achieved 'relative success' in contemporary African literary discourses because of its capacity to challenge essentialist notions of identity, and to emphasize 'difference and hybridity over the homogeneity promoted by the nation-state' (2003: 525). The 'third-generation' authors discussed in Chapters 12 and 13 certainly reinforce this position, offering texts and perspectives which have taken many 'second-generation' writers by surprise.

12

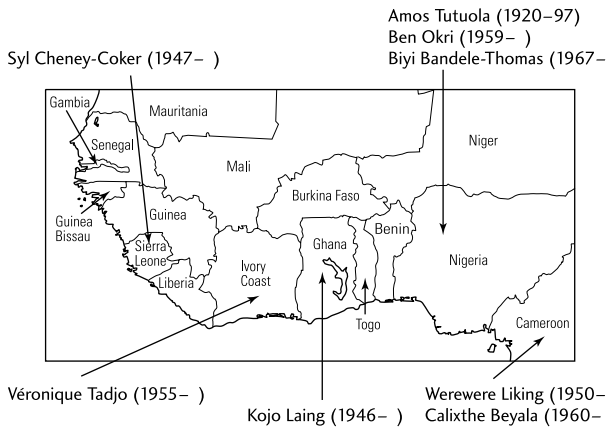
Experimental Writing by the 'Third Generation'

> Our novelists no longer want to be seen as moralists, mouthpieces, catalysts of their people.
>
> (Kesteloot, 1996: 8)

In 1996, Femi Osofisan remarked upon a 'new kind of writing which is astonishingly different' in West Africa, manifesting 'a violent rupture with the goals of literature as understood and interpreted by my generation' (1996: 25). In place of the themes and styles developed by second-generation writers, authors since the 1980s have produced 'metanarratives without authors, without plot ... in which the protagonist's identity (or, more correctly, identities) has become unstable, and inconstant, splintered into plural heteroglossic, and sometimes even conflictual phantoms' (Osofisan, 1996: 25). Osofisan's use of manifestly postmodern words such as 'metanarrative' and 'heteroglossic' helps to mark the violence of the 'rupture' he perceives.

While Osofisan's own generation of intellectuals continues to reject the three 'posts' of recent critical theory, the new generation of creative writers seems, in his view, to be producing a literature characterized by its explicit 'post-ness'. This chapter explores the reasons why so many younger writers have moved away from overtly anti-colonial, political, and realist modes of writing about Africa into genres which cannot easily be identified using the conventional critical frameworks for West African literature.

The new writers include, within an anglophone grouping, Ben Okri (1959–), Biyi Bandele-Thomas (1967–), Syl Cheney-Coker (1947–) and Kojo Laing (1946–) and, within a francophone grouping, Werewere Liking (1950–), Véronique Tadjo (1955–), and Calixthe



Map 12 Experimental Writing by the 'Third Generation'

Beyala (1960–). Almost the entire landmass of West Africa is represented by these authors, whose birthplaces range from Ghana to the Ivory Coast and Sierra Leone, from Cameroon to Nigeria. Writing in French or in English, they seem to have broken through the linguistic barrier that has hitherto separated the region's literature into two parallel traditions and trajectories. Perhaps the explanation for this convergence stems, at least in part, from the fact that most of these authors have moved away from their countries of birth and settled in Europe and America, from where they shuttle between global locations. In the process, they have also moved away from discourses about national identity and authentic 'Africanness' in their work, choosing instead to develop hybrid literary styles and to highlight themes of migration, existential anguish, and cultural intermingling (Ngaboh-Smart, 2004; Quayson, 1997).[1] As we shall see, however, 'West Africa' is not abandoned in this cosmopolitan literature, for the violence of postcolonial society is powerfully fictionalized, and local acts of compassion and humanity are promoted as models for human relations worldwide.

With no formal alliances between them as West Africans and no literary journal or aesthetic 'school' in the manner of the *négritude* poets, these authors have formed a surprisingly coherent *avant garde* which has taken many critics by surprise. Together they mark the end

of the 'era of the story-novel', and their work demands a 'new critical framework' (Kesteloot, 1996: 9). While their protagonists and subject-matter vary greatly—from Okri's wandering *abiku* child to Liking's *misovire* and Laing's comedic multilingual babblers—their texts share several structural and stylistic features. For example, these novels are generally set in urban West African locations, often in slums and marginal communities in the city, from where acts of violence, greed, and power are set against acts of compassion and survival by ordinary people. Stylistically, their work is characterized by features such as narrative indeterminacy, non-linearity, non-realism, linguistic experimentation with the ex-colonial language, and the fragmentation of subjectivity.

Unsurprisingly, many labels have been adopted to classify this distinctive strain in West African literature, which bears many similarities to postmodern and postcolonial literature published in Europe and America: it has been variously named 'postmodernist', 'postnational', 'transnational', 'transcultural', 'migrant cosmopolitan', 'magical realist', 'anti-realist', 'post-realist', 'avant garde', 'African Absurdist'.[2] Each label brings its own truths, and its own acts of misrecognition. Indeed, the generational tag used in this book to describe West African literature is a primary instance of misnaming, for not all 'third-generation' writers are part of the new experimental movement, nor do all 'second-generation' writers oppose postcolonialism in the manner described in Chapter 11. Many emergent writers draw inspiration from the work of their predecessors, producing clearly plotted, realist texts with well-delineated themes. As for the established writers, one need only recall Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1952) to realize that some so-called 'first-generation' anglophone writers employed non-realist narrative techniques, or did not engage with the terms of realism at all.

Moreover, the label 'third generation' should not obscure the fact that many of the new, experimental writers share themes with other and earlier West African authors, including a common concern for urban poverty, slum-life, and political violence in the postcolony. A preoccupation with dirt, sex, odours, vermin, disease, and slimy bodily excretions also links the experimental writers with a long tradition of scatological writing in postcolonial West Africa, a tradition which deserves a full-length study of its own for the aesthetic of excess that emerges, and its political significance.[3] Men's attitudes

towards women and domestic violence also form central themes in Beyala's, Liking's, and Tadjo's work, linking them with a long line of West African women writers since the 1960s. Finally, in spite of their 'postmodern' writing styles and international locations, many of the new authors remain self-consciously 'West African' in their choice of settings, characters, and themes. The ethical and political issues with which they engage often derive from local literatures and debates, creating areas of continuity with earlier generations of authors. For all their 'postmodernism', the new authors share with their predecessors a sense of the writer's 'social relevance and political responsibility', producing texts filled with 'polemical intensity' and 'moral concern' (Wright, 1997: 184). These shared topics and concerns furnish the link that Osofisan cannot find when he describes the new authors as 'disillusioned fugitives' who write solely for foreign audiences and show 'an abandonment of the African predicament' (1996: 28).

Intellectual divisions and labels should not therefore be used to impose an artificially rigid grid over the literary currents that circulate around West Africa. What is obvious from the reception of these writers, however, is that they have collectively made a break with realist modes of narration. 'I got tired of the traditional artifices and realism of the novel', Ben Okri commented in an interview (Deandrea, 2002: 47). Okri's 'tiredness' reveals a great deal, for the central difference separating the *avant garde* from other contemporary West African writers is not thematic so much as stylistic: their criticisms of postcolonial governments, of poverty, violence, and corruption, are implicit rather than explicit, couched in layers of experimental language and often conveyed through ambiguously liminal narrators. Achebe's narrator, who faced both ways in *Things Fall Apart*, has been thrown inwards upon himself in this new literature which abandons exteriority and well-plotted narratives in favour of the journey into inner spaces, layers, and dimensions.

Even the most sympathetic commentators sometimes express reservations about the excesses that can result from this experimental approach to the French and English languages. In an otherwise positive assessment of B. Kojo Laing and Somalian writer Nuruddin Farah, for example, the literary critic Francis Ngaboh-Smart comments that Laing's writing 'totters precariously on the brink of social or political vacuity', and asks of his generation, 'can the increasing slide into postmodern aesthetic practice … allow postcolonial

writers to continue to articulate a sense of place, history or ethical responsibility?' (2004: 143). Derek Wright also criticizes Laing's later work for its 'faddish verbal gimmicking and fabrication' (1997: 202). Beyala's writing unsettles critics the most, for her novels 'reek of bizarre sensuality' and set up a timeless present which, it is felt, over-privileges the West and ignores historical inequalities between Europe and Africa (Ngaboh-Smart, 2004: 151–2; see also Dunton, 1997; see Chapter 13).

As we have seen, the majority of *avant garde* writers live and work in European locations. It is possible that their experiences of migration, exile, and displacement have helped to generate the new styles and themes, in which fixed (racial or gendered) identities are melted down and poured into a field of 'inter-subjectivity' which is global in reach and polymorphous in shape.[4] Dissolving identity and language, shifting boundaries, taking risks with subject-matter, challenging notions of the 'readable' text, these authors have stretched and tested the limits of established critical models.

This is not an entirely new development, however, for the *avant garde* authors can be seen to have taken up and mended a broken literary thread which stretches back to Amos Tutuola's work. As we saw in Chapter 6, *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1952) was rejected as un-literary by numerous African critics in the 1950s and 1960s, and it continues to be described as an 'aberrant' literary strain which represents a 'cul-de-sac in African literature' (Osofisan, 1996: 25; Peters, 1993: 14). 'Tutuola created a tradition for himself but not for others to follow', wrote Jonathan A. Peters in 1993 (ibid.).

Over and against this dismissive view of Tutuola, other scholars have started to call for the acknowledgment of the literary current represented by his work, for Tutuola offers an alternative, less polarized, mode of writing in which the 'Self' is not opposed to the 'Other' in eternal conflict. Outside the canon of African literature exemplified by Achebe, there is, in the opinion of Sarah Nuttall, an unacknowledged 'body of texts ... which appear to operate beyond the structures of the self and other paradigm which has dominated much nativist and postcolonial writing and theorizing' (2001: 396). Nuttall suggests that with its verbal excesses, moral unaccountability, and narcissistic refusal to recognize the Other, Tutuola's work can be regarded as the seminal counter-text to *Things Fall Apart* (2001: 396). We must 'reopen that plurality' of selfhood that has been excluded

by nativist and counter-nativist theorizing, she concludes: only in this way can we, as readers, allow space for African writing to emerge as 'a living archive which offers new resources for self-imagining' (2001: 403).

The 'third-generation' literature discussed in this section certainly activates the 'unbounded imaginative space' sought by Nuttall for the expression of 'a self before and beyond the other' (2001: 395). In a similar manner to Tutuola, contemporary *avant garde* authors defy expectations about what 'African literature' is or ought to be. They introduce currents of indeterminacy to the recognized literary tradition and force us to change the shape of the canon to re-accommodate Tutuola and other marginalized non-realist authors.

Unsurprisingly, critics acclimatized to fifty years of Achebe's style and themes have had some difficulty adjusting to this body of work, especially Calixthe Beyala's and Biyi Bandele-Thomas's explicit, violent narratives which are choked with references to filth, decay, sex, and excreta. These authors have reactivated the debate about the 'Africanness' of certain types of literature, and the critical response they elicit helps to reveal critics' underlying desires and expectations about the identity of African literature.

'No longer are the authors interested in a linear plot and limpid prose, whose ideological intentions are unambiguously articulated', complains Osofisan in an essay which seeks to understand the new writers politically, and regards their experimental work as an aesthetic response to West Africa's recent experience of civil war, dictatorship, drought, famine, and economic failure (1996: 25). As his essay develops, however, Osofisan's criticisms become increasingly severe, moving from ambivalence to outright condemnation: the authors' 'disjointed post-modern prose' is simply a gesture of 'conformity with the current respectable literary fashion in the west' and, in order to be retrieved as a positive vehicle for *African* cultural concerns, their writing must find 'anchorage' outside the hollow western 'posts' that provide their current moorings (1996: 28). There can be no utopian political spaces in such a foreign-inscribed body of writing.

To some extent, Osofisan's sense of the way in which a foreign market shapes this work is justified, for, unlike Osofisan himself, all of the *avant garde* authors have contracts with western rather than West African publishers. Véronique Tadjo is happy to acknowledge this fact: she commented in an interview, 'to publish in Africa would

have meant to be confined within the borders of the country from where the publisher in question operated' (cited in Larson, 2001). It seems unnecessarily harsh and essentialist, however, to suggest that these writers are 'unAfrican' on grounds of the location of their publisher. Such a move replicates the 1960s debate about 'what is "African" literature?', in which critics tackled the troublesome status of non-African-born authors who chose African themes, over and against African-born authors who wrote in supposedly 'non-African' styles. Each effort to define specifically 'African' styles and themes involved the *a priori* imposition of essentialist categories relating to identity, race, and literary practice. Given these obstacles, should we even attempt to define the ways in which 'third-generation' authors resident outside Africa, such as Okri, Beyala, Tadjo, and Bandele-Thomas, are or are not 'West African'? Does such a quest lead rapidly and inevitably to the dead-end of essentialist assumptions in which the definition of African literature often finds itself?

A dynamic vision of 'West Africa' is required in order to avoid a prescriptive, reductive definition of the region's literature. West Africa has a long history of travel, migration, and trade, all of which are accompanied by acts of cultural exchange. For many centuries, uneven flows of goods, people, values, and ideas have passed to and fro along the region's different rivers and highways, generating the '-scapes' described in the introduction to this book. Created by trade and migration, as well as by slavery and displacement, 'West Africa' is an entity, or a concept, which is distinctively absorbent and open to new elements. Particularly along the coast, West African cultures are characterized by their confidence and their capacity to accommodate the 'foreign' elements within existing cultural forms: thus, as Karin Barber suggests, 'Yoruba thrives on imported vocabulary which matches imported goods and experiences, something an ancient trading culture does not reject' (Barber, 1997: 113). Such cultures are, above all, 'incorporative' and 'porous' (Barber, 1987).

Kojo Laing encapsulates Barber's concept of cultural incorporativeness in his novel, *Search Sweet Country* (1986). In a scene between the farmer, ½-Allotey, and the professor of sociology, Professor Sackey, the farmer says, 'in spite of over 500 years of association with foreigners, we have been very stubborn. We have kept our basic rhythms, we know our languages, and we have assimilated so much into them' (p.98).[5] An older, more established author, Wole Soyinka, also

proposes a dynamic model of cultural absorption for West Africa: even the so-called traditionalists and followers of African 'pre-colonial' deities, he writes, are characterized by their 'attitude of philosophic accommodation [towards] the existence of impurities or "foreign" matter in the god's digestive system' (1992: 53–4). African gods change with the times, and thus retain their relevance to daily practice.

Seen from the historical and regional perspectives set out by Barber and Soyinka, West Africa's *avant garde* authors typify the exuberance, 'stubbornness' and 'accommodativeness' to be found in so many local cultures (Barber, 1987). Their fragmented, multi-layered representations of 'Africa' need not necessarily be defined by the terms of postmodern theory. Rather, their linguistic and stylistic experiments add local as well as 'foreign matter' to the 'digestive system' of their cultures, without damaging the system itself (Soyinka, op. cit.). Nevertheless, it must be emphasized that as African-born citizens of Europe and the United States, these authors occupy a range of diasporan and metropolitan '-scapes' which feed into (and transform) their West African '-scapes', infusing their cultural 'digestive systems' with materials and perspectives which distinguish them from locally resident authors.

It is fruitful to open up this literature to poststructuralist and deconstructive readings, as Kenneth Harrow demonstrates in his application of French feminist theory to francophone women's writing in *Less than One and Double: a Feminist Reading of African Women's Writing* (2002; see Chapter 13). This way of reading certainly helps us to think about the narrative voice which 'flies about' so radically that it cannot be identified or named in Tadjo's global novel, *As the Crow Flies*; it helps in our encounter with the literary version of cyberspace to be found in Laing's *Major Gentl and the Achimota Wars* (1992). Poststructuralist theory also provides a framework for our understanding of Beyala's female narrators who melt intersubjectively and 'queerly' into the bodies of other women (see Chapter 13). Finally, it helps in our comprehension of the multiple, parallel levels of reality which coexist outside linear, chronological models of space and time in Okri's *The Famished Road* (1991).

To focus *wholly* on relating French poststructuralist theory to this literature, however, without considering the African intellectual and cultural contexts for the authors' work, risks producing less than half

the story and perhaps missing more than double as a result. For, if these texts are 'postmodern' by western standards, they also engage with specifically West African ideas and identities through their settings, characters, and ethical agendas. Such ideas and identities are not, of course, cut off from global flows of culture and theory, nor are they set apart in a realm of authentic Africanity. Rather, they are part of West Africa's matrix of overlapping '-scapes'.

In pursuit of this goal to locate the 'third generation' of writers as *African* authors, many commentators have delineated the local cultural influences circulating around the new writing. In a chapter on Okri's *abiku* novels, for example, Pietro Deandrea argues that the author's decision to borrow the Yoruba figure of the *abiku* child 'roots' his fictions 'in an indigenous belief-system' which helps to reinforce and locate his characters and themes (2002: 48–59). Ato Quayson (1997) and Douglas McCabe (2002) also position Okri firmly within Yoruba cultural practices. Similarly, Laing's work, in Deandrea's view, is 'folktale realist' rather than 'magical realist' for the manner in which it draws on Ghanaian oral sources, particularly the popular 'Ananse' stories about the Akan trickster-hero (2002: 75–6).

In their rejection of realist modes of narration, third-generation writers endorse what Gareth Griffiths describes as 'African modes of knowledge, and reinstate an African ontology and epistemology in place of the dominant Euro-American conceptual frame' (2000: 326). In a more essentialist vein, Derek Wright describes the new writing as filled with 'worldviews only minimally distorted by western concepts of reality' (1997: 183). As for the francophone women writers, Sonja Darlington argues that Beyala's work contains a great deal of 'theorizing about indigenous knowledge' (2003: 48); and Irene Assiba D'Almeida suggests that Liking and her francophone peers are 'breaking the linguistic restrictions imposed upon women's speech' with their 'uninhibited and provocative language that speaks of sensuality, desire, eroticism' (2000: xvii–xviii). While D'Almeida refers to 'patriarchal society' rather than to any specific African social setting, her description of what is acceptable and forbidden in 'women's speech' closely reflects the critical practices of African oral performers and *griots* described in Chapter 4.

Taken together, all of these critics firmly situate the new authors in West African cultural contexts: in so doing, they counter Osofisan's description of the ill-effects of foreign theories upon local literatures,

and ironically they seem to treat as 'African' the very elements marked out as 'alien' and 'postmodern' by other critics.[6] As we will see in the next chapter, however, a recent strand of francophone writing tackles such notions of 'Africanness' head on, and it does so by 'queering' the very notion of identity.

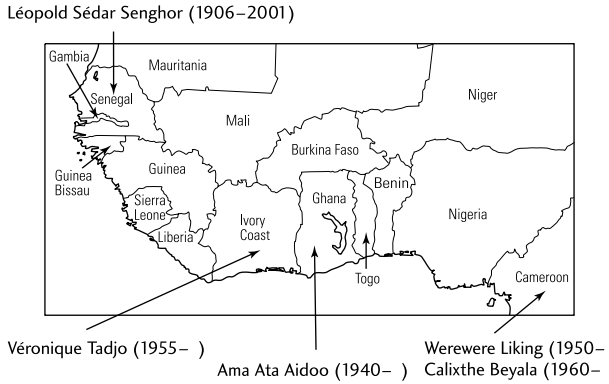
13

'Queering' West African Literatures: Calixthe Beyala, Werewere Liking, and Véronique Tadjo

> Is it possible to allow bodies to speak, to let them speak their own language which surpasses all the frontiers of silence?
>
> (Tadjo, 2001: 88)

This chapter focuses on the work of Calixthe Beyala (1961–) from Cameroon, Werewere Liking (1950–), who was born in Cameroon and lives in the Ivory Coast, and Véronique Tadjo (1955–) from the Ivory Coast. Of all 'third generation' writers, these three francophone women seem to be the most forceful in their rejection of systems of classification and '-isms', including feminism and Marxism, on the grounds that such discourses conceal more than they reveal.

The starting point for our discussion of these authors may be found in a common position that emerges in their work, summed up by one of Beyala's female protagonists who condemns 'the kind of pseudo-intellectual speech in which terms ending in ism are tossed about, all those chopping terms that divide people and remove them from life' (1988: 22–3). Similarly, in *It Shall be of Jasper and Coral* Liking presents a long, ironic 'question and answer' session in which a journalist poses questions to an African creative writer, and expects to hear 'right answers' such as the following, in response to the question 'are you committed?': 'My God, isn't that obvious! Look! ... against imperialism, racism, neocolonialism, fanaticism, earthquakism ... (and do make a concoction of every ism that comes out of your mouth...)' (2000: 81; ellipses retained). The entire text of *It Shall be of Jasper and Coral* can be regarded as a



Map 13 'Queering' West African Literatures

parody of '-ism'-filled academic discourse, for the bulk of the narrative depicts two men, Grozi and Babou, discussing their visions of utopia; these men-in-conversation are watched over by the sceptical, probing, liminal *misovire*,[1] who picks out choice words and ideas from their verbiage for development in her own journal. Comically, she dozes off repeatedly from boredom at the men's intellectual sterility and often breaks down their punctuation in her quotations, rendering their conversation meaningless babble.

While Liking calls for a new language altogether to liberate the process of naming, Véronique Tadjo rather more subtly criticizes systems of identification by simply refusing to attribute racial or national characteristics to the plural heroines of her novels. The narrator of *A vol d'oiseau* (1992; trans. *As the Crow Flies*, 2001) comments, 'I could have given her a name but she has too many faces. I am sure that she is somewhere. I have seen her, met her ... the only thing is, as in those bad photo-romances, a man came between us. Oh, not for long! but long enough to make me let go of her hand' (p. 94). Tadjo refuses to enclose her heroines within the labels furnished by the French language. 'I have an aversion to giving names to my characters', she stated in an interview, explaining, 'I want the readers to see them as human beings first of all. And these human beings are faced with challenges and struggles they must overcome if they want to retain their humanity in the unfavourable context of African society in crisis' (cited in Larson, 2001: 78).

For each of these female writers, identity-tags represent one dimension of the violence which closes down people's shared humanity. Systems of naming seem to obstruct the expression of what Liking terms 'other truths' which coexist with dominant discourses and insinuate themselves in-between the lines of ordinary speech (2000: 3). With remarkable unanimity, these three francophone authors seek a creative space that is free from the codes of established discourses, including discourses about gender difference, sexuality, race, and naming (D'Almeida, 2000: xi): theirs is a new humanism which challenges existing models of identity. Their writing style breaks free from grammatical and linguistic codes, challenging social divisions and destabilizing the boundaries between 'I', 'you', and 'we', setting new pronouns in place.

If Tadjo, Liking, and Beyala find a space for 'self-affirmation' through their creative writing, as Irene Assiba D'Almeida suggests (2000: xi), then the self to be affirmed tends to be a dislocated 'I', situated outside human society, outside the French language, outside the power of the gaze, outside grammar and outside normative sexuality, gazing down upon or looking in upon the world from a position 'without'. In Beyala's *E'est le soleil qui m'a brûlée* (1987; trans. *The Sun Hath Looked Upon Me*, 1996), a first-person female sun gazes down on the heroine, radiating motherly advice and love in a setting that is otherwise harsh and sexually violent for women. On other occasions, the 'self' imagined by Beyala is socially located but utterly trans-subjective: thus the 'I' of *Tu t'appelleras Tanga* (1988; trans. *Your Name Shall Be Tanga*, 1996) has no stable bodily host and shuttles between the abused bodies of the mature white woman, Anna-Claude, and the youthful African woman, Tanga.[2] Similarly, in Liking's experimental 'song-novel', *Elle sera de jaspe et de corail* (1983; trans. *It Shall be of Jasper and Coral*, 2000), the first-person narrator observes the dialogue of the two male characters from an unspecified, dislocated position on the outskirts of male language, participating 'only with her gaze, her ear and from afar, stalking the power-word that will formulate and give body to her dream' as a woman (2000: 4). In Tadjo's writing, too, the 'self' is an unnamed, fragmented female, an 'I' and a 'she' who spring up in a multitude of global locations to narrate short ethical tales, all of which revolve around the search for love and endings or deaths in relationships (see Tadjo, 2001).

Through their experiments with style and form, these authors seem to be using creative writing to explore new methods of expressing desire for the Other without appropriating the Other's subjectivity. Their writing offers an alternative model for the Self's relationship to the Other, describing a 'transference' which takes place beyond what the *misovire* terms 'the victorious quest of the phallus' (Liking, 2000: 50).

A striking parallel emerges, here, with Senghor's theory of *négritude*, in which the African's relationship with the Other was described in terms of intuition, connection (or feeling-within), and touch. Upon perceiving another human subject, Senghor wrote, the African 'is moved, centrifugally, from subject to object on the waves of the Other' (1964: 72; see Chapter 2). From this model based on touch and movement, Senghor developed his idea of an 'effective humanism' which prioritized the necessity for respect and recognition between people of different cultures (pp. 76–80). Liking's inspirational model for love 'touches' Senghor's humanism so closely that it is rather surprising to witness the *misovire*'s overt rejection of *négritude* as a stultifying and oppressive theory: 'Nor négritude tigritude and other turpitudes', she hisses during a tirade which rejects punctuation as well as African patriarchal theory (2000: 104).

Even as they reject Senghor's patriarchal and romantic representations of African womanhood, however, the francophone women writers *inherit* the French West African philosophy of *négritude* and the humanism it generated: it forms part of the intellectual culture within which they work, providing the philosophical starting-point for their challenges to gender identity. The *négritude* poets and the francophone women writers draw upon a similar framework in which the subordinate element in the oppressive power structure—Africa or Woman—is privileged, cut free from its location in the hierarchy, and celebrated for the very qualities which the dominant discourse describes as inferior. In the process, the language system is ruptured and made to throb with a *présence africaine*, or a *présence feminine*. In both *négritude* and recent francophone women's writing, then, the binary logic of the dominant discourse—its 'logocentrism'—is exposed and undermined by a new theory of desire which is expressed in and through an experimental use of the French language.

Femininity is not altogether lost from this equation: as Kenneth Harrow has demonstrated in his study of francophone African

women's writing, the experimental quality of this work seems to derive in large part from the influence of French feminist theories which position feminine pleasure in a space outside the symbolic order of language, beyond articulation (Harrow, 2002). From this perspective, Beyala, Liking, and Tadjo appear to be engaged in the very process of discursive sabotage which the French feminist Luce Irigaray calls for when she insists that the concept of woman should involve a 'jamming [of] the theoretical machinery itself', a suspension of 'the production of a truth and of a meaning that are excessively univocal' (Irigaray 1998: 571). As Africans in the metropolis, like the *négritude* poets before them, they come to writing without a secure sense of 'univocality'. As African women writing French-language literature, they are ideally positioned to take up Irigaray's call for acts of intellectual and linguistic sabotage against a phallocratic order which revolves around the division of subject from object.

Beyala, Tadjo, and Liking challenge the terms of the French language with their code-breaking, grammatically liberated, 'feminine' writing in which pulses, smells, and rhythms are emphasized above categories based on eyesight and (di)visible distinctions. Indeed, so close is the connection between their work and French feminist theory that texts such as Liking's *It Shall be of Jasper and Coral* directly echo the work of Irigaray and Hélène Cixous. When Liking's *misovire* deliberately positions her desires against phallic discourse and evokes 'eternity' (or excess) in its place, she seems to reiterate Cixous's call for the French language to be exploded with feminine desire. 'It is not this [phallic] desire I want to be talking about', the *misovire* says, 'I picture … A desire that undulates with successive advances | And finds its eternity in rhythm | Such as the ocean' (2000: 49). Similarly, Cixous writes of woman: 'Her libido is cosmic, just as her unconscious is worldwide' (1998: 584). For Cixous, as for Liking, 'woman' is located in 'a cosmos where eros never stops traveling, vast astral space. She doesn't revolve around a sun that is more stars than the stars' (Cixous 1998: 583–4). 'I am spacious singing Flesh', Cixous calls and Liking's *misovire* seems to respond from West Africa with the affirmation that her own desire 'will never be erect and it will never be limp' (Cixous, 1998: 584; Liking, 2000: 49).

Similarly, the heroine of Beyala's *The Sun Hath Looked Upon Me* floats paper boats along an open drain leading from her slum to the outside world with messages of love to other women. Her paper boats

are often blank, however, demanding that we acknowledge that some messages exceed current linguistic rules and logics. As symbols, the floating paper boats seem to admit, with Irigaray, that the rules of language are 'phallocentric' and that feminine writing is 'fluid' and elemental, 'cast[ing] phallocentrism, phallocratism, loose from its moorings in order to return the masculine to its own language, leaving open the possibility of a different language' (Irigaray, 1998: 573).

These similarities between the two groups of feminist texts are more than coincidental. Liking, Tadjo, and Beyala are highly educated francophone women who have lived and studied for many years in France: like the *négritude* poets, they carry mixed baggage from the French philosophical tradition into their own writing, and in a similar manner to Cixous and Irigaray, they use the French language to enable their subjects to become radically open to the entry of others. In this new writing, each 'I' is fissured by itself and by hosts of other 'I's as the authors jettison 'anti-colonial' and realist writing in favour of experimental forms.

What distinguishes these francophone women from their African male peers and predecessors is their quest, through writing, to explore new subjectivities for African women and to challenge existing attitudes and values. Beyala, Tadjo, and Liking seem to be using creative writing to compose a new gender theory for African women, working within the contours of experimental creative writing rather than within the analytical categories of non-fictional genres in order to produce 'theory' (see Nfah-Abbenyi, 1997). The *misovire* of *It Shall be of Jasper and Coral* describes the women writers' shared model of subjectivity: 'I love you and I survive through this love | Through this love I create and live again', she says, defining heterosexual love as 'a constancy in union and in transference | From one shore to the other without interruption ... I am speaking of a desire that would enrich you without impoverishing me | A desire that would fill me without emptying you' (Liking, 2000: 49–50).

In their own ways, Beyala, Liking, and Tadjo all imagine a space for feminine sexuality *outside* the limits of heterosexuality. In the process of developing their ethical alternatives to the dominant '-isms', each of these authors overthrows normative male–female relations in favour of sexual identities which revolve around new senses and sensations. In *As the Crow Flies*, Tadjo presents a set of tableaux which describe heterosexual relationships but actually explore the

abundance, or excess, of female desire in relation to the love that a man can offer. Thus in one story-fragment depicting a man's rape of his free-spirited girlfriend, Tadjo locates the woman's identity in what is described as an 'in between, ambiguous' space outside conventional gender codes: 'she considered herself to be without gender. She was a creature in between, ambiguous, who could not care less if she wore a skirt or if she had pointed breasts' (2001: 79).

Beyala and Liking are more confrontational than Tadjo, but they explore a similar range of non-heterosexual spaces for women. In *It Shall be of Jasper and Coral*, Liking's protagonist condemns the 'putrefaction of the macho civilization that has ruled for so many centuries now and that sees everything as a phallus!!!', and she calls for a revolutionary new language in which women can take up positions as speaking subjects (2000: 48). Beyala is the most controversial of the three authors.[3] Her work contains numerous scenes of sexual pleasure and erotic desire between women, including masturbation and homoerotic touch. She also dwells upon one of the most silenced areas of female sexuality: a daughter's sexual desire for the mother (see Nfah-Abbenyi, 1997). In one sensual scene, for example, the heroine of *The Sun Hath Looked Upon Me* recalls caressing and massaging her mother's tired body, generating 'bliss' and expunging the 'bad blood' of men through her touch (1996: 68–9). Such scenes articulate a taboo and highlight a repressed aspect of human sexuality.[4]

In contrast to Beyala's work, in which women continually touch and love one another, few, if any, overtly homosexual African characters can be found in anglophone West African literature. This has caused some commentators to suggest that homosexuality is both 'alien' to Africa and inadmissible to African literature (Kolawole, 1997; Ojo-Ade, 1983). In the 1980s, the female friendship and subsequent lesbian proposition in *Our Sister Killjoy* (1977) stimulated a heated debate about Ama Ata Aidoo's representation of homoerotic desire (Ojo-Ade, 1983; Frank, 1987). When the German character, Marija, asks Sissy to become her lover in *Our Sister Killjoy*, and Sissy experiences revulsion, an obvious interpretation is that the scene replays in symbolic form the colonization, or corruption, of Africa by Europe.[5] Beyond this moment of overt homosexuality, however, a 'queer' dimension persists in *Our Sister Killjoy* in the form of its experimental language and format, its gaps and silences, its careful account of Sissy's and Marija's *mutual* desire as female

friends, and the narrator's lack of moral comment on the crucial 'proposition' scene (see Rooney, 1991).

In a similar manner, other African women's novels may be opened up to 'queer' readings, as Elleke Boehmer (2003; 2005) demonstrates in her careful, speculative interpretation of the work of two Zimbabwean authors, Yvonne Vera and Tsitsi Dangarembga. Boehmer reads for instances of female desire and friendship which *exceed* heterosexuality without necessarily being 'homosexual': she emphasizes that her chosen authors are not necessarily conscious of this 'queer' dimension, which may arise in a novel 'in spite of itself' (2003: 139). One might apply the same interpretative method to texts from West Africa, such as Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* (1966), with its compassionate, open communions between women; or to Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* (1981), in which female friendship and the mother–daughter relationship command a love more abundant than any husband–wife bond. In all of these cases, however, in order to 'queer' the text, the critic must read against the grain of the narrative, unearthing hidden codes. One consequence of such readings is that female sexuality tends to be marginalized in favour of the less highly-charged (or perhaps less sexually definable) language of female 'bonds' and 'friendships': such bonds and friendships are a part of sexuality, of course, but they are also part of the process whereby sexual desire can be re-socialized or made more manageable in a heterosexual economy.

By contrast, what distinguishes the work of Beyala, Tadjo, and Liking is that they openly invite a 'queer' reading of female sexuality by setting their heroines' desires *against and also outside* the heterosexual norm: this invitation is not embedded in codes. This is not to suggest that they promote lesbian relationships as an ideal. Tadjo and Liking explore the space for femininity in heterosexual relationships. Their work illustrates the manner in which 'queer' does not refer simply to the promotion of homosexual or lesbian relationships set in opposition to heterosexuality. Rather than referring to same-sex object choices, 'queer' defines a method of thinking about desire outside binary oppositions, including the opposition between heterosexuality and homosexuality. 'One of the things that "queer" can refer to', writes Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), is 'the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality, aren't made

(or can't be made) to signify monolithically' (1990: 8). Thus, 'queer' is a spatial signifier which refers broadly to non-heterosexual or asexual bonds which fall outside, or beyond, or in excess of, existing social categories and roles, and which, in consequence, lead to indecision about naming.

In posing a creative challenge to the French language and to heterosexuality, the authors discussed in this chapter conjure up a space for the expression of desire outside language and beyond representation. In each case, womanhood remains the starting-point which justifies and inspires their experimentation with (patriarchal) linguistic forms. Their work is thus complex and challenging: it is both 'French feminist' and 'queer', containing a series of forceful revisions—or theorizations—which necessitate a reassessment of conventional categories of gender and writing in West Africa.

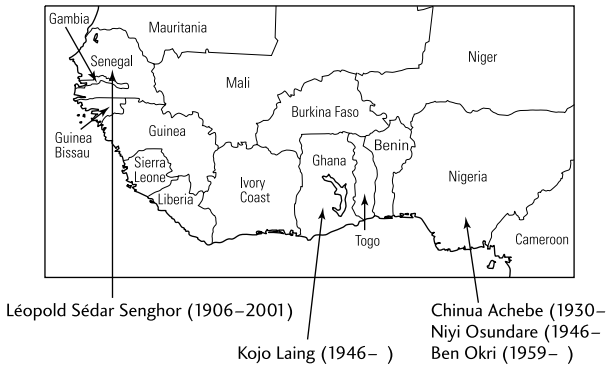
14

Conclusion
West Africa in Postcolonial Theory

> Who crawls into the place of the 'human' of 'humanism' at the end of the day, even in the name of diversity?
>
> **(Spivak, 2003: 23)**

West African authors and intellectuals have exercised a powerful influence over the direction of postcolonialism since the 1960s. A striking feature of their work is their repeated insistence on the importance of the local and particular dimensions of African culture: their work tends to highlight culturally specific West African spaces which are situated 'within and between things', not easily rendered general or universally applicable to other disciplines, locations, or discourses (Jeyifo, 1994: 19). In this concluding chapter, I revisit some of the literatures and theories discussed in preceding chapters in order to highlight this strikingly 'West African' aspect of postcolonialism in which cultural specificity is endorsed prior to, or within, global cultural formations, and humanism is promoted above anti-humanism.

A great deal of West African intellectual activity is situated in local political and cultural formations, often as part of a writer's insistence on the validity and vitality of African practices over and against colonial or metropolitan norms. Ben Okri summarized this position when he criticized the trajectory of postcolonial discourse which emphasises the repression, or victimization, of the colonized subject: 'it's quite possible that it [colonialism] didn't invade our spiritual and aesthetic and mythical internal structures', he stated, in disagreement with Fanon (Okri, 1992: 86). 'There's been too much attribution of



Map 14 West Africa in Postcolonial Theory

power to the effect of colonialism in our consciousness', he continued, adding, 'We've looked too much in that direction and have forgotten about our own aesthetic frames' (ibid.). For Okri, postcolonialism must involve an understanding of local systems of knowledge, for philosophy and literature are umbilically connected through Africa's 'own aesthetic frames'.

One consequence of this attention to the local is that postcolonial theory in West Africa tends to veer away from universals, actively resisting cross-cultural 'applications' to other postcolonial formations. For example, Soyinka's (1976) notion of the abyssal, transitional 'Fourth Stage' resists extrapolation into other contexts: rather, it is vitally connected with Yoruba religious practices and draws from Soyinka's meticulous research into Yoruba traditions in Nigeria. In this, Soyinka's postcolonialism could not be more different from Homi Bhabha's (1990) abstract theorizations about the 'in-between' location of postcolonial cultures.

This resistance to universalism in West African theories of culture and identity illustrates the dichotomy described by Gayatri Spivak (2003) between 'Area Studies' and 'Comparative Literature'. Whereas the academic discipline of 'Area Studies' involves the exploration of cultural identities in their integrity, Spivak argues that the humanist discipline of 'Comparative Literature' leans towards universals and promotes the ideal of multiculturalism above that of cultural singularity

(2003: 28). Both disciplines have benefits and drawbacks: while Comparative Literature risks erasing cultural specificity by leaping too easily from one text to another, presuming equivalence and transparency, Area Studies risks over-investing in the idea of the particular, or the local, and presuming that individual cultures cannot be compared or translated into the terms of one other (2003: 27–32). If one accepts Spivak's formulation, West African theories of identity fit better into the Area Studies than the Comparative Literature framework. A case in point is the manner in which, in the field of African literary studies, postcolonial and mainstream 'theories' tend to be tested and transformed by their percolation through the mesh of 'African Studies'. Ato Quayson's book, *Postcolonialism: Theory, Practice or Process?* (2000), provides an example of this approach, for Quayson presents numerous examples of postcolonialism drawn from African cultures, and demands the reinsertion of Africa into 'theory', rather than the application of 'theory' to Africa.

Spivak resolves the tensions between the universal and the particular by developing a model for Comparative Literature in which the principle of untranslatability, or radical specificity, is respected, for she recognizes that one culture 'cannot access another directly and with a guarantee' (2003: 30). The belief in guaranteed accessibility is one of the founding myths of European and North American multiculturalism. Comparative Literature, with its belief in mutually comprehensible collectivities, must start to make space for the radical specificity allowed for in the discipline of Area Studies. Academic research and writing must not transform the object of study 'into a Euro–U.S. model academic code of some kind' (p. 37); rather, scholars should remain open to the 'surprising' and 'unexpected' aspects of other cultures (pp. 56–7).

From the perspective of postcolonial studies in metropolitan locations, Spivak's resolution of the dilemma works well. As a framework for general academic practice, however, it carries the potential risk of further exacerbating the 'silencing' or 'erasure' of African theory diagnosed by critics such as Biodun Jeyifo (1994) and Simon Gikandi (2001b) in their critiques of postcolonialism, for since the turn of the twentieth century a major strand of African intellectual production has insisted upon preserving the very specificity which Spivak seeks to reposition within a comparative model.

The examples of literature and intellectual activity presented in this book reveal a powerful reason for the retention of 'Area Studies' as a discipline, especially because, as the historian Terence Ranger (2002) points out, specificity does not necessarily operate to the detriment of 'theory'. An Area Studies approach 'has a *universal* relevance', Ranger comments, because 'African writers had to take us *there*, to show *local* Africa in all its diversity and energy; to teach Africans to enjoy and celebrate "the way they are" ' (2002: 76–7; emphasis retained). Borrowing from the work of the Africanist historian John Lonsdale, Ranger insists that particular, located 'case studies', rather than universal or comparative theories, 'can show how the big *why* questions of world history actually manifest themselves to human actors in real life', thus generating answers and new theories, 'albeit provisional' (Lonsdale, cited in Ranger, 2002: 77–8; emphasis retained).

Ranger and Lonsdale seem to have observed an alternative mode of theorizing in Africa, in which the particular is not sacrificed to the universal, and yet the universal is not lost from view. Nevertheless, this other theory does not operate across disciplines, or comparatively, in the manner generally accepted by western intellectuals to characterize critical and literary theory (see Culler, 1997). Rather, this alternative theory recognizes that we must open up spaces within postcolonialism for an appreciation of what Osundare terms 'the crucial specificities of individual parts', including 'the enormous assortedness of the fishes in the postcolonial net: Africa, Australia, Bangladesh, Canada, the Caribbean, India, Malaysia, Malta, New Zealand, Pakistan, Singapore, South Pacific, Sri Lanka—and the U.S.A!' (2002b: 44). West African theories of culture and identity often seem to start from, and not to depart from, an Area Studies framework which dwells on these 'individual parts'. The 'individual parts' approach adopted by many West African intellectuals is not a narrow or parochial part of postcolonial discourse: instead it represents a way out of the postcolonial slough of despond, whereby subjectivity and social context are too readily swallowed up by concepts of indeterminacy and difference. Lonsdale writes:

> The grand narratives that once situated humanity in some continuing stream of meaning have faltered amidst existential doubt or economic and political ruin. In their exhausted hulks a myriad of smaller stories sprout, if not like

weeds then without any organising principle other than common humanity… this conjuncture may spell not so much disaster as opportunity for African history. The former meta-narratives of world history were, after all, deeply dismissive of Africa and Africans.

(cited in Ranger, 2002: 78)

It is these 'smaller stories' that West African intellectuals and authors have endorsed from the outset, assisted in their task by the vibrant orality and linguistic multiplicity of the region's literary culture.

The prevalence of theories of African specificity in West African intellectual circles must also be viewed historically in relation to the region's colonial experience. The cultural wholeness claimed by Europe under the mantle of liberal humanism served to corrode the foundations of what Abiola Irele powerfully terms the African's 'intimate subjectivity' (1981: 92; see Chapter 11). Africans, Irele argues, have been reacting ever since to this assault on their intimate subjectivity, creating theories of the African personality ranging from *négritude* to cultural nationalism, all of which operate according to ideas of specificity. As a result, the African 'selves' constructed in the last hundred years tend to circulate outside the false 'universal' values imposed by Europe (Irele, 1981: 92). Not all theorists approve of this intellectual heritage, of course: the celebration of Africa's *difference* is nothing radical or new, Simon Gikandi writes, for the continent has figured as 'the site of difference' since the start of the modern period in Europe (2001b: 4). Gikandi's hope for an alternative critical model may be found in the concept of specificity, for whereas 'difference' requires an Other in a conflictual relationship, 'specificity' involves a new humanistic relationship. 'Specificity' involves a type of otherness that cannot be negated or assimilated into a 'Self'.

14.1 Theories of planetarity and complementarity

Interestingly, a section of Spivak's *Death of a Discipline* offers an opening for our appreciation of West African theories of specificity. Dissatisfied with the implications of the term 'global', Spivak proposes the notion of 'planetarity' as a means to recognize an otherness that is not assimilated or neutralized by a 'self' who studies, observes, describes, and translates it into sameness (2003: 71–82). Planetarity is

put forward to replace our prevailing notion of 'global' identity which involves 'the imposition of the same system of exchange everywhere' (p. 72). Over and against the homogenizing style of globalization, a *planetary* identity brings with it a 'species of alterity, belonging to another system; and yet we inhabit it on loan' (ibid.). The planet thus provides a universal framework which does not, in the manner of liberal humanism, reduce cultural otherness to the struggle between Self and Other; nor is the Other permanently positioned in the oppositional 'master–servant' relationship described by Hegel, Fanon, and Sartre. 'If we imagine ourselves as planetary subjects rather than global agents', Spivak writes, then 'alterity remains underived from us; it is not our dialectical negation, it contains us as much as it flings us away' (ibid.).

Other recent developments in postcolonialism support Spivak's position. In an article entitled 'Postcolonial Complementarity' (2003), for example, Caroline Rooney borrows the word 'complementarity' from quantum physics in order to describe the existence of 'two different domains of propositions (or of histories), two different logics that cannot be embedded into some larger and consistent logic' (Omnès, cited in Rooney, 2003: 59). These different logics cannot be absorbed into an overarching, totalizing system of universals, Rooney argues, because they operate by separate rules: importantly, the existence of one logic does not require the elimination or delegitimation of the other logic.[1] The Ghanaian author, Kojo Laing, has been following this very principle of complementarity since he published his first novel in the mid-1980s: as Derek Wright states, *Search Sweet Country* (1986) revolves around proving that 'the intellectual has internalized spurious contradictions between alternatives which are really more complementary than antithetical' (Wright, 1997: 188).

The concept of complementarity marks a shift in postcolonialism: in a similar manner to Spivak's concept of planetarity, Rooney breaks away from the pervasive 'Self versus Other' dialectic that has dominated postcolonial theory since the work of Fanon and Said. The central proposition in Rooney's essay is that 'the principle of complementarity is not a relativistic one but one of an indeterminacy of mutual exclusion' (2003: 79). Otherness does not derive from its relation to a pre-existent Self, or a logic of the same, in this model. The ethical implication, of great relevance to West African literature and theory, is that 'each allow[s] for the other, their incompletion

even holding out for the potentiality of each other, in order to pre-empt a logic of totalisation' (ibid.). Here is a theory of the *need for* 'mutual exclusions', rather than of Self versus Other conflicts, which has resonance for the West African literatures discussed in this book. As with Spivak's notion of planetarity, Rooney insists upon our recognition of an otherness which is not simply the negation of the same, but exists in a more radical, parallel, undecidable space.

In a similar manner to Laing's recognition of complementary African worlds, Ben Okri remarked of his own novel, *The Famished Road* (1991), 'My desire was to catch as many layers of reality as I could' (1992: 82). The protagonist, Azaro, possesses a mind 'which is already aware of other lives behind and in front', Okri continued, and as a result the novel 'open[s] towards infinity' (1992: 83). Azaro's consciousness exemplifies the 'postcolonial complementarity' of *The Famished Road*: multiple worlds and realities coexist with equal validity as Azaro shuttles rapidly between different planes. These planes of reality are strongly reminiscent of the worlds of the living, the unborn, and the ancestors in African traditional religions. Not one of these worlds is entirely transparent and available for 'easy reading' according to the logic of another plane or reality. Okri creates worlds that are equivalent but not 'the same', nor necessarily comprehensible through one another's logics, nor easily 'transcoded' from one to the other in acts of simple translation. To use Spivak's terminology, a zone of radical 'undecidability' operates within and between each plane of reality in *The Famished Road*: in this zone one finds the presence of non-assimilable, unknowable elements alongside knowledge that is inaccessible and esoteric (Spivak, 2003). 'It's not meant to be coherent', Okri insisted of *The Famished Road*, for 'it's against the perception of the world as being coherent and therefore readable as text' (1992: 85). Each plane marks the presence of other systems of knowledge which are singular, of equivalent validity to one another, but incapable of assimilation by a dominant logic.

Similarly, in the francophone women's writing discussed in Chapter 13, a humanist model emerges in which no 'I' is complete without the presence of another 'I'. Véronique Tadjo (2001) repeatedly proposes a model of love based on the notion of complementarity, set against the violence of assimilation which refuses to respect a person's otherness. 'Queerest' of all are Beyala's heroines who fuse subjectivities with, and co-narrate, one another's stories. Given that Beyala and her

peers inhabit international rather than West African locations, however, the question to be asked, at the risk of essentialism, relates to how 'West African' the 'postcolonial complementarity' which surges through *avant garde*, or 'third-generation' writing is.

Interestingly, one of the most stark instances of cultural irreducibility occurs not in 'third-generation' writing, but in the final chapter of *Things Fall Apart*: there Achebe describes how Igbo culture is translated out of its own rich specificity by the District Commissioner, and planted into the terrain of anthropological otherness. In spite of this, however, Okonkwo's corpse hangs on beyond the final page, gazed at by his friend Obierika and by the District Commissioner, but never quite comprehended or cut down from its tree. If the hero's presence epitomizes the figure of the silenced, over-written colonial subject for most of the novel, then in death his body is *irreducible* to the colonial grammar and logic. The suicide represents an unspeakable abomination within Okonkwo's community, but for that very reason it cannot be retrieved into the speech and logic of colonial anthropology, or explained to the District Commissioner by locals in a way that makes it transparent to readers. 'Only strangers may touch it', Obierika tells the District Commissioner, but it is also clear that the colonial officer—the ultimate stranger—will never 'touch it', either physically or in writing (1986: 147). The corpse of Okonkwo possesses a kind of radical specificity which exposes the limits of (post)colonial onlookers' powers of interpretation.

This is the vital moment when postmodernism meets with and parts from West African theories of identity. As Chapter 11 suggested, a postmodernist or poststructuralist reading commences by questioning the notion of the centred, rational self and its relationship with a definite 'other', seeking instead what lies hidden behind such notions, making them possible. West African writing since Fagunwa in the 1940s also questions the 'self–other' relationship, but it does so rather differently by revealing numerous planes of reality and identity existing side-by-side, each with equal validity. Crucially, the humanist principles of 'reality', 'meaning', 'identity', and 'truth' are not overturned by West African authors. Human 'being' is not dispensed with, here, nor are notions of 'self' and 'other' dissolved: what we find instead is an alternative model based on the concept of complementarity.

The narrator of Laing's *Search Sweet Country* (1986) sums up this concept in his description of a youthful woman named Araba Fynn:

'when she spoke English in the airplanes, her Mfantse touched it, and her Ga touched her Mfantse; so that in this world of languages touching, her mouth became complex yet beautiful' (1986: 118). 'Third-generation' authors such as Laing achieve a remarkable reconciliation between humanism and postmodernism: they remain humanist without being *liberal* humanist, and deconstructive without erasing the agency of the subject.

This notion of 'touching' between one element and another completely rewrites Frantz Fanon's experience of the alienating gaze of the Other: as with the francophone women writers discussed in Chapter 13, and in a manner that connects his work firmly with Senghor's theory of touch, Laing refuses to allow otherness to exist in a conflictual relationship with the 'self'. While Fanon's experience of the colonial gaze was to be deprived of subjectivity and thrown into an anguished void, West Africa's 'third-generation' writers seem to draw from their predecessors and recognize otherness in a manner that avoids crisis and alienation. Thus, in place of anti-colonial assertions of selfhood over and against an invasive Other, they blend 'disparate ontologies' on an African cultural palate (Wright, 1997: 12). In 'postmodern' fashion, they challenge and replace unitary notions of place, space, culture, language, and self, but they do so from a starting-point which does not do away with the integrity of the human subject.

This sense of Self-touching-Other without damage or appropriation permeates West African literatures, providing a powerful ethical model for African postcolonial identities and giving us the tools to recognize a distinctive but as yet largely untheorized dimension of West African literatures as a whole. To borrow Rooney's and Spivak's terms once again, West African novelists since at least the 1940s seem to generate a cultural model which respects, rather than fears, undecidability, complementarity, and otherness. This model may be used to return to the literary and philosophical material that informed chapter 2 of this book, and to view it in a revisionary light.

14.2 *Négritude*: a return and a reassessment

Recent reassessments of *négritude* emphasize the humanistic impulse of the movement above its celebration of absolute ontological differences. A leading proponent of this view, Kwaku Asante-Darko, argues

that Senghor and his colleagues did not reject and expel Europe in favour of Africa: rather, *négritude* expressed 'a vibrant hope for racial harmony, equality, and conciliation', positing these as future ideals (2000: 152). Critics between the 1940s and 1960s, Asante-Darko suggests, were too quick to judge *négritude* according to the 'either-or' logic of their own anti-colonial nationalism: in consequence, they 'overemphasized vitriol and remonstrance to the conventional neglect of the theme of racial reconciliation', a theme which emerges even in the most vituperative verse of David Diop (pp. 151, 155). Now that the anti-colonial period has passed in West Africa,[2] Asante-Darko proposes that Senghor and his peers should be seen in the terms of their futuristic vision, which looks toward an ideal postcolonial society based upon 'multiracial reconciliation and conviviality' (p. 158). It is no accident that Asante-Darko's re-focusing of the historical lens occurs in the same period as South Africa's transition toward multi-racial democracy. Reassessed from this end-of-apartheid era, *négritude* may be regarded as an African initiative and a political model for inter-racial harmony in the contemporary world. As Senghor wrote, 'There is difference, but not inferiority or antagonism' (cited in Irele, 1981: 71).

While Asante-Darko tends to underplay resistance in favour of cosmopolitanism, he draws attention to a neglected current in the *négritude* movement. Senghor certainly rejected the see-saw movement of binary 'Self versus Other' models of identity. As early as 1954, he distanced *négritude* from 'assimilation' and also from 'anti-assimilation': that is, he rejected a culture's attempt to make another culture identical with itself, but he *also* rejected the politics of absolute difference, in which cultures regard themselves as incompatible with others (1965: 50).

In place of this either-or opposition, words such as 'partnership' and 'complementary' occur repeatedly in Senghor's work as he searches for a model of identity in which difference can be expressed without conflict or assimilation. He writes, idealistically, 'we must go beyond the false alternative of association or assimilation and say association AND assimilation' (p. 51; emphasis retained; see also p. 97). To this end, the 'final aim of colonization' should be 'a moral and intellectual cross-fertilization, a spiritual graft' (p. 54). This is a symbiotic model in which the 'other' flows into the 'self', demonstrating Senghor's form of humanism.[3]

Many of Senghor's images and references are outmoded and rightly open to criticism, but a sympathetic return to his work allows us to regard the *négritude* poets as historically situated seekers after an ethics of racial difference. From their position deeply embedded within French colonial culture, they formulated a theory of (post-)colonial relations in which specificity is respected rather than assimilated. Senghor's most powerful statement of this ethical position is strongly reminiscent of the work of the three francophone women writers discussed in Chapter 13:[4]

> our subject abandons his *I* to sym-pathize and identify himself with the THOU. He dies to himself to be reborn in the *Other*. He does not assimilate, he is assimilated. He does not kill the other life, he strengthens his own life through it. He lives with the *Other* in a communal life, lives in *symbiosis*: he is born-with and thereby knows the *Other*. Subject and object are dialectically confronted in the very act of knowing one another.
>
> **(Senghor [1962] 1965: 32; emphasis retained)**

In this humanistic vision, the 'Other' complements the 'Self' and does not compete with it in a power struggle. There is no masterful gaze conferring objecthood upon the Other. Senghor voices a progressive ideal for human co-existence, and his multicultural ideal occurs through symbiotic touch rather than through eyesight. For Senghor, Africa is thus the source of a new, true humanism which attempts to break with the 'false humanism' of European post-Enlightenment models. Modelling an ethical relationship based on touch above sight, Senghor's African exemplifies a 'respect for life' in which the object is 'felt' and not analysed or assimilated (p. 29).

Since at least the 1940s, African writers and intellectuals have been formulating similar models, insisting upon the right of specific cultures to exist without negation as 'Other'. Senghor's contribution to West African theories of identity was his affirmation of the primacy of the human subject without erasing the concept of cultural specificity. His model of humanism is different from *liberal* humanism in that a culture's alterity, or complementarity, is affirmed within the context of a broader shared humanity.

It is possible to discern similar principles of complementarity at work in an enormous range of West African literatures, oral forms and popular texts. As we saw in Hauwa Ali's *Destiny* (1988), global literary genres such as the popular romance may be adapted by West

African writers to suit local conditions (Chapter 9). This dynamic adaptation of new forms does not damage the 'host' culture, which remains open to the Other and also invested in the promotion of its own specificity. Similarly, oral literatures and popular cultures in West Africa confidently absorb 'foreign' elements—whether they be Islamic, Christian, colonial or multinational—without simply mimicking the new elements in a submissive manner or appearing to be 'damaged' by the cultural cross-fertilizations.

Niyi Osundare states that ours is a world which is 'scared of idealism, a world where humanist ethos are [sic] becoming a faint echo' (Osundare, 2002b: 13). He calls for a reaffirmation of 'the commerce of human relationship', a mending of 'man's broken bond between himself and the Other' (p. 18). The sheer numbers of West African authors and intellectuals to promote 'complementarity' since the 1940s indicates the existence of Osundare's ideal in the form of a powerful alternative humanism in the region. Here is an intellectual tradition with roots that extend deeply into the African past and which also connects with current 'third-generation' writing. Founded on the idea of specificity, this humanism does not draw inspiration from the old liberal universals so influentially loathed by Achebe. Rather, this ethical alternative derives from West Africans' strong sense of 'the local in the global', or the 'particular in the universal': this is not a model that can be easily accommodated by anti-humanist theory with its celebration of 'difference', nor by the Marxist tradition with its hostility towards 'localist' discourses for their promotion of (ethnic) particularity above national and international collaboration.

For all its disturbing newness and experimentation, 'third-generation' writing from West Africa circles back and touches the tail of 'first-generation' writing, participating in what Okri describes as an 'African aesthetic' which 'is bound to a way of looking at the world in more than three dimensions. It's the aesthetic of possibilities, of labyrinths, of riddles … of paradoxes' (Okri, 1992: 87–8). Proceeding from an affirmation of human subjectivity, and assuming an individual's capacity to produce history, West African literature and theory remain solidly humanist in orientation, providing a fascinating but neglected alternative to anti-humanist theory.

In the context of the region's record of tense, productive, contradictory engagements with European discourses and colonial powers, it is easy to appreciate this long-standing emphasis on human relations

and the recognition of cultural specificity. Creative writing is not divorced from philosophy, or politics, or ethics, or reality, in this view; nor is it situated in an autonomous aesthetic realm of 'art for art's sake'. Instead, West African literature remains a *praxis*, a word which for Marxists signals the manner in which texts contain incentives for readers to rethink their conditions and take action on the world.

West African literature and theory occupy a firm place within the wide range of contemporary postcolonial discourses: whether one is reading the canonical 'heavyweights' or the emergent and experimental authors, this body of writing furnishes a model which meets Fanon's demand in the closing pages of *Black Skin, White Masks*: 'I recognize that I have one right alone: That of demanding human behaviour from the other' (1986: 229). Such 'human behaviour' includes the right to be recognized in one's potentially irreducible specificity.

ENDNOTES

CHAPTER 1

1. An estimated 11.7 million people were transported from West Africa across the Atlantic between 1450 and 1900 (Coquery-Vidrovitch, 1985: 19).
2. On glimpsing this colonial map in the offices of a Belgian trading company, the protagonist of Joseph Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness' (1899), Marlow, comments approvingly: 'There was a vast amount of red—good to see at any time, because one knows that some real work is done in there' (p. 14). Stripped of its British redness, however, Africa is nothing but darkness for Marlow. As Chapter 6 reveals, Chinua Achebe wrote his first novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1958), in an effort to reinsert Africa's own indigenous colours into the colonial map.
3. The British colonial administration was so concerned about the circulation of Marcus Garvey's newspaper, *The Negro World*, in West Africa that in the early 1930s it formulated legislation specifically designed to ensure its exclusion from the region.

CHAPTER 2

1. Laye is an influential African author whose work is discussed in detail by Simon Gikandi (1987).
2. This was not to the exclusion of African languages, for Senghor also expressed great love for the vernaculars (see Senghor, 1965).
3. When Cixous describes woman as the 'dark continent', quoting Freud's description of women but also quoting the imperialist euphemism for Africa, she plays with the racial form of this binary opposition; similarly, when the *négritude* poets evoke a highly symbolic image of African womanhood in order to perform their own Africanness, they deploy the opposition in its gendered form.
4. The French feminists have been roundly condemned for the same biological essentialism (Moi, 2002), but for a persuasive explanation of the problem, see Margaret Whitford (1991).

5. There is insufficient space to discuss individual poems in detail here, but readers are directed towards Senghor's war poetry in *Hosties Noires* (1948), his 'Chaka', in *Éthiopiques* (1956), and Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (1939).
6. The impact of the anthropological work of Leo Frobenius and Claude Levy-Bruhl upon the modernist movement is discussed by Christopher Miller (1990: 16).
7. Senghor's comment in its rightful context relates to the French Roman Catholic poets, St John Perse and Paul Claudel, suggesting his view of Roman Catholicism as a global faith.
8. Fanon also operates by this dialectical logic, drawn from Hegel and Marx (see Young, 1990).
9. In Chapter 14 I will return to this topic with a reassessment of *négritude* in the light of contemporary postcolonial theory.
10. Given the pervasive representation of Islamic cultures as sexually aggressive, colonizing and masculine in French 'Orientalist' painting and literature of the 1880s, and given the popularity of films such as *The Sheik* in the 1920s and 1930s, it is possible to interpret Senghor's reference to the 'eager caresses' of the East wind as an orientalist reference to Islamic forces occupying West Africa from the East.
11. Problems with an exclusive focus on gender and the label 'feminist' are discussed in Chapter 9.

CHAPTER 3

1. The contribution of pentecostal and born-again Christianity to West African literary culture is discussed in Chapter 7. Many denominations distribute publications to sustain their religious communities. For further studies of pentecostal and charismatic Christian movements in West Africa, see Hackett, 1997; Ojo, 1988; Meyer, 1999.
2. A *marabout* is a Muslim holy man, teacher or mystic. Several West African authors have represented the *marabout* as an excessively materialistic, greedy, immoral and politically corrupt individual: this character-type—or stereotype—has become a veritable part of the literary tradition in Senegal, featuring in the work of authors such as Aminata Sow Fall (1981) and in several of Sembene Ousmane's films and novels.
3. Or *Al-Hadj*. Women who have completed the pilgrimage are referred to as *Hajja* or *Hadja*.

4. Several languages, including Hausa, Wolof, Fulfulde, and Fulani, were transcribed into the Arabic script. Known as '*ajami*' literature, this writing gained importance in the nineteenth century as the religious revolutions spread from the western Sudan into West Africa, for *jihad* leaders made use of vernacular literary forms and styles (see Starratt, 1996).
5. This French response perfectly enacts Michel Foucault's famous formula in *Discipline and Punish* (1977), that the body is part of a political field, and power can be obtained over the body through the production of knowledge about it. Marxist theorist Louis Althusser adds a commentary on the role of the school system in ideologically conditioning and producing the subject ('Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses', 1971).
6. For an excellent history of Islam in West Africa, see David Robinson (1991).
7. These examples are taken from Crowther's late journals, written after many years as a missionary in Nigeria. In earlier journals he shows far more acceptance and tolerance towards Islam and actively seeks a shared discourse between Muslims and Christians.
8. Ousseina Alidou (2002) notes that the rise of Hausa writing in the Roman script was an important part of the 'subsequent male invasion of what was traditionally seen as the female oral narrative space' (p. 143). Alidou's comments are borne out by the gender of the five winners of the Translation Bureau's creative writing competition in the mid 1930s: five male authors were selected as winners, revealing a disparity in men's and women's access to 'western' education which persisted until the 1980s in Hausa areas of Nigeria.
9. Timbuktu was a centre of Islamic learning from the fourteenth century onwards, and became an important source of devotional literature, teaching and scholarship for much of West Africa (Gérard, 1981; Tissières, 2002).
10. West African Muslims were not inherently anti-colonial. Both the British and the French administrations regarded Islamic Hausa soldiers as exemplary colonial subjects, offering the most loyal and intelligent military support for campaigns.
11. There are many excellent studies of post-independence writing and alienation: see e.g., Fraser, 2000; Lazarus, 1990; Irele, 1981.
12. In one of the first books to address Islam in African literature, Kenneth Harrow called this gap in western scholarship an 'unforgivable lacuna' (1991: xii).

CHAPTER 4

1. The Senegalese writer Ousmane Sembene satirizes the essentialist, over-romantic idea of orality in his film *Xala* (1975). Here, the postcolonial political elite is shown to manipulate orality, cynically using it to assert their African 'authenticity' when, in fact, they are shown to be the most blatant mimics of European culture (see Cham, 1991). A similar political manipulation of orality is discussed by Kwesi Yankah in his assessment of Ghanaian president Kwame Nkrumah's use of official, state-sponsored praise-poets (Yankah, 1989).
2. In spite of the implications of their evolutionary framework, however, these anthropologists did *not* promote the imperialist idea that 'non-literate' people lack the ability to argue logically or to think in an abstract manner.
3. Both West African writers would certainly have read Thomas Mofolo's famous version of the story, a novel called *Chaka* (1925) which embellished Zulu oral accounts of Shaka's rule and went into many editions. Not all European writers condemned King Shaka (or Chaka): Rider Haggard acknowledged the ruler's warrior-masculinity and heroism (see McClintock, 1995: 248–53).
4. It must be emphasized that for many authors, particularly from Northern Nigeria and francophone West Africa, an Islamic education and Arabic literacy came long before so-called western schooling, creating doctrinal tensions and, on occasion, crises of identity: for a powerful exploration of the tensions and paradoxes, see Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure*, 1972), discussed in Chapter 3.
5. In a similar vein to Fagunwa, the francophone author Hampaté Bâ explores 'oral' narrators in the context of writing. In his work, Bâ questions 'ontological orality'—that is, the over-romantic view that orality is an essential part of Africanness—and he debates orality in relation to the problems of translation and transcription (see Adejunmobi, 2000).
6. The Nigerian playwright Femi Osofisan pays 'homage' to Tutuola's Drum, Song and Dance by updating and recontextualizing them in his play, *Yungba-Yungba and the Dance Contest: A Parable of Our Times* (1993) (Deandrea, 2002: 231).

CHAPTER 5

1. Kojo Laing makes a similarly parodic, subversive use of glossaries in his novels and poems in order to expose the flawed idea of 'translatability' between languages. He seems to favour a of notion of linguistic

complementarity rather than translatability: Laing's style is discussed in more detail in Chapter 14.

2. The ambivalent figure of the translator has featured in the work of many postcolonial authors, especially those who set their work in the colonial period. Perhaps the most extensive exploration of translation and its political consequences is Brian Friel's play *Translations* (1984), set in Donegal in Ireland. Friel shows the ways in which mistranslation can be subversive in a colonial context: the bilingual colonial subject can use his or her in-between status to convey messages that contradict or criticize the colonial authorities. Deliberate mistranslation and wrongly-translated messages are, however, shown to mask the truth of a situation to the detriment of local populations (see Loomba, 1998: 100–1).
3. For example, *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* is filled with references to imperial weights and measures, British colonial currency, and imperial map-making.

CHAPTER 6

1. Such a process illustrates the links between representation and power described by Said in *Orientalism* (1994).
2. Unlike these failed translators within the novel, it must be noted that Achebe himself successfully translates between Igbo and English in this anglophone representation of pre-colonial culture. There are many studies of this dimension of the novel (see Innes, 1990; Gikandi, 1991; Loomba, 1998).
3. A reader survey of 200 Ghanaian students conducted in the late 1990s shows a consistent admiration for the way in which Achebe represents pre-colonial African society, instilling cultural self-confidence in readers.
4. C. L. Innes's (1990) excellent book on Achebe offers a reading of *Things Fall Apart* through *Mister Johnson*, comparing the two texts and exposing the reasons why Achebe felt compelled to 'write back'. It must be noted, however, that 'Heart of Darkness' is a more complex and ambiguous narrative than *Mister Johnson*; while Achebe's rejection of the latter has been largely endorsed by critics, his accusations of 'racism' against Conrad have stimulated extensive debate and disagreement between Achebe and literary critics.
5. Said's *Orientalism* offers an accessible theoretical framework for understanding this process whereby the 'reality' of one culture is textually produced by another. For problems with Said's framework, see Ahmad (1994).

6. The colonial Marriage Ordinance of 1884 attempted to institutionalize monogamy. The Marriage Ordinance also allowed mothers to claim infant custody in divorce cases; it gave married women property and inheritance rights; and it endowed any woman over twenty-one years old with the authority to select and marry her own marriage partner (Mba, 1982: 53–4). If free, mutual consent to marriage had not been obtained in advance, a woman was given the right to obtain a divorce in court (ibid.). By 1920, infant betrothals also had also been outlawed (ibid.).
7. For further discussion of Tutuola see Chapters 5 and 12.
8. For details of Achebe's early writings, his involvement in founding the journal *Okike*, and his activities on student magazines at Ibadan, see Innes (1990). The direct, indeed dulling, influence of *Things Fall Apart* can be seen in some of the work of other eastern Nigerian writers, particularly Elechi Amadi (1934–) and Nkem Nwankwo (1936–), whose early novels shadow Achebe's very closely in theme, tone, and structure.

CHAPTER 7

1. Not all pamphlets were composed in English, nor were they all concerned with romantic relationships: some pamphlets were written in Igbo, and Onitsha market literature became increasingly politicized after the mid-1960s, as the first waves of military coups and conflicts swept postcolonial Africa.
2. The full text of Ogali's pamphlet is available in Ogali (1980). Several national libraries and university libraries hold good collections of Onitsha market literature, including the British Library, the Library of Congress, and Ibadan University Library.
3. For a more detailed account of masculinity in Onitsha market literature, see Newell (1996).
4. Interestingly, this is also the case at the end of Tutuola's *Palm-Wine Drinkard*, which also makes extensive use of the 'Complete Gentleman' folktale (see Quayson, 1997).

CHAPTER 8

1. For detailed examination of these poets, see Bodunde, 2001b; Deandrea, 2002; Fraser, 1986; Ezenwa-Ohaeto, 1998; Brown, 1995.
2. 'Concert Party' is a form of popular theatre in Ghana which dates back to the 1920s and involves music, dance, songs and short plays (see Bame, 1985; Sutherland, 1970; Cole, 2001).

3. A detailed discussion of the concept of West African specificity is developed in the concluding chapter.

CHAPTER 9

1. This position is exemplified by Florence Stratton (1994) and Molara Ogundipe (1994), but their polemical division of African male writers from female writers has been moderated and reassessed in recent critical work (see e.g. Boehmer, 2005; Chrisman, 2000).
2. When Nwapa *was* finally acknowledged by male critics in Nigeria, it was only to be described in laughably patriarchal terms as one who is 'prominent among the "sons" of Achebe' (Nnolim, 1989: 56).
3. Other books on African women's writing include *Binding Cultures* by Gay Wilenz (1992) and *Motherism: The Afrocentric Alternative to Feminism* by Catherine Acholonu (1995): however, both texts repeatedly fall into biologically essentialist categories about black women's writing and experience.
4. Ousseina Alidou makes the interesting suggestion that elite women's literature is more assertive and 'envoicing' to women 'because the European languages are themselves "foreign", [and] are less subject to social regulation … The "foreign tongue" allows women writers greater space to attract attention to the goings-on in their own cultures' (2002b: 149). This is not a generally applicable principle, however, for many female *soyyaya* authors are far more feisty in their political agendas than elite anglophone novelists (see e.g. Whitsitt, 2002; Larkin, 2002).
5. Translated excerpts of her novel, *Alhaki Kwikwiyo*, can be found in *Readings in African Popular Fiction* (Newell, 2002).
6. Many Nigerian novelists have taken the Biafran War as their setting. A small sample includes Chukwuemeka Ike's *Sunset at Dawn* (1976), Festus Iyayi's *Heroes* (1986), Cyprian Ekwensi's *Survive the Peace* (1976), Isidore Okpewho's *The Last Duty* (1976), Flora Nwapa's *Wives at War* (1980) and her *Never Again* (1975), and Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy* (1985).

CHAPTER 10

1. Prominent among these 'second-generation' intellectuals were the Nigerians Biodun Jeyifo, Kole Omotoso and Femi Osofisan.
2. See 'Who's Afraid of Elesin Oba?' (1993) and 'The Critic and Society: Barthes, Leftocracy and Other Mythologies' (1993).

3. In *Resistance in Postcolonial African Fiction*, the Marxist scholar Neil Lazarus (1990) criticizes Africa's 'first generation' of authors and intellectuals—including Fanon—for their messianic, over-optimistic, and politically naïve vision of political independence, which prevented them from taking organized action to prevent the escalation of violence and authoritarianism in the 1960s and 1970s. It is interesting to note that similar criticism comes from the anti-Marxist pen of Achille Mbembe, who tends to conflate Marxism with 'nativism' or cultural nationalism in his diagnosis of 'the neurosis of victimisation' in Africa, which 'fosters a mode of thought that is at once xenophobic, racist, negative, and circular' (2002: 251–2). In Lazarus's view, African writers and intellectuals assumed mistakenly that decolonization was the end-point, not the beginning, of a revolutionary process (1990: 23).
4. For an example of the political power of drama, see Ngugi wa Thiongo's *I Will Marry When I Want*, written in Gikuyu: this play landed Ngugi in prison, while his openly revolutionary English-language novel, *Petals of Blood*, did not upset the Kenyan authorities. In Ngugi's opinion, the genre and the language of *Petals of Blood* sanitized and defused its Marxist message (see Ngugi, 1986).
5. The debate about the relevance of Marxism to Africa is as heated as the debate about the language of African literature, or the 'Africanness' of the novel as a genre. The central argument revolves around the relevance of 'class' as a category, and whether or not Marxism can be adapted sufficiently to account for the continent's peasant economies. For key positions in the debate, see Senghor, 1964; Nkrumah, 1970; Amuta, 1989; Gikandi, 1991; Bartolovich and Lazarus, 2002. Soyinka's tendency to interpret through the *racial* category of 'African' rather than through class categories is seen by his detractors to be conservative and ethnocentric (Hunt, 1985).
6. The parallels between Soyinka's representations of traditional Africa and those produced by the *négritude* poets again come to the fore in this respect, in spite of Soyinka's protestations of difference from Senghor, discussed in Chapter 2.
7. The Cameroonian philosopher, Achille Mbembe, also criticizes what he calls 'Marxist-nationalist' thought in Africa for its lack of philosophical depth (2002: 243–6).
8. Additional critics of Marxist literary practice include Christopher Miller (1990), who dislikes the manner in which the radical critique can rapidly turn into an ahistorical and 'eurocentric' position (1990: 38–9); see also Lewis Nkosi's evaluation of South African 'protest' writing (1981).

9. Many West African gender theorists make precisely this assumption in West Africa, and the word 'feminism' has come to mean 'man-hating' or 'lesbian' in consequence, considered too troublesome to be used for political self-identification by many female gender-activists and writers in the region (see Chapter 9).
10. For studies of Sembene, see Amuta, 1989; Nkosi, 1981; Jones, 2000.
11. There is a long tradition in West African popular theatre of male actors playing female parts (see Barber, 2000; Sutherland, 1970; Bame, 1985; Cole, 2001).
12. A Christian reading would also mesh well with readers' expectations that literature yields morals, parables, lessons and advice. In fact, it is possible that the effects of mission schooling in the 1920s and 1930s fed into existing conventions for the interpretation of stories (see Griffiths, 2000; Newell, 2002).
13. Curiously, Amuta frequently resorts to terminology such as 'instinctive', 'natural', and 'authentic' in describing the merits of a Marxist approach to African literature (e.g., pp. 14, 70). He appears to be attempting to promote a sense of Africa's pre-colonial organic unity in order to authenticate what some might see as a 'foreign' Marxist model, thus demonstrating the uncomfortable intimacy between 'nativist' discourses and the 'foreign' discourses against which they react.
14. See also Benita Parry (1997; 1998). *Any* novel can be opened to a Marxist interpretation, not just the overtly socialist writers named in this section. For an example of this critical standpoint, see Barbara Harlow's (1987) reading of resistance in *Things Fall Apart* (xvi–xvii); see also Jeyifo's impressive materialist analysis of Soyinka's play, *The Road* (Jeyifo, 2004).

CHAPTER 11

1. Since Althusser published his book, *For Marx* (1969), however, it is not possible to assume that *all* Marxist positions are humanistic (see Soper, 1986). Nor, additionally, is the Marxist conception of 'history' a simple, human-centred process, for some Marxists regard history as a transcendent, teleological process working itself out at a level beyond human participation (ibid.).
2. While Achebe was editor for the African Writers Series between 1962 and 1972, these examples indicate that he had very little control over the presentation and marketing of material.
3. Modupe Olaogun made this point forcefully during a panel on 'Translocation, Translation' at the African Studies Association Conference, New Orleans, November 2004.

4. For a detailed discussion of all three theorists and French poststructuralism, see Robert Young's *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* (1990).

CHAPTER 12

1. Similar developments were evident among the visual artists featured in the 'Africa Remix Exhibition' in Spring 2005 at the Hayward Gallery, London.
2. Many books and articles have been written about these authors, including Cooper (1998), Deandrea (2002), Quayson (1997), Wright (1997), and Harrow (2002).
3. For primary texts in a study of this kind, see Ayi Kwei Armah, *The Beautyful Ones are Not Yet Born* (1968); Yambo Ouologuem, *Le devoir de violence* (1968; trans. *Bound to Violence*, 1968) for secondary studies, see Innes (1995); Wise (1999).
4. Similarly, the realist exile writer, Buchi Emecheta, once described the 'freedom' she gained as an author by deciding to leave Nigeria for Britain (1990).
5. In the speech that follows, Laing's farmer teaches the academic to see cultural history in terms other than anti-colonial nationalism: 'I don't accept that we are still slaves of our own history!', he says, 'Do you really think that our traditional ways were so weak that they could have been so easily swept aside? They were too strong!' (1986: 98). In a manoeuvre typical of Laing, however, ½-Allotey finishes his speech with a gesture that debunks the authority of the entire argument: 'don't take me too seriously; all these words I used, I read them' (p. 98).
6. In the concluding chapter I will return to the *avant garde* authors and their relationship to West African humanist discourses since *négritude*.

CHAPTER 13

1. While this word translates as 'male-hater', Liking's use of it in her experimental novel refers to the milder figure of the African woman in search of a heterosexual man who is worthy of her respect (see d'Almeida, 2000).
2. For analysis of Beyala's work using French feminist theories of abjection, see Harrow (2002) and Nfah-Abbenyi (1997).
3. As a result, Beyala has generated the most critical work: see Fatunde (2004); Dunton (1997); Harrow (2002).
4. From a European psychoanalytical perspective, Beyala's challenge falls most obviously at the feet of Sigmund Freud, whose theory of the

'Oedipus Complex' described the development of masculine heterosexuality and created a model in which female development was unaccounted for. See Freud's essay, 'Femininity' ([1964; 1973] 1988).

5. Similar exploitative homosexual relationships initiated by Europeans are portrayed in Ayi Kwei Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons* (1973) and in J. P. Clark Bekederemo's *The Raft* (1964).

CHAPTER 14

1. Rooney also uses the postmodern theorist Jean-Francois Lyotard's theory of the *differend*. There is insufficient space in this concluding chapter to consider the philosophers Walter Benjamin, T. W. Adorno, and Emmanuel Lévinas, whose work on ethics and humanism is relevant in the context of this discussion.
2. It might be helpful in this respect to divide anti-colonialism into: (a) 'classical' anti-colonialism, occurring prior to and immediately after decolonization, and (b) 'contemporary' anti-colonialism, which represents the movement against neocolonialism and cultural imperialism.
3. On the African continent, a similar model can be found in Ngugi wa Thiongo's concept of 'harmony in polyphony', described in *Caitaani Mutharaba-ini* (1980; trans. *Devil on the Cross*, 1982).
4. See also Emmanuel Lévinas (1999) for a similar movement away from 'Self–Other' models of identity.

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