

BOOK REVIEW

Taban lo Liyong, **Another Last Word**, Nairobi: Heinemann Kenya, 1990. Price not reported. Paperback.

Quite a lot of the essays contained in **Another Last Word** return to issues discussed in the highly provocative and controversial collection, **The Last Word**. The criticism of western scholars for their failure to come to terms with African experiences and the attack on the negritude movement for not offering a meaningful way forward are taken up again here with renewed vigour.

Altogether, there are thirty-one pieces coming under various guises, ranging from lecture notes through newspaper articles to interviews and poems. They span the decade of the 1970s. Except for one or two odd efforts written in Papua New Guinea, most of the items are set in the intellectual ferment of Nairobi during that period. The intended audience for the new book includes undergraduate students of literature, high school teachers, senior civil servants and politicians, fellow writers and critics, and the general public.

In a representative essay entitled "The Artists' Role in Shaping a New East African Mentality", Taban lo Liyong passionately argues that artists and intellectuals have a duty to examine topically relevant problems, to describe them candidly, and to propose solutions to them. Elsewhere in the book, however, the writer in a developing society is exhorted to master the craft of writing by experimenting with the various literary genres and by studying other literary traditions apart from his own. Such a writer should also beware of sacrificing literary art on the altar of propaganda.

One of the more stimulating offerings in **Another Last Word** introduces the reader to East African writing. Taban lo Liyong's definition of the geographical area will no doubt surprise a few people; for it includes not only Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania, but also Malawi and Zambia, countries often assumed to be in Central Africa. His account of the cultural heritage of the region, on the other hand, is one of the most comprehensive to date. Lo Liyong here draws attention to three dominant roots of East African literature: indigenous African; Oriental, mainly Arabic through Swahili; and Occidental, principally English through colonisation. According to lo Liyong, the study of East African literature involves the study of the oral

literature of the people and of the way this has permeated the new written literature of the area. It also entails the discussion of works which are artistically inferior but thematically rich. Furthermore, it includes the study of social science works which furnish the background to the creative writing.

As was the case with **The Last Word**, here too Taban lo Liyong bemoans the current state of the publishing industry in East Africa. His main point is that the publishers have not effectively played their role as middlemen between writers and readers through lack of creativity and aggressiveness. Authors are not used to promote the sales of their books, and there is no attempt on the part of the publisher to take advantage of such forms of popular advertisement as newspapers, radio and television. Besides, there is a general reluctance to buy rights of classics or best sellers published abroad with a view to bringing out much cheaper East African editions.

Taban lo Liyong assumes numerous roles in **Another Last Word**. The reader encounters him as a formidable creative writer in his own right, as an astute literary critic, as a journalist and as a lecturer determined to teach undergraduate students basic critical concepts as well as to foster their capacity for individual and collective research. It is also clear, however, that he is a concerned intellectual seeking solutions for Africa's persistent social, political and economic problems. Such essays as "How Long Must We Be Children?", "Twenty-two Confusions and the Future of Africa", "The Tribes Are There to Stay" and "Nietzsche as I Understand Him" attest to this quest for a "formula to change Africa, to make Africa developed" (p.99). Lo Liyong encourages Africans to accept change as a necessity and move forward along the elitist and capitalist path so rewardingly followed by the industrialised countries of the world. Needless to say, this is not the kind of standpoint that would endear Taban lo Liyong to the majority of African scholars at the present moment.

Readers familiar with Taban lo Liyong's idiosyncratic views and combative style will find in **Another Last Word** a worthy sequel to **The Last Word**. The new book deserves a place on the shelves of all college or university libraries wherever African studies are taken seriously.

Anthony Nazombe