

Oratory in the tongue: Ken Saro-Wiwa's *A Month and a Day* and the writer in politics

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This is probably the reason why the best Nigerian writers have involved themselves actively in 'politics'. Wole Soyinka, Nigeria's Nobel laureate, is an outstanding example. Even the normally placid and wise Achebe was forced to work within one of the political parties to buttress his call on all Nigerians to 'proselytize for civilized values'. Chris Okigbo died on the side of the Biafran secessionists. And Festus Iyayi has been involved in labour unions and recently in the Campaign for Democracy organization. Which only goes to prove what I have said elsewhere, that in a situation as critical as Nigeria's, it is idle merely to sit by and watch or record goons and bumpkins run the nation aground and dehumanize the people.

(Ken Saro-Wiwa)

Introduction

By his own admission, Kenule Saro-Wiwa's credo remains that "literature in a critical situation such as Nigeria's cannot be divorced from politics"¹. The interventionist role in politics which Saro-Wiwa advocates for the Nigerian and by extension the African writer, is one which has animated writers and critics of African literature since its inception. *A Month and a Day* is therefore more than a prison/detention diary, but perhaps more importantly, represents Saro-Wiwa's account of his own long voyage into becoming what he has always advocated – 'the writer must be *l'homme engagé*': the intellectual man of action'. Wole Soyinka, whom Saro-Wiwa describes as an outstanding example of the involvement of the writer in politics, for example, has described the late General Sani Abacha of Nigeria in a BBC radio interview as a spiritual dwarf. Nothing, according to Soyinka, would have given the physically and spiritually diminutive Abacha – the Nigerian military leader who at eleven thirty in the morning of 10 November 1995 gave the orders to hang Ken Saro-Wiwa in a prison in Port Harcourt, Eastern Nigeria – so much satisfaction than to be the first Head of State to hang a Nobel laureate. Even the usually placid but wise Achebe had to abandon the novelistic genre to record, in rhetorical fashion (not his natural suit), what he termed *The Trouble with*

Nigeria in the early 1980s. In Daniel Arap Moi's neocolonial Kenya, the plight of the country's most famous writer and relentless critic of the Moi regime, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, is particularly trenchant. In both *Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary* (1981) and *Barrel of a Pen: Resistance to Repression in Neo-colonial Kenya* (1983), Ngugi documents in graphic details what Victoria Brittain describes as "the showpiece of British neocolonialism in East Africa", and one which has been creaking for some time now "under the strain of a bitter power struggle between competing factions of the elite." (Brittain, 1983: 2) And just as Wole Soyinka's *The Man Died* and Egyptian feminist Nawal el Sa'adawi's *Memoirs from the Women's Prison* have gone down as integral aspects of the still evolving "testimonial literature" that now occupy its own place of uneasy prestige in the annals of African literature, even the very title of Malawi's Jack Mapanje's *Skipping Without Ropes* (1998) – the volume of verse that records Mapanje's harrowing experience in prison under the late Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda – reiterate a difficult philosophical position.

And when given the chance to bare his mind, Somalia's Nuruddin Farah adopted a histrionic as well as contemporary perspectives towards the enemies from within and those from without whose combined machination have ravaged and decimated his native Somalia:

A Somali proverb has it that a coward gathers far too many sticks. Tyrants, whether they appear in the guise of colonialists or post-colonialists, have a way of displaying their cowardice by amassing machines of destruction – in fact, the more insecure the state, the more weapons it accumulates. It follows then that the first to bring weapons into Somalia were the Europeans: the next to do so was Siad Barre.²

For the denizens of societies that have been decimated by colonial and post-colonial intrigues and machinations, Farah's image of tyrants appearing in colonialist and post-colonialist guises has a familiar ring to it. The image represents the "something" rather deadly that these societies have endured for so long. In Ania Loomba's book length study of *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, the term postcolonial is described as "the latest catchall term to dazzle the academic mind: "Oh, its something postcolonial" is what Jacoby's friend was told when she inquired about a piece of pottery." (Loomba, 2001:xi) However, while academics continue their squabble over the definition of colonialism and the "true" meaning of the "post" to the extent that "its enthusiasts themselves don't know what it is", it is important to assert straightforwardly that postcolonial malformations in politics, not to mention the socio-cultural and economic miasma that govern these societies, are not as ephemeral or innocuous as they are made to sound.

At the first international conference convened by the international Writer's Center at Washington University in St. Louis where Nuruddin Farah was a participant – the phenomenon of “The Writer in Politics” was divided into three parts: politics as material for the writer's work (“The writer in Politics”), politics as a threatening power over the pen (“The Writer under Politics”), and politics as a viewpoint held by writers (“The Writer with a Politics”). The division is particularly helpful, and it is under these headings that I would like to discuss Saro-Wiwa's *A Month and a Day*, and the telling implications it has for the incursion of the writer into politics.

Politics as material for the writer's work

...insofar as the academic discourse of history - that is “history” as a discourse produced at the institutional site of the university is concerned, “Europe” remains the sovereign, theoretical subject of all histories, including the ones we call “Indian”, “Chinese”, “Kenyan” and so on.... Third-world historians feel a need to refer to works in European history, historians of Europe do not feel any need to reciprocate... The everyday paradox of third world social science is that we find these theories, in spite of their inherent ignorance of “us” eminently useful in understanding our societies. What allowed the modern European sages to develop such clairvoyance with regard to societies of which they were empirically ignorant? Why cannot we, once again, return the gaze?

(Dipesh Chakrabarty)

Often speaking from within political movements, Third World writers have interrogated the role of culture in general – and the intelligentsia in particular – in the transformative politics of their nations. Influential figures such as Pablo Neruda have characterized their own writing as the “humble way of taking sides” with “the hewers of wood and the drawers of water.” Hugo Blanco, the Peruvian poet/activist, was open in his denunciation of apolitical writers: “The thing is, there are only great poets now, and no one writes for common people or common struggle.” Utpal Dutt, whose own commitment to social change in India has been exemplary, once observed that “in a colonial country to be a pure intellectual is to be a pure coward”.

(Modhumita Roy)

David Spurr's *The Rhetoric of Empire* helps a great deal in contextualizing what he describes as the particular languages which belong to a process, and one which enables that process while simultaneously being generated by it: the particular languages, according to Spurr, “are known collectively as colonial discourse”³. Within the field of literary studies alone, Spurr observes further that scholars have experienced a major

paradigm shift in which literary works once studied primarily as expressions of traditionally Western ideals are now also read as evidence of the manner in which such ideals have served in the historical process of colonization. In volume one of his seminal work, *The History of Sexuality*, French philosopher, Michel Foucault, elaborates on what he calls “the root of this discourse on God which Western culture has maintained for so long”. This discourse, according to Foucault, exists without any sense of “the impropriety of thoughtlessly adding to language a word which surpasses all words or any clear sense that it places at the limits of all possible languages.”⁴ Before we examine the ways Saro-Wiwa’s work in general and *A Month and a Day* in particular, have provided Saro-Wiwa’s quintessential addition to language – a word which surpasses all words – it is important to examine this dynamic process – often described as colonial/postcolonial discourses – in some detail.

The two epigraphs to this section bring together the two strands of my major concern in this section: politics as material for the writer’s work and the vexed issues of post-colonial practices and theories, including the socio-cultural and political matters that sustain and animate them. As the sovereign, theoretical subject of all histories, including the ones we call “Indian”, “Chinese”, “Kenyan” or “Nigerian” – Europe – as Chakrabarty observes – has maintained an “inherent ignorance” of “us”. The question remains – what are the implications of this “ignorance” and how does it reiterate and maintain the everyday paradox of Third-world social science and the other aspects of entity from politics to religion? An integral aspect of the answer to this all-important question probably lies in what Modhumita Roy has described as the role of culture in general and the intelligentsia in particular – in the transformative politics of the so-called Third-world nations. Before charging the Nigerian intelligentsia, for example, with turning a blind eye to the plight of the Ogoni people, in *A Month and a Day*, Saro-Wiwa describes the people that he led into the struggle of their lives as:

unused to political activism and the dangers inherent in it. I had taken them on a hard journey and although I had prepared their minds for it in public speeches and in private, I was not quite sure how they would react in any particular circumstance. Some were used to the detention endured by mostly Yoruba activists in Nigeria. None of their kin had ever undergone such horrors. They had been sleepwalking their way toward extinction, not knowing what internal colonialism had done and was doing to them. It had fallen on me to wake them up from the sleep of the century and I had accepted in full the responsibility of doing so. Would they be able to stand up to the rigours of the struggle? (p. 18)

The transformative politics of Nigeria has produced its own “internal colonialism” and

this in a nutshell is the “material” for the writer’s work. However, because this internal colonialism operates and is indeed reinforced within a global context, it is important to examine the cultural logic that governs what Maryse Condé describes as the movement that “is supposed to have the effect of suppressing authentic culture and subsuming everything into one vast, boundless mass.” (Condé, 1998:1) In his characteristically lucid preface to *The Cultures of Globalization*, Frederic Jameson describes the seemingly intractable term globalization as a sign of the emergence of a new kind of social phenomenon, and one that falls outside the established academic disciplines. As scholars and theorists approach this unclassifiable topic in an unprotected, daring and speculative manner, Jameson compares the hotly contested term itself to the proverbial elephant – described by its blind observers in so many diverse ways. As the modern or postmodern version of the proverbial elephant – globalization and the cultural, political and intellectual space it occupies – also animates the transcolonial situation. Jameson’s cautious definition of globalisation as “an untotizable totality” frees the term from the utopian vision of “globality” propounded by some theorists – that tends to uphold “some new form of global ethic and consciousness in the world today, rather than a structural account of the forms globalisation takes in the various realms of the political, the economic, and the cultural.”⁵ Mapping the transcolonial situation, for example, implies an awareness of the local emergence of difference or what Jameson describes further as “specificity” against “the old universalism that so often underwrote an imperial knowledge/power system,” among other conceptual axes.

In the same volume on *The Cultures of Globalization*, Manthia Diawara’s “Toward a Regional Imaginary in Africa” (Diawara, 1998) and Ioan Davies’s “Negotiating African Culture: Toward a Decolonization of the Fetish” (Davies, 1998) contextualize the specific African experience within the globalized context of this all-subsuming movement known as globalization. Within the globalized information network alone – according to Diawara – Africa is often seen and characterized as a continent sitting on top of infectious diseases, strangled by corruption and tribal vengeance, and populated by people with mouths and hands open to receive international aid. As Paris, New York, London and Brussels become the major outlets of the latest African music, films, theatre, fashion and literature, with Africa assuming the role of secondary or marginal market for African art – Diawara’s essay underscores the importance of the old paradigms of Afro-pessimism and the break away/return to them. Two patterns are clearly discernible: the first paradigm relies on Fanonian theories of resistance and nationalist consciousness, whereas the second is based on performance and competition in the global village. Not even pioneering African writers such as Sembene Ousmane of Senegal and Kenya’s Ngugi wa Thiong’o are unaffected by the paradigm shifts brought

about by globalization, and the former – according to Diawara – “returns to utopian narratives of self-determination that he explored in such early novels as *O Pays mon Beau Peuple* and *Les Bouts de Bois de Dieu* (*God's Bits of Wood*), and which he later abandons in his films in favour of the criticism of postindependence regimes, satire, and socialist realism.” Ioan Davies’s contribution dwells on the numerous ways African culture is constructed and re/negotiated in philosophical, political and creative terms. The African intellectual/philosopher – marginalized in Africa as protocolonial product – becomes in this sense, an “Otherness machine,” and “is therefore caught in the middle ground, as “Other” in both worlds.” In *A Month and a Day*, Saro-Wiwa describes the contemporary malaise in all facets of its operation. Beginning with the massive failure of vision and intellect on the part of the Nigerian elite, Saro-Wiwa describes the appetite and greed for the oil of the Niger Delta as coterminous with “the impatience of the Nigerian military with philosophy” (p. 86) – all of which “have conjoined to stop Nigerians from seeking a rational solution to their collective dilemma.” However, with the vast majority of Africans denied a literature that they can read, or have read to them, because of the literary and political elite’s use of an alien language – an integral aspect of the African experience in a global context concerns what one of Davies’s subtitles describes as “The Languages of Culture.” If V.Y. Mudimbe’s eclecticism – in which Levi-Strauss, Sartre, Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari, Marx and Evans-Pritchard are critically invoked either because there is usefulness in some of their conceptualizations or because they have become part of the “colonial library” and thus the resource of ideas that Africans are bound to explore – represents one pole of the African response – the lethal combination of language and politics which led to Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s detention and ultimate exile from Kenya – represents the other end of that polarity:

I have nothing against English, French, Portuguese, or any other language for that matter. They are all valid as far as they are languages and in as far as they do not seek to oppress other nations, nationalities, and languages. But if Kiswahili or any other African language were to become the language for the world, this would symbolise the dawn of a new era in human relations between the nations and peoples of Africa and those of other continents.

Maryse Condé is perhaps more historicist in her important keynote address at the joint meeting of the Comparative Literature Association and the African Literature Association in Austin, Texas, vis-à-vis the whole question of globalization. Condé locates in Negritude and Pan-Africanism the first acts of “a certain positive globalization.” The precursive relationship between seemingly disparate elements: René Maran’s and Alan Locke’s friendship, George Padmore’s and Garan Kouyate’s relationship, Jane’s letter to Alan Locke and her numerous articles in *La Dé pêche Africaine* (1928-32), leads

Condé to ask rhetorically “what was Negritude, what was Pan-Africanism if not forms of globalisation, the implied project of a complete identity and an active solidarity among the black peoples?” The first quarter of the 20th century – according to Condé –witnessed an unprecedented coming together of black intellectuals, Caribbean, African, and American alike who were “haunted by dreams of internationalization, and globalization based first on colour, then on a common exploitation of their people.” Ironically, it was the political evolution of erstwhile African colonies that shattered these early efforts: as the gains which French colonialism and primitivism had paradoxically combined to fuse into a vision of Pan-African unity received tremendous bashing in the 1960s:

Around the 1960s, the majority of African colonies gained independence. A good many intellectuals who were a driving force in the cultural life of Paris, like Léopold Sédar Senghor, returned home to occupy prominent political positions. Each country retreated behind its borders. (Condé, *Op.Cit.*, p.5, my emphasis)

The retreat behind colonial and ill-defined borders has, rather not surprisingly, produced its own internal colonialism – aided and abetted by what Roland Robertson has described as “the two fold process of the particularization of the universal and the universalization of the particular”⁶ known as globalization. It is also at this point that one may agree with Chakrabarty – “the gaze” which the Nigerian/African or indeed Third-world social scientist, writer or critic must return to the so-called “sovereign, theoretical subject of all histories” is only complete when they return “an inherent ignorance” of their usefulness in understanding “our” societies. It is in this sense alone that the international oil companies – notably Shell – that have devastated the Niger Delta should not feature in any analysis of this nature. For, according to Saro-Wiwa, “the complete devastation of the environment by the oil companies prospecting for and mining oil in Ogoni, notably Shell and Chevron” is only a tiny fraction of “that disaster which superficial or even lack of thought has visited on Africa in the last 700 or so years” (p.80). However, to bring this section on “Politics as material for the writer’s work” to a close, it is fitting that we return to the premise of Saro-Wiwa’s quintessential addition to language – what the Caribbean poet, Edward Kamau Brathwaite would describe as “nation language”. While demonstrating his fundamental belief that “a writer is his cause”, in *A Month and a Day*, Kenule Saro-Wiwa also gave us his views on the contemporary malaise afflicting his country and by extension his continent:

Quite clearly, what we are faced with is a massive failure of vision and intellect on the part of the Nigerian elite – that failure has led to the easy enslavement of Africa, which has made Africa the playthings of other peoples and races, which made African rulers persist in the slave trade long after Europe had tired of it. (p. 85)

But, it is the Argentine feminist and activist, Luisa Valenzuela – who, like Saro-Wiwa – has addressed in her books the military dictatorship that ruled Argentina from 1976 to 1983 – that sums up the dilemma of the writer walking down, what she terms “these god-forsaken streets (with) the political fabric that surrounds her like a muggy spider web”. According to Valenzuela:

The world breathes politics, eats politics, defecates politics. The trick is to avoid writing directly about politics while not losing contact, still being profoundly politically aware. It involves a kind of Zen and the art of archery of language: you shoot the arrow of language without burdening it with a message, and if it is a good arrow, if the shot is correctly aimed, it will hit its political mark, a mark that even the writer might not be aware when she starts to shoot, when she begins to write. (Valenzuela, 1996:85)

Saro-Wiwa – the producer and writer of Nigeria’s and probably Africa’s most popular TV soap opera, the hilarious and highly successful *Basi and Company* – understood this function of language as described by Luisa Valenzuela. In *A Month and a Day*, Saro-Wiwa reaffirms his own quintessential addition to “our” nation language: “As I say in *Basi & Co.*, to be, we have to think”. (p. 86)

Politics as a threatening power over the pen

Indeed, literature must serve society by steeping itself in politics, by intervention, and writers must not merely write to amuse or to take a bemused, critical look at society. They must play an interventionist role. My experience has been that African governments can ignore writers, taking comfort in the fact that only few can read and write, and that those who read find little time for the luxury of literary consumption beyond the need to pass examinations based on set texts. Therefore, the writer must be l’homme engagé: the intellectual man of action.

(Ken Saro-Wiwa)

In *Barrel of a Pen*, Ngugi wa Thiong’o demonstrates quite vividly the now commonplace notion that it is not just the AK47s and the Klashnikovs that possess a barrel. As literature steepes itself in politics, the threatening power of politics over the pen is perhaps best exemplified by Saro-Wiwa’s address – entitled rather poignantly and paradigmatically “Before the Curtain Falls” – at his fiftieth birthday celebration in 1991. Again, by his own admission, Saro-Wiwa claims that his address at the well-attended launch of the eight books he had proposed to publish before the occasion “was long on politics, and short on literature” (p. 80). The realisation has finally begun to dawn on African writers and critics alike that what is at stake within the narrowly constructed

and cynically controlled industry known as “Africa’s Development” – is their complete marginalization - a phenomenon which has telling implications for the development of the continent.

Mapping Intersections: African Literature and Africa’s Development is a collection of essays edited by Anne V. Adams and Janis A. Mayes (1998). A multifaceted matrix and one through which writers, scholars, and teachers of African literatures map and (re)define African literature and development *au pluriel*, the collection underscores, yet, another important aspect of the “transformative space” that could be described as the conjunction between African Literature and Development. Often perceived in terms of material cultures, and not generally construed to incorporate “the literary”, African Development - by now a self-sustaining industry is composed of economic, political and social factors: resource distribution and management, sustainable agricultural programs, democratic institutions, even literacy, etc. However, the role of the writer as Public Intellectual and community organiser - who actualise in real life their vision for their societies, their nations, their continent – as “development” work brings into question the definition, or construction, of development. Besides reviewing the construction of “development”, the twenty essays and two transcripts of roundtable discussions held at the African Literature Association (ALA) Cornell conference in the volume resonate on the notion of development as ‘an integrated whole’. According to the editors, ‘carrying it to its absurdly tragic consequences’, it is perhaps, the case of the martyred Nigerian writer Kenule Saro-Wiwa that epitomises the multifaceted roles of the writer as Public Intellectual and community organiser:

Poet and novelist, to the international readership, Saro-Wiwa was nationally recognised in Nigeria, however, as a political journalist and even more so as the creator of the phenomenally popular TV soap opera, itself a form of popular social education. His leadership in the movement to seek redress from exploiting oil companies and their government partners for the devastation to Ogoni lands is nothing if not an eloquent example of community organising for ecological and economic development. Thus, to refer to the work of Ken Saro-Wiwa – as well as that of the others mentioned above and scores more of African writers who actualise in real life their vision for their societies, their nations, their continent – as “development” work, brings into question *the definition, or construction, of “development,” for our purposes here.* (Adams & Mayes, 1998:3 -my emphasis)

That purpose is well served by the impressive range of practical and theoretical treatises on the notion of “development” by a variety of critics - ‘claiming their own agency from a variety of positions and geographic locations’ and exchanging ‘ideas

that include and extend beyond disciplinary turfs and other territorial boundaries to engage everyday life experiences’.

“Passing Through: The Transfer of Critical Methods in African Diaspora Literary and Cultural Studies” (13-26) is a roundtable discussion moderated by Vévé Clark and features three prominent critics of African and Black literatures, Rhonda Cobham-Sander, Biodun Jeyifo and Clyde Taylor. According to Clark, the aim of the roundtable is to provide a forum for the discussion of the directions that African Diaspora literary and cultural criticism is taking, and will take in the near future, based on various modes of analysis current in the discipline. For Cobham-Sander, there is a need to pose questions about the relationship between two quite distinctive modes of discourse. Within the context of what she describes as the intellectual space occupied by African women writers (and perhaps African writers in general) - that is, they develop in their creative writing a philosophical discourse that contains the political, sociological and theoretical premises, and didactic overtone, that in Western culture we associate with theorists - one of Cobham-Sander’s primary conclusions is that “when we apply literary theories, drawn in this case, from Western feminist theory, to African literature, we need to reassess the hierarchical nature of the relationships between the two”. Similarly, just as Taylor focuses on the post-Cartesian variety of Aesthetics or ‘Westhetics for short’ - a Western invention which ‘displaces and then replaces sacredness in works of art’ - in his “Tradition and Ex/tradition” (18-23) Jeyifo affirms very strongly that despite the emphasis in literary theory in America now, literary theory can never be apolitical. Using the concept of cultural tradition as a presence - a premise from which we can perceive Afro-American literary and cultural tradition, for example, as ‘a distinct identity in the U.S., in the West, and in the world at large’ - and the relatively less self-evident game play with the word “extradition” with which Jeyifo engages in deconstructionist and post-structuralist terms - between the “ex” and “tradition,” which means something external or exterior to tradition, according to Jeyifo, we can also locate ‘the more negative sense of “extradite,” which means surrendering or handing over, presumably a criminal or someone indicted, or someone presumed guilty, handed over or surrendered to an external force’. Whether in terms of stealing - or even what Brecht called “creative theft” - tradition, to paraphrase Jeyifo, has always gone outside to borrow ideas and resources, and this is a basic fact of cultural tradition, of cultural history. However, while Jeyifo delineates, with regard to contemporary Afro-American literary theory for example, two senses in which cultural theory have incorporated this understanding, Taylor perceives the paradigmatic possibilities opened up by the history of art movements and aesthetic movements as a kind of transitional period between two paradigms, a contention between Westhetics and critical consciousness: “And one

of the modes, one of the moves/movements in this development towards critical consciousness, and away from the negative impact of Western aesthetics, can be seen in works of Richard Wright and Sembene Ousmane, who have, to some extent, it seems to me, moved towards a kind of “zero-aesthetic” possibility.”

Molara Ogundipe-Leslie’s “Literature and Development: Writing and Audience in Africa” (27-36), Eustace Palmer’s “African Literature: Its role in development” (37-49) and Micere Githae Mugo’s “Women and Books” (51-60) return to the premise of the enormous challenge ‘to defend or explain the relevancy or value of our ideas in complex matters of politics and “development”’. For Ogundipe-Leslie, development ‘should be locogenetic; developed by its users; conceived by the people who need development’, and devoid of a human face, development, ‘as conceived historically now in Western hegemonic discourses and activities is failing because it has no cultural face’. If one of the purposes of literature and literary critical practice is the ‘engagement with values, their creation, questioning, rejection, and restructuring,’ then in Africa and Saro-Wiwa’s Nigeria, which are our geographical areas of concern, the bane of development is also the exclusion of culture from discourses of development. According to Ogundipe-Leslie, in an age which African children are proudly put through educational processes which render them illiterate and even “un-oral” in African languages, ‘we need to theorise new generations of Africans who speak no African languages due to inter-racial, overcultural, inter-ethnic and other intra-national experiences’. Along the same “locogenetic” lines of Ogundipe-Leslie’s coinage, Eustace Palmer undertakes – beginning with the award of the coveted Nobel prize in literature to the distinguished Nigerian writer Wole Soyinka – a survey of what he calls ‘the importance of African literature in the global cultural environment’. Besides the awareness of their history and culture that African literature has facilitated, some African writers have assumed the role of teachers ‘with a commitment to informing their people as well as the outside about African culture’. According to Palmer, because Africa’s contemporary malaise is itself a catalyst that fuels the imagination African writers - ‘the expectation seems to be that the reading of these works will alert the conscience of the people and this will result in a change in their own lifestyle and ultimately a change in the direction in which the country as a whole is moving.’ Similarly, Mugo’s “Women and Books” relives the paradigmatic examples of a small voluntary literacy campaign project with which she experimented between 1979 and 1982 vis-à-vis the drama activities of the famous Kamiriithu community which the Kenya government banned in 1982, ‘and then sadistically proceeded to raze the structures of the open air theatre that the workers and peasants had built to the ground’. Conversely, echoing the critical preoccupation of the other choice essays in this volume, a sum-

mation of informed opinion on the important subject of 'the role of literature in Africa's development', remains, besides the various ways in which the applications of theory, creativity, and experience can "move an agenda", change material conditions and engender new knowledge, challenges and activism – 'In a manner of speaking – literature and African development is beautifully political': in Saro-Wiwa's words, "in a situation as critical as Nigeria's, it is idle to sit by and watch or record goons and bumpkins run the nation aground and dehumanize the people" (p.82). Finally, George Lamming's "Literature and Sovereignty" (in Adams & Mayes, 255-263) and "Roundtable: What is the Role of Literature in Africa's Development" (in Adams & Mayes, 289-305) moderated by Abiola Irele contribute from a variety of creative and critical insights to the usually quantitative and statistical appraisal of the term "development" as applied to Africa and other third world countries. In Lamming's exploration of the paradox at the heart of the relation of literature to sovereignty, the road which literature travels toward sovereignty is full of 'startling example(s) of the profound difficulty which arises when the quest for sovereignty comes into conflict with the custodians of independence in post-colonial societies'. I closed the preceding section with a discussion of what the retreat behind colonial and ill-defined borders did to scuttle what Maryse Condé has termed the first acts of "a certain positive globalization". Again in *A Month and a Day*, Saro-Wiwa describes rather vividly the profound difficulty which arose the moment the quest for sovereignty came into conflict with the custodians of independence in post-colonial Nigeria:

In 1958 it was obvious that the federating ethnic groups of Nigeria needed to establish the fundament of their co-operation. The British opined that if that was to be done, independence would have to be postponed. Nigerian leaders decided to have independence first and talk later. They only got to talk in 1966 after several murders of political leaders and massacres of common people. But the ad-hoc Conference of 1966 called by Gowon was scuttled by Ojukwu when the discussions did not appear to be going in the direction the latter wanted. We plunged into civil war (p. 86).

The question remains, in a world that breathes "our variety" of politics, eats politics and defecates politics, how does a writer "walk these god-forsaken streets" immune to the political fabric that surrounds her/him like a muggy spider web?

Politics as a viewpoint held by the writer

I am beginning to understand why I am here. I have been wondering what a fiction writer is doing among world bankers and economists. But now I realise that what you are doing

here is fiction! You talk about “structural adjustments” as if Africa was some kind of laboratory! Some intellectual abstraction. You prepare your medicine, you mix this into that; if it doesn't work, you try out another concoction. But Africa is people, you know? In the last two years we have seen the minimum wage in Nigeria fall from the equivalent of fifteen pounds a month to five pounds a month! That's not an abstraction; somebody is earning that money and he has a wife and children you see. You are punishing these countries because they are in debt but America is the biggest debtor of all; and nobody is asking America to adopt policies that would bankrupt their citizens. But Africa – the Third World – they are places where you can try out things because you believe that Africans are not really people, they are expendable.

(Chinua Achebe)

“The Writer with a Politics” is perhaps the most problematic among the three paradigmatic angles that we may regard as encapsulating the phenomenon of “the writer in politics”. After mingling with world bankers and economists at the 1989, 25th anniversary of the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in Paris, it occurred to even the “normally placid but wise Achebe”, what SAP-induced slavery was doing to Africa and the Third-world. The argument ran thus:

You are not managing your affairs well – you are in debt. So if you need more loans, this is what you will do: you have to remove subsidies on agriculture and this and that: and if you obey our rules, more loans will come your way. These are a few things that you will have to adjust; it may impose some hardship on you, but we know it's going to work. (Chinua Achebe, cited in Ezenwa-Ohaeto, 1997:187)

In the field of literary studies alone, while examining – against the backdrop of the fiftieth anniversary of the precursive journal of African studies *Presence Africaine* – a hallowed meeting site for writers from the black anglophone and francophone world, “which deserves to be saluted with as many rounds of canon as is fitting,” Ambroise Kom's “African Absence: A Literature without a Voice” raises a number of pertinent issues concerning the progressive extinction of African voices from the interior – largely as a result of the multiform crises that are mercilessly afflicting individuals and institutions in Africa today. (Ambroise Kom, 1999:149) One primary factor responsible for the contemporary malaise – according to Kom – is that African institutions have not been able to withstand for long periods the centrifugal forces that are paralyzing Africa today. After a few issues – some never produced more than a single issue – literary and cultural reviews/journals initiated on the continent faced a certain extinction: “Everything takes place as if the coloniser had planned to create institutions in Africa modeled after the metropolitan models, with all the accompanying apparatus: endowed

centres of research; frameworks for publication and distribution; research teams; a search for excellence.” With postcolonial dictatorships all over the African continent privileging folklore as a means of directing the lower classes to sing their praises – the role of the critic as the poet’s interpreter or populariser is not just undermined – but their combined duty to “play an essential role in our struggles against imperial and neo-imperial forces” are rendered difficult if not impossible “in university institutions that disguise themselves as crude *Appareils Idéologiques d’Etat* (State apparatus for ideology) when colonial authority transferred them to local power.” Similarly, Eric Tabuteau’s “Will Multiculturalism Colonise Africa?” (CM, i, 97-107) is primarily a critique of the political and epistemological implications of the transfer of authority from the colonial to local powers. Tabuteau’s personal denomination of Naipaul’s novella *In a Free State* and the subsequent novel *A Bend in the River* as *African Narratives*, are the objects of critical focus in this essay. As victims of that bleak future which modern life – vis-à-vis the collapse of European colonial empires – soon reveals the fact that “the independence of the Third World countries, especially in Africa, was a poisoned gift, a time bomb disposed of by its owners before its explosion.” Even a cursory glance at Naipaul’s *African Narratives* – according to Tabuteau – soon reveal the sobering fact that the series of European contraptions on the African continent that are disguised as multicultural societies today are doomed: “For Naipaul, such societies try to emulate principles advocated by people who were themselves unable to apply them. In short, the multicultural ideology prevailing in some African countries is a European abstraction that does not take into account local realities.” (Tabateau, 1997: 97)

This “poisoned gift – a time bomb disposed of by its owners before its explosion” is the central theme of not just Kenule Saro-Wiwa’s *A Month and a Day*, but his relatively thin but compulsive oeuvre. According to Adams and Mayes, to refer to the work of Ken Saro-Wiwa – and scores more of African writers who actualise in real life their vision for their societies, their nations, their continent – as “development” work, brings into question the narrow definition, or construction, of African “development”.

Conclusion

The urgency with which Saro-Wiwa conducted his life and work – as poet and novelist, to the international readership, but nationally recognised in Nigeria as a political journalist and even more so as the creator of the phenomenally popular TV soap opera, itself a form of popular social education – to paraphrase Adams and Mayes – are just a few of Saro-Wiwa’s enduring legacies. While his leadership in the movement to seek redress from exploiting oil companies and their government partners for the devasta-

tion to Ogoni lands remains nothing if not an eloquent example of community organising for ecological and economic development – even more enriching in terms of the inherently problematic concept or phenomenon of “the writer in politics” are Saro-Wiwa’s prescriptions for the “intellectual wo/man of action” – and one who seeks to become *l’homme engagé*:

He must take part in mass organizations. He must establish direct contact with the people and resort to the strength of African literature – *oratory in the tongue*. For the word is power and more powerful is it when expressed in common currency. That is why a writer who takes part in mass organizations will deliver his message more effectively than one who only writes waiting for time to work its literary wonders. The only problem I see is that such a writer must strive to maintain his authenticity, which stands a chance of being corrupted by the demands of politics. A struggle will necessarily ensue, but that should conduce to making the writer even better. For we write best of the things we directly experience, better of what we hear, and well of what we imagine. (p. 81)

Conversely, the curtains may have fallen for Kenule Saro-Wiwa, but his legacies will certainly live on as one who “proselytized for civilized values” for his nation, his continent and indeed the human race.

Notes

- 1 Ken Saro-Wiwa. 1995. *A Month and a Day: A Detention Diary*, London: Penguin Books, pp.81-82 – All page references are to this edition
- 2 See Nuruddin Farah. 1996. "Savaging the Soul of a Nation", in *The Writer in Politics*, William H.Gass & Lorin Cuoco (eds.), Carbondale & Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, p.115, my emphasis
- 3 For detail see David Spurr. 1993. *The Rhetoric of Empire: Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing, and Imperial Administration*, Durham & London: Duke University Press.
- 4 For detail see Michel Foucault. 1978 *The History of Sexuality, Vol.1*, Hurley, R. (trans), Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- 5 For detail see, Fredric Jameson & Masao Miyoshi (eds). 1998. *The Cultures of Globalization*, Durham & London: Duke University Press.
- 6 Roland Robertson. 1992 *Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture*, London, pp.177-178 – Even within the context of the Weberian logic and rationality that govern Robertson's discussion in this book, the most intriguing of Robertson's proposition – according to Jameson – is the idea "that it was precisely the syncretism and eclecticism of Japanese religion that prepared Japan uniquely for a privileged role in the current state of globalization." (Jameson & Miyoshi, 1998., p.xvii).

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