50 YEARS OF NIGERIAN LITERATURE: PROSPECTS AND PROBLEMS

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Opening

I take it, sincerely, as an honour and a privilege to be asked to give the keynote for this year's Garden City Literary Festival. Any gathering of the writing community is an ennobling event, both for the people of letters and the imaginative guild, as well as for the society at large.

It is not immodest to claim that Nigeria's literature in the past fifty years is as worthy, even worthier, of celebration, on the nation's widely celebrated jubilee. With the first African and black Nobel Prize, the most widely read novel in Africa, numerous literary awards in the international scene, and the most vibrant and populous literary guild in Africa, Nigeria's literature has given a robust account of itself, since the nations independence. There is so much more to do, but there is no course for lamentation over non-accomplishment.

Provenance

Orature, oral literature and oral performance form the primal mode of thought and communication – paradoxically its existence was threatened by the civilisation of the written tradition, upon which the modern Nigerian writing and publishing thrive. This is in turn frightened by the internet and digital culture, the virtual book on the internet – even as old and new writers now

struggle and strive to write themselves into the civilization of the World Wide Web, or remain in the backwardness of the urological world.

In essence, oral literature is the forebear of Nigerian literature – our folktales, our folklore traditions. The legacy of the bards, the raconteur, the griot, the masque motif and performance art; this is where our literature – from pre-literate times and deep into the colonial hegemonic age-emerged. Happily, the written tradition, both evolve earlier the Nigerian language of Hausa, Ibo, Yoruba and the various Nigerian languages upon which literary orthography have been established sank its umbilical cord in the oral culture of our inheritance. Oral tradition remains extant in all our modern literary genre. Oral literature, even oral performing arts provide the essential and salient communal fibre of our modern story, in its aesthetics, its ideological direction and its cognitive and its epistemy. Today, fifty years after independence, there is hardly any Nigerian writer who wants to, or can, write, without paying homage and seeking inspiration from the oral traditions – the folk-narratives, the myths, the proverbs, the incantations, the aphorisms, the charts, and the avarces of oral thought and action. As C.G. Darah (1988) opined, all the nationalities that make up contemporary Nigeria had thriving traditions of literature before they come into contact with Arabic and European influences.

This being merely a Keynote, no deep theories either of the evolutionists, functionalist, and dialectical dimensions will be given reins of expression. We

shall just briefly explore the emergence, growth and development of Nigerian literature from its oral origins, to its participation, alienation, mediation and illumination of the Nigerian experience from colonialism, through cultural and published writers to its colonial, neo-colonial and post-colonial aegis – in no order of emphasis or concentration.

Literacy and Literary Culture

The evolution and development of literary culture is contingent upon literacy. Literacy, (while in general, refers to the ability to read and write, or in short being formally educated), is the basic implement for the development of any discipline of learning, including the literary discipline. Indeed, you cannot develop forms, shapes, tropes and styles-condiments an ingredients of literature unless you have education, unless you are literate. Literature which reflects and refracts human civilization across nations, is thus the expressive mode of a people's national culture. Since a people's level of development can be measured against the level of education, or literacy of the people, literacy is a fundament of national development. **The essence is thus to ferret out the** unfolding relationship between the growth of literacy with the pattern of the development of a literary culture in political functions and national development in Nigeria.

Nigeria, like the rest of West Africa was regarded as virtually a "literary desert" before 1930, mainly because tertiary institutions were non-existent before this time, when the Fourah Bay College at Freetown was established and

a few graduates in the humanities began to emerge. But of course, literature in the indigenous languages from pre-colonial times and this is in spite of the conscious devaluation or denigration inflicted on them by Arabic and western imperial ideological hegemonies.

Paucity of Written Literature between the 30s

Thus, when outsiders like Courtenay Hodgson who lived for a very long period in the West African coast crudely expressed the impossibility of a high cultural product like literature to emerge from Africa, in 1930, he was speaking from the then prevailing state of paucity of a western literary culture at that point in time. His words rang with a tone of pessimistic finality thus: 'West Africa is too crude, too brutalizing to nourish the afflatus of a poet or the *scabies scibendi* of the novelist' (1).

Now, a lot of deductions can be made from this xenophobic notion, which was not an isolated view of Hodgson. He, however, conveniently did not inform us that the British colonial policy was responsible for the limited exposure of the colonies to literacy and thus to the flourish of a literary culture. Such a final judgment passed on the development of a literary tradition in West Africa did not in fact anticipate that shortly, a slightly less pessimistic 'brand' of Englishmen, “Africanists” of the calibre of Joyce Carry, Joseph Conrad and Graham Greene would surface in West Africa, whose works were provocative enough to stir up a wave of creative responses that was to define the character of the early nationalist phase of the literary products of Nigerian writers. This is

the sense in which post-colonial literature in Nigeria predated the demise of colonialism. Note that the first novel of Africa's most famous novelist, Chinua Achebe, and one of the world's most widely read works is *Things Fall Apart* (ditto for the rest of his tetralogy: *Arrow of God* and *No Longer at Ease),* was a direct response to the provocative fictional works of Joyce Cary and Joseph Conrad in *Mister Johnson* and *Heart of Darkness,* respectively.

In highlighting the thinness and late development of a literary culture in English in West Africa, it must not be misconstrued to denote that there was no tradition of writing of any genre in Nigeria and the sub-region, nor that there was no literary culture of any kind before Western, tertiary, education emerged from the 1930s. Some occasional writing, of the autobiographical kind, was embarked upon in the late eighteenth century. In 1789, Oluaudah Equiano had published *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano.* Similarly, James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw published, in the city of Bath, Britain, *Albert Ukawsaw, An African Prince,* (1770) as related by himself. There was also Ignatius Sancho's, *Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho (London,* 1792) to which are prefixed memoirs of his life. Details of these initial writings by liberated, enslaved Africans, which must be granted a place in constructing the history of the development of Nigerian and African writing, in European languages, have been drawn by scholars, including O.R.Danthone in his critical studies titled 'African Writers of the Eighteenth Century' (1965) and *Olaudah Equiano, A Nigerian Writer of the Eighteenth Century(1965,p.2).*

Yet the culture of writing, both in the foreign languages and the indigenous West African languages, was slow in coming. Bernth Lindfors, advanced in his very instructive book, *Early Nigerian Literature* (1982, 2002) that 'in all of West Africa there were only seventeen literary works published in African Languages before 1927. Between 1927 and 1937, sixty-seven more appeared' (3). There is no doubt that a sizeable, dominant proportion of this came from Nigeria. Two bodies are usually cited for this development at the stage, in Nigeria: The United Society for Christian Literature in London and the British Council in Nigeria (the latter has remained in significant focus for over seven decades in giving support to cultural and artistic production in Nigeria, at least).

Defining Character of Nigerian Literature

First, is the unique perspectives of the essential character, features and nature of Nigerian Literature in particular, the pattern of the evolvement of the Nigeria national literature and its relation to the evolvement of the Nigerian nation itself, as well the ideological superstructure of the nation-state and its direct correlation with the literal culture in Nigeria. The first point to make about the inextricable link between literacy and literature in Nigeria is that literary productivity in English of any and all genres began to flourish much earlier in the Southern coast where western culture (education, religion and commerce) took root decade before similar experiences developed in the North. This requires greater elucidation. The early lead of the southern parts of Nigeria, in Western education and civilization was a direct result of early influx of

mission institutions to the southern region. These educational and literacy projects in the South were embarked upon, however, in enlightened commercial, cultural and ideological self-interest by the Missionaries. British imperialist needed to rapidly implant the notion of cultural and spiritual aridity on the conquered lands-to kill their perceived 'fetish and paganistic' cultures of the indigenous traditions and replace them with marginal Western literacy, culture and civilization. In the specific Nigerian experience, the first Missionary Secondary Schools were established in the 1850s, such as C.M.S Grammar School (1859), C.M.S. Girls School (1869), the Roman Catholic's St. Gregory's College (1878), Baptist Boys High School (1885), and in the East was, among others, the Hope Waddell College Institute, Calabar (1881). Almost all the first published works in Nigeria came from Southern authors-and in both foreign (English) and vernacular languages. There were D.O. Fagunwa (in Yoruba), Amos Tutuola, Cyprian Ekwensi, T.M. Aluko, Onuora Nzekwu and so on-all beneficiaries of the early Missionary post primary institutions. They were among the more notable writers who started creating as a result of the early development of literacy in the Southern part of Nigeria. Western literacy did not reach the North until much later in the early parts of the twentieth century, and this inadvertently accounted for the slow take-off of both western literary culture in that region.

Trans-national publishing Houses such as Heinemann, Longman, Macmillan, etc also quickly gave rapid acceptance to these works and soon

gave international attention to them, especially since the works of Chinua Achebe (following the instant hit that *Things Fall Apart* registered), Wole Soyinka and J.P.Clark; other writers that could be referred to as the first crop of internationalist writers who established conscious, sustained high cultural literary work in Nigeria, now commonly described as the first generation of contemporary writing of foreign language expression in Nigeria also gained tremendous publishing attention. Such was the spate of observable pandering of these publishers to the early effort of these writers that wary criticism began to mount from within the writers' 'commune', cautioning against uncritical lionization and publication by foreign publishers, with a certain undue fawning on the emergent writers, which may have a ruinous impact on the nascent literary culture in Nigeria (Mabel Aig-Imoukhuede, 1961).

On the contrary, literature of foreign language expression crept up to the Northern parts of Nigeria rather slowly. This is not to say that there was no literary culture in the region until literature in English emerged from the late sixties. The Jihad of Uthman Dan Fodio, a religious and intellectual movement kindled Arabic literary growth in the region, mainly in the poetic genre. Dan Fodio himself was a prolific poet who wrote about 480 poems, in Arabic, Fulfulde and Hausa (Yahaya, 1988). There was a valiant attempt to fuse Arabic and Hausa to produce Ajami, (the indigenization of Arabic scripts). Protest literature, notably by the Emir of Zaria, Aliyu dan Sidi, against Lugard's military incursion, and colonialism and Shehu na Salga's pro-nationalist epics,

flourished. However, Mudi Sipikin was the mai figure of radical, political poetry, among dozens of first rate poets in the north. There were European scholars' research efforts published (between 1908 and 1970) in English as exemplified in C. Charlton's, ***A Hausa Reading*** Book (1900) and F. Edger's ***Tatsuniyoyi Na Hausa*** (1911). Nationalism-directed literary works also thrived with works of poets like Aminu Kano, Sa'adu Zungur, Akoli Aliyu and so on. Indeed, the British colonial involvement in culture and literature in Northern Nigeria dates back to 1930, when they established the Translation and Literature Bureau and the establishment of Gaskiya Corporation in 1945. A vibrant literary culture in the indigenous Hausa-Fulani language attained dominance following the establishment of the Northern Regional Literature Agency (NORLA) in 1953 by the colonial administration. It was an agency for mass education and, social mobilization in the context of imperial hegemony. Sir Bryan Sherwood Smith instituted the mass literacy campaign committee as a full-blown organ for publicity-as an imperialist design on the natives of Northern Nigeria. It was not a neutral literary effort, but according to Sani Abba Aliyu (1991), it was to provide such a literacy that would enable the colonized to 'recognize who are their friends and who are their enemies, and so that they may be protected in the coming years against exploitation, either from within or from without'.

The second point that will be made in the establishment of the Nigerian literary culture is the direct impact of politics-the anti-colonial struggle for

political independence in Nigeria and West African the flourish of literary productivity. The struggle for political independence went arm in arm with the growth of cultural renaissance in Nigeria. This will be elaborated upon later.

National Character of Nigerian Literature

We must clarify at this point that a distinctively national literary culture in Nigeria, evolved right from the onset of the written tradition in English. This is to state that Nigerian writers forged a ***nationist***, rather than an ethno-national vision for our literature. Our politicians, alas, fifty years on, failed to emulate that feature in their practice of politics. This critical uniqueness devolves on the fact of its transcendence from origin, from its ethnic back-drop, to assume a national character. A significant illustration of this national, rather than ethnic – specificity of Nigerian literature has been observed in the writing of Cyprian Ekwensi, an early writer, who is non-hesitant in claiming responsibility for the national character of Nigerian literature, and who consciously set some of his highly cosmopolitan fictional works in the Sudan and Sahel Savannah topographies of the Islamic cultural fauna of Northern Nigeria. Ekwensi's novels, like *The Burning Grass* (1962), *Passport of Mallam Ilia* (1960) and *An African Nights Entertainment* (1962) were written, as Ekwensi himself claimed in 1961, to 'portray ... the authentic Nigerian scene'. Indeed, the importance of Ekwensi in the development of the Nigerian literary culture lies, essentially, in the pan-Nigerian character of his writing. He can be said with a reasonable degree of certitude, to be a leading proponent of the

authentic national Nigerian literature in English. It also lies in his initiation of the popular literary culture in Nigeria, which was derided at the beginning by the high-cultural Mbari-nurtured literary sensitivity of the late fifties and early sixties, but which flourished, through in the post-Civil War years. The early works of other writers of his generation also followed this trend.

Secondly, we must contextualize the rich, uncommon and complex diversity of Nigerian literature - especially with regards to its multiple heritage. Bernth Lindfors (1982 and 2002:2) aptly captures the multi-dimensional growth patterns of Nigerian Literature, which, right from the outset, reflects the heterogeneous composition in demographic and topographic terms. '...it was a literature that moved in several directions simultaneously, assimilating creative energy from sources as disparate as oral narratives, Christian classics and Western popular romances'. Indeed, the most dominant provenance of Nigerian literature is the oral narrative, poetic and performance traditions.

As we stated at the beginning, the deepest roots of Nigerian and West African literatures lie in the indigenous folklore-folktales, storytelling art of the griot and the bards, the performance traditions of the masquerades and the indigenous poetry of the diviners-the Ifa oracular and other oral poetic constructs all of which, through sheer resilience, helped the colonies to survive the cultural ravages and violence visited on them by imperialism and colonialism. The contemporary Nigerian writers- especially the most accomplished of them - have gone back to the pre-colonial literary structures

and formats for thematic and aesthetic inspirations, without losing sight of the impact of the inherited western literary canons bequeathed by education and western conscious ideological and cultural indoctrination. We can exemplify this feature in Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1952)- a marvellous adventure epic, taken completely from the Yoruba oral tradition, long established by the Yoruba classical novelist, D.O. Fagunwa in his masterpieces among which are *Ogboju Ode Ninu Igbo lrunmale,* which Wole Soyinka translated into *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons: A Hunter's Saga* (1968) *Igbo Olodumare, Adiitu Olodumare (The Mysterious Plan of the Almighty)* and *Irinkerindo Ninu Igbo Elegbeje-* all of which capture the Yoruba heroic journey/quest motif.

The Mbari Tradition

These earlier foundations of the emergence of a literary culture in Nigeria remain feeble and uneven. The first notable generation of writers of English expression was the elite cluster of University-educated, self-conscious, Ibadan-grown writers who located themselves in the Mbari Club. Christopher Okigbo, Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, J. P. Clark and that German cultural border crosser who played inimitable role in nurturing this generation of Nigeria writers, Ulli Beier. In terms of aesthetics, they constituted the first serious and profound end of Nigerian literary canon-building. They were raised and nourished on the sacred, myth poetic, individualist, idealist and romantic tradition of English literature as canonized in the works of the metaphysical,

Augustan, Victorian, Elizabethan and Romantic poets and dramatist. We must take this along with the self-conscious, inviolate solitude of the artist's personality. Osofisan (2001) captured the defining features of the literary culture represented by this leading generation as revealed in Okigbo's 'lyrical, clairvoyant surges; Soyinka's 'raw, inchoative passion' and his 'challenging esoterism', 'Achebe's sedate serious concern for the tragic mutations in social culture'. Added to this is Clark's densely profound drama and poetry. Theirs was a tradition also characterized by lucid denunciation of parasitic politics and neo-colonial economy of the newly independent nation and its anticipated reality. A few examples of the works of this generation include Achebe's tetralogy, *Things Fall Apart* (1958), *No Longer at Ease* (1960) and *Arrow of God* (1964), Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forest* (1960) and the famously impenetrable *The Interpreters,* J.P.Clark's, *Song of a Goat* and *The Raft* (1964) and Okigbo's only published volume of poetry, *Labyrinths* (1968).

Ideology of Engagement

It is difficult for a Nigerian writer, or any postcolonial writer, to either take a definite, Kantian art-for- art sake position. In the Nigerian experience, since the ravages of colonialism and the reality of neo-colonialism, the fortunes of politics have been inextricably bound with the fortunes of literature. Cultural nationalism, that phase of resistance to the project of cultural abnegation of Africa by the colonists, was indeed a critical factor in political nationalism. Literature and culture generally formed an integral part of the anti-colonial

struggle for independence. The definition and characterization of post-independence politics in Nigeria, up to the present modern market forces economy and globalization has been embarked upon by both the political and the intellectual (writers to be specific) elite. The building of literature and the building of the nation have been a mutually inclusive project-even when politicians pretend that it is otherwise, and that they have a monopoly of national reconstruction vision and wisdom. Since 1944, at the terminal point of the imperialist war, named the Second World War, cultural activities, including literature and theatre, have been found as inviolable instruments of political struggle for independence. The plays of Hubert Ogunde, especially *Strike and Hunger* and *Bread and Bullet* (1952) were fierce anti-colonial artistic products of political nationalism an audacious commitment for which the dramatist suffered reprisals in the hands of the Colonial Government and later in the sixties and seventies in the hands of the civilian or military governments.

Even much earlier, Nigerian political nationalists, such as Nnamdi Azikiwe, Herbert Macaulay and Dennis Osadebey, Obafemi Awolowo, Ahmadu Bello, Anthony Enahoro, Aminu Kano, Ernest Sessel Ikoli, Abubakar Imam, etc., had found out that political independence had to begin with cultural renaissance. Being poets and cultural patrons and journalist themselves, they had engaged and enlisted literature in the service of political struggle. They were zestful in their promotion of culture and they offered growth space to literature in their political programmes and media outfits. Nnamdi Azikiwe, who later became the

first President of the First Republic in Nigeria, carved out a poet's corner in his Newspaper, the *West African Pilot,* established in 1937. Obafemi Awolowo was not only a journalist, but ***The Tribune*** which survived up till today is a veritable legacy of his commitment to culturally media-tized politics. Ahmadu Bello established with a conscious political mandate. Other newspapers followed these examples, by providing space for theatre reviews especially on topical political issues, short stories and poems in their newspapers. As Bernth Lindfors (1982) recorded, 'Popular magazines such as the *West African Review,* a Liverpool-based monthly, published many short stories by Nigerians in the 1940s and made a special point of inviting would-be writers to submit manuscripts for consideration'. These may well be taken as the beginning of the intervention of the media in the growth of Nigerian literature, which various newspapers, including *The Guardian, The Tribune, Daily Times, The Post Express* and *The Sun,* etc., developed into a permanent feature in their dailies. There is indeed a sense in which the inclusion of creative works in the print media prepared the ground for the emergence of a reading culture for the emergence of the Nigerian literary movements of the fifties and sixties, epitomized by the writing of full-length works of literature in English which as I remarked earlier, earnestly commenced with the publication of Amos Tutuola's *The Palm- Wine Drinkard* in 1952.

National Literature and National Culture

It is thus easy to see why writers who were fired by nationalistic visions and

commitment got alienated and disillusioned, shortly after political emancipation was attained. They were also disillusioned by the mass poverty that followed the lack of development programmes on the ground. The sense of identity and national unity, which fired the creative imagination of writers during the struggle for independence, led them, first to disillusion and alienation, to uncanny prophesy and combat. The predictable early political disintegration was anticipated in early works of Wole Soyinka, as we found in his play, *A Dance of the Forest,* a play written originally to celebrate the Nigerian independence but which turned 'out to be a figurative critique of the 'gathering of the tribes'. This alienation of the literary artists by their political counterpart, which produced *A Man of the People* is in line with Achebe's belief at point that writers have not been engaging themselves sufficiently and effectively in the historic crisis situation in Nigeria.

A similar charge with social commitment to African writers was made by Wole Soyinka in his essay *'The Writer in a Modern African State'* delivered in Stockholm in 1967 - wherein Soyinka stated that 'the time has come when the African writer must have the courage to determine what alone can be salvaged from the recurrent circle of hum stupidity'.

National Literature and Nigerian Civil War

The cataclysmic events in the sixties, which led to the Nzeogwu/Ifeajuna coup of January 1966 and the subsequent Nigerian Civil War of 1967 -70, compelled a near-narcissistic poet like Christopher Okigbo, who literally

worshipped his art, to take a political side, in which he finally lost his life. He made a confession of his anguish and near-despair in a letter which the late Sunday Anozie (1971:10-11) quoted from as follows:

> After all it was a great shock …, in a short time to have to change political alliance under the grim strains of the massacres and to feel that there was no hope or trust in the country that you have believed in all your life and that the only course was to create a new nation.

Almost all the first generation writers in Nigeria-Ekwensi, Achebe, Okigbo, Soyinka, Clark, Amadi, Ike, Okara, and so on- responded, with an acute sense of urgency, to the new socio- political problems which resulted in the Civil War. A new national literature proceeded with writing that gave premonition of war through writers' interpretation of the political atmosphere in Nigeria after independence. Achebe's *A Man of the People* appeared, according to the late Kolawole Ogungbesan (1974: 16), like 'a literary tour de force', a 'spied' text of the January 1966 coup, which took place shortly after the novel was published. Other works, like Soyinka's *The Interpreters*, Ekwensi's *Iska*, Okara's *The Voice* showed indomitable concern with the moral and social quality of life in the Nigeria of the sixties. It was followed by angry, spontaneous outbursts in the poetic mould as events became more tragically urgent from 1966. Okigbo's *Path of Thunder*, Soyinka's *Poems October '66*, Clark's *Casualties*, Wonodi's *Dusts of Exile*, Ken Saro Wiwa's *A Voice in the Wind*, T.E. Nwosu's *Combat*, all read like verses from the trenches.

As events calmed down a little, just after the war and later, writers opted out of seeing themselves as mere moral and spiritual guides, preferring to function as active and engaged participants in rebuilding society, in a revolutionary fashion. Some of the initial works in this direction include Soyinka's *The Man Died* and *Season of Anomy*, Achebe's *Beware Soul Brother*, Okpewho's *The Last Duty*, Osofisan's *Kolera Kolej*, Omotoso's *The Combat* and the later generation novelist, Festus Iyayi' in *Heroes*.

Post-Civil War Literature

Beyond the anger and disenchantment, couched in lucid exposition, the post-war literature demanded new visions and fresh strategies by culture workers and writers, whose experience were more distant, temporally at least, from the level of direct, fresh and real participation in those cataclysmic events as the first generation writers went through. The new generation were committed to crystallizing the events into a dialectical framework requisite for a radical, ethical, and positive alternative These writers who were growing up in the seventies and who took the challenge, with some degree of accomplishment, took, conscious, literary options, departing from the style, language and ideology of their predecessors. This generation, include among others, Femi Osofisan, Festus Iyayi, Bode Osanyin, Bode Sowande, Kole Omotoso, Niyi Ben Iroha Osundare, Odia Ofeimun, Olu Obafemi, Tess Onwueme, Segun Oyekunle, Tunde Fatunde and later, Sam Ukala, Ahmed Yerima and Abubakar

Gimba, Zaynab Alkali and Akachi Ezeigbo.

They seek radical, revolutionary options to the pervasive decadence in the system, through an objective, topical capturing of the indices of the decay and optimistically codify these options in simple, lucid, if didactic, manner. The writers further aimed at deploying literature of all genres to construct a lucid transformational consciousness-a collectivist ideology of growth-which they hoped will usher a vibrant, self-rebirth, neo-parasitic and productive socio-economic structure.

There is a sense in which the anticipation of these writers that their literature will radicalize and mobilize the polity, even define the political economy of the Nigerian society, did not quite materialize for various reasons beyond the scope of this keynote.

The Emerging Generations

The generation of Nigerian writers that began to flourish from the late eighties had no pretension of any sort to committing their writing to specific ideological standpoints. These young men and women were and are justifiably impatient with the exponential rate at which chaos and incoherence which manifest in poverty, injustice and squalor-have overtaken the country, richly endowed, but wantonly impoverished by philistine and cynical leadership. These writers, who looked ahead in frustration and anger, write with minimum concern for a conscious and systematically articulated ideological persuasion which informed the writing of the preceding generation. The collapse of the

Berlin Wall, and Sovietology in particular, giving rise to a uni-polar globe did not inspire a materialist literary productivity. This generation is producing quite an impressive body of literature of varying stature and quality – in spite of the difficulty of writing and publishing in a comatose economy into which they were born and live in. Some of the best writing, coming from Nigeria today are from the angry and versatile pens and laptops of these productive men and women, led with distinction by Harry Garuba, Akachi Ezeigbo, Ben Okri, Ezenwa Ohaeto, Promise Okekwe, Remi Raji, Wale Okediran, Nimo Bassey,Omowumi Segun, Ben Imoloju, Ogaga Ifowodo, Yahaya Dangana, Maria Ajima, Esiaba lrobi, Ezenwa Ohaeto and Uche Nduka, Nduka Otiono, Jerry Agada, Austyn Njoku, Femi Ademiluyi, Amu Nnadi, Promise Okekwe, Adesokan, Charles Bodunde, Taiwo Oloruntoba-Oju, Felix and Charles Ugolo, Sunday Ododo, Phillip Begho, Akabogu Chinwuba, Lola Shoneyin, Sampson Odidi, Bina Nengi, Fatima Sanda Usara" Binta Salma Mohammed Chimamanda Achidio, Maxim Nwosu, Helon Habila, Pius Adesanmi,Chike Ofili, Deola Fadipe, Aisha Zakary, Lot Agoro, Olorunfemi Simbo, Arthur-Worey, Fola, Toni Kan Sefi Atta, Agari, Nwabuchi, etc.

Negotiated Female Voices

You may have observed that some of the names mentioned above are women writers drawn from across the country. This is one of the most positive features of recent Nigerian literature. Nigerian women writers have carved a spacious creative room of their own, to borrow a Virginia Wolf title, to describe

the robust way in which Nigerian women writers have negotiated a powerful voice for women, to correct the negative perception of women in society. Some of the finest, mature and profound qualitative works in all genres are cascading from the creative founts of Nigerian women writers. With the outstanding leadership and inspiration of the matriarchs, contemporal Nigerian women have claimed an unignorable stature on the socio-political and cultural landscape, essentially through the medium of literature. Some the best literary prizes offered in Nigeria and abroad are being won by Nigerian women writers - Tess Onwueme, Akachi Ezeigbo, Promise Okekwe, Adichie Chimamanda, B' Nengi, Seffi Atta, Agary and so on. They have done the Nigerian women writing a proud turn. This is, no doubt, a great tribute to the resilience and doggedness of the pioneering trail-blazing female writers such as Mabel Segun, Flora Nwapa, Zulu Sofola, Buchi Emecheta, Zaynab Alkali. Ifeoma Okoye and Catherine Acholonu, and others-who etched and cleared the thorny path for the present generation of women writers that the female angle of the evolving Nigeria's national literary culture has blossomed into a dominant space on the Nigeria literary landscape.

Challenges: Sustenance and Nurture

Writing, of the creative category is a lonely, lonesome, hazardous, in health and political terms, enterprise, and a challenging vocation indeed—given the inclement socio-economic and socio-political ambience in our country, and

in which the business of creative writing is carried on. This is worsened by the tradition of grossly inadequate publishing outlets for the manuscripts produced with blood and sweat. Nearly all the multinational publishers in Nigeria, have , out of mercantile self-interest, left the country, leaving behind shadows of their former selves, or local variety of their original selves; Heinemann, Macmillan, Longman, University Press and so on. Having made their names and gains on the bleeding creative backs of Achebe, Soyinka, Clark, Okara, Ike, Ekwensi, etc., they turned their backs on literature and obeyed the economic law of demand and supply of publishing commercially viable curriculum text books for primary and secondary schools. The indigenous ones are poorly capitalized, unambitious or is it unadventurous? as they hardly touch creative works, with a few exceptions, such as Spectrum, Fourth Dimension,Kraftbooks, Litramed, Bookraft, Sarafina, Lumina, and so on, that are braving the publishing odds of literary works.

Now, given this situation, writers in the country have had, either to approach relatively unknown foreign publishers or to self-publish. The consequence of either practice is unsavoury for the writers and their environment. Poor distribution and poor quality production are the aftermaths of such vanity publishing. Most of our new and struggling young writers are hardly on the curriculum in educational institutions. Self- publishing authors, if they are not lecturers who can carry their works in Ghana-Must-Go and parade

institutions where they go examining or conferencing, do not get read. Such writers who can afford to get their initial works published overseas could hardly be read in Nigeria—when there are hardly opportunities for local production rights or domestic distribution of their texts. As Sani Abba graphically expressed, most of those writers who opt for self-publishing suffer a similar fate; their works are 'poorly publicized, inadequately reviewed, and rarely available in the book stores'.

Will these disadvantages hinder or eliminate self-publishing? This is hardly possible, given the prevailing sociology of writing and publishing in the country today. Young writers are in a hurry to bear the name of authors—a condition for even becoming members of the umbrella writers' organ—ANA. Some of us, older writers, have been constant victim of this publishing hunger. We receive manuscripts with such injunctions as 'kindly help me sir. The publisher wants to go to press next week' or 'the launching of the work is in a month's time, my Chief launcher will travel immediately after'! What's the use then, if the comments we may have will require a surgical re-work of the text? There are occasions in which just before one began to read particular manuscripts, their launch would be announced in the media — in two days' time!!

Some writers—young or old, labour under the sad illusion that being an author is a passport to instant wealth. They need to do a little research as to why

most authors today are not full-time writers. Some of us in the academia and the humanities must improve our CV—with evidence of published creative works, if they wish to be smiled upon by the Appointments and Promotion Committees. In any case, there are hungry publishers as there are hungry authors, in a mutual self-seeking game.

In spite of all these, and the inevitable proliferation of self-publishing, the nurturing of our literature is a factor, largely of its quality, of aesthetics of production, technical finish and content. Creative works must benefit from editing, objective assessment on publishability. Publishers, not printers, must do job of book production, if our literature is to be sustained with enduring values.

For a bossoming literary culture to emerge and be sustained in the C21st Nigeria, some of these steps must be taken and maintained.

i. To stimulate and enhance literary creativity, literary competitions and contests, which used to be the practice in the colonial days need to be resuscitated. The colonialists did it in the 1930s. Even the radios and TVs did it. It should involve all departments of creativity in indigenous and foreign languages—drama, prose, poetry, short stories, film and video, etc. Attractive material rewards should be attached to winning texts. The successful texts should be distributed. Government and corporate bodies must embark on wide distribution of the winning texts in schools and public libraries. The winning texts must be toured and read in many

public institutions. If the colonialists did it with the result of an appreciable growth in the writing and reading culture of the time, there is even a greater need for our governments –at the center and in the States – to do so.

ii. Journals, magazines, newspapers should show greater interest in the publication and serialization of literary texts. The growth of a literary and reading culture have benefitted tremendously from the spaces which literary journals and newspapers devoted to works of literature. ***Black Orpheus, The Horn, Nigeria Magazine, Okike*** and so on, consciously helped to nurture literature. The example of ***Dandali*** which I mentioned earlier is worth emulating. The defunct ***New Nigeria***n, ***Daily Times*** and many of the more serious newspapers and tabloids in circulation today give prominence to serialized creative works, especially prose and poetry. They also give focus to literature and to book and play reviews. The fresh impetus began with ***The Guardian*** and it has been replicated in many of our newspapers. This is a direction to go. Indeed, the print media in Nigeria can move a step further by publishing the final products of the books they serialize after careful editing. To put it firmly, I am suggesting that newspapers should become publishers of literary work, if they wish , and they should, ferment robust synergy with the creative arm of the pen fraternity.

iii. Governments, voluntary agencies and organizations should endow writers fellowships and offer literary prizes to motivate writers to train and write in a sustained and enduring manner. The fellowships should cater for writers' needs—feeding, accommodation, and honoraria that will enable writers complete creative works in progress with less difficulty than it is now. In very specific terms, the National Endowment Draft Bill, which I believe has been with the National Assembly since the year 2004, has not been signed into law. Government should expedite action on this. In July 2004, during a courtesy visit to the President of the Federation, ANA under my leadership reiterated this fact that Nigeria is perhaps the only country of its stature where such an Endowment does not exist. In spite of the provision in our Constitution for funding the arts, and in spite of the robust achievements of Nigerian artists, especially writers on the international scene, there are no grants or fellowships to support creative arts in Nigeria. This is simply unspeakable and we must constantly remind the Nigerian government to desist from the business of consciously setting aside a mandate of our Cultural Policy which states, unequivocally and heart-warmingly, at Section 6.1.2. that ***'The State shall promote and encourage the establishment of writers clubs, art clubs, creative centres for encouraging creativity and popularizing the arts'.*** Section 6.1.3 more germanely and directly states that ***'the State shall support the associations and clubs through government***

subventions, grants and other forms of assistance' Government must stop provoking these high cultural people to resort to rough tactics before getting their rights! Then Pen is lethal, I must warn!!

iv. The tragic issue of piracy and intellectual property crime is still very much with us. Whatever reward that should attend the intellectual labour of writers and other artists are carted away by privates. I appreciate the effort of the Nigerian Copyright Commission in dealing, legally and administratively with the burning, raging crime. I also appreciate the Commission's partnership with the Reproduction Rights Society with regard to licensing on reprographic work. It is time however, that government committed more resources to dealing with the menace of copyright violations, which like fake drugs, and drug trafficking, is synonymous to pronouncing death sentence, on creative artists. This may be an apposite point to raise the issue of the National Creativity Prize which the Obasanjo Administration introduced in 2000. Its first, and only, edition was won by the venerable, octogenarian literary patriarch, Chinua Achebe. I recall, with pangs of nostalgia, the remarkable ceremonies that heralded and adorned the Prize. A government that is continuity-conscious would have sustained such a noble gesture of recognition to the creative literatti and a promotion of creative excellence. Government should urgently revisit that Prize and revive it.

v. Associations related to literature—writing and reading—should enhance their activities of promotion and nurturing. ANA has created many literary prizes and is collaborating with government and corporate citizens on workshops, prizes endowments and seminars. Others, like Readers Association of Nigeria (RAN), the Literary Society of Nigeria LSN) the Association of Non-Fiction Authors of Nigeria (ANFAAN) should work more conscientiously to promote literary awareness, help build a reading and writing culture.

vi. Our libraries are virtually dead. There are only very few public libraries in this country. There are fewer reading rooms around. Government should adopt a policy of acquiring at least 5000 copies of one successful creative text of every Nigerian author, registered with ANA and distribute them in libraries and reading rooms, which should now be rehabilitated, or re-built, as the case may be.

vii. The electronic media have been of tremendous help to the growth of creativity in the country, and especially in north in the past. I have mentioned the role of the FRCN. The radio audience, of the Hausa programmes, for instance, is in millions. This could be replicated in the other languages of Tiv, Fulfulde, Kanuri, Idoma, Okun, Igbirra, Nupe, Yoruba, Igbo, Ijaw, Urhobo, Itsekiri, Igala and so on. Radio Kaduna encouraged literary development by regularly broadcasting poems, short-

stories, drama sketches and story-telling sessions. The broadcast of their creative works have availed the authors access to wide audiences. My first dramatic text, ***Pestle in the Mortar***, was broadcast on the radio/Television Kaduna in 1974 and it was of tremendous inspiration for me. The Hausa television drama evolved out of the broadcast of radio plays by FRCN. This tradition of media intervention and propagation of literature has been long established in the Southern parts of the country—Village Headmaster, Cockrow at Dawn, and so on, nudged our creative consciousness. This trend should be re-energized, even now when profit consideration is a foremost preoccupation of the electronic media, nowadays.

viii. Literature is the soul of the society and no subsidy to develop, sustain and nurture it would be excessive. Fifty years after independence, literacy and the reading culture in Nigeria is still dismally poor. We are in a knowledge – driven, global world in which literacy is a critical element of economic development (knowledge, including literary knowledge). All arms of society—government at all levels, cooperate societies and citizens, genuinely rich Nigerians, etc, should commit resources and resource-input to the nation's creative enterprise and the creative community, if our civilization and humanity will be both enhanced and ennobled indirectly involved in this all. Governments should invest in the

literature of the nation and grant generous subsidies to literary institutions and literary people in their domains.

Conclusion

In conclusion, ladies and gentlemen, in spite of all these daunting and potentially crippling challenges, Nigerian literature has come of age, in a way in advance of the nation itself. Given the resilience and the indomitable spirit of Nigerian writers, old and young, Nigerian literature is among the fastest growing literatures of the world in quality and in quantity. There are hardly any prizes at the international space that Nigerian writers, male and female, old and young, have not won. Nigerian literature's future is assured. It is the duty and privilege of the ruling elite and the generality of the Nigerian people to identify with, nurture and replenish it from now on and unto the day of our centurion, as a people and a nation.

I thank you for listening to these various obvious statements that I have taken this space and time to make and I wish you all a very creatively and socially rewarding Garden City Festival.

Olu Obafemi.

06/12/10.

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