

THE CONCEPT OF AN AFRICAN PROSE LITERATURE

GENERAL

Prose is simply defined in the *Shorter Oxford Dictionary* as "...the ordinary form of written or spoken language without metrical structure" and certainly for a majority of native English speakers this definition serves well enough, though in English, prose is more usually understood to be written rather than spoken. Most people have a more or less clear idea of what they mean by prose, if only because there is a large body of accepted verse with which to contrast it, a contrast not materially affected by the problems posed by modern verse techniques. There is also a pretty wide measure of agreement as to what constitutes literature, again because there is a corpus of material, accumulated over the centuries, which is regarded as such by common consent. This material provides a basis for judgments of value on more recent work, so that one can make some sort of contrast between "Gibbon's *History* and to-night's evening paper" but there is

bound to be futile argument over certain cases, and one can be sure that there will be divergence from the current view with the passage of time. All in all, however, there is likely to be a large area over which one may obtain a fair measure of agreement as to what may be termed the prose literature of English.

The situation in Africa is quite otherwise, and a few words of introduction seem justifiable. Until recent years most of Africa south of the Sahara was occupied by a very large number of disparate societies, speaking languages belonging to several distinct families. Settled agriculture was practised over a wide area; pastoralism was important outside the equatorial forest and the tse-tse fly belt, and small groups of hunters and food gatherers occupied areas marginal to both. Some of these societies were large centralised states which, from time to time, controlled substantial areas of surrounding country and exacted tribute from less powerful neighbours and other states subject to them. As examples one may cite the West African empires of Ghana, Mali and Songhay; that of Monomotapa in Central Africa, and more recently, the kingdoms around Lake Victoria in Uganda and Ruanda, and the explosive Zulu state under Chaka.¹ On the other hand, many societies were not centralized states at all, but either loose congeries of largely autonomous groups or wholly autonomous small scale groups. It seems reasonable to suppose that groups were constantly hiving off from larger ones to form new groups or coming together with other small groups to form larger ones. It is also likely that, except in certain especially favoured areas, subsistence was often difficult, and the pattern of life often threatened by inter-group conflict. The detailed study of such societies has been the concern of anthropologists for the last thirty years,² and of historians, also, from more recent times.

¹ For a popular account of African history see B. Davidson, *Old Africa Rediscovered*, 1959; less popular is D. Westermann, *Geschichte Afrikas*, Köln, 1952. For more detailed studies of specific areas see J. D. Fage, *Ghana: A Historical Interpretation*, University of Wisconsin Press, 1959; Thomas Hodgkin, *Nigerian Perspectives*, Oxford University Press, 1960.

² For a general bibliography the standard anthropological text-books should be consulted, but a useful short bibliography is appended to E. E. Evans-Pritchard,

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At the time when European scholars began to take an interest, of a serious and systematic kind, in African societies, some had been in their areas for only a few generations, while others had traditions of unbroken occupation for several centuries. Common to all, however, was their lack of written traditions; one is dealing almost exclusively³ with an oral tradition, and for parallels in Europe one must look to mediaeval Ireland and Scotland or to Greece or Yugoslavia in more recent times.

Within the broad category of oral tradition in particular, it is manifestly unsatisfactory to make the prose/verse distinction turn on a "non-metrical" element, since a great deal, perhaps most, of African verse—and not only African verse—is non-metrical. A more useful distinction is between what is spoken and what is sung, yet even here one has to recognize that many folk-tales, for example, switch unconcernedly from speech to song and vice versa, and some recognition of hybrid categories is as essential as it is belated. A good example of this is the "choric speech" of the Zulu (*isigekle*), and similar phenomena have been reported from the Fula of West Africa. It is perhaps preferable that one should regard the prose/verse distinction in terms of points on a single scale of "patterning," with metrical verse towards one end, and everyday speech towards the other. However, for the purpose of this paper, I shall use the distinction between what is spoken and what is sung as my main criterion for setting off prose from verse. Prose will thus include the folk-tale, legend, history, biography and oratory, together with the fixed formulae; riddles, proverbs and tongue-twisters. Within the general category of folk-tale one can distinguish animal-stories,

Social Anthropology, Cohen and West, 1951. For more detailed studies see M. Fortes and E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *African Political Systems*, Oxford University Press, 1940, and *Tribes without Rulers*, ed. by John Middleton and David Tait, Routledge and Kegan, 1958.

³ From such a generalization one must of course, exclude regions such as Northern Nigeria, where Arabic was used over large areas and for many centuries, and also the East African coast, where Swahili was written in the Arabic script. For all practical purposes one can discount the scripts which have been recorded from parts of West Africa, i.e. Vai.

tales of supernatural beings or animals, and tales in which members of kinship groups are the protagonists. Such groupings, it need hardly be said, do not necessarily coincide with those recognized by the people themselves, these groupings being as various as the societies are numerous. Among the Kamba of Kenya, for example, the two main divisions are into *mbano*, stories which are essentially improbable, and *ngewa* stories which contain an element of truth. Among some societies of the Cameroons, by contrast, (P. Alexandre: personal communication) people distinguish between "mere talk," "purposeful talk" i.e. oratory, and "artful talk" i.e. "prose," the last being rhythmic but not sung.⁴ In all the variant types of prose there is a strong didactic element, and the symbiotic relationship between the prose and the society in which it occurs makes it extremely difficult to understand—let alone appreciate—a sample out of context.

One may not be able to accept wholly Sutherland's⁵ evolutionary view of the development of prose, so far as Africa is concerned, but it is clear that African societies on the whole possess a far richer verse tradition than that of prose, but they are certainly not unique in this.⁶

⁴ See also the Introduction to M. J. and F. S. Herskovits's *Dahomean Narrative*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958, and the discussion in J. Berry's *Spoken Art in West Africa*, Oxford University Press, 1961.

⁵ "... In the history of literature and the history of individual nations, the development of prose is nearly always slower and more uncertain than that of poetry. When we go back to obscure beginnings of any national literature, what we usually come upon is some kind of poetry; but we may have to wait several centuries before we get prose, and an even longer time before we find it fully articulate, and perhaps longer still before we meet with prose that is a pleasure to read...

... When prose begins to make its first tentative appearance, it is usually in the form of charters, deeds, proclamations, and practical discourses of one sort or another; and though from the first it may be well or badly written it is hardly likely to be thought of as literature." (p. 3) "...Until a nation has acquired an alphabet, it must depend upon oral transmission; and it is obvious that if what, for want of another word, we must call 'literature,' depends for its continuing existence on human memories, the outlook for prose is bleak indeed." (p. 4) James R. Sutherland, *On English Prose*, University of Toronto Press, Oxford University Press, 1957.

⁶ See, for example, *passim*, H. M. and N. K. Chadwick's monumental *The Growth of Literature*, Cambridge, 1932 (3 volumes).

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ORAL PROSE

To have established a distinction between prose and verse is one thing, to say whether this prose constitutes a literature is quite another.⁷ Definitions of literature may be normative or descriptive: the former cites non-controversial examples, the latter attempts to isolate qualities without which the literature is something else, perhaps journalism. Thus to quote the *Shorter Oxford Dictionary* again, literature may be defined as "... literary productions as a whole, or, less widely, writings esteemed for beauty of form or emotional effect." The first of these is clearly not helpful in the African context, and the second needs careful elaboration. The problem is a difficult one: what constitutes the distinction between literature and non-literature in societies where the whole continuity of the group is expressed in speech and other actions? Is one to regard the verdict of elders in court-cases as constituting literature, or the strictures of the instructress during the initiation ceremonies? In a recent enquiry into the nature of literature Laurence Lerner⁸ has suggested that all theories of literature can be reduced to three:

- (i) Literature as knowledge
- (ii) Literature as the expression of emotion
- (iii) Literature as the arousing of emotion in reader-listener

⁷ Divergent views on the status of oral material have been made, explicitly or implicitly, from time to time. The Chadwicks (*op. cit.*) so far as I can see, never question the literary status of such material, though I have nowhere found any explicit definition of literature. This general view is supported by R. Wellek and A. Warren in their *Theory of Literature*, London, 1949, "... for clearly, any coherent conception (of literature, WHW) must include 'oral literature.'" (p. 11). On the other hand the 6th edition (1951) of *Notes and Queries on Anthropology* makes the point that "... the repetition of stories, proverbs and traditional sayings may be an integral element of culture, corresponding among illiterate peoples to literature among the literate" (p. 206), and G. Pfeffer in his "Prose and Poetry of the Ful'be," *Africa*, 1939, maintains that there is literature "... only if there is a script, an author to provide material, the possibility of multiplication and distribution and the presence of a public willing to make some sort of reward to the author."

⁸ *The Truest Poetry*, London, 1960. An interesting discussion on this subject also occurs in an article of P. Alexandre, "Littératures négro-africaines", *Encyclopédie Clartés*, vol. 15, Fasc. 15350, Paris, 1959.

These form a useful base from which to discuss the African situation, bearing in mind that the data in this case can be broadly subsumed under the heading of "traditions," whether these be folk-tales or proverbs; riddles or histories.

If literature is knowledge, then one would expect to find truths, not perhaps necessarily of a scientific variety, but rather of a general and social kind, epitomized by the proverb or allegory. Certainly African societies are rich in such forms. If literature is the expression of emotion then should one accept the view of the Oxfordshire lady who wrote:

Love made me a poet
And this I writ
My heart did do it
And not my wit.⁹

or should one impose restrictions with Collingwood and deny that literature was the mere arousing of emotion whether for amusement or magic, but rather the result of a complex interaction between the imagination and the emotion in relation to experiences and expressed through language? This raises two important issues: the position of the speaker in society and the subject matter of the oral material. Both of these require separate treatment below: for the moment we can allow that there should be some expression of emotion, but will return later to the implications of this. If one can imagine literature in which neither of the first two criteria obtained, it is extremely difficult to imagine one which evoked no emotional response in the listener, though equally this is not a sufficient criterion. Many sorts of non-literary utterances evoke emotion in the listener, i.e. a judge giving sentence, teachers bestowing prizes, parents chastising children: here one is concerned not with direct transmission of news, but rather with the indirect transmission, in which the story-teller (court-historian, elder) acts as catalyst of events, presenting not unique events but events as examples of more general phenomena. One might liken the reciter to the distiller, presenting and warming his audience with spirit rather than with ale. The audience, in Africa, occupies a crucial place: if

⁹ Quoted by Lerner, *Op. cit.*, p. 54-55.

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much of the traditional material serves to reinforce the solidarity and continuity of the group, then the group must clearly be present on occasions when the reciter is the medium between the past and the present.

All Lerner's criteria presuppose the existence of an individual author/reciter, and whereas this presents no problem where authorship can be ascertained, the status of the individual in African society, as transmitter and exponent of the oral tradition, is by no means clear. Is traditional material *ipso facto* literature, in which case one can conveniently ignore the individual, or is it the task of the individual to create literature from a mass of traditional material? If one accepts, for example, Pfeffer's evidence¹⁰ that the Ful'be narrator's constant aim was to reproduce the material in the strictest traditional way, then in what light is one to regard such historical traditions? They certainly impart knowledge, and may well both express and arouse emotion, with the individual contribution at a minimum. There will undoubtedly be those who will admit such material to be literature, but I prefer to take the view that if the expression and arousing of emotion is due, not to the individual reciter, but to the material itself, then one still has not got literature but only the stuff from which literature is created. Literature, it seems to me, requires the imposition of individuality of composition or contribution onto the anonymous body of tradition; and perhaps, also, a measure of detachment from the "charter" of society constituted by that tradition.

It must always be remembered, however, that the individual does not create in a vacuum; he is always concerned with moulding institutionalized forms of tradition, and the extent to which he is an innovator is evidence of the extent to which he encapsulates that which has gone before.¹¹ Consider, for example, the

¹⁰ Pfeffer, *Op. cit.*

¹¹ In this connection T. S. Eliot's essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" is illuminating. The essay is reprinted in T. S. Eliot, *Selected Prose*, Penguin Books, 1953. Reference might also be made to J. Middleton Murray's *The Problem of Style*, Oxford University Press (Paperback), 1960: "...At a certain level of general culture, with certain combinations of economic and social conditions (which it would be well worth while to explore), certain artistic and literary forms impose

recital of folk-tales. The use of the term folk-tale often obscures the fact that in many African societies any given "folk-tale" is merely one version of a slice from a much larger body of traditional materials, loosely connected by theme or events. The skill of the individual reciter lies in his handling of certain of these themes, all well known to his audience. Each recital is, thus, a unique "literary" event.

Some general consideration must now be given to the position of the individual in relation to the main kinds of prose, though this is a source which has, as yet, been scarcely tapped by investigators.

Where strong centralized kingdoms developed, the accumulation and dissemination of historical traditions was at a premium, and reached an extreme form in the recognition of the office of court historian, though one may note in passing that these traditions were often in verse rather than prose. Specialization of this kind occurred in various parts of Africa, notably in Ruanda, parts of Uganda and South Africa, but no study of the role of such individuals has yet been made. We do not know to what extent such individuals were innovators or merely recorders, though if we can draw any inferences from our own society we might suppose that events were shaped according to the views of the current authority, rather than to those of an individual artist.¹² In the field of folk-tales, legends, proverbs and riddles, which comprise the bulk of the prose tradition, the greater part of the material was probably accessible to most adult members of the group, since it constituted a fundamental part of an individual's heritage, distinguishing him or her from others in similar groups elsewhere, and indeed reinforcing the identity of the group as a whole. There was thus every incentive for an individual to acquire a comprehensive stock of his group's tra-

themselves. These forms the writer is almost impelled to accept, either because he relies on his writing for his living, or because he feels instinctively that he *must* embrace the means necessary to reaching the largest possible audience." (pp. 43-44).

¹² Notice the injunction to field workers in the 5th ed. (1929) of *Notes and Queries on Anthropology*, to observe "... whether there is any body of men whose duty is to transmit traditions uncorrupted—though even this does not preclude deliberate alteration of them from motives of piety, vanity or self-interest..."

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ditional prose, but little incentive for the emergence of individual reciters specializing in the recital of such material. This is not to deny that such existed: there was certainly widespread specialization in the field of verse, and in certain of the societies of which I have personal knowledge, some people were regarded as specially skilled raconteurs. The fact, is, however, that we have quite inadequate knowledge of the contributions made by such people to the body of traditions generally, and of the qualities which people thought were praiseworthy in the performances of such raconteurs. Though educated Africans have, as yet, contributed little to our understanding of the situation, it is to them that one now looks for elucidation and guidance.

In deploring our lack of information on the part played by the individual, one must remember two things: Firstly, the very fact of committing prose traditions to writing robs them of much of their individuality: no written account, however conscientious—and very many of them were far from this—can possibly reproduce the verbal nuance, the delicate allusion or the voice quality of the original. This is a point which has been made by various authors at different times during the last hundred years. The first edition of *Notes and Queries on Anthropology* (1874) stresses that "...it is desirable to take them (stories, WHW) down verbatim from the lips of a skilled story-teller, as they thus form specimens of the language in its best form, exhibiting native metaphor, wit and picturesque diction..." A point similar to this was made some years later by Chatelain (*Folk Tales of Angola*, Amer. Folk-Lore Soc. 1894) when deploring the poor qualities of folk-lore collections to date. He complains that "...The essential qualities of folk-lore, those embodied in words, have been ignored, and the moral and intellectual world of Africa is, today, as much a *terra incognita* as geographical Africa was fifty years ago." More recently the point has been forcefully made by P. Itayemi and P. Gurrey in the Introduction to their collection of *Folk Tales and Fables* (Penguin Books, 1952) from West Africa. "...Folk tales, of course, should be told in their vernacular idiom. Told in these translations, they lose two important things: they lose many of the jokes and puns, and the funny twists of language that the listeners originally enjoyed, and waited eagerly for when the well-known story was begun.

They lose, too, the special songs that are so often part of them, especially those of the Yorubas."¹³ Secondly, the predominant interest of those who collected such material for our library shelves was in the content rather than in the style of the piece. Explorers and missionaries of the 19th century saw African societies in evolutionary terms, as representing stages through which other more complex societies had passed. They were, therefore, interested mainly in the content of African tradition, they looked for motifs, symbols and personalities, and compared them with examples from other parts of the world.¹⁴ This was a fertile period not only for comparative folk-lore in particular, but for comparative studies generally, as testified by the work of such scholars as Frazer, Schmidt and Wundt.

On the other hand the difficulties facing these early field workers were formidable: the mere task of learning the languages and reducing them to writing was to occupy many years, and there are still a majority of languages for which no adequate description is available. One has to remember also, that the main purpose of such studies was to make the Christian message accessible to pagan peoples, not to evaluate an African literature. Our debt, therefore, to missionary-linguists is great: men like Krapf and Steere in East Africa; Callaway in South Africa; Chatelain in Angola, and Bentley and Christaller in West Africa compiled collections, some of which have not yet been bettered. Equally it would be wrong to imagine that it was only the missionaries who were solely interested in the content of traditional prose: anthropologists who collected texts did so for their

¹³ For further discussion of this point see J. Berry, *Op. cit.* It seems that students of oral literature in other parts of the world may have paid greater attention to the role of the individual than has been the case in Africa. See, for example, Margaret Schlauch, "Folklore in the Soviet Union", *Science and Society*, vol. VIII/3, 1944, and the extremely interesting analysis of Yugoslav oral literature in Albert B. Lord's *The Singer of Tales*, Harvard University Press, 1960.

¹⁴ See, for example, Alice Werner's study of African mythology in "The Mythology of All Races," *Africa*, vol. VII, Archaeological Institute of America, 1925. Individual collections of texts commonly included comparative notes. See, for example, Rev. Canon Callaway, *Nursery Tales of the Zulus*, Trübner & Co., 1868; W. H. I. Bleek, *Reynard the Fox in South Africa; or Hottentot Fables and Tales*, Trübner & Co., 1864; G. Lindblom, *Kamba Folk-lore II: Tales of Supernatural Beings and Adventures*, Upsala, 1935.

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anthropological value, and as Doke has pointed out "...the mere recording of ethnographic, historical or technological texts need not *ipso facto* contribute much to the literature of a people."¹⁵ Even in very recent times, for example, anthropological interest in historical texts, has been directed solely at the historical value, a fact which is stated not in criticism so much as in observation.¹⁶ Following on the period of initial activity at the turn of the century, the collection of traditional material lapsed: social anthropologists concentrating on institutional, synchronic studies of individual societies; linguists on structural or grammatical studies, and missionaries on pastoral work. In the years since 1920 the amount of material collected has been extremely small, and it was not until recent times that the development of the tape-recorder has made possible a quality of reproduction undreamed of by earlier workers, and also made possible the collection of quantities of material in relatively short periods.¹⁷

Where such recordings are available one can readily appreciate something of the qualities contributed to the recital of traditional material by the individual, and if we have not yet solved the problem of transferring these qualities to paper, at least the problem can be stated.

¹⁵ C. M. Doke, "Lamba Literature," *Africa*, 1934.

¹⁶ For example: "A Lunda Love Story and Its Consequences": Selected texts from traditions collected by Henrique Dias de Carvalho at the court of Mwatianwa in 1887. Translated and annotated by V. W. Turner, *Rhodes-Livingstone Journal*, XIX, Manchester, 1955; I. Cunison, "Kazembe's Charter": (Extract from *Ifkolwe Fyandi na Bantu bandi, Mwata Kazembe XIV*, Macmillan, 1951), *Northern Rhodesia Journal*, vol. III/3, 1957.

¹⁷ A good example of this is furnished by some recent American work, thus "While in West African on a Fulbright award, I recorded among the Yoruba approximately a thousand folktales, three thousand songs, between seven and eight hundred riddles, numerous philosophical sayings, and some other varieties of their folklore." From L. Turner, "The Role of Folklore in the Life of the Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria," *Report of the Ninth Annual Round Table Meeting on Linguistics and Language Study* (1958), Georgetown, 1960.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF WRITTEN PROSE

An immediate and profound result of missionary endeavour for African society was the introduction of a western-type education: earlier in the south and west of the continent than in the east and centers. Oral traditions could now be written down by Africans and thus acquire permanent form with specific authorship.¹⁸ New forms could be created from traditional patterns, but it would be realized that one wrote for a different audience: the written word can be enjoyed in solitude and in silence. The mere writing down of what could be listened to with enjoyment cannot—as we have seen already—lead to enjoyable reading unless adaptation is made to the requirements of the written word. One cannot, for example, expect the reader to be familiar with the outline of the story, as before, and the form of the “short story,” “novel” or “play” does not lend itself to the kind of discursive treatment characteristic of many folk tales. The written word, moreover, depends for its production in book form upon economic factors relating to the number of readers anticipated, and the price they are willing to pay, together with educational and religious factors relating to its fitness for publication.¹⁹

As an oral literature differs in its attributes from those of a written literature, so does the status of the reciter differ from that of a writer. Except in areas where there were semi-professional reciters, such as the “griots” in parts of West Africa, the reciter was likely to be a local person, practising an art with which all were familiar before a highly critical audience. The writer, on the other hand, belonged to an *élite*; with his art, the majority of his elders would certainly be quite unfamiliar, and

¹⁸ There have been few general studies of written African prose, though articles have appeared, from time to time, in the French periodical *Présence Africaine*, which deal with literature within the general framework of *négritude*. Articles and detailed reviews of books by African authors also appear in the periodical *Black Orpheus*. See also *Approaches to African Literature*, by J. Jahn and J. Ramsaran. Jahn's contribution is expanded somewhat in his *Muntu*, Faber (English version), 1961.

¹⁹ Even to-day in some African territories “suitability for schools” is still one of the most potent means of securing publication.

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he would have little contact with his readers. If the reciter tended to look to members of an older generation for his standards of excellence, the writer had to work out for himself a written style in his own language or submit to world standards if he chose to write in a metropolitan language. Whatever the writer might think about the desirability of writing down his oral literature, the rapid expansion of education created an immediate demand for textbooks of all kinds and the first, indeed the only reading public for early writers was the school population and the church congregation. It was natural, therefore, that much traditional lore should find its way—suitably expurgated—into school books of one kind or another. These were supplemented by what might be termed “romances,” some with a historical setting, others with a biographical basis, both often strongly moral in tone. With the expansion of literacy, newspapers and periodicals were quickly established and they have remained for the great majority of literate Africans, the most regular and accessible form of secular “literature,” though the level of journalism only exceptionally rose to a literary level. Finally, in recent times there have begun to appear short stories, novels, plays and essays, at differing levels of sophistication and addressed to different reading publics.

The question of a reading public is a crucial one: it has been suggested that “...it is the people who can afford to *buy* books who really determine what shall be written and how it shall be written...” but this would seem to be true only under certain conditions; where, for example, there exists, already, a reading population who exercise a choice with regard to what they read. It seems probable that in Africa it was educational policy which determined what books should be read, and the circumscribed goal of education which has determined what books people have bought. Where African languages were used in education, and where the majority of the literate population was literate only in these languages—that is to say over the greater part of the regions administered by the British, and including South Africa—a great deal of effort was spent in producing books in such languages, as can be seen from the productions of the Mission Presses in South Africa, the S.P.C.K. in England, and, in recent years, the Literature and Publications Bureaux in East and Central Africa. The great bulk of African writing from

these areas has, consequently, been in local languages, and directed towards educational or religious ends. Several factors, however, combine to make African languages unpopular for the younger generation of African writers. Firstly, only among the largest groups can one hope to command a reasonable reading public, and for this reason alone, writers from the smaller groups must write either in a *lingua franca* or a European language if they are to achieve publication. Secondly, the use of African languages is generally restricted to the lower levels of education and this encourages the view that they have no part to play beyond this level. Thirdly, the use of English at the higher levels of education with its aura of prestige and sophistication, together with its offer of a vast potential reading public, all contribute to its popularity for the aspiring prose writer. The body of African writing in English is, as yet, too small to make any really useful observations but one does notice tendencies towards a documentary rather than an imaginative treatment of events, and an interest in the impact of situation rather than in the individual personality.

In regions previously administered by Belgian or French authorities, or those administered by the Portuguese there has been little concern for African languages in education, all the emphasis being laid on the metropolitan language. At the time when African writers in South Africa were rediscovering the glories of the past in Zulu or Xhosa, nothing comparable could be found in French or Belgian territories. Then, in the years following 1945, a number of novels by French West African writers were published in Paris which gave evidence not only of a remarkable mastery of French, but also, in some cases, of a great insight into African problems and situations. A comparable mastery of English was not to be achieved by West and South African writers until the late fifties, but when French and English writing is compared there are differences in approach which may be ascribed as much to differences in their French and English models as to regional African differences. Is the kind of symbolism in Camara Laye or even Birago Diop's writing wholly attributable to the pan-African or neo-African culture of which some intellectuals would claim it was a part? Or, is the concept of a neo-African culture one which springs from an

appreciation by some Western intellectuals of some West African cultures whose representativeness for the whole of the continent one should in no way assume.

This is an interesting question which cannot be discussed here: what I propose to do, however, is to examine in rather greater detail the development of African writing in four main areas as it developed from the middle of the 19th century up till the present time.

African writing in South Africa dates from the middle of the last century,²⁰ and was, in its quantity and general quality, in striking contrast to what was being produced elsewhere, although it lacked variety and suffered from a preoccupation with the tribal past. Writing in Xhosa, T. Soga (1831-71) and his contemporary W. W. Gqoba (1840-88) produced numbers of short stories, essays, proverbs. While the former made a fine translation of part of *Pilgrim's Progress* (Uhambo lo Mhambi), the latter wrote down the famous historical tradition of Nongqawuse. Among the early Sotho writers the important figures are E. L. Segoete (1858-?) and Z. D. Mangoela who produced collections of folk-traditions and short stories. It is Thomas Mofolo (1877-1948), however, recently described as "the first great modern African author," who is best known to English readers through the translation of his historical novel *Chaka* (Tr. F. H. Dutton, International African Institute, London, 1931), a vivid account of the rise of the Zulu state under Chaka. Unfortunately Mofolo's other two novels, *Moeti oa Bochabela* (Traveller from the East) and *Pitseng*, are less well known, not having been translated from the Sotho. Among recent Sotho writing one should mention the strongly moral *Log Cabin to White House* novels of A. Phalane, M. J. Madiba and J. I. Serote, all written during

²⁰ There are a number of articles dealing with South African literature: A. C. Jordan, "Towards an African Literature," *Africa South*, vols. I/4, 1957 - IV/3, 1960; A. A. Jacques, "A Survey of Shangana-Tsonga, Ronga and Tswa Literature," *Bantu Studies*, XIV, 1940; G. H. Franz, "The Literature of Le Sotho," *Bantu Studies*, IV, 1930; G. L. Letele, "Some Recent Literary Publications in Languages of the Sotho Group," *African Studies*, III, 1944; D. McK. Malcolm, "Zulu Literature," *Africa*, 1949. Many examples from the early period can be found in the Xhosa Anthology *Zemk' Inkomo Magwalandini* (Preserve your heritage), Collected and edited by W. B. Rubusana, 1906; as well as in a second collection *Imibengo* (Titbits), by W. G. Bennie, Lovedale Press, 1936.

the 1940's. Writing in Zulu started later, the first book, by M. M. Fuze, *Abantu Abanyama Lapha Tavela* (The black people and where they came from) not appearing until 1922. This was largely historical in character, and it set a pattern which was to be followed by later writers such as J. L. Dube and B. W. Vilakazi. Translators of Shakespeare set themselves a formidable task, but the translations into Tswana of S. T. Plaatje set a high standard, and the same writer's novel *Mbudi* (Lovedale Press, 1930) is also worth mentioning.

During the last fifteen years the volume of African writing in English has grown steadily, but, with the exception of the novels of Peter Abrahams, there has been no extended work of fiction. The premise of inequality in South African life has imbued African writing—and not only African writing—with the desire to inform, and much of the best writing is of a documentary kind. This is especially true of the shorter pieces in periodicals like *Drum* among whose writers the names of Henry Nxumalo, Todd Matshikiza and Casey Motsisi recall vivid accounts of current events and a high standard of journalistic writing, but it is also true of longer works: P. Lanham and A. S. Mopeli Paulus's *Blanket Boy's Moon* (Collins, 1953); Ezekiel Mphahlele's autobiographical *Down Second Avenue* (Faber, 1959); N. Jabavu's *Drawn in Colour* (Murray, 1960), with its comparison between her South African life and that of the Baganda among whom she happened to be living; and finally, A. Hutchinson's "escape-story" *Road to Ghana* (Gollancz, 1960). Yet, if the South African situation has contributed to the thread of documentation which runs through all these works—all, it may be noted, published outside South Africa—it has also contributed a measure of unity to the writing beyond that of subject matter, so that it is questionable whether any useful purpose is served by talking of African writing as though there were something peculiarly African about its style. As Ezekiel Mphahlele has recently commented in *Encounter* (March, 1961) "...If my writing shows any Africanness, it is as it should be, if my note and tone has authenticity. I take my negro-ness for granted and it is not a matter for slogans."

It is interesting to recall that perhaps the first prose work to be written in English by an African was written in England

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for an English reading public, and provided substance for the early campaigns against slavery: *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa the African* was published in 1789 in London, and proved so popular that it ran into several editions during the next few years. Equiano's recollections of life in West Africa in the middle of the eighteenth century are interesting but fragmentary and one has to wait for more than a century for the picture to be filled in by C. Reindorf in his *The History of the Gold Coast and Asante* (1911?). Reindorf makes extensive use of oral traditions in his history, and if his techniques of analysis leave something to be desired by modern standards, the richness of these traditions is never in doubt. Indirect evidence for another aspect of the oral tradition, that of oratory, is provided by the speeches of the early politicians, and those of J. E. Casely-Heyford (*West African Leadership*, Ed. Magnus Sampson, Stockwell, 1951) recall the skill of the Ashanti "linguists" which he had himself elsewhere described.

Fiction, however, developed slowly during the early years of the present century, first in the local language and then, during the last fifteen years, in English. Virtually all of this has come from Southern Nigeria: first, D. O. Fagunwa and A. Tutuola, then writers like C. O. D. Ekwensi and C. Achebe.²¹ When Amos Tutuola's first book, *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* appeared in 1952, it was immediately hailed both for its content and its style; "the first work of literature to be written in English by a West African and published in London" averred one critic, whilst a fellow African writer referred to it as "...an exciting story told with characteristic brevity...an anthropological study." The content of Tutuola's work is clearly derivative from Yoruba tradition, with a liberal sprinkling of modern concepts to bring it up to date. His style—described by one writer as "loose talking-prose"—is a

²¹ The main works of these authors to date are as follows: A. Tutuola, *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, Faber, 1952; *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, Faber, 1954; *Simbi and the Satyr of the Dark Jungle*, Faber, 1955; *The Brave African Huntress*, Faber, 1958; D. O. Fagunwa, *Ogboju-ode-ninu igbo Irunmale*, Nelson, 1939; *Igbo Oludumare*, Nelson, 1946 (?); C. O. D. Ekwensi, *People of the City*, Dakers, 1954; *Jagua Nana*, Hutchinson, 1961; C. Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, Heinemann, 1958; *No Longer at Ease*, 1960.

curious mixture of spontaneity and contrivance; the language is simple but disjointed; the choice of words vivid but careless. There is often the feeling that the language is being distorted to match the events described, and as a literary device, this does not always succeed. By contrast, his fellow Yoruba, D. O. Fagunwa has chosen to cast his traditional material wholly in Yoruba, and while this makes for inaccessibility to English readers he appears to command a considerable following in Nigeria. Both Cyprian Ekwensi and Chinua Achebe are concerned with change, and with the situations that change produces, rather than with the development of individual characters: both Okonkwo in Achebe's first novel, and Jagua in Ekwensi's latest novel are victims, and typical victims, of circumstances. This doesn't make the works any less interesting but it does give them a flavour which is possibly peculiarly African. It is worth noting that while Tutuola, Ekwensi and Achebe have primarily been writing for a non-African reading public, there are signs that some of their contemporaries are finding a local market for fiction written in English.

From the former French territories a number of notable works of fiction have appeared since 1945;²² they have all been published in Paris, many by *Présence Africaine*; they all display a mastery of the metropolitan language which their British contemporaries may well envy; and they all *appear*—since I have no knowledge of local sales—to be directed to a French rather than to an African reading public. Of these writers, Camara Laye is perhaps the most interesting, and certainly the best known to English readers, through the translations of James Kirkup. Both

²² James Kirkup's translations of Laye's two main works are *The African Child*, Collins, 1954; and *The Radiance of the King*, Collins, 1956. The main works of the other writers listed are as follows: B. B. Dadié, *Le Pagne Noir*, *Présence Africaine*, 1955; *Climbié*, Paris, 1956; Jean Malonga, *La légende de M'Pfoumou Ma Mazono*, *Présence Africaine*, 1955; Birago Diop, *Les Contes d'Amadou Koumba*, *Présence Africaine*, 1956; *Les nouveaux contes d'Amadou Koumba*, *Présence Africaine*, 1958; Ferdinand Oyono, *Une vie de boy*, Julliard, Paris, 1956; *Le vieux nègre et la médaille*, Julliard, Paris, 1956; Alexandre Biyidi (Pseud. Mongo Beti, Eza Boto), *Ville Cruelle*, *Présence Africaine*, 1955; *La Pauvre Christ de Bomba*, R. Laffont, Paris, 1955; *Mission terminée*, Paris, 1957 (Tr. into English as *Mission to Kala*, Peter Green, Muller, London, 1958); *Le roi miraculé*, Paris, 1958.

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in the autobiographical *L'Enfant noir* and in the novel *Le Regard du roi*, there is a conscious attempt to interpret the African society in which he grew up, and his characters, though rooted in this society, have an individuality which sets them apart. If at times the idiom of the symbolism in *Le Regard du roi* or the short stories is elusive, interpreters are not lacking in the pages of the journal *Black Orpheus*. A second group of writers, including Bernard Dadié, Jean Malonga and Birago Diop, have chosen to cast their material in the traditional form of the folk-tale, shortened to accommodate the reader, but enlivened by the songs so characteristic of much of the oral literature. Here one meets again the traditional characters; the hare, the spider and the lion, together with their human counterparts. These stories are skilfully told and evoke the African landscape as vividly as the characters who people it. Finally there are the writers like Alexandre Biyidi (*alias* Eza Boto and Mongo Beti) and Ferdinand Oyono for whom the colonial situation has provided a setting for bitter, satirical novels, full of the acute observations of people and events which illuminate, sometimes disconcertingly, one's relationships with Africans.

From the Congo and Angola notable writing is rare:²³ there are some strongly moral romances like *Victoire d'amour* by D. Mutombo (Bibliothèque de l'étoile, Leopoldville) and some interesting writing by J. S. Naigiziki and P. Lomani-Tshibamba, but that is all. From Angola, the writing of the blind Oscar Ribas (1909-) must be mentioned, but he, it seems, has few colleagues.

East and Central Africa represent *par excellence* the area of the vernacular: there has, up till now, been virtually no writing at all in English. For economic reasons most of the books are short—rarely more than 75 pages—and, in East Africa in particular, there is a high proportion of translations and adaptations of folk-material. The establishment of Literature and Publications

²³ For a general survey of the situation in the Congo see J. M. Jadot, *Les écrivains africains du Congo belge et du Ruanda-Urundi*, Bruxelles, 1959. Note also J. Saverio Naigiziki, *Escapade Ruandaise*, Bruxelles, 1950, and P. Lomami-Tshibamba, *Ngando* (Le Crocodile), Bruxelles, 1949. From Angola see, for example, *Ecos da Minha Terra*, O. Ribas Luanda, 1952 and also *Contos d'Africa*, Publicações Imbondeiro, Sá da Bandeira, Angola, 1961.

Bureaux in Nairobi and Lusaka after 1945 gave an impetus to the production of books in many local languages and several authors owe their introduction to print to these sources. To Lusaka belongs the credit of having sponsored at least one novelist of distinction, Stephen Mpashi, who has managed to combine some of the characteristics of oral Bemba with the subject matter of twentieth-century life in Northern Rhodesia. From Nairobi, in recent months, has come the first Swahili detective story to swell the small body of reading material for an adult reading public.

Swahili is the most widely spoken language in East Africa and is used extensively in education, administration, broadcasting and the Press.²⁴ From the early years of this century there has been a steady stream of books suitable for the education and edification of the young. Some of these, like James Mbotela's vivid historical account of the freeing of the slaves (*Uhuru wa Watumwa*, 1934)²⁵ have become minor classics of their kind, but a majority represent variations of the folk-story theme or translations of English "classics" (*The Swiss Family Robinson*, *King Solomon's Mines*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *Gulliver's Travels*) or biographies of such famous men as Aggrey, Samuel A. Crowther, and Winston Churchill. While a Swahili novelist has yet to be published, there is at least one distinguished writer who writes solely in Swahili: Shaaban Robert of Tanga has written an autobiography, a biography of a well-known Zanzibar singer, several volumes of essays and several of verse. He has tried to evolve a definite written prose style, and though his recent work suggests that he is achieving this, much of his earlier writing is

²⁴ In Tanganyika alone there are two Swahili dailies and a large number of weekly, bi-weekly and monthly periodicals and broadsheets.

²⁵ There are a number of works which antedate this, but these belong really to the oral tradition: for example, the history of the founding of the Shamba by Mbega was published in 1905 under the title *Habari za Wakilindi*, and Part I of this was reprinted in the *Journal of the E. A. Swahili Committee*, No. 27, 1957. Similarly, the autobiography of Hamed bin Muhammed el Murjebi (Tippu Tip), published in the *Mitteilungen des Seminars für orientalische Sprachen*, by H. Brode in 1902-3 and reprinted with an English translation as a Supplement to the *Journal of the E. A. Swahili Committee*, Nos. 28/2 and 29/1, July 1958 and January 1959.

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too difficult for the majority of his readers, his vocabulary too rich and esoteric.²⁶

Of the other languages in East and Central Africa in which books have been written in any number, Ganda and Nyanja deserve mention.²⁷ From the former one still reads with interest Sir Apolo Kagwa's studies of the Baganda, and Sir Daudi Chwa's pamphlet on the reasons for Sir Apolo's retirement (*Lwaki Sir Apolo Kagwa Yawumula*, Nairobi, 1931). In recent years there have been the works of M. B. Nsimbi: the study of Ganda place-names, and the weighty volume on Ganda clans. From Nyanja one should mention the novel *Ukawamba* by L. L. Nkomba (Ed. Guy Atkins, *Annotated African Texts II*, Cewa, Oxford University Press, 1953).

CONCLUSIONS

In the foregoing pages I have been concerned with discussing two main questions: the status of oral prose materials, and the development of written prose: the former being recited wholly in African languages, the latter increasingly in metropolitan languages. In discussing the former, I have been chiefly concerned with considering its status as "literature," since this is an aspect of the subject that has received too little attention. In the historical survey of what has so far been written, I have avoided making premature artistic judgements, since what seems more important at the present time is a recognition of what has been achieved so far and under what circumstances. The use of a world language to command a world market entails the acceptance of a world criticism, so that one can leave to others the task of assessing the literary status of the written prose.

²⁶ Shaaban Robert's contribution to East African Literature has recently been recognized by the award of the Margaret Wrong Memorial Medal for 1960. The work of the Margaret Wrong *Memorial Fund* in encouraging African writers should here be recognized.

²⁷ For further details on Ganda see R. A. Snoxall, "Ganda Literature," *African Studies*, I, 1942. For further details of the situation in the Central African Federation see G. Fortune, *The Bantu Languages of the Federation*, Rhodes-Livingstone Communication, No. 14, Lusaka, 1959.

At the present time both oral and written traditions exist side by side, with the amount written in African languages varying from country to country according to a wide range of circumstances. It seems certain that the written word will gradually supersede the oral tradition, but for many years this latter will probably continue to flourish in many parts of Africa. At this stage it is important that literary interest—and academic interest, too— should be focussed on this oral tradition, so that, with the refined techniques now available, some assessment of its status as literature may now be made. Whether it is desirable or profitable to estimate how much modern African writing is, or can be, derivative in structure and content from African or European traditions I shall not here consider. What is certain, is that no such attempt can be made without a proper awareness of the literary status of the oral tradition and of the contribution of the individual artist to the prose tradition as a whole.