West Africa

Gambia, Ghana, Nigeria, Sierra Leone

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Introduction

In West Africa 1977 will be remembered as the year of FESTAC, the popular name for the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture. For about five weeks in January and February thousands of people made up of artistes, pressmen, politicians, and spectators converged on Nigeria. The Festival was a media event. Consequently, what was billed as its centre-piece, the Colloquium on 'Black Civilization and Education' was relegated to the background, while the singers, dancers, and horse troupes received unlimited attention. This did not save the Colloquium from being a
bore. There was plenty of evidence of arid scholarship, but even the few papers that were really relevant were couched in such arcane terms as to constitute a real disservice to the black people. The arts, especially drama, fared better at the so-called Mini-Festival which began as a protest against the unmanageable size of the Festival.

There was much more intelligent discussion on literature at another conference, this time at Ibadan, which several participants in the Colloquium attended. Called the Seminar on Caribbean Literature, one of its most interesting accomplishments was to draw parallels between writings in Africa and the Caribbean countries. In July the third Annual Ibadan Conference on African Literature was held. Its theme was Oral Poetry. A few of the participants, notably Professors Adeboye Babalola and Wande Abimbola, demonstrated the possibilities of oral literature as a discipline. But most of the participants were prisoners of their training in Departments of English, and their knowledge of oral tradition did not go far beyond ‘tales my mother told me’. Not unexpectedly they highjacked the conference, and discussions quickly got bogged down in an attempt to establish a dividing line between poetry and narrative in oral performance. In December, a workshop was held in Ibadan on radical perspectives in African Literature. It was dominated by a sociologist.

The output of poetry from Ghana continues unabated. It certainly reflects the efforts of Atukwei Okai (perhaps the finest among Africa’s young poets) and others who have made public recitals a normal feature of the literary scene in Ghana, and thereby re-established the vital connection between poetry and society. Kayper-Mensah whose first volume of poems, *The Drummer in Our Time* (1975), was very well received, has published another, *Sankofa*. It is a middling achievement, although his experiment in exploring the poetic range of the epigrammatic symbols embossed on adinkra (originally funeral) cloth is noteworthy. The successful poems are terse explorations of the potential of the graphic adinkra symbols.

Wole Soyinka’s *Ogun Abibiman* was inspired, as the poet said in the preface, by the decision of Samora Machel, President of Mozambique, to put his newly independent nation on a war footing against white-ruled Rhodesia. Soyinka saw this symbolic gesture as the culmination of Africa’s battle against the forces of white oppression. To the familiar Ogun, the god of iron, Soyinka has added, in the title of his poem, the Akan word *Abibiman* for the black nation. In *Ogun Abibiman* Soyinka has toned down his language in order to condition social awareness, a development that should be welcomed, considering the needless obscurity of much of his earlier poetry. It is also perhaps the first time that a Nigerian writer has lifted his gaze from the problems of his country to write on continental concerns. This volume puts Soyinka in the tradition of Senghor, David Diop, and Agostinho Neto.

Drama continues its hard-nosed explorations of immediate national problems. Ola Rotimi who made his name with his first play *The Gods Are Not to Blame* (1971) has looked with some apprehension at the imminent return of party politics in Nigeria. Implicit in the title of his new play, *Our
Husband Has Gone Mad Again, is a warning of the pitfalls that lie ahead. For Rotimi this play represents a departure, and demonstrates his capacity for comedy, without losing his usual inventiveness of language.

It remains to note, in passing, three Nigerian novelists in search of a theatre. Femi Osofisan, whose novel Kolera Kolej (1975) showed promise, has published a play, The Chattering and the Song, which indicates that, as in the plays of his friend, Kole Omotoso – author of the novels, The Edifice (1971) and The Combat (1972) – the battle to foist a marxist orientation on Nigerian literature is not over yet. Omotoso’s new play, Shadow in the Horizon, is an attack on private wealth. Both playwrights continue to manifest the influence of Soyinka, with whom they have kept up a running ideological battle. Osofisan is the better dramatist, although his play has serious technical faults. Elechi Amadi, too, has turned playwright in spite of the considerable acclamation given to his two novels, The Concubine (1966) and The Great Ponds (1969). The first play in his Peppersoup and The Road to Ibadan comically treats the commonplace theme of black-white confrontation. ‘The Road to Ibadan’ also takes us back, to the Nigerian Civil War, by recounting the story of an undergraduate caught behind the secessionist lines. Both plays are shallow.

In fiction there has been some rattling of old bones in Nigeria. The considerable public relations effort put in by Achebe in the founding of the indigenous publishing house, the futuristically named Fourth Dimension, has been belittled by their first product to reach the market, Ogali A. Ogali’s Coal City. Ogali is a most familiar name to readers of Onitsha pamphlets. His latest novel is based in Enugu but reveals that Ogali has not really left Onisha market. The story is of the adventures of a girl called ‘Baby U.K.’, also known as Nnenna. ‘God did a little overtime when she was created; her breasts were killing and her buttocks contained atoms of magnetism’. Every page of this novel reminds us of Cyprian Ekwensi, whom Ogali has attempted to beat, unsuccessfully, on the former’s own turf. The greatest loser is art. Notwithstanding this somewhat unpropitious beginning, Fourth Dimension has announced two new books by Achebe, The Flute and Tube Drum. Both are said to be adaptations of traditional tales. After such a long silence from ‘the master’ their publication must be considered an event.

Two novels attempt to stand out from the remaining poor lot. Ama Ata Aidoo, the playwright, has tried to graduate from writing short stories to writing a novel. Our Sister Kiljoy, predictably autobiographical, is an account of the adventures and reflections of a Ghanaian girl who wanders through Europe and back to Africa. To qualify, Miss Aidoo still has a long way to go. Dillibe Onyecma who became notorious for his account of his college life in Britain, Nigger at Eton, has written another novel a little removed from his first, the scabrous Sex is a Nigger’s Game. His Juju is intended to raise fresh doubts in those who believe that supernatural powers cannot reach out to the city from the village. And for lovers of art who believe that the ruling class in Africa should seek other forms of diversion beside cocktail parties,
A Dirge Too Soon by Peggy Appiah, the wife of the Special Adviser to the Ghanaian Head of State, is recommended as a sobering draught.

In conclusion, a word should be said in praise of Elaine Saint-Andre's Bibliography of West African Life and Literature. It is not without serious gaps, but it is still the most comprehensive bibliography to date on West African writing up to 1974. Its organization—not least of all, the addition of an index—makes for easy reference.

I wish to thank Dr. B. Lindfors for help with some of the information for this bibliography.

Note: Where appropriate, individual entries are marked (G), (Gh), (N), or (S.L.) to denote country of author's origin.

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