1990

African Literature as Restoration of Celebration

Chinua Achebe

Follow this and additional works at: https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi

Recommended Citation
Available at:https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol12/iss2/3
African Literature as Restoration of Celebration

Abstract
Just under two years ago, I was one of a dozen or so foreign guests at a Writers' Symposium organized by the Irish Arts Council to commemorate one thousand years of the founding of the City of Dublin. The general theme of that Symposium, chosen, I believe, by the novelist Anthony Cronin, was LITERATURE AS CELEBRATION
African Literature as Restoration of Celebration

Just under two years ago, I was one of a dozen or so foreign guests at a Writers' Symposium organized by the Irish Arts Council to commemorate one thousand years of the founding of the City of Dublin. The general theme of that Symposium, chosen, I believe, by the novelist Anthony Cronin, was LITERATURE AS CELEBRATION.

Some of my colleagues, as I recall, appeared to have difficulty with that subject. For my part, I found it almost perfect; it rendered in a simple form of words a truth about art which accorded with my traditional inheritance and also satisfied my personal taste in the matter. The brief paper I presented on that occasion was the genesis of the reflections I wish to share with you today in this 1990 South Bank show lecture concerning African literature, a body of writing which in our life time has added an important dimension to world literature.

But, before I start, I wish to repeat a disclaimer which I made in Dublin. On the morning of my presentation, the Irish Times carried a prominent story in which a very kind columnist referred to me as the man who invented African literature. So I took the opportunity of the forum given me at the Symposium to dissociate myself from that well-meant but blasphemous characterization. Now, before you run away with the idea that my disavowal was due to modesty on my part, I should tell you right away that I am actually not a very modest man (a fact which you probably would have discovered on your own before very long). No, my refusal was due rather to an artistic taboo among my people, a prohibition – on pain of being finished off rather quickly by the gods – from laying a proprietary hand on even the smallest item in that communal enterprise in creativity which my people, the Igbo of Nigeria, undertook from time to time, and to which they gave the name Mbari. Mbari was a celebration through art of the world and of the life lived in it. It was performed by the community on command by its presiding deity, usually the Earth goddess, Ana. Ana combined two formidable roles in the Igbo pantheon as fountain of creativity in the world and custodian of the moral order in human society. An abominable act is called nso-ana, taboo-to-Earth.
Once every so often, and in her absolute discretion, this goddess would instruct the community through divination to build a home of images in her honour. The diviner would travel through the village and knock on the doors of those chosen by Ana for her work. These chosen people were then blessed and separated from the larger community in a ritual with more than a passing resemblance to their own death and funeral. Thereafter, they moved into the forest and, behind a high fence and under the instruction and supervision of master artists and craftsmen, they constructed a temple of art.

Architecturally, it was a simple structure, a stage formed by three high walls supporting a peaked roof; but in place of a flat door you had a deck of steps running from one side wall to the other and rising almost to the roof at the back wall. This auditorium was then filled to the brim with sculptures in moulded earth and clay, and the walls with murals in white, black, yellow, and green. The sculptures were arranged carefully on the steps. At the centre of the front row sat the earth goddess herself, a child on her left knee and a raised sword in her right hand. She is mother and judge.

To her right and left, other deities took their places. Human figures, animals (perhaps a leopard dragging along the carcass of a goat), figures from folklore, history, or pure imagination; forest scenes, scenes of village and domestic life; everyday events, abnormal scandals; set pieces from past displays of mbari, new images that had never been depicted before – everything jostled together for space in that extraordinary con­vocation of the entire kingdom of human experience and imagination.

When all was ready, after months or even years of preparation, the makers of mbari, who had been working in complete seclusion, sent word to the larger community. A day was chosen for the unveiling and celebration of the work with music and dancing and feasting in front of the house of mbari.

I used the words stage and auditorium to describe the mbari house; let me explain. Indeed, the two side walls and the back wall encompassed a stage of sorts, in which the community in the foreground is the audience looking into the enclosure with its festive walls and the massed arrangement of sculptures on the steps. But I believe the event does invite a second way of apprehension in which the roles are reversed, and those still and silent dignitaries of moulded earth seated on those steps in the royal pavilion become the spectators of the world as a lively scene.

The problem some of my colleagues had in Dublin with the word celebration may have arisen, I suspect, from too narrow a perspective on it. Mbari extends the view, opens it out to meanings beyond the mere remembering of blessings or happy events; it deliberately sets out to in-
clude other experiences — indeed, all significant encounters which man makes in his journey through life, especially new, unaccustomed and thus potentially threatening, encounters.

For example, when Europe made its appearance in Igbo society out of travellers’ tales into the concrete and alarming shape of the District Officer, the artists immediately gave him a seat among the moulded figures of *mbari*, complete with his peaked helmet and pipe. Sometimes, they even made room for his bicycle and his native police orderly. To the Igbo mentality art must, among other uses, provide a means to domesticate that which is wild; it must act like the lightning conductor which arrests destructive electrical potentials and channels them harmlessly to earth. The Igbo insist that any presence which is ignored, denigrated, denied acknowledgement and celebration can become a focus for anxiety and disruption. To them, celebration is the acknowledgement of a presence, the courtesy of giving to everybody his due.

Therefore, the celebration of *mbari* was no blind adoration of a perfect world or even a good world. It was an acknowledgement of the world as these particular inhabitants perceived it in reality, in their dreams and imagination. The white District Officer was obviously not a matter for dancing. But he was not alone in that. Consider another disquieting presence — a man whose body was covered with the spots of small-pox, a disease so dreaded that it was personified and alluded to only in quiet, deferential tones of appeasement; he was called the Decorator of its victims, not their killer. As for the woman depicted in copulation with a dog, was there much to choose as oddities go between her and the white man?

I offer *mbari* to you as one illustration of my pre-colonial inheritance — of art as celebration of my reality; of art in its social dimension; of the creative potential in all of us and of the need to exercise this latent energy again and again in artistic expression and communal, cooperative enterprises.

And now I come to what I have chosen to call my Middle Passage, my colonial inheritance. To call my colonial experience an inheritance may surprise some people. But everything is grist to the mill of the artist. True, one grain may differ from another in its powers of nourishment; still, we must in the manner of those incomparable artists of *mbari* accord appropriate recognition to every grain that comes our way.

It is not my intention, however, to engage in a detailed evaluation of the colonial experience, but merely to ask what possibility, what encouragement, there was in this episode of our history for the celebration of our own world, for the singing of the song of ourselves, in the din of an insistent world and song of others.
Colonization may indeed be a very complex affair, but one thing is certain: You do not walk in, seize the land, the person, the history of another, and then sit back and compose hymns of praise in his honour. To do that would amount to calling yourself a bandit; and you don't want to do that. So what do you do? You construct very elaborate excuses for your action. You say, for instance, that the man in question is worthless and quite unfit to manage himself or his affairs. If there are valuable things like gold or diamonds which you are carting away from his territory, you proceed to prove that he doesn't own them in the real sense of the word — that he and they just happened to be lying around the same place when you arrived. Finally if the worse comes to the worst, you may even be prepared to question whether such as he can be, like you, fully human. From denying the presence of a man standing there before you, you end up questioning his very humanity.

I have used the word presence quite a few times already. Now I want to suggest that in the colonial situation presence was the critical question, the crucial word. Its denial was the keynote of colonialist ideology. Question: Were there people there? Answer: Well ... not really, you know ... people of sorts, perhaps, but not as you and I understand the word.

From the period of the Slave Trade, through the Age of Colonization to the present day, the catalogue of what Africa and Africans have been said not to have or not to be, is a pretty extensive list. Churchmen at some point wondered about the soul itself. Did the black man have a soul? Popes and theologians debated that for a while. Lesser attributes such as culture and religion were debated extensively by others and generally ruled out as far as Africa was concerned. African history seemed unimaginable except perhaps for a few marginal places like Ethiopia where Gibbon tells us of a short burst of activity followed from the seventh century by one thousand years in which she fell into a deep sleep, 'forgetful of the world by whom she was forgot' to use his own famous phrase.

With Hugh Trevor-Roper, Regius Professor of History at Oxford in our own time, no bursts of light, no matter how brief, have ever illumined the dark sky of the Dark Continent. A habit of generosity to Africa has not grown since Gibbon's time; on the contrary it seems to have diminished. If we shift our focus from history to literature we find the same hardening of attitude.

In The Tempest, Caliban is not specifically African; but he is the quintessential colonial subject created by Shakespeare's genius at the very onset of Europe's Age of Expansion. To begin with, Caliban knew not his own meaning but 'wouldst gabble like a thing most brutish'. However, Shakespeare restores humanity to him in many little ways but especially
by giving him not just speech but great poetry to speak before the play’s end. Contrast this with Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* three hundred years later. His Calibans make ‘a violent babble of uncouth sounds’ and go on making it right through the novel. Generosity has not prospered.

So these African creatures have no soul, no religion, no culture, no history, no human speech, no I.Q. Any wonder then that they should be subjugated by those who are endowed with these human gifts?

A character in John Buchan’s famous colonial novel, *Prester John*, has this to say:

> I knew then the meaning of the white man’s duty. He has to take all the risks.... That is the difference between white and black, the gift of responsibility, the power of being in a little way a king, and so long as we know and practice it we will rule not in Africa alone but wherever there are dark men who live only for their bellies.¹

John Buchan, by the way, was a very senior colonial administrator and novelist. One suspects he knew his terrain.

So let us add to our long list of absences this last item – the absence of responsibility. If we should now draw a line under this list and add up all the absences reported from Africa, our grand total would equal one great absence of the Human Mind and Spirit.

I am not quite certain whether all the field-workers who reported these absences genuinely believed their report or whether it was some kind of make-believe, the kind of alibi we might expect a man arraigned for a serious crime to put together. You see, it is significant, for example, that the moment when churchmen began to worry and doubt the existence of the black man’s soul was the same moment when the black man’s body was fetching high prices in the market-place.

On the other hand these reporters may well have believed their own stories – such was the complex nature of the imperial vocation. The picture of Africa and Africans which they carried in their minds did not grow there adventitiously but was planted and watered by careful mental and educational husbandry. In an important study of this phenomenon Philip Curtin tells us that Europe’s image of Africa which began to emerge in the 1870s was ‘found in children’s books, in Sunday school tracts, in the popular press. Its major affirmations were the “common knowledge” of the educated classes. Thereafter, when new generations of explorers and administrators went to Africa, they went with a prior impression of what they would find. Most often, they found it...’²

Conrad’s famous novel, *Heart of Darkness*, first published in 1899, portrays Africa as a place where the wandering European may discover that the dark impulses and unspeakable appetites he has suppressed
and forgotten through ages of civilization may spring into life again in answer to Africa’s free and triumphant savagery. In one striking passage in this novel Conrad reveals a very interesting aspect of the question of presence. It is the scene where a French gun-boat is sitting on the water and firing rockets into the mainland. Conrad’s intention, high-minded as usual, is to show the futility of Europe’s action in Africa: ‘Pop would go one of the six-inch guns; a small flame would dart and vanish, a tiny projectile would give a feeble screech – and nothing happened. Nothing could happen. There was a touch of insanity in the proceeding.” About sanity I cannot speak. But futility, good heavens, no! By that crazy act of shelling the bush, France managed to acquire an empire in West and Equatorial Africa nine to ten times its own size. So whether there was method in the madness, or not, there was profit quite definitely.

Conrad was giving vent to one popular conceit that Europe’s devastation of Africa left no mark on the victim. Africa is presumed to pursue its dark, mysterious ways and destiny untouched by explorations and expeditions. Sometimes Africa as an anthropomorphic personage steps out of the shadows and physically annihilates the invasion – which of course adds a touch of suspense and even tragedy to Europe’s enterprise. One of the best images in *Heart of Darkness* is of a boat going upstream and the forest stepping across to bar its return. Note, however, that it is the African forest that takes the action: The Africans themselves are absent.

I think it is interesting to contrast Conrad’s episode of the French gun-boat with the rendering of an analogous incident in *Ambiguous Adventure*, a powerful novel of colonization by the Muslim writer Cheikh Hamidou Kane from Senegal, a country which, as you know, was colonized by the French. Conrad insists on the futility of the bombardment but also the absence of human response to it. Cheikh Hamidou Kane, standing as it were at the explosive end of the trajectory, tells a different story. The words are those of one of the characters, the Most Royal Lady, a member of the Dialloube aristocracy:

A hundred years ago our grandfather, along with all the inhabitants of this countryside, was awakened one morning by an uproar arising from the river. He took his gun and, followed by all the elite of the region, he flung himself upon the newcomers. His heart was intrepid and to him the value of liberty was greater than the value of life. Our grandfather, and the elite of the country with him, was defeated. Why? How? Only the newcomers know. We must ask them: we must go to learn from them the art of conquering without being in the right.

Conrad portrays a void; Hamidou Kane celebrates a human presence and a heroic struggle.
The difference between the two stories is very clear. You might say that difference was the very reason the African writer came into being. His story had been told for him and he had found the telling quite unsatisfactory.

One of the earliest short stories I wrote was called ‘Chike’s School Days’, and it ended like this:

The first sentences in his New Method Reader were simple enough and yet they filled him with a vague exultation: ‘Once there was a wizard. He lived in Africa. He went to China to get a lamp.’ Chike read it over and over again at home and then made a song of it. It was a meaningless song. ‘Periwinkles’ got into it, and also ‘Damascus’. But it was like a window through which he saw in the distance a strange, magical new world. And he was happy.

And so the young African boy enthusiastically opened his heart and mind to the exciting, wider world unfolding around him. That boy was me.

I went to a good school modelled on British public schools. I read lots of English books there. I read Treasure Island and Gulliver’s Travels and Prisoner of Zenda, and Oliver Twist and Tom Brown’s School Days and such books in their dozens. But I also encountered Ryder Haggard and John Buchan and the rest, and their ‘African’ books.

I did not see myself as an African to begin with. I took sides with the white men against the savages. In other words I went through my first level of schooling thinking I was of the party of the white man in his hair-raising adventures and narrow escapes. The white man was good and reasonable and intelligent and courageous. The savages arrayed against him were sinister and stupid or, at the most, cunning. I hated their guts.

But a time came when I reached the appropriate age and realized that these writers had pulled a fast one on me! I was not on Marlowe’s boat steaming up the Congo in Heart of Darkness. I was one of those strange beings jumping up and down on the river bank, making horrid faces. Or, if I insisted on the boat-ride, then I had to settle perhaps for that ‘improved specimen’, as Conrad sarcastically calls him, more absurd than a dog in a pair of breeches trying to make out the witchcraft behind the ship’s water-gauge.

That was when I said no, and realized that stories are not innocent; that they can be used to put you in the wrong crowd, in the party of the man who has come to dispossess you.

And talking of dispossession, what about language itself? Does my writing in the language of my colonizer not amount to acquiescing in the ultimate dispossession? This is a big and complex matter which we cannot go into fully here. Let me simply say that when at the age of
thirteen I went to that school modelled after British public schools, it was not only English literature that I encountered there. I came in contact also for the first time in my life with a large number of other boys of my own age who did not speak my Igbo language. And they were not foreigners but fellow Nigerian youth. We lived in the same dormitories, attended the same morning assembly and classes, and in the evenings gathered in the same playing fields. To be able to do all that we had to put away our different mother tongues and communicate in the language of our colonizers. This paradox was not peculiar to Nigeria. It happened in every colony where the British put diverse peoples together under one administration.

Some of my colleagues finding this too awkward have tried to rewrite their story into a straight-forward case of oppression by presenting a happy monolingual African childhood brusquely disrupted by the imposition of a domineering foreign language. This historical fantasy demands that we throw out the English language in order to restore linguistic justice and self-respect to ourselves.

My position is that anyone who feels unable to write in English should of course follow his desires. But he must not take liberties with our history. It is simply not true that the English forced us to learn their language. On the contrary British colonial policy in Africa and elsewhere emphasized again and again its preference for native languages. We see remnants of that preference today in the Bantustan policies of South Africa. We chose English not because the British desired it but because having tacitly accepted the new nationalities into which colonialism had grouped us, we needed its language to transact our business, including the business of overthrowing colonialism itself in the fullness of time.

Now, that does not mean that our indigenous languages should now be neglected. It does mean that these languages must co-exist and interact with the newcomer at the present time and into the foreseeable future. For me it is not either English or Igbo, it is both. Twenty-one years ago when Christopher Okigbo, our finest poet, fell in the Biafran battlefield, I wrote for him one of the best poems I have ever written, in the Igbo language, in the form of a traditional dirge sung by his age-grade. Fifteen years ago I wrote a different kind of poem, in English, to commemorate the passing away of the Angolan poet and President, Agostinho Neto. The ability to do both is in my view a great advantage and not the disaster some of my friends insist on calling it.

It is inevitable, I believe, to see the emergence of modern African literature as a return of celebration. It is tempting to say that this literature came to put people back into Africa. But that would be wrong
because people never left Africa except in the guilty imagination of Africa’s antagonists.

I must now emphasize one final point. Celebration does not mean praise or approval. Of course praise can be part of it, but only a part. Anyone who is familiar with contemporary African writing knows how we stand in this matter; we are no flatterers of the Emperor. Some years ago at an international writers’ meeting in Sweden, a Swedish writer and journalist said to a small group of Africans present: You fellows are lucky. Your governments put you in prison. Here in Sweden nobody pays any attention to us no matter what we write. We apologized profusely to him for our undeserved luck!

The running battle between the Emperor and the Poet in Africa is not a modern phenomenon either. Our ancestral poets, the griots, had their way of dealing with the problem, sometimes direct, at other times oblique.

I shall end by telling you a very short Hausa tale, from Nigeria: a miniature masterpiece of the story as a two-edged sword:

The Snake was once riding his horse curled up, as was his fashion, in the saddle. As he passed the Toad who was walking on the road, the Toad said: ‘Excuse me sir, but that is not how to ride a horse.’

‘It’s not?’, asked the Snake. ‘Can you show me then how it’s done?’

‘With pleasure,’ said the Toad.

The Snake slid out of the saddle down the side of the horse to the ground. The Toad jumped into the saddle, sat bolt upright and galloped most elegantly up and down the road. ‘That’s how to ride a horse,’ he said.

‘Very good,’ said the Snake. ‘Very good indeed. Please descend.’

The Toad jumped down and the Snake slid up the side of the horse back into the saddle and coiled himself up as before. Then, looking down at the Toad on the roadside he said: ‘To know is very good, but to have is better. What good can superb horsemanship do to a man without a horse?’ And he rode away.

Everyone can see in that simple tale the use of story to foster the status quo in a class society. The Snake is an aristocrat who has things like horses because of who he is. The Toad is a commoner whose horsemanship, acquired no doubt through years of struggle and practice, avails nothing in this hierarchical society. The Hausa who made this story are a monarchical people and the ethos of the story accords with the ruling values of their political system. One can imagine the Emir and his court laughing boisterously at the telling of that story.

But quite clearly the griot who fashioned that story, whether he was aware of it or not, concealed in the voluminous folds of the laughter the hint and the glint of iron. In the fullness of time that same story will stand ready to serve a revolutionary purpose using what was al-
ways there: an unattractive, incompetent and complacent aristocracy, exposing it not to laughter this time but to severe stricture.

The new literature in Africa is aware of the possibilities available to it for celebrating humanity in our continent. It is aware also that our world interlocks more and more with the worlds of others. For, as another character in *Ambiguous Adventure* says to a Frenchman: 'We have not had the same past you and ourselves, but we shall have strictly the same future. The era of separate destinies has run its course' (p. 79).

If we accept that, and I don't see that we have much choice, then we had better learn to appreciate one another's presence and to accord to every people their due of human respect.

NOTES