

African Literatures in the Year 2050

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Introduction

Historians abhor “what-if” scenarios. Similarly, literary critics rarely allow themselves to indulge publicly in pure speculation, as I am going to do. African literature in the year 2050 – about three generations from now – may not turn out as I sketch it in this futurological scenario, but the vision I offer does reflect what present-day scholarship knows about literary systems and African ones in particular, however out of tune it might sound with much contemporary Africanist thought, often *misérabiliste*, as they say in French: given to morbidity and pessimism. My goal is simple: to short-circuit “Afro-pessimism,” the chronic short-selling of things African, usually on the part of sympathetic foreigners or Africans in exile. I am not claiming that Africa does not, and will not have problems, but that one hang-over of colonialism is the evaluation of Africa according to criteria which do not fit African terms. This process results from the systematic simplification of African realities, the first syndrome of which is the very idea of considering Africa as a distinct whole, this at the cost of its rich internal diversity.

By way of advance summary, here are some predictions upon which I shall elaborate upon below.

- As Africans gradually rid themselves of the modernist literary systems British and French colonialism imposed, and as the creative potential of African languages is tapped through expanding literacy, semi-autonomous though overlapping literary markets will develop across the continent, and spread beyond.
- The construct “African literature” (in the singular) will dissolve into a plurality of literatures (in the plural), and those literatures will look very different from the “high” Euro-African canon taught in the West today under that name.
- Writing in English, French and Portuguese, will not be representative of the bulk of literary creation in Africa, in fact will offer a distorted image of it.

- There will be a welter of aesthetic forms combining the indigenous traditions of African cultures with the new generic possibilities globalization brings, and African literature will share in this bounty.
- Over the next half century the polemic onus which has fallen on African intellectuals, and in particular those who have chosen or been forced into exile, will lighten.

To get some measure of where African literature will be in 2050, it might be helpful to frame matters by looking back at 1950. The cultural ambiance in Africa just after the Second World War was emphatically political, and for good reason. Many of the first generation of independent African leaders were themselves poets and writers, or so defined themselves, and the literary ideologies of the time focussed on the creation of self-consciously African, usually Pan-African, identities. On the French side of things, *Négritude* typified those heady years of self-definition. On the English side, a different but equally ambitious set of intellectual strategies were deployed. In both linguistic domains, the sixties were an intensely creative moment in Africa.

Within a decade most African states had acquired nominal independence. At roughly the same time a second literary generation came to the fore, one whose *raison-d'être* was not to fight for independence rather to define itself *against* the previous generation. This transition was marked by the appearance, in the late sixties, of so-called novels of disillusionment, Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1969) and Yambo Ouologuem's *Le Devoir de violence* (1968) being symptomatic of the trend. At the same time, critics began to sense the contingent historicity of both *Négritude* and of its English-language counterparts. Though this new phase reflected the inter-generational dialectic of tradition and change that shapes most literary history, it took African forms, and was rooted in local or national contexts. For example, both novels just mentioned targeted the political culture and climate created by the cohort of leaders who took control of the newly independent African states in the early sixties, and were written when their authors were in their twenties (they were born, respectively, in 1940 and 1939).

In African literature in European languages, the novel, poetry, drama and the essay are, despite their distinct content and styles, essentially cloned on Western modernist counterparts or, in recent years -- with the work of, say, V.Y. Mudimbe or Sony Labou Tansi or Boubacar

Boris Diop -- *postmodernist* ones. This is not surprising. The achievement of contemporary African writers in European languages has been to master their literary codes while at the same time inflecting them in original ways or, to use a phrase of fashionable jargon, to inscribe their difference. There is nothing frivolous about the kind of engagement which contemporary African writers have brought to their lives and their politics. The execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa and the exile of Wole Soyinka are *nec plus ultra* examples. What I am suggesting, though, is that real potential of African literature resides elsewhere than in the high literary canon of international modernism and postmodernism, instead in forms of verbal and imaginative creativity that are as yet to be imagined.

That said, there is an internationally recognized canon of contemporary African writers, a canon about three generations long and which now, finally, includes women writers: Aminata Sow-Fall, Ama Ata Aidoo, or more recently Calixthe Beyala. The annual production of African literary works has grown exponentially to the point that unlike in, say, 1970, when it might have been possible to read all of the best and even much of the worst African writing, such a project is impossible. There are numerous scholarly journals (like *Research in African Literatures*), as well as academic associations which meet annually to pursue research (the *African Literature Association* and in France *L'Association pour l'étude des littératures africaines*, l'*APELA*). Those who are interested in African literature(s) constitute a perhaps small but nonetheless sturdy company scattered around the world.

But will it suffice simply to project into the future the trends of development just mentioned in order to draw a reliable portrait of African literatures in the year 2050? The answer, of course, is no. With the vantage of hindsight we can reconstruct the history of the discursive field we now call African literature, but there is not much evidence that literary critics or African writers in the late 1950s knew where they were going, foresaw either the novels of disillusionment or the post-independence political climate which inspired them. Likewise, you can search far and wide in the texts of those times for some hint that African women writers might emerge as a significant force, or Western feminists come to constitute an important segment of their public. In other words, the shape of the African literary institution of the late 1970s (its gamut of writers, works, publishers, readers and critics), was not predicted, and probably unpredictable. Likewise, the prolonged existence of this institution itself beyond this point in time carries no warranty. If the contingent circumstances upon which it is based

change, the field of African literary discourse will change too.

In the 1950s the reigning assumptions appear to have been, 1) that quality literature would be written only in English and a handful of other European languages; 2) that authors were male; 3) that independence would be salutary and 4) that African political and cultural entities be considerably larger and more homogeneous than they have turned out to be. The challenge when speaking about African literature in the new millennium is thus to disclose the assumptions we ourselves make about African literature, and which are predicated upon our current but contingent concept of African literary discourse.

It will be useful, first, to contrast the expression “European literature” with “African literature.” There is indeed a canon of major works going by the name of European literature, but this list is at best a short chart of texts which most readers know only through translation (or hearsay). It is implicitly understood that each and every one of its constituent literatures, say, Norwegian or Czech or Catalan, has a complex and variegated history of its own, and that only a fool would dare to generalize about the sum. My expectation is that a like state of affairs will come to prevail for African literature by the year 2050. Some African literatures, say Nigerian, Senegalese, Kenyan or South African, will dominate the canon of African literature (just as say British or French or German currently does European literature), but the separate identities and characteristics of Nigerian, Senegalese, etc., literatures will stand out in their own right, and be included in the broad category of African literature only for taxonomical convenience. In fact, this process of “nationalization” began some while back, and was confirmed by the appearance of books on specific literatures, Dorothy Blair on Senegalese (1986)¹, and the late Richard Bjornson on Cameroonian literature (1993)².

At present African literature is still very dependent on Western readers, and especially academics, and will remain so until it develops a broad internal readership. In the meantime many younger Western scholars committed to postcolonial studies, into which category African literature often falls, will have matured. By the year 2030 those are currently engaged in doctoral studies will be in their fifties or sixties. There is nothing at all to prevent the academic

1. Dorothy S. Blair, *Senegalese Literature*, Boston: Twayne, 1986.

2. Richard Bjornson, *The African Quest For Freedom And Identity: Cameroonian Writing And The National Experience*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991.

study of African literature from renewing itself under their guiding hand, but the track record for aging academics is not particularly good, and there is every reason to believe that the innovative methodologies of today will become the orthodoxy of tomorrow: Postcolonial studies is a prime candidate for such ossification, having the distinct disadvantage of having constituting itself around a theme fixed in time and fixated on an ever receding past.

Several consequential factors will also tend to preclude exogenous academic discourse from keeping up with changes on the endogenous African ground, not the least of which is the tendency for non-Africans to rely on English and French as *lingua francas* in Africa, which condemns them to a limited spectrum of experience and understanding. Although hundreds of African languages will disappear over the next half century, they are “more likely to be replaced by those relatively few ‘highly valued’ African languages, than by imported ones.”³ The latter will be the basis of indigenous literacy and literature. The data is telling: Swahili has well over 30 million speakers, roughly on a par with Italian; Yoruba has a core population about 20 million, about that of Dutch world-wide. But by 2050, Yoruba will have a pool of at least 50 million readers; Shona, in Zimbabwe, which has a thriving literature, has at least 8 million potential readers now, and will have many more in 2050. As for South Africa, there are more native speakers of Xhosa and Zulu there than of English. Although pure numbers of speakers do not equate directly with the size of a literary readership, these literary systems – Swahili, Yoruba, and the like – are long-standing.⁴ Over the next several generations these hardy survivors will continue to expand, as will Arabic, whose appeal to many African Muslims is systematically neglected in the West by intellectuals.

Of course, the very notion of African studies reposes on the idea that Africa is something *studied*, not something which itself studies. To some extent, this problem is inherent to “regional studies” of all kinds, which have had the tendency to be instruments of knowledge that the centre practices upon the periphery (this was the gist of Edward Said’s now almost banal insight in *Orientalism*). Globalization cuts several ways, however, implying not only the impact of world culture upon African life, or increased knowledge of world culture by

3. Matthias Brenzinger, Bernd Heine and Gabriele Sommer, “Language Death in Africa,” in R.H. Robins and E.M. Uhlenbeck (eds.), *Endangered Languages*, New York: St Martin’s Press, 1991, p. 40.

4. Albert S. Gérard, *African Language Literatures*, Washington D.C, 1981.

Africans, but also world culture as partly constituted by African culture. By the year 2050, African intellectuals will have developed their own methodologies and approaches to universal problems. Already, the inclusion of Africa as a *normal*, as opposed to an exceptional and eccentric source of information about human culture has begun to transform some academic paradigms. We can see this process underway in the recent collection of essays, *Africa and the Disciplines*.⁵ Several of whose authors claim that adducing what Pliny called the *semper aliquid novi* out of Africa into their own disciplines has the potential to alter and expand them. Both macro- and micro-economics, for example, have found fertile terrain in Africa: the former as a zone in which transition from statist to private and from war to peace economies are of prime interest, the latter in which local household and small enterprise economies and their effects might be best understood.⁶ Though Africanist political science is not regarded as central to that discipline, the liminality of political life in Africa has the capacity to instill a sense of relativism, wherein “the utility of multiple, transborder, ethnic linkages for regional peace-keeping and security warrants attention [and] could prove to have methodological as well as practical significance.”⁷ Social anthropology is less global in its assertions about Africa, but the need to parse detail and to account for authenticity of voice when addressing African cultures has, at the very least, produced a sense of unease that echoes throughout that discipline, and “the direction of the new anthropology will surely be affected by the paths taken by the new Africa, its scholars, and its other citizens.”⁸ Despite increasing wealth of information on African literature, general literary studies have not responded in as positive a manner as these other disciplines.

The sorts of transformation which will occur over the next three generations will not be merely academic. Writers with creative potential will be seeking direct ways of engaging with the African public (or publics, in the plural). The novel, poetry, and the essay, which are at the core of the African literary canon as it exists in the year 2000, will accordingly be superseded

5. Richard H. Bates, et al.(eds.), *Africa and the Disciplines: The Contributions of Research in Africa to the Social Sciences*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press,1993.

6. Paul Collier in Bates et al.,1993, p. 76-77.

7. Richard L. Sklar in Bates et al., 1993, p. 107.

on the ground by genres which are popular, paraliterary and/or derived from oral literature in African languages. Bernth Lindfors was one of the pioneers in detecting the rise of popular genres in Africa: everything from Onitsha chapbooks to pulp fiction to porn.⁹ Lindfors would be the first to admit that he barely scratched the surface, and this is not the place to speculate at length on the additional generic permutations which may arise as print and electronic media in Africa grow. I would point, though, to the explosion of creativity in African popular music over the past decades as offering hints about the potential for merging traditional forms and practices with contemporary media and (not necessarily Western) instruments. Although music has the advantage of short-circuiting linguistic communication and crossing borders with relative ease, there is no reason Africa cannot become an active exporter of its future literary culture, entering world literature not through the conduit of European genres and styles, but on its own terms. In fact, leaving aside the onerous conditions in which the diaspora transmitted the rudiments of African culture to the Atlantic world and especially the Caribbean, there is every reason to imagine Africa can compete culturally on the international marketplace, its creations successfully implanting themselves far beyond the continent. When this happens, the very definition of what is literary will be at stake.

Finally, a touchy issue: over the next half century, I believe, the polemic burden vis-à-vis the West which has fallen on African intellectuals will lighten. “Politics” pervades everything, and will certainly still be doing so in the year 2050. What I am predicting will subside is discourse of the type which arose directly from the struggle against colonialism and continues to echo. “Post-colonialism” is something of a misnomer, since flag independence only slightly mitigated existing global hierarchies. Anti-(neo)colonialism like Fanon’s was based upon broad-scale homogeneous identities (class, nation, people) which recent post-colonial theory seriously undermines, for example in the work of Homi Bhabha.¹⁰ There is in fact an odd congruence between the theoretical claims of that “post-identitarian” strain of post-colonialism and the welter of ideological formations in Africa which appear when focus draws

8. Sally Flak Moore in Bates *et al.*, 1993, p.34.

9. Bernth.Lindfors, *African Popular Literatures*, Trenton: Africa World Press,1991.

10. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (eds.), *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1994.

close to events on the ground. Unless African literatures become as complex and internally conflictual as African societies themselves, this coincidence of post-colonial theory and social and cultural practice will prove to be purely contingent and ephemeral.

The above futurological predictions depend upon the conviction, which could be mistaken, that the circumstances which have forced many African writers to address in the first instance a Western public will subside by the year 2050. This optimistic forecast also reposes on the hope that the next five decades of African literary history will be driven more by internal forces, conditions and circumstances than by external ones, this, paradoxically, as globalization ensues. If that hope is misplaced, the future of African literatures will be bleak, since they will continue to reflect the state of domination and dependence from which Africans have been trying to emerge for the past half century.