Chapter 7

African Literature and the Colonial Factor

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Modern African literature was produced in the crucible of colonialism. What this means, among other things, is that the men and women who founded the tradition of what we now call modern African writing, both in European and indigenous languages, were, without exception, products of the institutions that colonialism had introduced and developed in the continent, especially in the period beginning with the Berlin Conference of 1884–5 and decolonization in the late 1950s and early 1960s. African literature had, of course, been produced outside the institutions of colonialism: the existence of oral literature in all African languages and precolonial writing in Arabic, Amharic, Swahili, and other African languages is ample evidence of a thriving literary tradition in precolonial Africa. But what is now considered to be the heart of literary scholarship on the continent could not have acquired its current identity or function if the traumatic encounter between Africa and Europe had not taken place. Not only were the founders of modern African literature colonial subjects, but colonialism was also to be the most important and enduring theme in their works. From the eighteenth century onwards, the colonial situation shaped what it meant to be an African writer, shaped the language of African writing, and overdetermined the culture of letters in Africa.

In 1955, Georges Balandier began his influential theoretical study of the colonial situation by observing that despite the changes that had occurred in the era of decolonization, "the colonial problem remains one of the main issues with which specialists in the social sciences have to deal. Indeed, the pressures of a new nationalism and the reactions resulting from decolonization give this problem an immediacy and a topicality that cannot be treated with indifference" (1970: 21). The point Balandier made about the relationship between colonialism and the social sciences can be said about the conjunction between African literature and the colonial situation. Colonialism, especially in its radical transformation of African societies, remains one of the central problems with which writers and intellectuals in Africa

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have to deal; the tradition of African writing that has produced Nobel Prize laureates was built and consolidated when African writers began to take stock of the colonial situation and its impact on the African psyche. Even the African writing that emerged in the postcolonial era, a literature shaped by the pressures of "arrested decolonization" and the "pitfalls of national consciousness," can be said to have been driven by the same imperative as writing under colonialism – the desire to understand the consequences of the colonial moment (see Jeyifo 1990: 33–46; and Fanon 1968: 148–205). The purpose of this chapter, then, is to explore the paradigmatic and practical value of the colonial moment in the history of African literature. Our starting point is that the key to the development of modern African literature can be found in a number of institutions – the Christian mission, the colonial school, and the university – that were crucial to the emergence, nature, and function of African literature.

Colonial culture and African literature: an overview

A discussion of the relationship between colonialism and African literature should perhaps begin with a simple question: why has colonialism been the main subject of African literature and why do colonial institutions seem to be such a central component of a literature which was expressively produced as a critique of European domination? The most obvious answer, as we shall see in our discussion of several colonial institutions, is that the political and cultural force of colonialism in Africa was so enduring that writers concerned with the nature of African society could not avoid the trauma and drama that accompanied the imposition of European rule on the continent. As early as the end of the eighteenth century, Africans writing in European languages, most notably Olaudah Equiano, had appropriated dominant literary conventions to oppose slavery and to validate an African identity; but others, such as Johannes Capitein, had produced treatises arguing that slavery was not necessarily an affront to morality and Christianity. While the political interests of these early writers might now appear radically divergent, it is important to keep in mind that their writing was generated by a common desire to deploy writing both as the mark of the African's humanity and as a point of entry into the culture of modernity (see Gates 1985: 9–10).

If the late colonial period (1880–1935) seems to preoccupy the imagination even of writers who were born in the age of decolonization and after, it is because it is considered to be a period unlike any other in African history. Adu Boahen has remarked: "Never in the history of Africa did so many changes occur and with such speed as they did between 1880 and 1935 . . . The pace of this drama was truly astonishing, for as late as 1880 only very limited areas of Africa had come under the direct rule of Europeans" (1985a: 1). For almost four centuries Africans had endured traumas induced by the foreign encounter, most notably the transatlantic slave trade, but the European element had remained localized at the coast and no significant political entities had lost their sovereignty until the late colonial period. After the Conference of Berlin, however, the whole continent was divided among the major European powers and the nature of African society was rapidly transformed under the tutelage of foreign powers. And while the process of colonial rule might have appeared to the European powers to be a matter of military strategy and commercial interests, for many African societies it was tantamount to what F. Abbas has called "a veritable

revolution, overthrowing a whole ancient world of beliefs and ideas and an immemorial way of life"; European conquest confronted local societies with the difficult choice "to adapt or perish" (quoted in Boahen 1985a: 3). Either way, what was at issue in the colonial encounter was the question of African autonomy, a major subject in early writing from the continent.

It is easy to underestimate the centrality of the ideology of sovereignty and the idea of autonomy to African debates on colonialism and decolonization and the literary texts they inspired. And yet, as Chinua Achebe was to note in an influential essay published in the early 1960s, one of the key motivations for producing an African literature was to restore the moral integrity and cultural autonomy of the African in the age of decolonization. The fundamental theme of African writing, noted Achebe, was that "African people did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans; that their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty, that they had poetry and, above all, they had dignity. It is this dignity that many African people all but lost during the colonial period and it is this they must regain now" (1973: 8). For many African writers in the age of decolonization, then, the loss of sovereignty was not simply the process by which older cultures and institutions were deprived of their authority under colonialism; it was also conceived, especially by members of the African elite, as the ultimate loss of agency and free will. Thus the narrative of colonialism came to be conceived as the unwilled evacuation of African subjects from the movement of time; for many African intellectuals in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, to be colonized, as Walter Rodney noted aptly, was "to be removed from history" (1972: 245–56).

But the process of colonial rule was to appeal to African writers for something more than its drama and impact: for writers born between the cusp of European rule and decolonization, especially in the period between 1900 and 1945, colonialism was more than a period of loss and temporal dislocation; it also represented the challenges and opportunities of modernity. It is these opportunities that the authors of the Pan-African Conference held in London in 1900 had in mind when they reminded "the modern world" that colonized people, "by reason of sheer numbers and physical contact," were bound to have an immense effect upon the world: "If now the world of culture bends itself towards giving Negroes and other dark men the largest and broadest opportunity for education and self-development, then this contact and influence is bound to have a beneficial effect upon the world and hasten human progress" (see Langley 1979: 738). For the colonized African elite, colonialism was a challenge because its impact was evident throughout Africa and it had bound the destiny of the continent with other worlds.

At the same time, however, the colonial process presented an interpretative enigma: colonial culture had transformed many African societies through voluntary and enforced modernization, but as many observers of the African scene were quick to note, this process did not seem to penetrate too deeply into the fabric of local communities. Ostensibly, colonialism touched every aspect of social and political life on the continent, but its impact also seemed to be superficial because, in spite of the predominance and preponderance of colonial modernity, so-called traditional society seemed to function as if the colonial event was a mere interruption in the *longue durée* of African history. For the men and women who came to produce modern African literature, the subjects who were most affected by the colonial process, the simultaneous existence of a modern and traditional world could only be negotiated through works of the imagination. It is not accidental

that the foundational texts of modern African literature in the European languages were concerned with the dialectic of modernity and tradition as it was played out on the continent under colonialism.

Nevertheless, this turn to writing as a way of accounting for the existence of the modern within what appeared to be traditional societies was the source of an important paradox: in order to oppose colonialism, and thus to assert indigenous interests and rights, African leaders and intellectuals had to turn to a recently discovered European language of tradition, nation, and race. This new language, which sought a synthesis between modernization and African autonomy, is evident in declarations by leaders such as Makombe Hanga, chief of the Barue, as he confronted the Portuguese in Central Mozambique in 1895: "I see how you white men advance more and more in Africa . . . My country will also have to take up these reforms and I am quite prepared to open it up . . . I should also like to have good roads and railways . . . But I will remain the Makombe my fathers have been" (quoted in Ranger 1985: 49). In his confrontation with the Germans in Namibia, the great Nama leader Hendrik Wittboi easily resorted to the language of the *Volksgeist* popularized by his European adversaries: "The Lord has established various kingdoms in the world. Therefore I know and believe that it is no sin or crime that I should wish to remain the independent chief of my land and people" (quoted in Ranger 1985: 49).

The emergence of African literatures in European language needs to be located within the crucial claim that colonized subjects had set out to use the instruments and grammar given to them by the colonizer to oppose foreign domination and assert their sovereignty. It should not hence come as a surprise that the pioneers of African literature and African cultural nationalism, writers like Sol Plaatje in South Africa or Caseley Hayford in West Africa, identified very closely with colonial culture and its institutions, even as they opposed the destructive practices of imperial rule and fought for African political rights. Indeed, a key axiom of African literary history is that the founders of African literature were the most Europeanized. What this meant was that African literature was not initially intended to provide a radical critique of European rule; rather, it was a discursive mode through which Africans could try to represent and mediate their location both inside and outside colonial culture.

But why did literature become one of the most important weapons of cultural resistance against European intervention in Africa in the late nineteenth century? Literature came to occupy a central place in colonial culture for three closely related reasons. First, one of the most attractive aspects of colonial culture, from the perspective of the colonized, was what came to be universally conceived as the gift of literacy. Even though many African subjects may have been ambivalent about many aspects of colonial modernity, they seemed unanimous about the power and enchantment of literacy and the culture of print that enabled it: "Literacy was for many African peoples a new magic, and was sought after as such and at all costs since it appeared to open the treasure house of the modern world. To know the amount of power, authority and influence which the first generation of African clerks, interpreters and teachers exercised is to have some idea of the spell which literacy cast over many African peoples" (Afigbo 1985: 496).

The literary history of Africa has often been written from the perspective of university-educated writers and intellectuals (see Wauthier 1979 and July 1968), but we need to foreground the significance of the first generation of literate Africans, many of them clerks, interpreters, and teachers with only a few years of education, in the establishment of an

African tradition of letters. Out of this class came not only the writers who produced the earlier works in European languages (Plaatje and Tutuola, for example), but even more influential writers working in African languages, including Thomas Mofolo (Sotho), H. I. E. Dlomo (Zulu), D. O. Fagunwa (Yoruba), and Shabaan Robert (Swahili). These writers were the great mediators between colonial culture and the newly literate African masses. Indeed, the subject, language, and form used in the most influential works of these writers was intended to simultaneously represent the bourgeois public sphere that colonialism had instituted and satisfy the reading desires of the newly literate African.

But there was a second reason why literature came to occupy such an important role in the mediation of the colonial relationship: in both the popular imagination and the annals of Africanism or Orientalism (see Miller 1985 and Said 1979), the process of colonization existed as both an unprecedented historical episode and a monumental literary event. While it is true that colonial conquest and rule were effected through violent military methods, aggressive diplomacy, and blatant economic exploitation, these processes ultimately came to acquire their authority and totality when they were represented in powerful narratives of conquest. Napoleon's invasion of Egypt (1789), to cite one of the most prominent examples, came to have a presence, a voice, and rationale when it was represented in *Description de l'Egypte*, the massive twenty-four volume account of the expedition. In this account, as Edward Said has noted, a diachronic and contested event was transformed into a synchronic narrative of European conquest and rule; Orientalism acquired its intellectual power through textualization, which brought together 'a family of ideas and a unifying set of values proven in various ways to be effective' (1979: 41–2). Nevertheless, against the texts of European power produced during the process of conquest, there emerged powerful African texts produced in response; works written as a counterpoint to the Napoleonic narrative (the most famous example is "Abd al-Rahman al-Jabarti's" *Ajaib al-Athar*) contested the terrain of culture as vigorously as the literature of conquest. Indeed, most of the African writing produced in the nineteenth century by writers as diverse as al-Jarbati and Edward Blyden simultaneously sought to take stock of the colonial situation and to challenge its philosophical and cultural assumptions on the nature of the colonized, their culture, and community.

The third reason why colonialism and literary culture came to be so closely associated in the history of African literature is one that has become central in postcolonial studies: this is the recognition that the idea of culture itself lay at the heart of the colonial project of conquest and rule. Colonial writers understood not only the obvious fact that culture and knowledge were used as instruments of control, but that the process of colonization produced new cultural formations and configurations, what Nicholas Dirks has described as "the allied network of processes" that spawned new subjects and nations (1992: 3). As Dirks has noted, the idea of culture, as an object and mode of knowledge, was formed out of colonial histories and spawned specific cultural forms; these cultural forms, he concludes, "became fundamental to the development of resistance against colonialism, most notably in the nationalist movements that used Western notions of national integrity and self-determination to justify claims for independence" (1992: 4). It was at this point – the point where western notions about nation, culture, and self were turned against the project of colonialism – that the largest body of work by African writers was produced.

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