Creating New Bounds: Identity and Form of African Literature

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Preamble

Imagining the future of African literature, popular culture, and the digital humanities provides a rich pool for literary scholars to push the frontiers of the literary enterprise of Africa. Literature of the African continent has grown and is still growing, metamorphosing in diverse forms, and inviting scrutiny that will help upcoming scholars and literature enthusiasts appreciate the growth and extent of this vibrant body of literary art. There is no gainsaying in the fact that African literature is no longer that body that is strictly tailored after, or conditioned by, the literary traditions of other climes. It has come a long way from what Ernest Emenyonu describes as the pre-colonial and colonial European intellectual theory of "If it is not written, it is not Literature!" (3), and which Obiajunwa Wali calls "a minor appendage in the main stream of European literature" (13). The focus of this paper is to examine the African literary enterprise which, I dare to say, is defying old labels, shaking off old restrictions, and carving out new identities. This ambitious exploration I hope to explain to you using the changing dynamics playing out in the different modes through which African literature is taking.

Introduction

That African Literature has roots in orality is not news neither is it in contention, ditto for the fact that contemporary African literary artists have found novel ways to combine oral aesthetics with the writing tradition. What is, however, interesting is how this fusion of African's oral heritage with the more recent writing tradition has led to the creation of unique art forms that are adapting to the continent's emerging needs and realities**.** Africa's literary industry is growing through many vibrant modes that are firming up on functionality, entertainment, appeal, and reach. Leveraging on information technology, African literature continues to rapidly transcend spatial and cultural borders to become a commodity that enjoys the patronage of the global community, regardless of language of composition.

This paper attempts a vista into the growth of African literature in the different forms currently in existence. It redefines the canon to admit content not limited to the written or

even the book form. This is because of the factors of politics, medium of transmission, the cross fertilization of ideas, emerging socio-economic realities, and the immense innovations in information technology, which have prompted contemporary African literary enterprise to leverage greatly on its oral and performative origins. This oral and performative origin had always privileged functionality of educating, informing, correcting, challenging, recording history and culture, and of course, entertaining.

The Identity of African Literature in the 21st Century

The historic African Writers Conference which held at Makerere University in Kampala, Uganda in 1962 marked the start of formal discourse around the identity of African literature. The "Conference of African Writers of English Expression", focused on how colonialism and its legacy of colonial languages had generated a dilemma of choice of language with which to write. Participants at the forum also debated questions around what constituted African literature, who could write it, the focus of the writing, as well as which language of expression qualified for the writing of African literature. This was a strategic conference which held at the peak of the attainment of political independence in many African countries. The implication was to define and set the agenda for the literary enterprise of the continent. However, Wali's opening statement in his "The Dead End of African Literature?" that the most important achievements of the Conference was that "African Literature as now defined and understood lead nowhere" (13) captures the unresolved arguments that arose from the deliberations. The heterogenous colonial histories with the looming issue of the status and role of the colonial languages bequeathed the continent and the challenge of the many indigenous languages and cultures of the African people were topics that forced inconclusiveness upon the deliberations of what made a work African. Bernard Fonlon's review of the 1962 conference, contained in "African Writers meet in Uganda", shares highlights of the discussions around what constitutes African literature. He reviews Christopher Okigbo's position as a Negritudist one when he (Okigbo) qualified African literature as works that "must have its roots deep in African soil, must take its birth from African experience, must pulsate with African feeling... It was not race, neither was it theme that made a work African: a foreigner could treat African material and an African writer could be devoid of authentic African feeling" (Fonlon, 42).

Fonlon notes further that Langston Hughes' position counters Okigbo's with the position that while the expression of African-ness was key to a work qualifying to be African literature, only an African could achieve such depth of feeling. Fonlon himself adds to the discourse thus:

> I drew attention to the fact that the experiences and emotions of the African are essentially universal: colonial humiliation, frustration, sorrow, bitterness, hate, revolt, revenge, exaltation, joy, love — these were human experiences. To my mind, what conferred on these an African character was their expression, their manner… [which] will bear an African imprint, whatever their theme may be.

While acceding to the possibilities of national fragmentation in the 'African expression' which marks out literary works, Fonlon posits that there were enough unifying elements among the many Africans "to weld the ensemble into a genuine African literature". Achebe would later write in "English and the African Writer" (27) that the Makerere conference failed to satisfactorily define African literatureon the basis that there was no consensus on questions of: "was it literature produced in Africa or about Africa? Could African literature be on any subject, or must it have an African theme?

In 1963, African Anglophone writers would again meet at another conference in Fourah Bay. Their focus, which was to restructure the curriculum of African literature in schools, defined African literature as "creative writing in which an African setting is authentically handled or to which experiences originating in Africa are integral" (qtd in Achebe, "English and the African Writer", 18). As seminal as this definition was at that time, it drew criticism for its exclusion of works which were written by African but had non-African settings, non-African characters, and experiences such as Aminatta Forna's *The Hired Man* and Helen Oyeyemi's *Boy Snow Bird*. However, while the definition captured colonial novels such as Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* because of the setting and characters, Graham Greene's *Heart of the Matter* did not make it into the canon "because it could have been set anywhere outside Africa" (Achebe 27). Achebe also noted that "What all this suggests … is that you cannot cram African literature into a small, neat definition".

Since the 1962 and 1963 conferences, there have been other attempts at defining African Literature, some of which showed Eurocentric sensibilities such as Eileen Julien (295) in "African Literature", or others which problematised indigen-ship and focus of writing. However, in this current age of globalisation, of "borderless and international connectivity for the transfer of intellectual work, cultural productions, finances, and worldviews" (Bodunde, Aliyu, 122), parameters with which to categorise African Literature may have also lost some of their sharp edges. What may be crucial in defining a work as African at this age may be two of the following:

1. the writer's claim to the continent regardless of their physical location, and
2. the expression of what Fonlon describes as experiences and emotions which bear imprints of African-ness.

I will use the poetry of Tanure Ojaide to explain my position. Ojaide is a diasporan poet who migrated to the United States in 1989. I posited in an article on the role memory plays in diasporic literature that writers such as Ojaide, Zakes Mda, Okey Ndibe, and Tess Onwueme encounter the diaspora differently from writers who are in the diaspora by virtue of forced migration or those who were born in the diaspora. For the category of writers like Ojaide, I noted that they have more reasons and show more readiness to call the diaspora home, especially when there is no restriction to their return to Africa. Despite their migration being by choice and their affinity to call their diasporan abode home, these writers maintain and reveal African-ness in their works. A number of Ojaide's poems focus on Charlotte in North Carolina, his state of residence in the US. However, despite the setting of these poems being non-African, and despite his diasporan location even at the

point of writing the poems, the African expression is readily identifiable in these works. Take his *Narrow Escapes: A Poetic Diary of the Coronavirus Pandemic* which was composed while he was in the pandemic-induced lockdown as an example. Poems such as "Déjà vu" (12), "We all Value our Lives" (24), and "Air Fleet" (27) are about the Charlotte landscape and ways of life, yet one reads from the lines a sense of African-ness. An excerpt from "Déjà vu" would suffice to buttress this point:

> I have always walked through
> a ghost town; no human sound
> and even birds taking a nap
> this early that I am up and alone.
> And so it's nothing new…
> I never expect children
> running out pursued by parents ("Déjà vu" 12)

The reference to parents pursuing children brings up the image of his Nigerian/African homeland where such a scene is wont to happen. This is, as Fonlon says, the expression of the experiences and emotions which bear imprints of African-ness. Imprinting African-ness in works had been set in motion and developing since African writers began to incorporate oral aesthetics in their works and this has had great impact on the question of the language used in writing African literature. The dominant colonial language of English, for instance, has so metamorphosed as to have recognised varieties which have acquired African nationalities as well as other continental identities. The term 'Englishes' now describes "the ways in which English in its spread has been 'indigenized' and appropriated by speakers of African languages," (Makoni and Meinhof, 8). This is what Achebe in "English and the African Writer" says is his intention in his argument for the use of a world language to write African literature:

> The price a world language must be prepared to pay is submission to many different kinds of use. The African writer should aim to use English in a way that brings out his message best without altering the language to the extent that its value as a medium of international exchange will be lost. He should aim at fashioning out an English which is at once universal and able to carry his peculiar experience…. I feel that the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings (29-30).

Other writers/critics who support Achebe's position of the use of a world language to compose African literature are Amos Tutuola, Wole Soyinka, Buchi Emecheta, Moradewun Adejunmobi, Ken Saro-Wiwa among others. They agree that while the colonial languages have become national heritage uniting Africans who do not have a common language, they, however, have the leeway to transform the colonial languages in ways which allow them to transmit African experiences and address the need of Africans.

The seeming dominance of the belief that literature must be written is yet another problematic shadowing a conceptualisation of the African literature. Western anthropologists who were privileged to lead the definition of terminologies and concepts, and who provided principles for the understanding of a cultural enterprise such as oral art forms, had established the act of writing as key to the production of literature. The evolutionist approach to the study of societies by Western anthropologists prescribed "a progress from the crude communal stage of primitive life towards the civilized and differentiated culture of contemporary Europe" (Finnegan, 38). The implications on the oral art of the then non-literate peoples of the African continent is "that their art, if any, would be correspondingly primitive…dominated by the idea of magic, by totemism, or by their failure to distinguish between themselves and the animal world round them. And all these ideas could be presumed to come out in their oral literature or 'folk-lore'" (Finnegan, 39). The evolutionist perspective is also responsible for the early presupposition that for anything to be literature, it must be written. This contributed to the earlier relegation of African oral art as non-literature.

Joseph Murage explains the exclusion of oral art forms from 'mainstream' literature as arising from the fact that they:

> do not fit neatly into familiar categories of literate cultures and because the concept of oral literature therefore becomes unfamiliar to cultures that lay emphasis on literacy and written traditions. When these same literate cultures are left to ascribe meaning of the oral forms, they may not necessary understand all the artistry involved in the cultures of the people…" (n.d).

Indeed, Adrian Roscoe in his 1971 book*Mother is Gold: A Study in West African Literature* did not consider as novels certain oral narratives that existed in precolonial Africa: "the novel, as it is known in the West precisely because it is a written form has no history whatever in Africa. It is a literary import… from Europe…. It is not in its nature, an African form…. It is not a fact of the African past (75). However, according to Leif Lorentzon, the literariness of oral literature is both to be found in the material (the text) and its performance.

The Oral and Performance Aesthetic in New Literary Art

That African literature began before contact with Europeans and the written mode is a debate that has both been roundly championed and disputed by African and Western scholars alike. A historical overview of literary forms in most parts of the world shows that performance and orality predated and influenced the written forms of prose, drama, and poetry, categories which, more often than not, restrictively encapsulates the written enterprise of literature. However, what is crucial to this paper is that African literary art, beyond the written prose, poetry, and drama, is equally developing vibrantly in forms that are harnessing aesthetics of orality and performance, just as in the pre-literate era.

The growth of digital media technology is also facilitating the incorporation of these aesthetics for the emergence of new forms that some scholars categorise as popular culture.

The question of whether these literary artistic forms have the aesthetic qualities of the written literature is yet another debate. The position of this paper is that in as much as these works employ aesthetic use of language, reveal the world in such a way "that nobody can be ignorant of the world" (Sartre, 24), and mediate and encourage social change in the society, incorporating them as valid entries into the canon of African literature enhances the vibrance and dynamic nature of the canon. As such, electronic narratives such as "fictioning in cyberspace" (Aliyu, 2021), electronic poetry, the spoken word genre, music and chants of different genres, electronic dramas such as movies, skits, and other arts used in storytelling via the medium of information technology and other mass media, or popular media are some of the emerging modes of African literary art. I call them emerging for their evolving characteristics and developing features. They are also emerging because the creators of these literary art forms, or content creators (to use a more current terminology), are creating for a diverse virtual public. They thus adapt their art to the abilities and needs of their audiences/consumers, making their art form to be determined by external demands and not strictly according to its own creativity.

They change forms of narrative and even reasoning, for the sole reason of making their productions accessible else they risk alienation of their audience. The creators leverage on synthesizing the aesthetic of populist appeal with a medium that appeals to the target demographic, electronic/social media. This use of Information Technology to transmit these literary art forms is pushing the frontiers of access to the continent's creations. There are two main advantages to this virtual medium of creativity. First is the facilitation of access beyond the capacity of physical mediums such as the physical book form of writing which was a major challenge to circulation, and second, is the strategy of mass appeal which encourages cross-fertilization of cultures and ideas. Aliyu (Fictioning, 2) points out that the virtual location of cultural and creative products is an expansion of literary location which helps to overcome the challenges of distribution/reach thereby promoting the globalization of cultural works beyond the spatial localities of the authors.

Popular Culture as Literary Art

Ode Ogede notes that the word "Popular" is one of the most elusive concepts to define within the context of African Studies. Ogede takes this position from the different scholarly stances on what constitutes popular cultural productions. He submits that, popular culture, being a heterogeneous body of material has been constantly approached and presented from an aspect, or as he puts it, "mistaking a part for the whole".

> With particular reference to popular literary expression, as individual scholars go from a variety of angles toward their object, and as each continues to see and emphasize so many different aspects, there are so many broad lines of approach taken, the differences in opinion are so vast, that it is difficult to foresee the possibility that a commonly accepted ground will emerge in the near future (Ogede 626).

A review of some attempts at conceptualising popular culture is necessary to exemplify Ogede's claim. Ime Ikiddeh describes popular culture as art where aesthetics are only a peripheral concern. Karen Barber in "Popular Arts in Africa" describes it as art which transforms, articulates, and communicates real experience (38). Richard Bjornson presents "popular" as referring to literary document produced locally and for a local audience (1991: 147) while F. Odun Balogun describes it as a "radicalizing artistic endeavor, one produced by the educated elite but that is not only about the abject conditions of the disadvantaged masses but also is addressed primarily to audiences with a mass appeal (Balogun qted in Ogede 627). Johannes Fabian describes African popular culture as being a polymorphous mass encompassing a complex range of cultural activity that "is almost an embodiment of exercises in self-contradiction and is thus impossible to pigeonhole" (qtd. in Ogede 627). One recurring decimal in these positions is the category of consumers of popular culture: the masses. Barber, acceding to the mass appeal characteristic of popular culture says, it is an art that is:

> …everywhere. They flourish without encouragement or recognition from official cultural bodies, and sometimes in defiance of them. People too poor to contemplate spending money on luxuries do spend it on popular arts, sustaining them and constantly infusing them with new life" (1987: 1).

The polymorphous nature of popular culture has seen scholars list diverse forms such as music, figural sculptures, drawings, graffiti, utterances mouthed at political rallies, bumper stickers, vehicle slogans, message-bearing cloths, and cartoons, Onitsha Market pamphlets, and literary works that enjoy the readership of university students such as Achebe's *A Man of the People*. Ikiddeh's position that popular cultural productions have peripheral aesthetic concern is quite the elitist position which attempts to force these unique arts into established/western aesthetic values. "Design appreciation" (5) is a term Noël Carroll employs to describe the unity among the structural parts of a literary production which contributes to aesthetic experience. That popular culture enjoys mass appeal indicates that there is significant "design appreciation" by consumers of the production who experience pleasure in either one or both of content and form of the work.

The emergence of digital platforms media outlets such as Boomplay, Spotify, Audiomack, YouTube, Tik Tok, Facebook, and Instagram is also extending the reach of narrative, musical, dramatic, poetic, and other literary forms. In collaboration with the strong presence of structural appeal in the productions, there continues to be growing interest in, and consumption of, African popular cultural art beyond the continent. For instance, English professional football club, Arsenal, played a song titled *Declan Rice* by *Nigerian* rapper, Tochukwu Gbubemi Ojogwu popularly known as Odumodublvck, during the announcement of a footballer by that song's name's move to the club side on July 15, 2023. In September 2024, Kizz Daniels with Ramii and Suhel Nafar, released a chart-topper called "Marhaba." This is a song that incorporates multiple cultural and

language aesthetics, blending the North African Moroccan traditional music aesthetic and language with Yoruba, Pidgin English, and street slangs. This track is well on its way to the top of the charts not only in Nigeria but also beyond especially as the beat, feel, and appeal resonate with diverse cultures. The social media is replete with "oyinbos" dancing to, miming, or remixing the music of Nigerian musical celebrities like Asake, Davido, Wiz Kid, Kizz Daniels, South African Young Stunna, Wizdji and many others. There are many western musical celebrities collaborating with African artists and incorporating African musical aesthetics and popular expressions. For instance, Omah Lay has featured Justin Bieber, Rema and Chris Brown, Adekunle Gold and TY dolla sign, Tiwa Savage and Brandy and another upcoming collaboration between Tiwa Savage and Craig David in 2025 are some examples. These collaborations and across space appeal and culture are regardless of the language of composition which sometimes is in any of the indigenous languages. Oluwatomisin Amokeoja in an online newsletter, *Forbes Africa* states that "The success rate of collaboration between the US and Nigerian entertainment industries has allowed Nigerian music to access the largest entertainment markets in the world" (n.d.).

The film industry is yet another form of popular culture that is accessed by people across the world, again facilitated by digital platforms such as Netflix and YouTube. There is an increasing pervasiveness of Nollywood and Ghanawood, for instance. Nollywood, according to a Business Day Newspaper article, produces more than 2,000 movies each year and has estimated annual revenue of $1.2 billion:

> Nollywood's and other Africanwood's focus on the representation of social issues like family life, marriage, economic and political concerns, and identity aid its appeal to the public who seek entertainment and edification of tensions that are prevalent in the society.

The Writing Tradition of African Literature

In all this, the pertinent question is: how has written literature fared in the face of the emergence of diverse oral and performative forms? As the number of content creators increases on digital space, so also have the number of writers grown. The explosion of the oral and performative forms has not catastrophically decimated the ranks of the creators who engage the written text to create their art. The culture of youths holding creative books about town may have reduced, but contemporary writers are leveraging on the digital forms to appeal to the demography with a growing apathy towards reading or those that do not care to hold a physical book. Aliyu's article on "Fictioning in Cyberspace" posits that contemporary writers have found a veritable medium in cyberspace, "exploring the opportunities of a readership that daily surfs the cyberspace…keying into the grow[ing] cyber citizenship" (4). Okadabooks, Brittlepaper, among other online writers' platforms, offer African writers' agency to reach a wide range of readership. More popularly known is Wattpad, a platform developed in 2006, and which claims to be one of the largest libraries of stories on the internet with an estimated audience of more than 80 million. Available in over 50 languages, these allow writers to reach a global audience.

The import of the large reach and the medium of reach have other implications. Aliyu adds that the new technologies through which current writers disseminate their writings ensure that there is a cross-cutting of ideologies, cultures, and popular thoughts. This is because the technologies provide interactive features which allow readers have access to the writers and provide feedback just as live stage performances have the benefit of audience response. There is a gap-closing in the sharing of agency and joint participation in the creative endeavour as readers engage with each episode, express their understanding, anxieties, hope, and even twists to the unfolding story:

> …the writer, with the skill of composition, is engaged in creating a work that reflects his/her personal vision but is also influenced and shaped by the ideologies offered to him/her by the readers in the course of the composition. This engenders a communal engagement, a group outpouring of ideology that has the potentials of evolving group perspectives into popular ideologies…[even] as readers sometimes engage in discussions among themselves, further shrinking the global divide with access to individuals linked by a single story (9).

Jenkins calls this "participatory culture" (67). There is also the Audio book which is an audio recording of a book or magazine for people to listen to. Audible and Storytel are examples of platforms for the engagement with audio-fiction. The Audio book has a growing popularity because it is both portable as an installation of the smartphone that millions carry around. This bridges the gap of reading to being read to, a digital recreation of the oral storytelling mode.

Conclusion

African literature is vast and varied, and the role of the African literary artist has always been clearly defined by the needs of the continent. Despite the different forms the literary enterprise is taking in contemporary times, creators of African literary art continue to expose consumers to historical and current realities. They present their works in language which is driving higher creativity in language use. The different forms of literary productions should be considered as constituting literature of the African continent. English and literature departments in Africa are slowly and gradually researching these forms. The emergence of departments of film studies and courses which encourage the study of popular cultural productions are now in existence. These forms explore humanity, social relations, behaviours, economies, spirituality, politics and more. They offer vista to assess realities and proffer objective societal readings towards fashioning egalitarian worlds. I hope that we get to engage with researches which focus on new literary art at this conference.

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