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The Collective Voice: The Novels of Tchicaya U Tam'Si

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Identifier une chose, c'est limiter ses possibilités.

Tchicaya U Tam'Si, Les cancrelats.

ABSTRACT

This two part study of Tchicaya U Tam'Si's novels reflects the twin objectives of the research project. By showing in the first part the need for critical criteria founded in the socio-historical and linguistic realities of Africa, the hegemony of the Western aesthetic canon with respect to African writing is challenged. In the second part, by applying a contextualised, syncretic critical approach to U Tam'Si's prose works, important features not only of his narrative but also of his poetic discourse are illuminated. This movement from broad questions of theory to focus on a specific body of writing makes it possible to identify elements that may be considered characteristic of African writing in general while at the same time contributing to a better understanding of a particular writer's creative expression.

One of Africa's most enduring colonial legacies is the Francophone-Anglophone divide that compartmentalises the continent into major English and French language zones. From the time of the first publication of African literary texts, the language question has raised issues of far-reaching material and ideological implication, which today remain largely unresolved. The challenge to reach across linguistic barriers is one that the writer and critic alike must meet, if better channels of communication

are to be developed between the many peoples of Africa. For the critic, this does not imply broad overviews which reduce the rich diversity of African writing. In fact, it is important to work within clearly defined parameters, recognising regional and national specificities. At the same time, full cognisance must be taken of developments in the rest of Africa. Such is one of the major concerns of this study, which takes French-language African writing as its main field of reference while making frequent cross-reference to African writers and critics who publish in English.

Part One begins by looking at the way in which French-language texts from Africa are received in France, in order to show concretely the need for a shift in critical perspective with regard to African writing. This leads on to a consideration of more appropriate criteria for the critical appreciation of African writing.

The complex cultural heritage of African writers suggests the need for a syncretic approach. Consideration is given to the contribution of structuralist, Marxist and psychoanalytic theories of literary criticism. This is complemented by an investigation into socio-historic factors that determine the role of the writer in society and the writer-reader-critic relationship. Linguistic and cultural issues are of particular importance, as they focus upon the dynamic interplay of traditional oral

story-telling techniques and the exigencies of modern creative expression. Indeed, orality is shown to be a factor of considerable signifcance for the critical appreciation of contemporary African writing. In this context, the notion of the ideo-image is devised as a tool of analysis.

In Part Two, the critical principles outlined in Part One are applied to Tchicaya U Tam'Si's novels. The work is contextually situated by a brief introduction to those features of Congolese history and contemporary society which have bearing upon creative writing in that central African country. Allied to this contextualised approach to literary analysis is the notion of a globalised reading of the writer's *oeuvre*; a particular text or texts must be seen not only in an appropriate socio-historical and cultural context but also in relation to the writer's whole body of creative writing. Consequently, while discussing U Tam'Si's novels, frequent cross-reference is made to his other works.

U Tam'Si's novels form a tetralogy, resembling in many ways an extended epic tale, which lends itself to a global analysis. This approach reveals the underlying unity of the writer's creative vision and expression, notwithstanding the inevitable stylistic changes that took place during the period stretching from their conception in the 1950's to the conclusion of the last novel in the 1980's.

A three-part analysis is made, beginning with thematic concerns. The dominant theme which emerges and which gathers together the complex narrative threads of the four novels is that of the search for understanding of self and of the human condition. The quest takes many different forms, ranging from the progressive commitment of the individual to issues of collective concern, to a metaphysical enactment of the initiatory path, leading to suffering and even martyrdom. The constant interplay between individual experience and wider community issues ensures that the narrative never loses its sharp relevance for contemporary Africa.

This chapter is followed by a semiological analysis which, while primarily of the narrative, refers constantly to U Tam'Si's poetry, revealing the overall shape and consistency of creative expression and world view. Crucial to this chapter is the study of how the ideo-images develop through the *oeuvre* to become rich, dialectical signifiers that defy narrow definition.

In the last part of this textual analysis, the narrative is illuminated by looking at it in the light of the oral tradition. The strong sense of a narrator communicating with an "audience", the dramatic enactment of many scenes and the episodic nature of the narrative, mnemonic devices using rhythm and alliteration, antithetical or parallel patterning, the musicality of the prose and proverbial expression, the

supernatural element - all these aspects relate to the tradition of the spoken word, to the techniques of the oral teller of tales. Like the major part, if not all, of contemporary African writing, U Tam'Si's narrative represents a period of transition along an axis linking societies in a state of pure orality to those of complete literacy.

In summing up the findings of the study it is concluded that, while it it erroneous to view African literatures as a unique body of writing with definitive characteristics, it is nevertheless possible to identify certain elements that constitute a specifically African related aesthetic. It is the existence of this aesthetic which calls for critical criteria that grow out of African material and metaphysical realities.

The appendices to this work provide important research material, particularly the account of contemporary political change in the Congo Republic and the bibliography of published and unpublished creative writing by Congolese poets, novelists and playwrights.

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ABSTRACT

PREFACE

From the time that African writers first began publishing creative works in a European language, critical discourse has been the prerogative of the West and the reception of African writing has been determined in terms of Western aesthetic canon. Inevitably, this has led to a number of anomalies if not distortions. For example, while the rich diversity and innovativeness of African writing is gaining increasing recognition, texts are often acclaimed for the wrong reasons. One such misconception, which will be examined in detail in the course of this study, in illustration of the problem, concerns Tchicaya U Tam'Si himself, who was hailed by many as a great African "surrealist" poet.

Equally problematical is the fact that other African authors have been neglected because their writing does not correspond to the prevailing Western tastes, or aesthetic criteria.

However, since the early seventies and particularly during the eighties, African critical opinion has made itself heard with increasing insistence and with it comes the call for a contextualised reading of African literatures, based on criteria deriving from African realities.

The establishment of an Afrocentric theory of literature would seem to be fundamental to any

investigation of contemporary African writing. This is indeed a formidable task, given the diversity of African literatures and the complexity of the debate, which encompasses issues relating to ideology, language, socio-historic and geographical realities. Furthermore, such an investigation leads on to the even more contentious issue of an African aesthetic.

The objectives of this work are therefore modest. It begins with a concrete evaluation of prevailing critical approaches, in order to show that the appreciation of African writing requires not merely an adjustment of critical criteria but a radical change of perspective. Clearly, an African literary theory must begin from a starting point firmly centred in Africa.

This does not imply a narcissistic return to some mythical source of inspiration. Indeed, the second step is to show that, since African writers inherit a dual if not multiple cultural tradition, their writing requires a syncretic critical approach. The practical and ideological implications of this must be carefully considered.

In this study, no attempt is made to offer a definitive critical model or paradigm. Indeed, coherent theoretical structures may be intellectually satisfying but they are sterile in their fixity and they cannot account for exceptions. Creative writing, on the other hand, is a constantly shifting

terrain, responding to complex material and historical forces which defy definition within a single, globalising system.

At the same time, the danger of an impressionistic or piecemeal approach is recognised. For a creative work to enter the mainstream of literature, it must be shown to operate within certain objectively established constants. If not, the debate is reduced to an intimate dialogue between the text and the critic.

A major objective of this work is to engage with the language issue. This is a subject that evokes vigorous debate at the practical and ideological level, with as yet, little consensus being reached. One of Africa's most enduring colonial legacies has been the creation of two major language zones, each with its own specific historical development yet sharing many common features. However, writers and critics in the Anglophone and Francophone zones are not always able to follow the issues being debated by their counterparts. Few Africans are conversant in both languages so that, for example, a Kenyan wanting to know what Congolese writers and critics are saying has to rely heavily on the arbitrary selection of texts that exist in translation.

With respect to the French-language regions of Africa, this restriction is compounded by the fact

that, for reasons relating back to the history of the French colonial administration, critical attention tends to favour West Africa. Although today, writing from the Congo and Zaïre is becoming better known, nevertheless many critical studies give inadequate consideration to the historical, cultural and linguistic differences that distinguish these literatures from those of West Africa.

This work then seeks to straddle the linguistic divide. It is however, necessary to reconcile two conflicting imperatives. On the one hand, a continental overview risks blurring regional diversity, and on the other hand, a more specific focus may lose sight of the full African dimension. The dilemma can be resolved by taking Francophone writing as the point of departure, while making frequent reference to Anglophone writers and critics, in order to maintain a continental perspective. In concrete terms, a study of Tchicaya U Tam'Si's writing, set in the wider perspective of French-language literatures in Africa, with cross references to the debate amongst English-language African writers and critics, focusses on significant points of convergence and divergence. This approach has the advantage of moving away from the traditional North-South axis of communication and contributes to an inter-African dialogue.

One of the central objectives of this study is to suggest an alternative to the evaluative critical method, that seeks to judge African writing according to a pre-established set of criteria. This is of particular significance for the study of African literatures written in an European language, where Western literary canon has predominated. Literary criticism as it is practised today, is the creation of the West and the foundations of its canon are seldom open to question by its practitioners. Western critics therefore approach the African text from a position of privilege, judging African creative expression in terms of what are considered to be "universal" criteria, but which in fact reflect the values of the West.

Furthermore, it is important to recognise that critics are viewed, and view themselves, very differently in Africa and the West. The Western critic's role is analogous to that of a guide, who will bring to the attention of the reading public the latest literary "finds".

In Africa however, the objective, professional critic is not customary. Traditionally, creative expression is an act of spoken communication and the audience is the critic. Today, circumstances are such that, with few exceptions, the writer is himself often a critic and the critic is invariably also a writer. Contemporary African writers relate therefore, to a

context where the critic is an integral part of the creative act. Clearly this implies different perspectives and priorities.

In contrast to the evaluative approach, therefore, an important principle underlying the critical method demonstrated in this study is that of illumination. Instead of judging a piece of creative writing from a point that is removed from its cultural, socio-historic and linguistic context, the critic endeavours to illuminate it from within that context. It is essential to understand the writer's point of departure, in order to appreciate the distance that has been travelled. Starting from the text itself, the critic seeks to discover the dynamic movement from the particular to the general and back again, a dialectic that implies a sense of exploration rather than judgement. To illuminate a text in this way, makes considerable demands upon the critic, whose task it is to become as fully conversant as possible with the context from which the literary text emerges.

Literary criticism treads a narrow path between on the one hand, the endeavour to give it an objective, scientific foundation and on the other, implicit to its very nature, the requirements of an empathetic exploration of the text. Discussing in Théorie de la littérature the shortcomings of the Russian Formalist approach, Tzvetan Todorov focusses on this dilemma:

> On s'aperçoit que le travail scientifique ne peut être réduit à son résultat final: sa fécondité véritable réside dans l'activité par laquelle ce travail s'actualise, dans degrés successifs d'élaboration. Seul le pédagogue exige un traité qui décrive un système achevé de formules parfaites; non le chercheur qui trouve dans les approximations de son devancier un point de départ à sa démarche.(21-2)

Finally, the expression "collective voice" in the title of this work requires some explanation. The deliberately juxtaposed concepts of plurality and singularity focus upon a dialectic which is of particular significance not only for the work of Tchicaya U Tam'Si but for African writing in general.

U Tam'Si's creative writing illustrates particularly well a feature that characterises most, if not all, African writing. His poetry and prose recreate in poetic form an individual's experience of a collective history. The poetic voice maintains a fine balance between the collective and the individual, between the expression of common or shared experience and that of profound personal emotion. The symbolism itself is structured on a constant dialectical tension between the collective and the personal. U Tam'Si's is an intensely individual voice, yet which speaks to, and on behalf of, a clearly perceived audience.

This dialectic distinguishes the African writer from his or her Western counterpart. In identifying with a specific collectivity, the former is committed

to something beyond his or her own inner world. For example, in U Tam'Si's creative universe, the notion of betrayal relates to the political betrayal of the Congolese people and of Patrice Lumumba, who represented the hopes and ideals of independence. At the same time, betrayal is a personal concept; that of the poet who is not fully understood by his fellows and also of the man, "orphaned" from his mother and Africa at an early age. Added to this is a complex image of the Christ, betrayer and betrayed. U Tam'Si's writing is marked by his notion of the leader-poet's suffering, both personal and collective. Es'kia Mphahlele expresses a similar idea, when he speaks of the writer as being the sensitive point of the community.

The expression "creative voice" also conveys an oblique reference to the oral tradition, where creative expression involves an act of communication between a speaking voice and a live audience. In oral tale-telling, the speaker-audience relationship determines elements of form, style and content. Contemporary African writing is still close enough to traditional practices to reflect the influence of oral narrative techniques. An investigation of a writer's traditional cultural and linguistic context is therefore a necessary prerequisite for the analysis of his or her creative discourse.

A key concept for the investigation of African creative expression is that of ambiguity. The words taken from Les cancrelats and quoted in exegesis to this work highlight its importance. Ambiguous expression reflects the dialectical relationship between the writer and socio-historical context. Furthermore, as an expression of multiplicity, ambiguity defies attempts by the critic to establish neat categories, thereby sacrificing diversity and contradiction for the sake of unity. Instead of seeking to impose cohesion, the African writer finds meaning in the paradox itself. Truth is perceived as paradoxical and multi-facetted.

Ambiguous expression reflects the dialectical forces of society and also relates directly to the historical realities of Africa. Pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial societies in Africa have been, and still are, in a situation of contact, if not profound contradiction or even open conflict, with other cultures. A close reading of paradoxical and ambiguous symbolic expression reveals how individual writers have acquiesced to, resisted or rejected the influences and the conditions that the confrontation with other cultures has imposed on them.

Literary theory develops all too easily into a structured model which, in order to preserve its integrality, fails to illuminate fully the texts which

it purports to explain. Elements which contradict the theory are often glossed over and others may be given undue importance. Indeed, the text is often lost from sight, and theory becomes an end in itself. This investigation into African writing therefore, focusses on the literary text itself, in the belief that it will provide the keys to its understanding.

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INTRODUCTION

As the title of this dissertation suggests, the focal point is Tchicaya U Tam'Si's fictional writing. U Tam'Si, a first generation writer from the Congo, was known first and foremost as a poet. His novels, which were published only during the eighties, have not as yet received the attention they deserve. However, it is not possible to make an exclusive study of his prose writing; the subject requires extensive introduction for two reasons. Firstly, U Tam'Si's creative work, which includes poetry, fiction and theatre, cannot be separated off into genres for the convenience of analysis. His writing constitutes an integrated ensemble, such that each part relates to the whole in terms of theme, imagery and style. In order to illuminate aspects of his prose, the complex inter-relatedness of his work requires a global reading and frequent cross-reference, in particular to his poetry.

Secondly, a discussion of U Tam'Si's writing requires a carefully established contextual framework. Although within the discipline of African literatures, Congolese writing is attracting increasing attention, as yet relatively little research has been published on the subject. In order therefore to situate U Tam'Si's work, it is necessary to begin with an introduction to the historical and cultural realities

of the Congo and its peoples. Furthermore, Congolese writing cannot be treated in isolation from the issues that concern African literatures in general. This does not imply that a generalised study of African writing is required; indeed, it is argued that such an approach has severe limitations. It is nevertheless important to establish U Tam'Si's writing not only within an immediate regional or national context but also within a wider framework of African critical theory.

The dissertation therefore falls into two sections, moving from the general to the particular. The first part deals with theoretical approaches. In Chapter One, methods of enquiry used by contemporary mainstream Africanists are examined in order to discover significant trends. The shortcomings of the essentially Eurocentric perspective that emerges are considered. Chapter Two argues the need for a syncretic approach and demonstrates that, while no single method is sufficient in itself, each contributes certain elements that are helpful in illuminating the text. Endorsing contemporary calls for a contextualised reading of the text and for the discovery of critical criteria that take account of African realities, traditional oral story-telling techniques and the relationship between language and cognitive patterns are investigated to determine the extent to which they influence modern prose writing.

The notion of the ideo-image is introduced, to describe the particular form of figurative expression that emerges from such a context.

In Part Two, the theoretical approaches found in Part One to be the most appropriate for illuminating African writing are applied to the novels of Tchicaya U Tam'Si. In order to ensure a contextualised reading of the novels, Chapter Three introduces significant aspects of Congolese history and culture that have a bearing on creative writing. Further factual information regarding the contemporary political situation in the Congo Republic and U Tam'Si's life are given in the Appendices.

An interview with Tchicaya U Tam'Si, conducted eighteen months before his death, is also included in the Appendices. This illustrates a theoretical principle. More than any other body of creative writing, African texts represent the point of convergence between many, often conflicting, historical and cultural forces. In order to situate a piece of writing, the critic needs all the clues at his disposal, including insights which the author may be able to provide. Used with caution and discernment, the interview provides a first-hand witness to African realities, a record that is all the more valuable given that well documented accounts of events in contemporary Africa are not readily available. In defiance then of the school of opinion

which holds that the text should speak for itself and that the author cannot be trusted to explain his own writing. considerable attention is given to the views expressed by writers themselves, both in writing and in the course of interviews. It is held that the ability to listen rather than to pronounce judgement is one of the literary critic's most valuable qualities.

The analysis of U Tam'Si's prose writing focusses on three essential aspects: the writer's thematic concerns, stylistic features with particular emphasis on his symbolic universe, and thirdly, features that relate to the oral tradition. The object of the study is to explore and illuminate, calling upon the widest possible range of critical resources. The analysis makes no claim to be definitive, since the complex ambiguities of U Tam'Si's creative universe illustrate in a particularly striking way the fundamental importance for African writing of a multiple reading.

The bibliography of Congolese writing comprises an important part of the research project. Given the country's small population and the short history of published writing, the number of titles bears witness to the vitality of Congolese writing. The inclusion of unpublished titles requires some explanation. They are representative of a considerable body of unpublished manuscripts and they illustrate an important aspect of literary life in the Congo. On

account of political and material conditions, the majority of writers, whether they enjoy an established reputation or not, have various manuscripts collecting dust in their drawers. Almost by definition these are difficult to document but a representative few have been included in the hope that changing conditions will allow more to see the light of day.

This dissertation is intended to introduce Tchicaya U Tam'Si's fiction to the serious reader of African literatures. The expansive referential framework, encompassing the Congolese milieu and African critical theory, provides a broad basis for further investigation into other areas of French-language writing from the Congo. For this, the bibliographic material is an important research tool while the demonstration of a syncretic critical approach suggests fruitful avenues of research into the dynamic and innovative literatures of this Central African region.

PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

WESTERN PERCEPTIONS OF AFRICAN LITERATURES

The broad Western-African polarisation that the title of this chapter would seem to suggest requires careful qualification, even though historical and material realities might appear to justify it. When attempting to trace general trends, it is all too easy to blurr important distinctions and to neglect exceptions to nice categories. However, the richly divergent cultural and linguistic zones of Africa require that the field of reference be clearly delimited. While many issues may indeed relate to the experience of the majority of Africans, or while certain attitudes may reflect those of most Africanists, it is important not to lose sight of experiences or viewpoints which do not confrom to the overall pattern.

African writers and intellectuals themselves have often glossed over their differences in order to present a united front in their opposition to the political and cultural hegemony of the West. This was particularly so during the fifites when reaction to colonial domination reached its height, bringing together Black people throughout the world under the banner of pan-Africanism. That this ideal was inherently ambiguous could be seen at the Premier

Congrès International des Ecrivains et Artistes Noirs held in Paris in 1956. A brief consideration of this and subsequent cultural congresses will serve to illustrate how discourse in the domain of African writing and critical theory often contains hidden paradoxes.

The first Congrès International was conceived and organised by the Présence Africaine group of writers but every effort was made to ensure that the Black world was widely represented. Nevertheless, while the Diaspora was strongly present, the African continent was unevenly represented, with only one delegate from Central Africa and delegates from three Anglophone countries as against ten Francophone countries. Not surprisingly, the debate at this and at the second International Congress held in Rome in 1959, was predominantly Francophone. Other cleavages became even more apparent in 1969 when the Festival Mondial des Arts Nègres was held in April in Dakar and the Premier Festival Culturel Pan-Africain was held in Algiers in July-August. Criticism of the Negritude movement was strongly voiced by Anglophone and Central African delegates and the Maghreb-sub-Saharan divide became more evident.

In focussing upon the conflicting viewpoints which surfaced during those pan-Africanist gatherings, the intention is not to discount the important role they played in bringing together Black writers and

intellectuals, as well as Africanists, from throughout the world. Nevertheless, it illustrates how diverse geographical, historical and linguistic conditions make it impossible to treat African issues in all-embracing way. This is particularly true with respect to the divisions that the colonial era bequeathed to Africa. Only too often, upon closer examination, "Black" and "African" are found to express the experience or viewpoint of the predominantly Francophone or Anglophone or even Lusophone sectors. Given that communication across these linguistic divides remains limited even today, thirty years after independence, this is understandable. However, in order to avoid an over-simplification of complex issues, the author's views must be read in the context of a specific point of departure.

A similar delimitation is required for the discussion of Western perceptions of African literatures, given the size and diversity of the field. In this chapter, it is not intended to make a comparative study of African writing in the various linguistic zones. Nor is it intended to make a systematic historical study of critical discourse, since this would be merely duplicating the work already done by others such as Locha Mateso in La littérature africaine et sa critique[1]. The focus is on certain contemporary critical trends which reveal an inherently Eurocentric viewpoint, with respect

primarily to Francophone writing. At the same time, in order to maintain a broader African perspective, reference is frequently made to the debate amongst Anglophone African writers and critics.

In an article published in Présence Africaine in 1970, Thomas Mélone, the Cameroonian academic and critic, discusses the issue of literary criticism from "le point de vue d'un Africain."[2] Here it must be remembered that Mélone is in fact expressing the view of a Francophone African. The thrust of his argument centres around the question of language; he maintains that to appreciate a piece of African writing the critic must understand its linguistic context. This raises the question of the non-African critic's competence to pronounce on African writing; indeed, Mélone writes that African literature has always denounced the Europeans'

> méconnaissance totale de l'Afrique, doublée quelques fois d'une surprenante prétention à posséder plus que quiconque l'intimité de ce vaste et déroutant continent. (18)

Mélone postulates that an essential requirement of the literary critic is "une certaine assimilation de la culture exposée." He considers the Western critic to be sadly lacking in this respect. This view is not dissimilar to that of Frantz Fanon, although Mélone's essay is less polemical than "Racisme et

culture" which had appeared some fifteen years earlier.[3] In both essays, the underlying argument challenges the existence in Africa of a cultural hierarchy, reflecting the political and economic hierarchy established by the colonial administrations, which was strongly racist in character. Whether stated explicitly or implicitly, resistance to this "colonisation of the mind" dates back to the Negritude movement, with its insistence on a distinctive African identity, or "Africanity".[4] However, Mélone's concern is less ideological and more literary than that of Fanon and in terms of the critical approaches which he explores, his article touches on a new period in the contemporary history of African critical discourse.

The turmoil of the sixties and three decades of independence have stimulated both Africanists and Africans alike to pursue new directions. Western images of Africa have come a long way from those projected in the colonial literature of the late nineteenth century and such theories of race as expounded by Gobineau or Hegel are today largely discounted. Nevertheless, the West's taste for the exotic continues to underpin many mythical misconceptions regarding the realities of that "vast and disconcerting continent." Furthermore, underpinning the major part of critical discourse since the late seventies, be it that of Africans or Africanists, is a preoccupation with what makes

African writing "different". That "differentness" is then given the status of a literary criterion. This essentially racial rather than racist view reflects a tenaciously Eurocentric perspective, which presupposes Western writing as the pole of reference.

At the same time, there emerges from much contemporary critical discourse, both African and Western, another underlying theme suggesting a shift in critical perspectives and fruitful avenues of research. During the eighties, an increasing number of critics have moved away from trying to establish the essentially African identity of a piece of writing, to searching for criteria that are grounded in the complex realities of Africa. Instead of critical debate being determined by a pre-established point of arrival, that is, the text's "Africanity", today there is a repeated call for a different point of departure, one that is firmly anchored in Africa. In this, writers such as Mohamadou Kane, Zadi Zaourou or M.a M. Ngal join with their Anglophone counterparts; Ngugi wa Thiongo, or Biodun Jeyifo or Chidi Amuta.

One of the first important critical studies to focus on the current shift in critical perspectives is Bernard Mouralis' doctoral thesis, published in 1984 under the title Littérature et développement.[5] From a detailed examination of the linguistic, cultural and

ideological criteria evoked by both Africanists and Africans to show the specificity of African writing, Mouralis concludes that such specificity is an illusion. In this, he challenges the very basis of some of the most eminent Africanists' work which, in its discourse and its theoretical framework, implicitly shows itself to be following in the Negritude tradition.[6] A brief look at the critical writings of such distinguished Africanists as Lilyan Kesteloot, Robert Cornevin or Jacques Chevrier will show that the underlying question that they attempt to answer is, to paraphrase Sartre, "Qu'est-ce que la littérature africaine?"

A semiological study of the title of Jacques Chevrier's recently revised work Littérature nègre illustrates on the linguistic level a common false premise.[7] The singular form of "littérature", frequently used in titles by both African and French critics, is today studiously avoided by those who are concerned with the debate that centres around the question of national and regional identities.[8] "African literature" denotes a homogenous body of writing, grouping together works from countries as historically, culturally and linguistically diverse as Senegal and the Congo. At first reading it could be assumed that even Maghrebian writing is included in this generalisation. The implications of this are perhaps better appreciated if the terminology were to

be transposed to Europe: in fact, what serious editor would attempt to publish a critical analysis, in a single volume, of "European literature"? The use of the singular collective noun reflects a concern to find common, identifying factors, so sacrificing rich diversity for all-inclusive surveys.[9]

"Nègre" or "négro-africain" are other high frequency linguistic elements which recur not only in titles but also in the text of many critical works. These terms are highly reminiscent of Senghor's discourse and of critical writing in the sixties. As recently as in 1985, Daniel-Henri Pageaux, Professor of General and Comparative Literature at the Sorbonne-Paris III and Director of Harmattan's collection "Classiques de demain", sees in Tchicaya U Tam'Si's novels "une descente dans l'imaginaire 'nègre'." Interestingly however, although no attempt is made to define what is meant by the "imaginaire 'nègre'," the use of inverted commas around 'nègre' implies a certain reservation or sense of discomfort with the term.

A closer reading of many important contemporary critical works and articles shows that much research is still based on the assumption that the *africanité* of a piece of writing is a literary criterion. In the past, this "Africanness" was defined in terms of ideological or socio-cultural factors - Jahn and Kesteloot's early writing are prime examples of this.

While most critics today show greater interest in literary elements, such as recurrent images, temporal structures or semantic devices, nevertheless their overriding concern is to identify common factors, concentrating on resemblances rather than on differences. This may in some way be explained by the typically French or Western taste for diachronic and synchronic systems, for tracing tendencies and for drawing up satisfying *bilans*. While a panoramic overview is valuable for the literary historian or for a general introduction to the subject, the approach has two major drawbacks. In the first place it is necessarily limited to the description of literary works and furthermore, it does not or cannot explain exceptions to the pattern. This can be illustrated in microcosm by an analysis of a recent number of Notre Librairie.[10]

A comparison of the three critical articles which constitute the section of the review devoted to African writing *per se*, reveals a predominant concern for the descriptive model.[11] Without specifically justifying or clearly defining their critical parameters, the authors, who concentrate on the novel, refer to titles and writers from countries throughout West and Central Africa, without always identifying the country of origin. In fact, their observations are based on an extremely limited fund of "data"; of the 25 writers mentioned in all, six form the core of

reference for all three articles. These are Sony Labou Tansi (Congo), Valentin Mudimbe (Zaïre), Tchicaya U Tam'Si (Congo), Henri Lopes (Congo), Tierno Monénembo (Guinea) and Jean-Marie Adiaffi (Ivory Coast). From this limited basis, conclusions are reached about "typical" features of contemporary African writing relating to theme, form and style. No attempt is made to relate the writer or the texts to the geographical or socio-cultural realities of the region from where the novels originated and inevitably, no mention is made of texts which do not reflect the trends that have been identified. While the articles make interesting reading, they reduce the rich, often perplexing diversity of creative writing from the Francophone regions of Africa to over-simplified, albeit it intellectually satisfying, categories.

Es'kia Mphahlele has voiced in his inimitable way this typically Western taste for classifications:

> Why does Mr Jahn want to parcel up Afr.ca in a neat bundle? To sell us back to the white world? ... I refuse to be put into the negro pigeon hole by people whose interest is to find you, pin you down like a butterfly.... [12]

The concern to discover what constitutes a work's "Africanness" reflects an essentially racial notion of "otherness". It is the expression, or indeed the

result, of a predominantly Eurocentric perspective on the part of both Western critics and Africans who have adopted the Western canon. Literary critical theory is the creation of the West and in many ways it remains the "property" of the Western world. Even after thirty years of independence, Western hegemony remains strong in Africa. It is difficult to escape the pervasive assumption that, not only are French and English universal languages, but also the value systems conveyed by those languages are universal. The powerful economic resources of Western countries and the monopoly they hold over printing, publication and markets, continue to entrench Western world views. In the domain of culture, Western traditions are all too often taken as the norms against which other traditions are measured.

Sony Labou Tansi takes the West to task on this subject, with particular reference to received criteria relating to theatre.[13] He points out that South American, African or Indian theatre have traditions as ancient as the West. They are fashioned according to aesthetic criteria that are not necessarily founded on notions of mimesis or cartesian logic. Yet, despite more widely diffused knowledge about other ancient civilisations, Western criteria continue to hold the pivotal position against which other forms of artistic expression are judged.

> L'occidental est un barbare dans les intentions et dans ce qu'il a de plus profond: l'instinct de rejet de "autrui", le don du mépris de tout ce qui lui est extérieur: il ne tolère ni l'invention d'autres réels, ni le regard d'autres yeux que les siens sur le réel conventionnel. ("Brouillon" 2)

Labou Tansi, in his typically controversial style, expresses an extreme position and paradoxically, he would be one of the first to recognise the insightful work of many Africanists such as for example, the Chemains, who became an integral part of the cultural life of Brazzaville during the late '70's and early '80's. However, while overt paternalism amongst Western critics is today rare, a comparison of the various modes of critical analysis that are practised will show that they implicitly assume Western norms as their point of departure.

In demonstrating this, it is not intended to minimise the work of those who, through their scholarship, their wide experience and their support, have been instrumental in introducing the Western world to the riches of African writing. It is nevertheless important to pinpoint implicit assumptions that in effect impede African creative discourse from assuming its rightful place in the world of literature.

It is appropriate to begin by considering the ethnological and historical approaches which have made

a valuable contribution in documenting African literatures. It was ethnologists such as Léo Frobenius, Maurice Delafosse and later, Marcel Griaule, who were amongst the first to interest themselves in the cultural history of Africa and they played a major role in revealing to Europe the riches of African plastic arts and oral traditions. However, given their particular scientific perspective, they regarded the different forms of creative expression as ethnographical documents. This approach has been developed by for example, Denise Paulme and Geneviève Calame-Griaule, whose research into oral literatures follows on from Marcel Griaule's work among the Dogon people.[14]

Africanist historians and sociologists value literary texts in much the same way as the ethnologists, studying them in order to gain insights into the life of particular social groups. One such historian who did important pioneering work in researching African literatures was Robert Cornevin. A tireless researcher and advocate of African writing, Cornevin was known and loved by writers from Francophone Africa and his works are invaluable tools of reference.[15] However, the historical approach of Cornevin and others, such as Robert Pageard, has two limitations.[16] On the one hand, it views literary texts as a means of exploring African history and in so doing it not only priviledges content over

expression but it also fails to distinguish between reality and fiction.

Furthermore, implicit in the chronological structure of these studies is the notion of progress or "improvement"; the assessment of African literatures in terms of evolution from simple beginnings to a stage of maturity. These stages are invariably measured against European models. This can be seen for example, in Cornevin's historical survey of theatre in West Africa. Although he recognises the influence on modern theatre of traditional dramatic representations, the parameters of his research are set by existing written texts which he catalogues, beginning with the early schoolboy dramatisations of daily life that first took place at the William Ponty school in Gorée, through to Italian-style theatrical performances.

Inevitably, this approach tends to foreground those texts that relate to Western criteria and little or no mention is made of other popular, usually oral, forms of drama which have no significant counterpart in the West today but which exist in many different, vibrant forms in Africa.

The concern to understand African writing in terms of its "literariness" is a relatively recent development.[17] From the late seventies and particularly during the past decade, there have been

a number of critical approaches based on a more literary than socio-historical treatment of creative writing. Undoubtedly the French structuralists and semiologists have been influential in this welcome focus on form, image and expressive techniques.

In contrast to panoramic surveys of African literature which tend to priviledge content over style, there are an increasing number of critics who, working within the parameters of a single writer or region, investigate and endeavour to explain a specific poetic *imaginaire*. For example, Bernard Mouralis has looked at the work of Mongo Béti and of the Zaïrean writer, V.Y. Mudimbé.[18] Roger and Arlette Chemain have concentrated on aspects of Congolese writing and Roger Godard has analysed the mythical universe of three Congolese poets.

Such critics approach their subject from a variety of angles, each contributing their own special experience and insights, yet a common thread can be perceived running through their work. Direct or oblique references to Western, more precisely French models, establish a backdrop against which African writing is implicitly measured. A few examples will illustrate this.

In their Panorama critique de la littérature congolaise contemporaine, the Chemains judge Sony Labou Tansi's desire to change life as "très rimbaldien."[19] This intertextual approach is

problematic firstly because it assumes, without explicitly defining them, Eurocentric criteria. Furthermore, it is questionable to what extent a comparison between Sony Labou Tansi and Arthur Rimbaud is enlightening for the reader of Sony's disconcerting theatre.

It is true that comparisons to French writers are often intended in a complimentary way, as the following quotation with respect this time to a play by Sylvain Bemba will show:

> On doit louer l'auteur d'Euroshima d'avoir retrouvé cette poésie des bas-fonds urbains, ce "fantastique social" des Misérables ou des Mystères de Paris et d'avoir su en restituer l'équivalent actuel et africain. (Panorama 125)

Leaving aside the unconsciously patronising tone and without speculating on the response of the writers themselves to such comments, the fundamental drawback to this comparative approach is that it subverts the very text it purports to explain. The French text or writer is evoked not only as a literary landmark but also as a measure of quality, without giving definition to the basis of that comparison. This has the effect of diverting attention away from the specifically African context which has shaped the text and which distinguishes the writing of Sony Labou Tansi and Sylvain Bemba from Rimbaud's *fin de siècle*

disillusion with society or from Hugo's poetic response to conditions in nineteenth century France.

The Chemains do not hesitate to judge certain authors severely. Their manner recalls the often peremptory style of Dorothy Blair, whose tendency to make unnuanced pronouncements is illustrated by her following assessment of Mariama Bâ's second novel:

> ..the weaknesses of Un chant écarlate, as with the *roman à thèse* in general, arise from the fact that the author has contrived a situation to accommodate her thesis, and then created characters to act out the morality to its melodramatic dénouement. (Senegalese Literature 139)

The Chemains liken Emmanuel Dongala's first novel, Un fusil dans la main, un poème dans la poche, to the strident calls for freedom made by writers and artists under the Third Republic.

> Peut-être le souvenir de la liberté brandissant l'étendard de la révolte sur les barricades de 1830, telle que l'a peinte Delacroix, ou encore Rimbaud symbolisant le Paris de la Commune par l'image de "la rouge courtisane aux seins lourds de bataille", sont-ils pour quelque chose dans cette scène. (Panorama 93)

An interesting feature of this intertextual approach is the assumption that a young writer, (in this case one who completed all his schooling in the Congo and went to France only after spending seven years in the United States, where he obtained an MSc in chemistry) should be so susceptible to artistic

influences from "la Belle Epoque" in France that these would determine the shape and style of his novel. Yet no consideration is given to patterns of artistic expression and narrative techniques from within the writer's own culture, which would surely be a more decisive factor.

The Chemains devote a further eight pages to a predominantly thematic analysis of the novel, which they consider to fall short of the achievements of, amongst others, Zola and Hugo. They regret in particular the many factual "errors " and "inconsistencies". Their final word is

> Quelques mois d'un travail supplémentaire d'élagage avant de le remettre à l'éditeur eûssent sans doute permis à ce premier roman d'Emmanuel Dongala d'être aussi un grand roman. (Panorama 101)

Clearly this opinion was not shared by all, since Un fusil dans la main was awarded the Prix Ladislas Dormandi in 1974 for the best book written in French by a foreigner. The reaction of a young compatriot, Dominique Matanga, writing in La Semaine Africaine, reflects the indignation of African writers at the Western critic's arrogant, albeit it often unconscious, belief in the inviolability of a particular set of aesthetic criteria:

> On ne reconnaît pas les véritables dimensions de l'écriture congolaise sans références hasardeuses et fantaisistes aux mouvements littéraires occidentaux.[20]

In their Panorama critique de la littérature congolaise, the Chemains have attempted to do on a national scale what others have offered on a continental scale; that is, give a schematic and therefore necessarily superficial overview of the richly divergent creative discourses that have emerged from the Congo during the past forty years. Arlette Chemain herself suggests a more fruitful approach in an article published in 1978. Here she applies the structuralist or the psychoanalytic method to specific texts, such as Kourouma's Les soleils des Indépendences or Tchicaya U Tam'Si's poetry.[21]

More recently, in La ville dans le roman africain and more especially in L'imaginaire dans le roman africain, Roger Chemain has developed a different approach.[22] These two works are exceptional in that they take the text as the starting point for an in-depth exploration of certain images and structures of the imaginary mind. Furthermore, where analogy is drawn between features of the African novel and the European tradition, it is not in order to imply value judgements but rather to extend the parameters of the investigation. Gilbert Durand, who wrote the introduction to L'imaginaire dans le roman africain, observes that this is a study of the Francophone

novel, "enfin émancipé de nos idéologies, de nos catégories, de nos philosophies...." (L'imaginaire 9) The choice of Gilbert Durand to introduce his work is not fortuitous, for Chemain's methodological approach is unequivocally psycho- or mythoanalytic. Importantly however, his exploration into the roots of the African *imaginaire* takes full cognisance of each writer's socio-historic context. He concentrates on one *oeuvre* at a time in a series of what could be termed monographs, and then in more rapid studies, shows how certain recurrent structures can be found in other texts.

Roger Godard too has opted for this psychoanalytic approach, calling upon Bachelard's theory of archetypal images as well as African mythology to explore the *imaginaire* of three Congolese poets. Such a multi-facetted approach is fundamental to an understanding of African writing, as will be argued more fully in the following chapter. However, Godard's method is only partially satisfying because his critical perspectives remain firmly grounded in Europe. A hint of this is given in his preface, where he refers to his attempt to "saisir les éléments caractéristiques d'**une esthétique typiquement négro-africaine**". (Trois poètes 6; emphasis added). This sets Godard firmly in Europe, from which perspective African cultures and the rich diversity of the poetic *imaginaire* are contained in a "typically negro-african

aesthetic." Godard has not taken the important critical "leap" that enables the poetic discourse to be studied from a perspective grounded in the realities of its socio-political and cultural context.

The application of Western critical models is widely practised, not only by French but also by other European and American Africanists.[23] While an analysis of English-language critical works with respect to African writing would extend beyond the scope of this study, reference can be made to those who have given attention to French-language writers. Two such Africanists, Gerald Moore and Bernth Lindfors, have been severely castigated by Wole Soyinka in his essay "The critic and society: Barthes, leftocracy and other mythologies."[24] While Soyinka's comment that "certain European critics proceed from the abyss of ignorance on which they must erect a platform" calls for considerable reservation, the central point of his argument holds; that is, these critics examine African writing from an essentially Western view point. Another often quoted critic from across the Atlantic is Albert Gérard. His approach being essentially historical, he gives some interesting insights into the existence of pre-colonial written African texts.[25] However, a comment such as the following, which opens his essay "Preservation of Tradition in African Creative

Writing," indicates how removed at times his standpoint is from Africa.[26]

> The influence of tradition upon the birth and growth of modern literature in sub-Saharan Africa seems at first to have been primarily negative. If we consider the novel as a representative example, critics, both European and African, are unanimous in deploring the deficiencies in character-delineation so conspicuous in most modern African novels. (35)

Such comments highlight the shortcomings of a mode of criticism which views African writing from a standpoint that is firmly grounded in a Western aesthetic.

A last example will illustrate the issues that polarise Western critics and African writers. An important conference was held in May 1989 by CERCLEF on the subject of French-language literatures.[27] It attracted a considerable number of critics and writers from not only Africa and the Indian Ocean islands but also Europe and Canada. From the start, controversial questions such as the notion of "la Francophonie" were addressed and debated in a spirit of frank confrontation. Of more immediate interest for the present discussion was the negro-African workshop, where some 26 papers were presented, 16 of which by Africans.

Lilyan Kesteloot, probably the best-known French Africanist present at the workshop, made her contribution at the first session.[28] The subject was

"La poésie africaine francophone: état actuel et perspectives." Kesteloot attempted to classify poetry across French-speaking sub-Saharan Africa, from Senegal to the Congo. She then proceeded to divide contemporary poets into two categories: "poètes alphabètes" and "poètes professeurs". The former she identified as poets who, unlike the first generation of African writers, had had a "formation incomplète" and whose insufficient mastery of French resulted in clichés, plagiarisms and at best, surprising formulations. The solution she proposed for them was to write in their mother tongue and have their work translated. The "poètes professeurs" were defined as those who have a world conception of poetry, "les vrais héritiers d'une double culture africaine et occidentale," although she conceded that they did at times run the risk of being too academic. Predictably, such evaluations, which assessed poetic expression in terms of Western notions of originality and linguistic norms, evoked sharp reaction from the African participants. As André Bokiba, an academic from Brazzaville, was to point out the next day, there exists an obsession amongst Western critics to identify exceptional artistic creation and to sustain a critical discourse that approaches poetic art from a normative rather than from an experiential basis.

Underpinning this evaluative approach is the system of literary awards introduced by the West. Again, it is not intended to belittle the intentions of the donors nor to underestimate the contribution that the resultant publicity has made in disseminating African writing and helping writers to escape the ghetto-like situation which illiteracy and poverty create in Africa. However, despite the presence of African writers on the adjudicating boards, it is inevitable that those works which do not comply to some degree with Western models and fashions will be precluded. Many would concur with André Bokiba, who sees the award of a European literary prize as signalling the writer's degree of "déracinement par rapport à l'Afrique."[29] It must be recognised that, albeit unintentionally, the large number of prizes awarded in Europe for specifically African or Francophone writing convey with them subtle but nonetheless influential neo-colonial undertones and serve to entrench what Ngugi Wa Thiongo has aptly described as the African's persistent tendency to see himself with the eyes of an outsider.[30]

Reference has been made to the issue of "la Francophonie" which gives rise to polemical debate not only on the part of the French-speaking African states but also among Belgians and French Canadians. The debate is an important one because it reveals the

extent to which world views commonly held in metropolitan France differ fundamentally from those of other French-speaking nations. The confrontation reaches beyond questions of language and economic ties, or hegemony as some would have it, to reveal that the essential factor is one of identity.

It is widely recognised that French speakers from beyond the frontiers of "la hexagone" have a dual, if not multiple, cultural heritage but the profound conflict that this can create is not immediately obvious for those who are born into a primarily mono-cultural environment, particularly one which enjoys a dominant position in the world. For Senghor to advocate cultural "métissage" culminating in some sort of universal civilization, is to gloss over the fact that in many important respects, elements of one culture can survive only at the expense of the other. This is nowhere more true than in the domaine of language, where the passion with which opposing positions are maintained is evidence of how acutely pertinent the issue is.

In Africa the divisions are particularly sharply drawn and the African writer finds himself trapped in a web of contradictory imperatives, both practical and ideological. In literature, these tensions manifest themselves in the text and the metatext, in ways which are not always immediately understood by the Western reader. Central to the issue is the question of

language. This is one of the most important factors that determine not only the way in which writers view themselves but also the reception of African writing in the West.

At the risk of over-simplifying the debate, the opposing stances can be illustrated by turning to the Anglophone zones of Africa. On the one hand are the pragmatists who, like Achebe or Chinweizu, advocate the use of an international language such as English or French. On the other hand are those who would support Ngugi Wa Thiong'o and Adewala Maja-Pearce, who call for the use of African languages in creative writing. Writing in 1985, Maja-Pearce states:

> To write in European languages is, for the African writer, to define his society within European terms of reference. This is necessarily to his disadvantage since it not only places a severe limit on what he can usefully say about his society but, being the language of his oppressor, is automatically hostile to his view of the world.[31]

This echoes the dilemma expressed in the thirties by many French-language African writers, and critics such as Thomas Mélone. The Caribbean poet, Léon Laleau's often quoted poem "Trahison" has lost nothing of its poignancy in this respect:

> Ce coeur obsdédant, qui ne correspond
> Pas à mon langage ou à mes costumes,
> Et sur lequel mordent, comme un crampon,
> Des sentiments d'emprunt et des coutumes
> D'Europe, sentez-vous cette souffrance

Et ce désespoir à nul autre égal
D'apprivoiser, avec des mots de France,
Ce coeur qui m'est venu du Sénégal?

Yet it is perhaps understandable that Western critics and readers view with some impatience, if not cynicism, the stance held by Ngugi or Maja-Pearce, that Africans should use their mother tongue for creative writing. From a Western perspective, practical considerations of readership and publishing militate overwhelmingly in favour of a "universal" language such as French or English. But this is to reduce language to a communicative function and to ignore the distinction between *langue* and *parole*, which the socio- and psycholinguists have explored. At this level, language becomes inextricably intertwined with experiential and ideological issues.

Today in sub-Saharan Africa the position held by French-language writers is ambiguous, especially in comparison with the more extreme stance maintained by many Anglophones, against the hegemony of European languages. The reasons for this may in part be attributed to the different attitudes towards African languages shown by the colonial administrations. For example, France imposed the use of French throughout the colonial schooling and administrative systems, firmly entrenching it as both a status symbol and a means to advancement. By contrast, in the British colonies, African languages were used in junior

schools and the transcription of vernacular languages was encouraged. Furthermore, while difficult to measure, the French reverance for their language undoubtedly conveyed itself to their students and in part explains pronouncements such as that of Senghor, who defended his use of French in passionate terms: "Car je sais ses ressources pour l'avoir goûté, mâché, enseigné, et qu'il est la langue des dieux."[32]

Such a stance has understandably aroused the ire of many African writers, particularly Anglophone, who see it as a sign of acculturation, of alienation and even capitulation to European hegemony. Nevertheless, today most Francophone African writers seem to have made their peace with French. Indeed, they express some irritation at being frequently asked by Western critics whether they are able to express satisfactorily their deepest thoughts in a "borrowed" language. For many, the language debate has the effect of clouding more important issues. Tchicaya U Tam'Si's stance was that: "Il faut être apatride de la langue pour être de plein-pied au coeur d'une autre quête plus longue."[33]

The historical and socio-cultural background to the language debate in Francophone Africa has been documented by Mouralis in Littérature et développement. The range of positions held amongst Africans writing in French has also been frequently discussed by leading Africanists. However, awareness

of the complexities of the issue is generally confined to the relatively small circle of Westerners who have made a specialised study of African writing. As far as the general reading public is concerned, many find it difficult to condone the "liberties" which African writers take with the French language, as they adapt it to make it a tool capable of expressing their specific experience and world view. Even for those who are well-disposed towards the African affirmation of political and cultural independence, it is not always easy to accept that the French language is not the exclusive property of the French nation. Innovative manipulation of the French language's rich resources is often perceived negatively as the violation of linguistic canon.

From the African perspective, the *parole africaine* is profoundly ambiguous, reflecting a love-hate relationship characteristic of many African writers' rapport with the French language. Sony Labou Tansi, whose mastery of French is all the more extraordinary in that he first came in contact with it when he began his secondary schooling in the Congo, replies in his own inimitable way to the familiar accusation that "les Africains abâtardisent et vampirisent la langue française."[34]

> Je me considère comme un voleur de conscience. Pour la langue française c'est un choix. C'est un rapport d'amour que j'ai avec cette langue.

> Et dans un rapport d'amour, chacun fait l'amour selon son talent et sa générosité.

Contemporary African writing then often leaves the French reading public feeling uncomfortable; readers find disconcerting the neologisms, the unfamiliar syntactical structures and the strange idioms. This discourse is a far cry from the romantic exoticism that conjures up visions of far away places. Indeed, it raises questions that challenge the inviolability of their place in the world.

It is important, however, to qualify the aforegoing by noting a trend in France, evident since the late eighties, towards an increasing degree of tolerance regarding language issues. The traditionally normative approach which, since the time of Vaugelas had endeavoured to prescribe rules of "good taste" is being modified by a concern to describe actual usage. Borrowings, be they from English or from Africa, are less vehemently repudiated. Regionalisms are gaining respectability and variations are legitimised by the commercial success of such publications as the Dictionnaire du français Plus, which devotes considerable attention to linguistic items peculiar to Canada or Quebec. In the domain of teaching French as a foreign language, there is some evidence that the bastion of metropolitan French is being challenged.[35]

Writing in Diagonales in 1991, Claude Oliviéri, former Coordinator for Africa at the Ministry of Foreign Affair's Direction Générale des Relations Culturelles, Scientifiques et Techniques, makes an eloquent defense of linguistic variations in African writing.[36] He points out that the creative exploration of the French language's expressive potential places the African writer in a position of giver instead of the traditional receiver.

> Quelle plus grande satisfaction pour un écrivain francophone du Sud que de pouvoir dire à un francophone de langue maternelle: "Regarde-moi: je suis capable d'écrire dans une langue plus belle que celle que tu m'as apprise, c'est le cadeau que je te voulais faire."

At the political and economic level, France's changing relationship with the Francophone world and the development of structures such as the Sommets de Chefs d'Etat et de Gouvernement, which was instituted in 1986, has had further repercussions regarding the way the French people view themselves in relation to the rest of the world.

Closer to home, and certainly of more pertinence to the majority of the French people, is the emergence of the European Community. The disintegration of previously rigid economic and political frontiers has created among the partners a more international consciousness and has had important ramifications with

respect to the traditional relationship between language, literature and national identity.

However, while the notion of plurality establishes itself in cultural and economic spheres, school and university programmes continue to reflect a predominantly monopolistic notion of literature. The views of Roger Fayolle are significant in this regard, since his formation and experience make him eminently well qualified to pronounce upon a system which he knows from the inside.[37] Fayolle was a student of the prestigious Ecole Normale Supérieure (E.N.S.), where he later returned to teach. He was Professor of French Literature at the E.N.S. and is presently Professor of French at Paris IV - La Sorbonne. He received an education typical of his contemporaries for whom, in his words, the study of the classics was viewed as the "voie royale de la sélection."[38] While there have been considerable reforms to the French educational system over the past fifty years, Fayolle observes that priorities have not changed significantly; emphasis remains focussed on teaching the masterpieces of French literature, whose line of descendence can be traced back to the literature of antiquity. Outside of this illustrious body of writing, is only "ignorance ou barbarie." Fayolle goes on to say:

> Ainsi s'est trouvé intériorisé, dans l'esprit de la plupart des élites sélectionnées par notre système scolaire et universitaire, par la voie (et la voix) des études littéraires un imperturbable sentiment de supériorité par rapport à tout ce qui n'est pas l'univers culturel franco-latino-grec (d'ailleurs perçu à travers quelques archétypes réducteurs). Sentiment de supériorité auquel l'expansion de l'impérialisme française au cours du siècle dernier offrait sur le terrain confirmation pratique et occasion commode de se manifester. Beaucoup d'entre nous ont, innocemment et naïvement, retiré d'une telle formation beaucoup plus de certitudes que de curiosités, plus d'orgueil que de modestie et, au mieux (ou au pis?) un certain esprit de mission: l'envie d'apporter aux ignorants et aux barbares la connaissance de la vraie beauté et de la vraie sagesse. (37)

Fortunately there is enough evidence of exceptions to this rule to qualify Fayolle's acerbic observations, which undoubtedly have offended many of the French intellectual and professional elite. Nevertheless, a closer look at educational programmes, particularly at the tertiary level, gives credance to his assertions.

A full and comprehensive survey of school literature programmes and textbooks in France would be beyond the scope of this study. In general however, it can be said that little importance is given to French-language literatures from Africa. They are not taught systematically and those texts that do appear on the programme are predominantly the "classics" from the first generation of writers, such as the poetry of Senghor, Bernard Diop's folk tales or Enfant noir by Camara Laye. This is perhaps understandable, since

such texts are amongst the least disconcerting for scholars who have not been exposed to other aesthetic systems. Little or no attention is given to contemporary African writing. Certainly the names of Werewere Liking or Williams Sassine or even Sony Labou Tansi and Henri Lopes, who enjoy a significant reputation in France, would not elicit much response from the average French lycéen.[39]

The more autonomous university programmes allow for a degree of flexibility in the courses that they offer and many universities have options in Francophone or African literatures, usually at the level of Masters or the DEA (the first part of doctorial studies). At some universities, interest in African literatures is given particular impetus thanks to the efforts of well-known Africanists, who work in comparative isolation usually within the departments of French or Comparative Literature. For example, Bernard Mouralis is at the University of Lille III and Arlette Chemain is at the University of Nice. However, for the most part, African literatures do not form part of a systematically structured programme. According to Bernard Mouralis, this is "une discipline fragile et pas encore vraiment reconnue."[40] His view is confirmed by the fact that in 1985 there were less than 10 doctorats d'Etat on a subject relating to African literatures.[41]

It is important to note that certain universities have research centres devoted to Francophone or African literatures. The best-known of these are in Paris and they provide the working base for a relatively small circle of French Africanists. Professors Robert Jouanny and Jacques Chevrier have long been associated with C.E.R.C.L.E.F. (Centre d'Etudes et de Recherches sur les Civilisations, Langues et Littératures d'Expression Francaise), which is based at Paris XII-Val de Marne. This Centre was founded in 1979 and has been responsible for two major Francophone conferences as well as frequent smaller colloquies. It disseminates information, encourages research and runs courses in Franc[illegible]ne literatures. In the Department of General and Comparative Literature at Paris III-la Sorbonne Nouvelle, interest in African writing is stimulated by Professor Daniel-Henri Pageaux while a Centre d'Etudes Francophones at the University of Paris XIII (Paris-Nord) is headed by Professsor Jean-Louis Joubert. At the University of Paris IV-La Sorbonne, a new Centre International d'Etudes Francophones (C.I.E.F.) was created in 1990. The President of C.I.E.F.'s administrative council is Professor Robert Jouanny. There are several other research centres in Paris which are not attached to a university, such as C.H.E.A.M. (Centre de Hautes Etudes sur l'Afrique et l'Asie Modernes), the Centre d'Etudes Africaines, the Centre de Recherches

Africaines, as well as libraries such as that of the Centre d'Etudes et de Documentation sur l'Afrique et l'Outre-Mer (C.E.D.A.O.M.), the libraries at the Musée de l'Homme and the Académie des Sciences d'Outre-Mer, the documentation centre at (Radio France Internationale (R.F.I.) and the Bibliothèque Nationale. Apart from the latter, these libraries and research centres are frequented by a relatively small and specialised public, many of whom are foreign students and researchers.

Outside of Paris, the most significant centre for African studies is at the University of Bordeaux. Here the Centre d'Etude d'Afrique Noire (C.E.A.N.), founded in 1958, functions within the larger framework of the Institut d'Etudes Politiques. It offers post-graduate studies leading to a doctorate in African Studies and, although as its situation suggests, it is primarily concerned with historical, socio-political and economic issues, cultural life and teaching comprises one of the fourteen areas of research. Professor Alain Ricard, Director of Research at the National Research Centre (C.N.R.S.) and responsible for the literature, language and cultural section, has been affected to the C.E.A.N. He has published widely in the domain of African literatures, especially theatre.

When viewed in the context of some 50 major universities and research centres in France, the

relatively minor implantation of Francophone-African studies can be appreciated. Furthemore, as the names of many of these research centres indicate, African literatures often fall within the wider parameters of Francophone or socio-political studies.

It is perhaps understandable that African literatures appeal to a relatively small number of students and teachers. Unlike African art, music and sculpture, which are perhaps more readily integrated into Western systems of artistic appreciation, African writing not only challenges the literary discourse and canon of metroplitan French literature but also the study and appreciation of it requires considerable effort. In order to analyse the creative text itself, it is necessary to acquire a solid understanding of the historic and socio-cultural context. Furthermore, it is a field that is expanding rapidly and it is not easy to keep abreast of contemporary African creative writing nor of the critical and scientific works which are progressively challenging the monopoly until now held by Western critical discourse.

Interest in African literatures is of course not confined to academic circles and some of the most dynamic work on promoting African theatre in particular comes from other quarters.

Reference has already been made to the Festival International des Francophonies in Limousin. The 8th

Festival was held in September-October 1991 and a brief account of it will give some idea how it has grown into an important cultural event, attracting wide national and international attention. In all some 182 artists from 14 countries participated, of whom 25 were writers and producers with an established reputation. (10 from sub-Saharan Africa, 6 from Canada, 4 from the Maghreb, 2 from France and one from each of Belguim, Reunion, Martinique and Italy). The Festival enjoys considerable official support, with 72 invited guests representing Ministeries, U.N.E.S.C.O., cultural centres, arts councils and cultural associations. During the 12 days of the Festival, over 50 theatrical and musical performances, poetry readings and other cultural activities took place, as well as 28 presentations in schools and 15 screenings of Francophone films. An interesting feature were the four artistic workshops. These activities took place not only in Limoges, the capital town of Limousin where the Festival first began, but also in 11 towns in the region. An important new dimension has been added to the Festival, with five of the theatrical groups undertaking tours during the course of the year to other French centres and, in the case of Werewere Liking's Ki-Yi Mbock troup, to Berlin, Belgium and Mexico. In Limousin itself, the Festival attracted audiences from all over the world

and more than 8 000 places were taken for the theatrical performances alone.

The emphasis of the Festival is twofold: firstly on the creation and development of international dialogue and secondly, on creativity. The Festival not only gives established artists the opportunity to present new works but also launches young, as yet unknown writers. In order to offer conditions conducive to writing, since 1988 invited writers have been hosted at Limoges for three months prior to the Festival as "writers in residence." Given the material and political constraints under which many, especially African, writers live and work, this provides a valuable opportunity to reflect and write, culminating usually in a publication or performance during the Festival.[42] The concept is to be expanded next year with the opening of the "Maison des Francophonies" which will be a house accommodating four writers or artists for the duration of the Festival. There will be offices, a conference room, a library and video room, all with a view to facilitating dialogue and creative composition.

The work of the Festival is not confined to 12 days of cultural activities during September-October of each year. Many of the texts read or produced during the Festival are later published and a journal, Le Traversier, keeps national and international subscribers informed of cultural events in the

Francophone world and of activies surrounding the Festival itself.

The Festival attracts considerable attention from the media. The local and national radio and television networks broadcast interviews with the artists and the organisers, poetry and play readings and discussions. Programmes are transmitted internationally to Europe and on Radio France Internationale.

If the Festival International des Francophonies has been discussed at some length, it is in order to show the degree of commitment and innovation on the part of a relatively small group of organisers, directed by Monique Blin. By giving material support to writers from the Francophone world, they have contributed significantly both to creative production and equally importantly, to the French public's awareness and appreciation of other world views and aesthetic criteria.

Other teams of people, who are equally committed to the promotion of African writing, work within the structures of Radio France Internationale. Apart from the comprehensive archives manned by Chantal Nourrit, French-language literatures are disseminated in a variety of ways to listeners both in France and across the Francophone world. The most influential has undoubtedly been the holding of radio competitions

such as the Concours Théâtral Interafricain and the Concours Radiophonique de la Meilleure Nouvelle de Langue Française. The former has perhaps had the greatest impact and it is worth looking more closely at its history and activities.

Begun in 1968, the 18th Concours was held in 1991. Although the latest available full report is of the 14th Concours, this is adequate to show the growing interest that the programme inspires. It is run in conjunction with 22 African radio stations, A.C.C.T. and U.N.E.S.C.O. as well as the Ministry of Cooperation and Development and the Institut Culturel Africain. During an initial selection procedure, each play is read by two people, one of whom is either a university person or a dramatist from Africa. The winners are chosen by an international panel of judges, of whom two thirds are African. The panel is headed by the well-known Mauritian poet, Edouard Maunick. The public's participation is enlisted by means of a listeners' prize.

For the first Concours, 125 manuscripts were submitted from 14 countries. This grew to 4 871 manuscripts from 25 countries for the 14th Concours. Writers from the Maghreb participated for the first time in the 12th Concours, signifying an important new stage in Franco-Maghrebian relations.[43] The prizes in 1991 comprised a total of 45 000 FF, a study bursary in France for the winner, and 10 000 FF worth of

equipment for the theatrical group winning the "Théâtre vivant" section. Such prizes are particularly attractive to writers who struggle under difficult material conditions in most African countries. However, of equal if not greater value is the international exposure that is assured the winners: the plays that reach the finals are recorded in the author's own country to be diffused over all the radio stations of Africa and the Indian Ocean associated with the Concours. Many of these plays are later edited by, amongst others, Harmattan in the revue Théâtre Sud. One of the plays is produced on video and the winning play is produced for the stage and sent on tour through several African and European countries. In addition, the winning plays reach large audiences at the Festival International at Limoges where, since 1988, a theatrical workshop called Atelier Théâtre et Radio is run. Here professionals from many different countries meet and work together, with special emphasis on radiophonic theatre.

The stated aim of the Concours Théâtral Interafricain is two-fold: to make the authors better known and also to "amener le plus grand nombre d'auteurs à SE connaître, à s'authentifier."[44] The somewhat paternalistic ring of this statement in Jean Delpierres' report on the 14th Concours is better understood if read in the light of the preceding paragraph:

> Comme nous l'avons fait les années précédentes, nous engageons les auteurs à faire table-rase de tout ce qu'ils ont appris d'une culture d'importation plus ou moins bien assimilée, pour rechercher la seule vraie valeur: l'authenticité. (20)

Delpierres' report calls for some comment. The first section gives statistics relating to the number of manuscripts submitted each year since the first Concours, followed by the country of origin, the age and profession of the authors and the number of women writers. Delpierres then analyses the plays primarily in terms of thematic content. A single-page report considers the comments on form and style made by readers at the first round of selection. Essentially they criticise the reliance on imported models, stereotyped or archetypal characters and the negative influence of popular romantic picture-story type novels.

The readers' assessments are detailed in a table of statistics. The manuscripts received from the various countries for the 14th Concours are put into five categories, ranging from good to worthless. Overall, 4,6% were judged to be good, 12% fairly good, 12,3% mediocre, 37,1 very mediocre and 34% worthless. Previous Concours reflect a similar pattern, whereby the "good" category ranges from between 6,8% and 10,3% and the "worthless" from 32,3% to 38,8%.

This sort of judgement raises questions regarding the criteria or critical canon by which the

manuscripts were judged, bearing in mind that the readers were not necessarily African. It is undoubtedly a concrete example of African writing being assessed in terms of predominantly Eurocentric criteria.

These reservations notwithstanding, the thematic analysis of the manuscripts reveals some interesting trends. The importance of the category "moeurs" is particularly significant. This category includes plots centering around questions of mariage, inter-personal, inter-family or inter-social relationships and acts of violence or natural catastrophies. Statistics for the past seven Concours put this category in the region of 70% whereas, by way of contrast, political themes comprised between 6,7% and 14,7%. The other five categories are history, religion-magic (sic), detective thrillers, poetry-fantasy and legends-tales. The general picture that emerges from this analysis is that the plots are uncontroversial with little or no attempt to deal with real issues in contemporary Africa.

It would appear then that, notwithstanding the undefined critical parameters used by the readers, there is some justification for the Concours' second objective as defined by Delpierres, that is, to encourage authentic expression. A real need has been identified in the domain of popular African writing,

bearing in mind that the majority of the participants in the Concours are non-professionals.

The concern to promote authentic expression is concretised by an evaluative procedure whereby manuscripts judged to be not quite good enough to go forward to the second round of selection are broadcast in the programme "Première Chance sur les Ondes" and others which show some potential are indicated as such to the author in order to encourage him or her to continue writing.

Whatever the shortcomings of the Concours system, it is noteworthy that many of today's well-known writers first came to the public's attention through winning an award and receiving the publicity, the encouragement and the material assistance needed to continue writing. Among these can be cited Guy Menga who won the first Concours, Guillaume Oyono Mbia who won awards in the second and third Concours and in particular Sony Labou Tansi who won awards in the sixth, eighth, ninth, tenth and twelfth Concours.

Mention must be made of another activity within R.F.I. whereby writing from Africa and the Diaspora is promoted. This is the creation of the "Archives sonores", a collection of records compiled by Jacqueline Sorel, Georges Godebertan and their technical team, together with members of C.L.E.F. (Club des Lecteurs d'Expression Française). Readings from African, Caribbean and Indian Ocean Island

literatures are accompanied by comments and reminiscences by the authors themselves, so lending a note of lively authenticity to the archives. Each is accompanied by a booklet containing biographical and bibliographical information. These records are invaluable to teachers and students and, while for a long time they were not available commercially nor widely advertised, more recently a start has been made to have them produced on tape and marketed by Hatier International, an important publisher of French text books and language manuals.

At this point, mention must be made of Gabriel Garran's Théâtre International de Langue Française (T.I.L.F.) which has close associations with both the Concours Théâtral Inter-Africain and the Festival International des Francophonies. Indeed, since 1985, T.I.L.F. has staged many of the prize-winning plays. Gabriel Garron and his team are untiring in their efforts to promote French-language theatre. This dynamic and innovative company sees in the creativity of the Francophone world a revitalising source of inspiration for French theatre. Their productions defy the norms of classic theatre and confront audiences with a vigorous and challenging expression of other *imaginaires* and other forms of dramatic expression. A personal friend of many African writers, Garran works in close association with the

playwright. A recent, highly successful example was the staging in 1988 of Tchicaya U Tam'Si's Le bal de N'Dinga.

Sadly, U Tam'Si died shortly before the first performance but, with two fellow Congolese, Marius Yelolo and Pascal N'Zonzi playing the leading roles, it was widely acclaimed in both France and Africa. To mark the anniversary of U Tam'Si's death, T.I.L.F. took the play on a tour of Africa during the course of 1989, performing in the Camerocns, the Central African Republic, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea, Tchad, Zaïre and the Congo Republic.

Although financial and material constraints prevent T.I.L.F. from touring as frequently as Garran and his team would like to, through its varied activities it is indeed the "nomadic" theatre that it aims to be. Primarily concerned with offering audiences plays from other zones of the French-speaking world, it has staged African theatre in Quebec, Brussels and Paris, Belgian theatre in Paris, Canadian theatre in Paris and Belgium, Indian Island and Carribean theatre in Paris. It works in association with artistic and theatrical groups in Canada, Belgium and Africa and participates in international play-writing contests. One of its objectives is to create a centre in Paris to bring together writers and the public.

T.I.L.F.'s activities are not confined to theatrical productions. The "Parloir" has been conceived, where a text is read by a group of actors and this is followed by discussions with the audience, all in the presence of the author. Following upon a "Parloir Africain et Malgache", held at the Festival of Avignon in 1986, and a "Parloir Africain" held in Bruxelles in the same year, O Saisons, O Congo was presented in Paris in 1988. Here once a week for five weeks, an unpublished text by a Congolese author was presented and Bernard Magnier of C.L.E.F. chaired the debate which followed. The programme culminated in a round table discussion of Tchicaya U Tam'Si's writing. In 1990 a "Parloir Maghrébin" offered texts from Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia.

Yet another inter-cultural exchange has been developed in the form of theatrical training workshops, the first of which was held in Rabat in 1988. Others are planned for the Congo, Mauritania, the Cameroons, Tchad and the Central African Republic. The aim is to expose national troups to European theatrical techniques and to offer members of T.I.L.F. insight into the culture and theatrical practices of the countries they visit.

In the context of French theatre as a whole, the efforts of T.I.L.F. do not make a great impact, despite the acclaim which their performances have received in the Press. However, T.I.L.F. represents

an enriching intercultural meeting point and its activities challenge a narrow and chauvinistic view of art and language. In the words of Garran, "La langue n'est pas un patrimoine mais un espace contemporain."[45]

The relatively small groups of writers, critics and readers of African literatures find themselves working very much in isolation and it is here that various cultural and literary associations play an important role. Generally their memberships are small and their administrative committees are very often associated with a university or a research centre. However, a look at their list of subscribers or contributors shows that they have international support, with a circulation list including in particular Belgium, the Netherlands, Italy and Germany, the U.S.A. and Canada, the Caribbean and Indian Ocean islands, most of Francophone Africa and to a lesser extent Anglophone Africa. It must however be conceded that these countries are generally represented by a handfull of people, usually academics. One such association which is of some long standing is the Association des Ecrivains de Langue Francaise (A.D.E.L.F.) A.D.E.L.F. boasts the patronage of the President of the French Republic as well as that of the Presidents of Francophone African States, Ambassadors from Francophone Europe and Canada

and various Ministries. Its Committee of Honour comprises leading personalities from the Alliance Française, the Académie Goncourt and the Académie Française, and its members are writers or academics of some distinction.

The weight of governmental and essentially French representation on committees and amongst members makes A.D.E.L.F.'s position not without controversy and it has been accused of imperialism or neo-imperialism by non other than Sekou Traoré.[46] However, its contribution to the world of French-language writing is recognised by such leading African writers as Jacques Rabemananjara, Sony Labou Tansi and Rachid Mimouni, to mention but three. One of A.D.E.L.F.'s primary objectives being to act as a link between French-language writers throughout the world, it publishes regular bibliographies, has a considerable library, organises frequent colloquies, edits a small review entitled Lettres et Cultures de Langue Française and awards 10 literary prizes, which are held in esteem by most writers.

Less prestigious, but enjoying wider membership among writers, academics and researchers throughout the Francophone world, is the Association pour l'Etude des Littératures Africaines (A.P.E.L.A.). Although A.P.E.L.A. has well-known Africanists such as Claude Wauthier, Bernard Mouralis and Jacques Chevrier on its central committee, its administrative structure is

primarily French orientated, with only three of the twenty members of the Administrative Council being from Africa. Nevertheless, A.P.E.L.A. provides a very valuable information service, keeping its subscribers informed of conferences, new publications and research projects. Each year it organises an important conference in France which is well supported by participants from Europe and Africa.

C.L.E.F. (Club des Lecteurs d'Expression Française) is another association that enjoys governmental support, primarily from the Ministries of Cooperation and Development and of Foreign Affairs. Its objective is to make French-language literatures from Africa better known. To this end, and with the advantage of considerable funding, it creates itinerant exhibitions that tour the Francophone world and it is responsible for editing the review Notre Librairie. C.L.E.F. works closely with Radio France Internationale and it is able to use French Embassies and Cultural Centres to establish communication channels. Although within France C.L.E.F.'s influence is limited, it stimulates debate around contemporary issues among writers and critics in the Francophone world.

Notre Librairie is particularly interesting in this respect. This review makes no claim to being an academic research journal. It aims at a more general readership and as such it has contributed in no small

way to making African writing more widely known and better understood. An interesting feature of recent years is the degree to which priority is given to articles by African writers and critics. This contrasts with issues from the seventies or early eighties, where most critical articles are by French Africanists and the African voice is heard primarily through interviews. Issues dating from the early eighties have given importance to regional surveys and it publishes regular bibliographies of writing from Africa and the Diaspora.

The picture that emerges from the aforegoing investigation into the reception of French-language literatures, particularly African, by the French academic world and the reading public is that, while there are areas of dynamic activity, these remain for the most part isolated. As yet, African writing has made only a slight impression on the metropolitan French literary world. Perhaps the most concrete proof of this can be had by looking at publication figures.

Sylvène Samba directs EDITAF, one of the few Africain publishing houses in Paris. In an interview with La Semaine Africaine, he makes mention of 1 500 publishers in Paris of which only six are African.[47] From another perspective, Notre Librairie lists 79 publishing houses in France who have published French-language African texts.[48] Of these

only approximately 25 can be said to have edited a significant number of texts. But perhaps the clearest indication of the space that African literature enjoys in the publishing world can be had from a monthly bibliographical review such as Livres de France. This review, produced by the Cercle de la Librairie, gives details of the latest publications by all the major and most of the minor publishing houses in France. The table below details the number of French-language titles from Africa, the Indian Ocean Islands and the Caribbean, recorded for the months October 1991 to February 1992 under the four rubrics "Poésie", "Théâtre", "Roman, Nouvelles, Récit, Conte" and "Roman en poche".

FRENCH-LANGUAGE LITERATURE OF AFRICAN, INDIAN OCEAN ISLANDS OR CARIBBEAN ORIGIN PUBLISHED BETWEEN OCTOBER 1991 - FEBRUARY 1992

Country of origin	Number of books published				
	Oct. 1991	N	Dec. 1991	Jan. 1992	Feb. 1992
Maghreb	3	1	4	1	3
sub-Saharan Africa:					
a Francophone	0	0	1	2	1
b Other	1	0	0	0	2
Indian Ocean Islands	0	0	1	0	0
Caribbean	0	0	2	0	0
Total	**4**	**2**	**8**	**3**	**6**

As these figures show, the total number of French-language titles from Africa, the Indian Ocean Islands and the Caribbean, published during this period, represents between 0,44% and 2,8% of the total number of publications listed under the four rubrics in question.

Another indication of the interest, or lack of it, accorded in metropolitan France to African writing is given by the list of best-sellers published in the same monthly review.[49] Over a period of eight months from April 1991, African writing was represented by Tahar Ben Jalloun's Les yeux baissés and Malin Maalouf's Le jardin des lumières, which each figured twice on the list of the ten best-selling novels. There were no African authors in the "Essais/Documents" section.

It is worth pausing to speculate as to the reason for the lack of interest in, if not resistance to, French-language writing from Africa, on the part of French academics and the reading public in general. Without conducting an in-depth survey of French opinion, accompanied by a consideration of historical, political and social factors, any conclusions reached here must remain speculative. However, there is enough evidence to indicate some broad directions.

There are perhaps two root factors, which can be loosely termed "cultural" and "textual". The former constitutes something of an impasse, whereby society's

ignorance of African writing is perpetuated by the majority of society's informants (those determining the information relayed by the mass medias and the educational system) are themselves uninformed about the subject. Added to this is the fact that French national identity is integrally bound up with a specific cultural and literary heritage, so that to challenge the canon of the latter is to threaten the former. Furthermore, complex and often contradictory attitudes towards Africa, the aftermath of France's colonial history, contribute to the problematic. These are often exacerbated by contemporary issues of race. While the laws of censorship are not evoked today as they were in the past, to silence the often aggressive rebukes expressed directly or indirectly by African writers, nevertheless it is certain that at least part of the French public reacts negatively to this sort of criticism, if only by choosing not to read the works.

"Textual" factors relate to the demands made on the reader by the African texts themselves; the elements of language, form and image which challenge familiar reading habits and aesthetic norms. The frequency with which critics apply the term "hermetic" to African texts is a measure of the difficulties which they pose for the non-African reader.

Yet the challenge that African writing represents need not be seen as a threat to European cultural

traditions. On the contrary, as the Moroccan Ben Jelloun has said, its existence does honour to the French world of letters. Much would be gained by more people sharing the experience related by Professor Roger Fayolle, when a group of students at the University of Paris III - la Sorbonne Nouvelle were offered a module on literatures from Africa and the Maghreb.[50] They appreciated above all the exposure to a "d'ailleurs", an "elsewhere", that carried with it a new and important vision.

The acceptance of cultural diversity and of other world views calls for a flexible, multi-facetted approach. It is not easy to step aside in order to consider objectively the acquired value systems and mental processes that have shaped one's understanding of the human condition. Nor is it possible, or even desirable, to begin from a *degré zéro*. To meet the "other" in a mutually enriching exchange, there must be a willingness to enter another *imaginaire*. For that, one needs all the keys at one's disposal. Therein lies the real challenge that African literatures represent to the Western world.

NOTES

1. Locha Mateso, La littérature africaine et sa critique (Paris: A.C.C.T.- Khartala, 1986).

2. Thomas Melone, "La critique littéraire et les problèmes du langage: point de vue d'un Africain," Présence Africaine 73 (1970): 3-19.

3. Frantz Fanon, "Racisme et culture," Présence Africaine 8-9-10 (1956): 122-31.

4. The echoing of Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's Decolonising the Mind is not unintentional. His vigorous call for resistance to European influences in Africa and his concern for Africa-centered educational and cultural structures, demonstrates his affinity to the Negritude poets, despite his criticism of aspects of the Negritude ideology.

5. Bernard Mouralis, Littérature et développement (Paris: A.C.C.T./Silex, 1984). Bernard Mouralis has taught in several universities in sub-Saharan Africa. He is currently director of the Collection A3 for Silex, a publishing house founded and directed by the Cameroonian poet and dramatist, Paul Akeyo. The Collection A3 is devoted to critical works relating to African, Black American and West Indian writing.

6. In the following critique of the critical writing of well-known French Africanists, it must be emphasised that the intention is in no way to minimise the great contribution that they have made in the field of African literatures. Critics such as Lilyan Kesteloot, critic-historian Robert Cornevin, Roger Chemain, Arlette Chemain-Degrange and many others, have devoted the major part of their academic life to researching African writing and to making these literatures better known and understood in both Africa and the Western world. For this they are appreciated and respected by African writers who, nevertheless, do not hesitate to challenge theories which they consider to be controversial.

7. Jacques Chevrier, Littérature nègre (Paris: Armand Colin, 1984). The 1974 edition of this work received an award from the Académie Française in 1975. Jacques Chevrier, who has worked in several Francophone countries of Africa, has researched and published widely in

the field of French- language writing from Africa. He is Professor of Comparative Literature and African Literature at the Universities of Paris III and Paris XII and Assistant Director of CERCLEF (Centre d'Etudes et de Recherches sur les Civilisations, Langues et Littératures d'Expression Française). He directs the collection "Monde noir Poche" at Hatier.

8. Chevrier's title can be compared with that of other significant critical works published since the late seventies:

Patrick Mérand, Séwanou Dabla, Guide de littérature africaine (Paris: A.C.C.T./Harmattan, 1979); Hans Zell, Carol Bundy and Virginia Coulon A New Reader's Guide to African Literature (comprend la littérature africaine francophone) (London: Heinemann, 1983); Dorothy Blair African Literature in French (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1976); Christophe Dailly et Barthélémy Kotchy, Propos sur la littérature négro-africaine (Abidjan: CEDA, 1984); Iyay Kimoni, Destin de la littérature négro-africaine ou problématique d'une culture (Sherbroke: Naaman, 1985); B. Lecherbonnier, Initiation à la littérature négro-africaine (Paris: Nathan, 1977); Guy Midiohouan, L'idéologie dans la littérature négro-africaine d'expression française (Paris: Harmattan, 1986); Pius Ngandu Nkashama, Comprendre la littérature africaine écrite en langue française: la poésie, le roman le théâtre (Issy les Moulineaux: Editions Saint-Paul, 1979).

Significant exceptions to this expression of a global approach to writing from Africa are Robert Cornevin's Littératures d'Afrique noire de langue française (Paris: P.U.F. 1976), Alain Rouch and Gérard Clavreuil's critical bibliography, Littératures nationales d'écriture française (Paris: Bordas, 1986).

9. An analysis of existing critical works relating to African writing shows further evidence of a predominantly globalising approach on the part of the critics. One significant feature is the small number of existing monographs. They have, for the most part, been published in collections destined for school or university use, offering a limited number of studies on specific subjects such as oral literature or the analysis of "classic", first generation texts. An indication of the importance given to general critical works as compared with the study of individual authors, can be obtained from a survey of 2 500 French-language titles from sub-Saharan Africa published

by Notre Librairie 94 (1988). General critical works, including those of the early sixties by Janheinz Jahn, number 107; of those, 9 are devoted to poetry, 19 to the novel and 15 to theatre, but in each category they cover works from throughout sub-Saharan Africa. By contrast, only 27 titles deal with one specific country and it is interesting to note that of those, half have been published since 1980. Similarly, only 74 titles are devoted to a single author, 45 of which have been published since 1980. A particularly striking feature is that 62 of the studies concern writers of the first generation, 20 being devoted to Léopold Senghor. Another significant aspect is the importance given to anthologies: 38 general anthologies of African writing are listed, the great majority of which have been published in France. By contrast, of the 33 anthologies devoted to a single country, 26 have been published by African publishing houses, mostly during the '70's.

The general picture that emerges from these statistics is that, up until the last decade, African literatures have been perceived in global, non-differentiated terms by the majority of critics.

10. Notre Librairie 78 (janv. - mars, 1985). This review, which enjoys the patronage of the Ministère des Affaires Etrangères and the Ministère de la Coopération et du Développement, has published many articles by such well-known French Africanists as Jacques Chevrier, Claude Wauthier and Daniel-Henri Pageaux. Important African writers who have regularly participated include Caya Makhele, Pius Ngandu Nkashama, Locha Mateso, Tahar Bekri and many others.

11. The articles in question are:
Daniel-Henri Pageaux, "Entre le renouveau et la modernité," 31-36; Jacques Chevrier, "Le roman dans tous ses états," 37-46; Nicolas Martin-Granel, "Le crier-écrire," 47-55.

12. Es'kia Mphahlele, "Negritude revisited," The African Image (N.Y.: Praeger Publishers, 1974) 82, 87.

13. Sony Labou Tansi, "Brouillon de lettre à ceux qui luttent en faveur d'une culture nationale ou spectacle et contact de cultures," La Semaine Africaine 1468 (14-20 jan. 1982): 2,10.

14. See in particular:
Denise Paulme, La mère dévorante: essai sur la morphologie des contes afr cains (Paris: Gallimard, 1976); Geneviève Calame-Griaule, Ethnologie et Langage: La parole chez les Dogon (Paris: Gallimard, 1965) and Langage et cultures africaines (Paris: Maspéro, 1977); Marcel Griaule, Masques dogons (Paris: Institut d'Ethnologie, 1938).

15. See in particular:
Le théâtre en Afrique noire et à Madagascar (Paris: Le livre africain, 1970) and Littératures d'Afrique noire de langue française (Paris: P.U.F., 1976). Robert Cornevin was for many years President of A.D.E.L.F. (Association des Ecrivains de Langue Française).

16. Author of Littérature négro-africaine d'expression française (Paris: Le livre africain, 1966) and Mutation des mythes traditionnels africains dans la littérature moderne (Limoges: Publ de Trames, U. de Limoges, 1977).

17. This is understood in the sense of *littérarité*, as defined by Jakobson, Todorov et al.

18. Bernard Mouralis' first critical study, Individu et collectivité dans le roman négro-africain d'expression française (Annales de l'Université d'Abidjan, 1969) was an important landmark. As the author stated in his introduction, he sets out to make a literary rather than a sociological study and to view the novel in no other way than "la traduction d'une réalité selon un mode artistique." This early work, undertaken when the corpus of African prose was still limited, makes an over-all analysis of the themes of collectivity and the individual as revealed through style, form and image. However, the innovative and widely divergent literary discourses that have appeared during the past twenty years have overtaken this otherwise interesting study.

19. R. Chemain, A. Chemain-Legrange Panorama critique de la littérature congolaise contemporaine (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1979) 129.

20. D. Matanga, "Le romancier un enchanteur incompris," La Semaine Africaine 1414 (13-19 nov. 1980) 8-9.

21. Arlette Chemain, "Quelle critique adoptée pour la littérature africaine," Recherche, pédagogie et culture (mai-août 1978) 33-8.

22. La ville dans le roman africain (Paris: l'Harmattan, 1981); L'imaginaire dans le roman africain (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1986).

23. See for example A. Huannou, "Afrique noire et Maghreb dans les publications américaines," Notre Librairie 96 (janvier-mars 1989) 66-9. This article gives an insight into the globalising American perspective and in particular the tendancy to detach the Maghreb from Africa and include it in Islamic studies.

24. Published in Henry Louis Gates Jr.ed. Black Literature and Literary Theory (New York: Methuen, 1984) 27-55.

25. See in particular Albert Gérard Essais d'histoire littéraire africaine (Paris/Québec: A.C.C.T/Naaman, 1984).

26. Albert Gérard, "Preservatioin of Tradition in African Creative Writing," Research in African Literatures 1 (1970) i 35-9.

27. Deuxième Congrès International des Littératures d'Expression Française, 18-20 mai 1989, Université de Paris XII - Val de Marne.

28. Lilyan Kesteloot has lived for many years in Africa and has taught at the Université Fédérale of the Cameroons and more recently at the University of Dakar in Senegal. Following upon her authoritative work on the Negritude poets, Kesteloot's interest in African poetic expression is evidenced by the anthologies and critical works she has published in the domain of both contemporary and traditional oral poetry.

29. André Bokiba, L'Ecole étrangère dans la littérature africaine thèse de 3è cycle, quoted by D. Matanga in "Le romancier un enchanteur incompris," La Semaine Africaine 1414 (1980) 8.

30. This notion which informs Decolonising the Mind, was taken up again during an informal talk delivered by Ngugi at the University of the Western Cape in October 1991.

31. Adewale Maja-Pearce, "Cultural Half-Castes," Présence Africaine 133-4 (1985): 49.

32. Léopold Senghor, "Comme les lamantins vont boire à la source," Poèmes (Paris: Seuil, 1984) 155-68.

33. Expressed at a colloquium held in 1975. Quoted by Jacques Chevrier in "L'écrivain africain devant la langue française," Notre Librairie 53 (1980): 37-51. This article gives a very good overview of the different positions held by Africans writing in French, from both the Maghreb and sub-Saharan Africa.

34. Sony Labou Tansi, interview, "Je fais du théâtre par ambition," Jeune Afrique 1297 (1985) 60.

35. Maria Cichon, "Francophonie: invité permanent ou hôte encombrant," Le français dans le monde 245 (1991) 29-31. Cichon summarises a research project undertaken by BELC, an important centre of research for the teaching of French as a foreign language. The members of the research team examined 43 manuals, published during the past twenty years. Their findings showed that, while several of the newest methods make reference to the Francophone world, this remains marginal. For the most part, the thematic content tends to be reductionist if not touristic and linguistic peculiarities are linked to situations requiring specific professional communicative competence.

36. Claude Oliviéri, "Tristes tropismes," Diagonales 18 (1991): 6. The existence of this review is in itself an interesting development. Begun in 1986, it is a supplement to Le français dans le monde, probably the most important journal for teachers of French as a foreign language and it enjoys a world-wide circulation. Diagonales is aimed at the Francophone world in general but the overwhelming majority of its articles are concerned with Francophone Africa. It is edited by EDICEF which publishes a wide range of school text books for Africa.

37. Roger Fayolle is primarily a teacher and critic of French literature, being particularly interested in the history of teaching French literature. He is Professor of French at the University of Paris III-La Sorbonne and is author of, amongst other works, an authorative history of criticsm, La critique (Paris: Armand Colin, 1978) and of numerous articles in leading French literary reviews. (Revue d'Histoire littéraire de la France, Littérature, etc) His interest in African writing has led him to publish articles in Présence Africaine and Notre Librairie.

38. Roger Fayolle, "La sagesse des barbares. Enseigner les littératures maghrébines et africaines de langue française," Notre Librairie 96 (1989) 36-9.

39. Schools in the Limousin region, around Limoges, represent a significant exception to this. An important part of the Festival International des Francophonies' annual programme is devoted to visits to schools and related activities. The presence of large numbers of writers and dramatists from all over the Francophone world, the full two-week programme of theatre, film, debates, workshops and poetry readings as well as the strong Festival presence which extends over the whole year, exposes the young people in this region to a dynamic and enriching multi-cultural environment. It is possible that "outreach" programmes exist in other regions where there is a centre of African or Francophone studies, although certainly not on the scale of the Limoges Festival. However, these examples remain isolated and marginal in relation to the country as a whole.

40. Bernard Mouralis, "Réflexions sur l'enseignement des littératures africaines," Nouvelles du Sud 1 (1985) 7-13.

41. This situation is mirrored in many African universities today. The establishment in the colonies of educational systems based on European models has been well documented by Bernard Mouralis and others. Suffice to say that even today, Eurocentric programmes dominate school and university programmes in many independent African nations. A case in point is that of the Congo where, after thirty years of independence, while Latin and German may be offered in some schools, little or no attention is given to teaching national languages and literatures. At the University of Marien Ngouabi, departments such as that of African Literatures and Civilisation or Linguistics and Oral Literature, are young and as yet relatively small.

In the southern part of the continent, in a multi-lingual country such as South Africa, where the official languages are Afrikaans and English, French is regarded as a minor discipline in most if not all universities. However, a questionnaire sent to the 23 university French departments in South Africa and neighbouring Swaziland, Lesotho and Botswana, revealed some interesting facts and trends with respect to the

importance accorded to the study of French-language African literatures.

From the 16 replies received, only 10 departments offer any undergraduate courses in French-language African literatures. Of these, five offer only one text or selections of poetry or *contes*. It is clear that the study of African writing is a recent phenomenon, most departments having introduced African texts from the mid-eighties and the first PhD registration in African or comparative literatures dates from 1989. Interestingly enough, of the five PhD students, four are university lecturers. There are, however, indications of growing interest in the domain of African writing: several departments indicated their intention to introduce African texts into their undergraduate or Honours programme in 1993.

Material considerations have militated against the development of fully viable French departments in the universities of Zululand, Swaziland and Botswana. However, within the limitations of their programme, they offer significantly more African texts than the long-established French departments of some of the more prestigious and better endowed South African universities.

As regards the secondary school system, relatively few schools offer French as an official subject. Replies to the same questionnaire were received from only 10 schools in the Cape Province, five of them being private. With respect to schools administered by the "White" department of education, there have until recently been no French-language African texts on the programme. However, a poem by Senghor and one by Tirolien were introduced onto the Matriculation syllabus in 1991. In the so-called "Coloured" education department, where French has only recently been introduced as an official subject, there has been a move to put African texts on the programme. As yet, French is not offered in the "Black" schools.

42. Authors in residence funded by the Centre National des Lettres from 1988 to 1991:

Sylvain Bemba (Congo), Jean-Marc Dalpé (Ontario-Canada), Moussa Diagana (Mauritania), David Jaomanor (Madagascar), Moussa Konaté (Mali), Dominique Ngoïe-Ngalla (Congo), Laurent Owondo (Gabon), Michèle Rakotoson (Madagascar), Bernard

Zadi-Zaourou (Ivory Coast), Ousmane Moussa Diagana (Mauritania), Jean-Claude Fignolé (Haïti), Emmanuel Genvrin (Reunion), Williams Sassine (Guinea).

Authors in residence funded by the Fondation Beaumarchais from 1990 to 1991.

Camille Adébah Amouro (Benin), Michel Marc Bouchard (Quebec-Canada), David Jaomanoro (Madagascar), Pius Ngandu Nkashama (Zaïre), Sony Labou Tansi (Congo), Bodi Bunch Bodelin (Togo), Gaoussou Diawara (Mali), Hélène Kaziendé (Niger), Laïsi Watuka Kasélé (Zaïre)

43. Interestingly, statistics at the time of the 14th Concours show that the Cameroons, Zaïre and the Congo Republic had submitted the greatest number of manuscripts (896, 661 and 582 respectively) and that the Cameroons and the Congo Republic had received the greatest number of awards (14 and 12 respectively). The ratio of submissions to awards for other leading participants were:

Benin (328:0), Senegal (310:5), Mali (292:6), Gabon (251:1), Burkino Faso (249:3), Central African Republic (216:3), Ivory Coast (203:4), Tchad (159:4), Togo (151:3), Madagascar (127:3), Mauritius (127:2), Niger (106:0). Unfortunately no overall statistics have been released for subsequent Concours. However, the winners since 1988 are:

1988 (15th Concours): Moussa Diagana (Mauritania), Ngwezi Katot Ed-au (Zaïre), Sapi Gampez (Congo), Charlotte Rafenomanjato (Madagascar), Henri Rakoto (Madagascar), La Troupe Nationale Centrafricaine de Théâtre.

1989 (16th Concours): Kossi Efoui (Togo), Michèle Rakotoson (Madagascar), Koulsy Lamki (Tchad), La Troupe d'Azize Asgarally (Mauritius).

1990 (17th Concours): Kangni Alemdjrodo (Togo), Jean-Luc Raharimanana (Madagascar), Amid Beriouni (Morocco), la Troupe Dissiale (Gabon).

1991 (18th Concours): Abdoul Karim Thiam (Guinea), Alain Léandre Baker (Congo), Ahmed Tidjani Cisse (Guinea), La Troupe Seca (Haïti) and the Prix Tchicaya U Tam'Si awarded by A.C.C.T. was won by Ilias Driss (Morocco).

44. Jean Delpierres, Participation au 14è Concours Théâtral Inter-Africain (Paris: R.F.I., 1987) 20.

45. Gabriel Garran, interview, La Croix (3 nov.1988): 21.

46. Sekou Traoré, Questions africaines, francophonie, langues nationales, O.U.A. (Paris: Harmattan, 1989).

47. Sylvène Samba, "L'Edition africaine: quel avenir?" La Semaine Africaine 1669 (26 juin-2 juillet, 1986) 6.

48. Notre Librairie 98 (juillet-sept. 1988) 179-82.

49. Livres de France (avril - nov. 1991). The tables of best sellers are compiled from lists published by five leading French reviews: L'Express, Livres hebdomadaires, L'Ev. du jeudi, Le Point and Nouvel Observateur.

50. Roger Fayolle, "La sagesse des barbares," Notre Librairie 96 (1989) 38-9.

pages 86 - 89 omitted in the pagination.

PART ONE

CHAPTER TWO

SHIFTING CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES: A SYNCRETIC APPROACH

Contemporary African creative writing represents the meeting point of innumerable, often conflicting forces. It contains within it elements of African cultural traditions and Western literary influences. It also reflects the dilemmas confronting an African who writes in a European language for diverse reading publics, both real and virtual. Within Africa itself, interface between the traditional and the modern, the development of distinctive national identities and conflicting political ideologies, give rise to profound tensions that shape the creative *imaginaire*. Attempts to explain such writing in terms of a pre-established set of criteria that have evolved in a European or Western cultural environment have been seen to be inadequate. At the same time, a critical approach that looks exclusively to Africa for its source and rationale ignores the evidence of Western influence on African creative expression.

Clearly the multi-dimensional nature of African writing requires a flexible syncretic approach, whereby the reader or critic makes use of all available keys to unlock the text. Most importantly, the starting point should be, not an external set of

aesthetic norms but the text itself, which will suggest its own critical parameters. These analytical parameters must be sufficiently wide to account for characteristic features that relate the text to other, larger bodies of writing and at the same time, must focus on elements that distinguish the individual work from all others. In order to reach beyond a purely subjective interpretation, the syncretic method must be rigorous in its approach: from a careful consideration of the evidence, certain hypotheses can be drawn which are then tested by applying them to a specific case. In this, it is not suggested that literature can be reduced to a science. While certain criteria or principles may be identified, any critical method which seeks to account fully for the dynamics of creative writing runs contrary to its very *raison d'être*. Gilbert Durand sounds a warning about the dangers of a system which loses sight of the creative act, for it is the latter that itself determines the constituent, dynamic structures of the work and ensures its uniqueness:

> Il faut découvrir les contradictions, des disjonctions dynamiques au sein d'un acte créateur unique - non les réduire à un système.[1]

In fact, the weakness of any method or school is that it tends towards the simplistic blurring of distinctive differences. Certainly, no definitive

approach can contain the diversity of experience and expressive mode, originating in countries as dfferent as Senegal, Nigeria, the Congo or Burundi. "Identifier une chose, c'est limiter ses possibilités". It is in fact that which escapes definition that distinguishes the great work of art. In the last analysis, it must be recognised that ambiguity is the hallmark of human creativity.

Any investigation of critical approaches requires to be prefaced by a consideration of the role of the literary critic - a debate in which writers have been consciously engaged since the sixteenth century in Europe, and which has become increasingly complex and wide-ranging. Most fruitful for the syncretic critical model is the view that criticism is a creative act in itself, with the critic playing a dynamic role in the artistic process. Such a view of the critic's function presupposes certain important principles.

As a participant, the critic abdicates a position that has been held unchallenged until modern times - the role of judge whose responsibility it is to distinguish good from bad writing. The dangers of erecting a subjective viewpoint into a set of rules are obvious. The shortcomings of such an approach are evident in the following statements regarding the role of the critic.

The Nigerian critic and writer, Abiolo Irele maintains that one of the critic's functions is to establish a "framework of valuations" in order to distinguish "works of value."[2] Yet the evaluative criteria would seem to emerge from an intuitive and personalised reading of the text. When Irele states that "...the best criticism implies an affective and intense participation in the creative act,"(32) he would seem to be suggesting an emotional response to the work, rather than a dynamic contribution to the creative act. The evaluation of a work based on a subjective, emotional response cannot justifiably be developed into a critical framework.

At the same time, criticism is not something exclusively intellectual, belonging to an educated elite. It is an integral part of social reality. In the words of Es'kia Mphahlele, critical standards must evolve from "the organic forces in the society rather than the musings of people at the top.....intellectuals stricken with guilt because they live in the metropolitan capitals of Europe."[3]

The critic plays a pivotal role in the multiple reading of a text. Far from establishing norms and systems of classification in order to reduce the text to manageable proportions, the critic's task is to seek out paradox and ambiguity, which are crucial elements of metaphorical expression. This implies more than "decoding a message", as Makouta-Mboukou

sees it, or "intercepting the creative act."[4] The critic is integral to the author-reader relationship, where the text is not a passive description of the world but a dynamic force for confrontation and change. The critic contributes to this process, by examining not only the text but also the socio-historic context, the economic and political realities, the choices made by the writer, what has been left unsaid as well as what is said.

Two important preliminary tasks for the critic then, are the contextualization of the text and an investigation of the specific reader-writer-critic relationship, relating to the text in question.

Jacques Derrida has highlighted the difficulties inherent in attempting to interpret *le signe* and in particular, to identify its historical significance.[5] Certainly, his reservations about Foucault's commentary on Descartes and the attitude of seventeenth century philosophers towards madness are valid: viewed from across three centuries, interpreted by means of literary texts and incomplete documentary evidence, no conclusions about that society can be definitive. In many ways, Africa is equally remote from the Western world, not in time but in cognitive space, and non-Africans need to recognise that their understanding of African discourse is of necessity incomplete. This of course does not preclude an "outsider" from contributing to an appreciation of

another culture's creative output but the reference points must be taken from within that culture itself. Referring to a foreign producer wishing to stage an African play, Wole Soyinka says:

> The burden on a producer is one of knowledge, understanding and of sympathetic imagination.[6]

The contextualisation of a text that derives from a culture foreign to that of the reader-critic requires considerable effort. There is what Okpewho calls the "ecology of art," which the critic must come to terms with, the "subtle but discernable link between art and the landscape out of which it grows" and which determines not only the imagery but the modes of expression.[7]

In contemporary African discourse, these features are integrated in the text in a way that the more self-conscious exotic elements of the first generation of writing were not and in order to discern them the critic must become familiar, in one way or another, with the geographic, climatic and natural environment from which the writing emerges. It is equally important to understand the historical, political, cultural and linguistic milieu. A literary text must be read against a background of contemporary research in these fields. This in itself is no easy task and it is compounded by difficulties of a material and ideological nature: the relatively small amount of

material published by African researchers, the unavailability of much that has been written and the false premises of much Western scholarship.

At the referential level, there will always be obstacles to the foreign reader. Yet no text is fully transparent and all texts are open to a plural reading. It is here that the element of sympathetic imagination comes into play, for the critic must attempt to penetrate the writer's particular creative universe. In order to understand the writer's intentions, conscious or unconscious, the reader of African literatures is helped by the fact that, perhaps because African writers feel the need to be constantly defending and explaining what they are doing, there usually exists a wealth of recorded interviews, which serve as useful indicators.

Again, it is the very ambiguity of the narrator's voice, the relation of the fictional "I" to that of the author, that distinguishes a piece of creative writing as a great work of art. Speaking about Les liaisons dangéreuses, a novel by the eighteenth century French writer, de Laclos, and drawing out the implications for the narrative in general, Todorov has the following to say:

> Il n'est pas le simple exposé d'une action, mais l'histoire du conflit entre deux ordres: celui du livre et celui de son contexte social.... Nous ne savons pas quelle est la vérité, nous ne connaissons que les apparences; et nous ne savons pas quelle est la position exacte de l'auteur: le niveau appréciatif est dissimulé. C'est cette

> ambiguïté profonde, cette ouverture vers des interprétations opposées, qui distingue le roman de Laclos de nombreux romans "bien construits" et le place au rang des chefs-d'oeuvre.[8]

Just as the critic plays a creative role in the realisation of the text, so too the reader has an integral function. In a very real way, the reader completes the creative act begun by the author; in choosing to read the text, he commits himself. He enters into a pact with the author and this pact carries with it demands and responsibilities.

For such a relationship to be fruitful presupposes a sympathetic and informed reader, something that has, from the beginning, posed a dilemma for African writers. Jean-Paul Sartre has defined in philosophical terms the irreconcilable tensions facing African and American Negro writers, whether they write in a European or in an indigenous language. Sartre demonstrates that writing, like any other act, supposes a choice. The writer does not write for himself but for an audience and he chooses his audience. It is this audience that determines what he writes. Yet, in the case of the African or American Negro writer, this choice is profoundly paradoxical, for there is a clear divide between the real and the virtual audience. The real readers are those who are literate and who have the material means of procuring the book; that is, they either can afford to buy books or they have access to a source of

supply, such as a library. This public is made up for the most part, by Western readers together with a limited Black elite. It is they who make the publication of the text financially feasible. Yet these readers are the most alienated from the Black writer's world and they are likely to be the least sympathetic towards the Black writer's intentions.

The reader towards whom the Black writer is really reaching is the virtual audience, in Africa or in the ghettos of American cities. These "readers" are unlikely ever to see the book; in Africa they are for the most part illiterate and, in the struggle to survive, even where books are available, they are at the bottom of the list of priorities. There is furthermore, the question of language. It imposes a particularly acute choice for the African writer: in order to be published and read, the material realities of supply and demand oblige most writers to write in a European language. Yet the virtual audience, even when literate, has for the most part acquired only the basic elements of this imported language, enough to cope with official or administrative communication but seldom sufficient to appreciate the nuances of a literary text.

I

The formulation of a syncretic critical method requires that mainstream Western models be considered,

to ascertain in what way they may help to resolve some of the problems encountered in understanding African writing.

The issues raised by the notion of contextuality are complex and it is here that Marxist theory makes its most useful contribution. While no consistent theory of African Marxism has as yet been developed - the term "African Marxism" contains in itself an inherent contradiction - many writers, from both the French and the English speaking zones of Africa, express in their critical discourse their allegiance to this ideology.

Not surprisingly, given the country's history of Marxist-inspired rule, some of the most explicitly Marxist of the Francophone critics are from the Congo Republic. The historian and ethnologist, Théophile Obenga, prefaces his work on Mbochi oral literature by citing Gramsci, from his Letteratura e vita nazionale:

> "Les prémisses de la nouvelle littérature doivent être nécessairement historiques, politiques, populaires; elles doivent tendre à élaborer ce qui existe déjà, de façon polémique ou de toute autre façon, peu importe; l'important est que cette nouvelle littérature plonge ses racines dans l'*humus* de la culture populaire telle qu'elle est, avec ses goûts, ses tendances, etc., avec son monde moral et intellectuel, même s'il est arriéré et conventionnel."[9]

Obenga rejects sterile academic literary criticism; a people's cultural patrimony must be seen in an historical and political perspective.

> En effet, "développer" un pays, c'est le construire matériellement mais aussi et surtout spirituellement, humainement, bref au plan de l'économie comme au plan de la culture. En réalité, "construire" un pays, c'est libérer toutes ses propres forces vives, l'ingéniosité de ses artisans, l'intelligence de ses cadres, la créativité et l'imagination de sa jeunesse, la grandeur morale et culturelle de toutes ses ethnies, de toutes ses potentialités humaines. Il est entièrement erroné de croire que le problème culturel est secondaire en Afrique noire. C'est même, au fond, le problème prioritaire, à condition de ne pas ramener "la culture" à ce qu'elle n'est pas, c'est-à-dire à une curiosité superficielle, presque moqueuse, pour "les choses africaines traditionnelles". (44)

The belief that a people's socio-cultural history is a key factor of liberation is a fundamental principle guiding Obenga's research into the pre-colonial history of Central Africa. It is the principle which informs his work on the Mbochi oral tradition. The thrust of his analysis of the poem-songs is twofold: as a poet he illuminates their aesthetic qualities and as a radical historian he shows how they relate to the changing material history of the people.

A second Congolese critic, Jean-Pierre Makouta-Mboukou, is an outspoken proponent of a Marxist ideology for Africa, although he himself is a professed Christian, who has chosen to live in exile

from the régime in the Congo. Makouta-Mboukou criticises the West with acerbity and emotion, if not always with rigorous logic, for being the producer of what he terms, typically bourgeois literature. This, he believes, has no place in Africa:

> Car il faut aussi le reconnaître, la littérature négro-africaine n'est pas une littérature bourgeoise. Si nous définissons le bourgeois comme, entre autres traits, celui qui a plus qu'il ne faut d'argent et de temps pour vivre, en le prévalant souvent sur les efforts des plus démunis, et qui le dépense parfois en futilité, la littérature négro-africaine n'a aucune minute, aucune page à dépenser inutilement. Chacune de ses lignes, en raison du retard que le monde noir a sur l'Occident, a un but particulier, et doit assumer et accomplir la mission qui lui a été assignée.[10]

Makouta-Mboukou is merciless in his scorn for Senghor's rejection of Marxism, which he sees as the reason for the resistance to Senghor's cause on the part of many Black writers:[11]

> Au lieu de cela, il a choisi délibérément d'être le prédicateur de la négritude narcissique, en tuant dans l'oeuf les élans révolutionnaires des jeunes Nègres. Au lieu de leur préparer une pédagogie conscientisante, il leur a servi un soporifique qui a failli les endormir pour longtemps, lui-même servant de paravent à l'acte destructeur de l'Occident.

But if, thanks to the influence of the Negritude movement and to various religious persuasions, Black writers are not avowed adherents of Marxism,

nevertheless, in Makouta-Mboukou's opinion, they are nearly all sympathisers:

> Comment un opprimé pourrait-il honnêtement être inattentif aux thèses marxistes relatives à l'oppression, à la domination des faibles par les puissants, des pauvres par les riches? Comment un exploité pourrait-il être insensible à la dialectique: exploiteurs-exploités, maîtres-esclaves, colonisés-colonialistes? Même les écrivains franchement anti-marxistes ne peuvent être insensibles à la philosophie marxiste en matière d'économie. (327)

Makouta-Mboukous's tendentious arguments and sweeping generalisations reveal a more emotional than scientific understanding of Marxism.[12] Yet the main thread of his argument is significant: Marxism shows the way to a committed, consciousness-raising, change-provoking literature. In this he expresses his allegiance with first generation French-language writers such as Frantz Fanon, Cheik Anta Diop and the Légitime Défense group.

The relationship of art and the artist to society is an issue that preoccupies both Francophone and Anglophone writers, whether they profess to a Marxist ideology or not.

As far back as 1969, Abiola Irele called for an African literary criticism which would be "sociological in its implications." An important argument that his collection of essays entitled The African Experience and Ideology demonstrates, is that the originality of African literature lies in its

reference to historical and experiential forces.[13] He makes a case against the structuralist school, which dominated European criticism at the time and which saw literature as a turning in upon itself, a refusal to find its meaning in the referential world. For Irele, "poetic values ...are values precisely by reference to social values."(19) Such views are widely echoed today. The Nigerian critic, Biodun Jeyifo calls for an ethical consciousness of a political not mythical nature:

> ....that superior ethical consciousness which welds the life of the individual combatant to the destiny of an embattled and battling collectivity.[14]

More recently, Chidi Amuta, deploring the "theoretical anaemia" which he sees as the common denominator of African literary scholarship, states the thesis which informs his book on African literary theory:

> African literature and its criticism testify to the historical contradictions that define the African situation. In order to resolve these contradictions in the direction of progressive change, literary criticism must be predicated on a theoretical outlook that couples cultural theory back to social practice. In this respect, literary theory and practice must form part of the anti-imperialist struggle, thus demystifying literary criticism and reintegrating it into the social experience and practice of which literature itself is very much part.[15]

Even Wole Soyinka, who is sharply criticised by the Marxist critics for his mystifying postulation of the archetypal myth as the expression of man's struggle with cosmic forces, calls for literary works of social vision. His theory is not expressed in Marxist terms but it reveals the same concern for literature's participation in the reconstruction of society, as can be seen in the following somewhat laboured definition of the work of social vision:

> The intellectual and emotional impulse to a re-examination of the propositions upon which man, nature and society are posited or interpreted at any point in history, the effort to expand such propositions or to contest and replace them with others more in tune with the writer's own idealistic disposition or his pragmatic, resolving genius; this impulse and its integrative role in the ordering of experience and events leads to a work of social vision.[16]

One of the contributions of the Marxist model is its focus on art as praxis. This counterbalances the mystical, romantic conception of the artist creating in an inspired vacuum, far removed from the harsh realities of daily living conditions. Marxist theory emphasises that the artist, or writer, is a producer, subject to economic and market conditions similar to those of any other sector of society. Such a view is particularly significant in Africa, where material difficulties abound, aggravated by the transition from colonial to neo-colonial economic systems, and the forces of nationalism and neo-imperialism.

However, the most valuable contribution that the Marxist model makes towards an African theory of literature is its demonstration of the dialectical relation between art and society. Opponents of Marxism may reject what they see as a mechanistic correspondence between social forces and creative works, claiming that this cannot account for individual, original expression. However, the now classic expositions of Raymond Williams or Terry Eagleton present a nuanced position, which is of particular relevance to the African situation.

A work of art, in terms of its form, style and content, is seen as the product of a particular history and, at the same time, is a factor of transformation:

> A scientific criticism would seek to explain the literary work in terms of the ideological structure of which it is part, yet which it transforms in its art: it would search out the principle which both ties the work to ideology and distances it from it.[17]

Critics are quick to point out the dangers of relating art to ideology. Indeed, one of the weaknesses of "vulgar" Marxist criticism, as Eagleton terms it, is to impose a prescriptive strait jacket on creative expression. Raymond Williams clarifies the problem in his discussion of Gramsci's notion of hegemony which, as a process not a structure, goes beyond ideology.

By recognising the forces of dominance and subordination which determine society and the way people perceive themselves and the world, hegemony offers a more holistic concept of society. It is, in particular, a concept which reflects accurately the forces that have determined, and continue to determine, the historical development of African societies. Moreover, Marixist theory highlights the aspect of struggle which is inherent in creative practice:

> Creative practice is thus of many kinds. It is already, and actively, our practical consciousness. When it becomes struggle - the active struggle for new consciousness through new relationships that is the ineradicable emphasis of the Marxist sense of self-creation - it can take many forms. It can be the long and difficult remaking of an inherited (determined) practical consciousness: a process often described as development but in practice a struggle at the roots of the mind - not casting off an ideology, or learning phrases about it, but confronting a hegemony in the fibres of the self and in the hard practical substance of effective and continuing relationships. It can be more evident practice: the reproduction and illustration of hitherto excluded and subordinated models: the embodiment and performance of known but excluded and subordinated experiences and relationships; the articulation and formation of latent, momentary, and newly possible consciousness.[18]

The emphasis here on the dialectical interplay of past and present forms and relations is important. This view of creativity is more flexible than that of other exponents of Marxism who, like Chidi Amuta, interpret somewhat rigidly Karl Marx's idea, that "the

tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living."[19] For such Marxist theoriticiens, elements of traditional practices are seen as evidence of bourgeois society, which must be eradicated. Tradition is perceived as false mythology, an utopean dream into which, what Sartre would term "inauthentic" writers, seek to escape. Traditional inheritance is not seen to have any positive, creative contribution to make.

This standpoint is problematical for the African context, where past and present are imbricated at all levels of society and consciousness. Furthermore, with respect to literature, the view that traditional influence can be only detrimental, fails to recognise the importance of oral composition in contemporary African writing. As will be seen later, the consideration of traditional oral story-telling techniques is crucial for illuminating modern African literatures.

In one respect then, the Marxist aesthetic cannot fully account for African creative writing, for it fails to take into account a fundamental feature: the importance of myth and the profound belief in spiritual forces which pervades African societies, be they urban or rural. Indeed, Marxist theorists who refuse to recognise the dynamic interplay of tradition and modernity, are self-contradictory. While emphasising the dialectical relationship of cultural

activity to society, they see this in only synchronic and not diachronic terms.

Even where traditional societies have long been broken up, thought processes and language remain marked by mythology or, more broadly, spirituality. In African literatures, this is reflected in symbolic language which cannot be reduced to purely material or referential significance. Literature is not a social science; it represents as much a spiritual as a socio-historical mediation of human experience.

Furthermore, Marxist criticism accords little or no attention to the entertainment value of African artistic expression. Indeed, in any society, people listen to a story, or join in a song, because they enjoy it. They respond, not so much with their mind as with their senses, to the rhythm of the music and the harmonising of voices and musical instruments.

Traditionally, the Peul story teller would open his session with the words; "Mon conte est utile, futile et instructif.. In over-emphasising the first and last elements, the Marxist critics have forgotten the second one. For aesthetic pleasure, measured in functional terms, is indeed "futile" but it answers an undeniable human need for beauty and laughter. In their uncompromising view that literature should be a means of righting social wrongs, the Marxist critics have forgotten that beauty and imagination cannot be reduced to a material form and they seem even to have

forgotten how to laugh. They are far too serious for Africa. Tchicaya U Tam'Si's description of the Congolese people is true for large parts, if not all of sub-Saharan Africa:

> Les Congolais, sur les deux rives, sont un peuple gai, goualleur, souvent [illegible], pas sérieux. Ils prennent la vie au [illegible] mais avec une espèce de légèreté. Un Congolais dira que la vie vaut d'être vécue, même avec des haillons. En vérité, nous sommes un peuple "d'ambianceurs". Nous aimons l'ambiance. Nous avons un sens de la convivialité qui dépasse les bornes, même dans la tristesse la plus noire. Il n'y a qu'à voir comment nous organisons les veillées funèbres et les sommes folles que nous dépensons dans ces occasions. L'humour est d'ailleurs une caractéristique omniprésente, même dans les oeuvres d'engagement politique plus violent.[20]

By way of contrast, Georg Gugelberger's words are representative of certain radical Marxist critical thought. Taken to their extreme, they suggest uncomfortable echoes of the worst aspects of Soviet Socialist Realism:

> ... the more refined and successful in aesthetic terms a work of art becomes, the more it lacks moral and social integrity.[21]

An over-riding concern with moral and social integrity does not ensure readability. The question to be asked is, why should "successful in aesthetic terms" and "moral and social integrity" be mutually exclusive? Such a view of literature makes it

difficult to distinguish art from a political treatise or pamphleteering.

Nevertheless, by relating creative expression to open-ended, changing cultural and societal forces, the Marxist model is particularly useful in illuminating the function of art in the African context, where art is traditionally rooted in collective cultural experience. In general, an hermetic, individual mythology still has no place in Africa.

In introducing Henri Arvon's work on Marxist aesthetics, Fredric Jameson says:

> For a middle-class state, art is a luxury, when it is not an investment; for a socialist one, it is the indispensable sign of the reintegration of a fragmented, alienated existence.[22]

The artist, or writer, is crucial in this process of reintegration. Marxist positions vary regarding the role of the artist in society, and the degree of freedom in personal expression to be allowed in a socialist society. In general, contemporary Marxists would hold with the view that, as a member of a particular society, the writer experiences the history of a collectivity and recreates it in poetical terms. In this way, reality is mediated through the personal, experiential vision of an individual. A writer therefore, expresses both individual and collective experience.

Lucien Goldmann's theory of genetic structuralism, inspired by Lukacs' work, offers useful insights into the role of the writer in society. For Goldmann, no important work can ever be the expression of a single experience, for:

> ... le caractère collectif de la création littéraire provient du fait que les *structures* de l'univers de l'oeuvre sont homologues aux *structures* mentales de certains groupes sociaux ou en relation intelligible avec elles, ...[23]

Genetic structuralism, which analyses art forms in terms of the degree to which they reflect the structures of a given society, leads naturally to a favouring of realism and naturalism in literature. It also highlights an area of Marxist theory which is particularly problematic.

To judge art by the degree to which it reflects, or even mediates, social realities, makes little or no allowance for the individual artist's creative *imaginaire*. Indeed, Marixist theory is uncomfortable with the concept of poetic inspiration, often rejecting is as mythological. While recognising that the artist recreates historical reality, no clear explanation is given of this process. Amuta's way of dealing with the question illustrates the difficulty that it represents for Marxist theory. While dismissing scornfully the psychoanalysts' understanding of the creative act, Amuta offers the

following explanation of the process undertaken by the artist or "mediating subject". Mediation is, "the recycling of socio-historical experience according to the laws of imaginative projection."[24]

Not only is this a somewhat laboured account of creative expression but, more importantly, at no stage does Amuta clarify his position regarding the nature and functioning of the imagination in the creative process.

Whereas contemporary Western Marxists are engaged with the task of defining the relationship between artistic production and advanced capitalist societies, African Marxists are more concerned with the artist's responsibility in the struggle for liberation and improved social and political conditions. Their emphasis is on the committed nature of literature, in the sense of it being consciously aligned with the forces for change.

First generation French-language writers, such as Fanon and the Légitime Défense group, interpreted this in a very concrete way, advocating literature as an arm in the struggle for political liberation. They were impatient with the less radical "Senghorian wing" of the Negritude movement, accusing those poets of lulling the people with narcisstic dreams of a glorious past.

A digression to look at a parallel situation in South Africa today, throws interesting light on this issue. In South Africa recently, the dangers of fixing literature in a purely referential, denunciative mode were captured in what came to be termed "the Albie Sachs debate".[25] Albie Sachs, a prominent member of the African National Congress, who had for many years lived in exile, delivered a paper, "Preparing ourselves for freedom", at an in-house ANC discussion which took place abroad in 1989. Sachs challenged the concept of "culture as a weapon for struggle" and warned against the stifling effects of a too narrow, prescriptive view of art. This gave rise to wide-spread and at times polemical debate amongst progressive writers, critics and cultural workers in South Africa. For decades, repressive legislation had acted as a focal point for the resistance movements, drawing together those who were involved at many different levels in the freedom struggle. In the cultural sphere, resistance songs, theatre and writing became an important expression of solidarity. However, in such circumstances, the expression of collective emotion is sanctioned over and above private experience and artistic expression is threatened by cliché political statements and sloganeering.

When in 1990, political organisations were unbanned and the focus of resistance became blurred,

progressive writers and cultural organisations were forced to look for new directions. Sachs had raised fundamental questions about ascribing a political function to art. In the months following the dissemination of his document, the debate stimulated both reflection and self-criticism. This episode illustrates in a concrete way the dilemma of reconciling poetics and politics.

The issue is a complex one and crucial for an understanding of African literature. African writers are caught between mainstream Western canon on the one hand, which places great value on the *littérarité* of creative writing, and on the other hand, the ideological imperatives of Africa.

African writers are repeatedly asked their views on committed writing. The Congolese playwright and novelist, Sony Labou Tansi, who explains his stance with eloquence and finesse, gives new definition to the concept of committed writing, when he states that he is more *engageant* than *engagé*; his writing poses questions more than it offers answers. If writing is to be a "change-facilitating process," then the form which that process takes must be carefully identified, or else the writer risks being indistinguishable from the politician.[26] Es'kia Mphahlele focusses upon this difficulty:

> In terms of social action he (the writer) is irrelevant. The best he can do is make us aware

> of ourselves as we truly are and can be. The politician defines the social situation in terms of imperatives. The writer as teacher and entertainer, in terms other than the politician's. And yet he arrives at something like a set of imperatives. That is the paradox he is.[27]

If commitment implies social action, the creative writer would seem to be confronted with the impossible task of integrating the essentially conflicting roles of the social activist and the poet. However, what is needed is a redefinition of the notion "committed literature". *Engagement* should be seen as a changing, dialectical process, a personal response to contextual realities. It is more than ideological slogan-wielding or overt conscientising of the masses.

Like Lukacs' "problematical hero", the committed writer expresses the experience of an individual who is in conflict with the ideology and values of a dominant class. Furthermore, the committed writer assumes certain responsibilities; he or she accepts the role of spokesperson for an exploited grouping within a given society. In bearing personal witness against injustice, the writer engages in a liberating struggle. In this sense, committed writing is polemical but the expressive mode may be lyrical, even intensely private. Such writing may be subversive, in that the values of the establishment are challenged, perhaps even modified. It is by intellectualising

personal testimony in this way that it becomes subversive.

The desire to *témoigner*, or bear witness, is a leit-motif in French-language writing, running through from the first autobiographical novels of Ferdinand Oyono or Mongo Beti to contemporary Congolese writing.

Today, thirty years after independence, the responsibility to testify against the abuses of the colonial administration has changed its focus. In contemporary neo-colonial societies, the committed writer now confronts injustice and corruption perpetuated by African masters. Many portray their protagonists, who reject the African versions of exploitation and oppression, as alientated heroes whose search is not to radically transform society but to understand themselves and the world in which they live. The way in which the writer perceives his or her relationship with society is crucial to African writing and it reflects the recognition of collective responsibility, which is fundamental to committed writing. It is an issue frequently debated among African writers, as a recent round-table discussion between a group of four prominent Congolese authors serves to illustrate.[28] The interviewer, Daniel Maximin, himself a Black writer from Guadeloupe, focusses on the dilemma of reconciling the poetic "I" with socio-political issues. He asks:

> L'humour, la dérision, l'engagement contre le maître, les grands sujets.... Est-ce que vous ne souffrez pas d'une certaine absence de la confidence, d'une certaine absence de vous même, de vous même parlant de vous? Du "je" qui est si peu présent?

Sony Labou Tansi's reply is categorical and unhesitating:

> Le "je" est collectif!
> Daniel Maximin: Il n'y a pas besoin de plus?
> Sony Labou Tansi: Non! non!

For others, the issue is more nuanced. The poet Maxime N'Débéka relates the personal "I" to a sense of a wider fraternity:

> J'ai dit qu'il fallait abattre les frontières du "je". Faire tomber les bastilles du "je", c'est chaque fois rechercher une plus grande fraternité. Quand on pense que notre pays a encore des problèmes inter-ethniques...Dans ma poésie, il y a toujours cette contradiction, ce déplacement du "je" au "nous". C'est une contradiction que je n'ai pas encore résolue.

It is significant that for N'Débéka, "nous" does not relate to some abstract universal concept of humanity but to the harsh reality of ethnic conflict in the Congo.

Tchicaya U Tam'Si, who was scathing of those who seek to convey a clear political message by means of creative writing, is unequivocal in his affirmation of the poetical "I":

> Dans ce que j'écris, le "je" est permanent. Le "je" existe mais on ne veut pas le voir car on persiste à nous lire à travers des stéréotypes.

A timely word of warning against formulating a theoretical mould into which all African writers can be neatly fitted.

These different replies illustrate the various ways in which the notion of commitment can be expressed. In Africa, committed writing implies a sense of responsiblity towards one's fellow countrypeople, an awareness of social realities and an acceptance of the vocation of *porte-parole* on behalf of those whose voice is not heard.

In this sense, it can be said that commitment is a characteristic feature of African writing. However, the poetical form that this commitment takes cannot be circumscribed nor prescribed, without running the risk of simplification and distortion. The constant dialectic between the poetic "I" and the historical "we" is one of the most dynamic mainsprings informing contemporary African artistic expression.

The notion of speaking on behalf of those who do not have the means to express themselves, raises certain difficulties with respect to the writer-reader relationship in Africa. The debate revolves around the issue of writing in European languages since, as reality would have it, this constitutes today the most

significant number of published literary texts from Africa.

Writers in European languages comprise a relatively small elite, in many ways the *évolués* of the colonial period. For them to act as *porte-parole*, presupposes that they are able to identify with the majority of their compatriots, who have had little or no formal education and have little or no experience of life outside of their immediate milieu. That they should share similar preoccupations and perspectives is not self-evident. Furthermore, it assumes a reader receptive to the progressive, conscientising message of the literary work. This, however, is not always the case; there are indeed as many reactionary or apathetic members of the working classes as there are among the bourgeoisie.

Moreover, the majority of the peasantry and the city working classes have in fact little or no access to literary texts, given the price of books and the poor distribution networks. Probably the most telling factor is the high illiteracy rates and the limited mastery of European languages, which effectively isolates the modern writer from the people. The struggling working classes do not have the linguistic skills, nor indeed the time or interest to read the poetry of Tchicaya U Tam'Si or Ngugi's Petals of Blood. The social concerns of the Marxist critics have made them acutely sensitive to these

problems and various solutions have been offered. Ngugi Wa Thiongo has posited most vigorously the importance of educating the people. He holds that it is the responsibility of the state, of writers, of academics, of teachers and of social or community workers, to encourage and help develop amongst the people a renewed appreciation for cultural practices. In his view, to write in a European language reinforces the forces of neo-colonialism and alienation, and the only solution is to develop African languages.

While many would identify with Ngugi's ideological stance, practical realities militate against abandoning French, English or Portuguese as the vehicles for creative expression. This is recognised by even Chidi Amuta, who on this point is in agreement with the less radical Chinweizu, and by the majority of Francophone writers.

Notwithstanding these difficulties with respect to reaching an audience which remains virtual, the Marxist model makes a useful contribution to an African literary theory by confirming the inappropriateness of elitist or ivory-tower art.

However, there are inherent dangers in an aesthetic which establishes criteria in terms of class.

Indeed, the notion of class struggle, which underpins the Marxist theory, has been overtaken in contemporary

societies throughout the world, by issues such as the cold war and the nuclear arms race, ethno-racial conflict, and women's rights.

Finally, there is another important domain where Marxist theory has a contribution to make, this time at the textual level. Marxist critics are often accused of ascribing undue importance to the content or message of a literary text and of not analysing sufficiently features of form and style. This may indeed be true of some of the most radical positions. However, central to Marxist theory is the notion that form and content are integrally, and more importantly, dialectically related.

Henri Arvon concedes that Marxist aesthetics is forced to admit the priority of content over form. However, this is an interactive relationship, where content may be modified by form. Furthermore, form like content, is determined by changing societal relations and forces.

This dynamic conception of form breaks with the rigid formalist theory, which reduces literature to a system of structures. What is equally important however, is the idea that there is to be found in the best works of art, a fundatmental unity of form and content.

It must be recognised that the prescriptive and ideologically aligned stance of many Marixist theorists has an impoverishing effect, and to evaluate

literature as a "change-orientated activity" as does Gugelberger, is to devalue the meditative, interpretive aspect.

However, the contribution of Marxist theory for understanding African writing is an important one. It focusses upon the dialectical forces of individual liberty and social change. It has shown conclusively that African works cannot be read out of context; that the writer, the reader and the text are inextricably bound up with historical realities.

II

A syncretic literary approach, that is centered in African realities, must take full cognisance of the oral tradition. In particular, the techniques of oral composition are undoubtedly one of the richest areas for investigation, in order to identify elements that permeate contemporary writing. Indeed, any critical method which ignores such factors will fail to understand important expressive and formal features of African writing.[29] As long ago as the early sixties, in his search for what constitutes the *africanité* of a text, Janheinz Jahn saw the necessity of identifying the *topoi*, the stylistic elements and "thought forms" that find their origin in oral literature.[30] More recently, many critics and researchers in both Francophone and Anglophone Africa have turned their

attention to the oral tradition; Mohamadou Kane and Mbwil a Mpang Ngal, Kofi Awooner, Harold Scheub and Jeff Opland to name but a few. However, as yet little research has been undertaken into the use of orality as a tool for the literary analysis of African prose writing.

It is understandable that Western critics should overlook the orality factor for, while all written cultures have their roots in an oral tradtion, in the West the power of the written word has for so long held sway that only fragments of oral cultures remain. In Africa however, where few of the indigenous languages have as yet been transcribed and where only a small percentage of the peo have acquired minimal reading and writing skills, l cultural traditions are very much alive. Indeed, the interaction between oral and written forms of expression is a question attracting considerable debate among contemporary oralists.[31]

In Africa the dynamics are particularly intricate for, in a single country or region, the whole range from orality to literacy is represented. While the older generations in the isolated rural areas still exist in a state of pure orality, amongst the village and town dwellers some degree of schooling has created a situation of diglossia. Written communication with administrative bodies takes place in one of the

official languages but cultural traditions are preserved in the mother tongue.

This is not dissimilar to the situation in Yugoslavia, where Milman Parry and Albert Lord conducted their research into oral composition. However, it may be argued that African novelists, and in particular those who write in an acquired language such as French or English, occupy a special position on the orality-literacy spectrum. Not only are they highly literate but furthermore, they have chosen a genre that is by definition literary, and which does not exist in the oral tradition. However, they live in a transitional period and it is important to guage the extent to which this is reflected in their prose writing.

Indeed, it raises the question of whether there can in fact be such a thing as a transitional text. Can the novel be read in terms of anything other that literary convention?

In answer to this, the following extract from Sony Labou Tansi's novel, Les Sept Solitudes de Lorsa Lopez, which was published in 1985, provides a good illustration of writing that defies the conventional canon of prose writing:[32]

> Tout sourire, caressant le paquet de remerciements qu'ils lui avaient préparé, les visiteurs arrivaient par groups hilares. Certains chantaient le morceau des morceaux, non pour son sens, mais pour sa profonde beauté, pour la paix que le chant procurait, pour l'espoir

> qu'il faisait naître, pour cette délicieuse ivresse et cette électricité du tonnerre des tonnerres qu'il donnait à l'âme affligée. Lorsa Manuel Yeba tirait des coups d'arquebuse comme nous en tirons pendant les fêtes du poisson ou pendant la Toussaint. Les coups caviardaient les prières d'Armano Yozua. De toutes les directions, arrivait un monde noir qui huchait, criait, chantait, jubilait, convergeant vers l'habitation d'Estina Bronzario. Beaucoup n'étaient pas invités, qui venaient seulement lui serrer la pince et lui remettre en main propre le petit quelque chose que je ne pouvais pas m'empêcher de vous faire tenir à cette occasion-ci la dernière peut-être. (111)

In the following pages, such writing is looked at in its contemporary African context. A close examination of the dynamics of expression in African societies, shows that it is indeed possible to trace the clear influence of oral traditions on literary expression. Because the focus is primarily on the use of language and linguistic forms, the discussion will of necessity remain within the parameters of one linguistic zone, namely Francophone Africa. However, many of the findings may be applied to writing from Anglophone or Lusiphone Africa.

As early as in 1974, the Senegalese critic Mohamadou Kane published an article in the Revue de Littérature Comparée, entitled "Structures: sur les 'formes traditionnelles' du roman africain," where he stated explicitly the importance of the oral tradition for the contemporary Francophone novel.[33] Several

aspects of this important article suggest a fruitful avenue for further investigation, although Kane himself did not develop his ideas and, as will be seen, he appears later to discount the importance of traditional forms. However, in 1974 Kane stated that:

> l'originalité du roman africain doit être cherchée plus particulièrement dans ses rapports avec les formes de la littérature orale de l'Afrique. (537)

Kane goes on to enumerate briefly six major forms inherited from the oral tradition. He identifies such features as a single action, the focussing around one central character, a three-stage temporal structure or the use of dreams to express man's communication with the spiritual or natural world. However, his study is based on a very limited number of texts, all works from the first period of African prose writing, the most recent being Les soleils des indépendances, published in 1968. Not all the characteristics which he highlights can be considered distinguishing criteria of the contemporary African novel, particularly those of the past decade. Other elements mentioned by Kane remain significant however, such as the recurrent theme of the journey, the mixing of genres, the use of proverbs and the dominant voice of the author.

In Kane's *thèse d'état*, which was published as Roman africain et tradition in 1982, he studies

certain texts from the perspective of tradition in order to show that the apparent conflict between tradition and modernity is false.[34] He examines the African novel with respect to its evolution, its diverse orientations and its relationship with traditional literatures, and he demonstrates how tradition and modernity are part of a continuous process, which leads to a new synthesis. However, the texts studied are again chosen almost exclusively from the first period of African prose writing, with only very brief allusion to certain contemporary novelists. Furthermore, while Kane's stated objective is to avoid the form-content dichotomy, his analysis is essentially thematic. He does not study systematically the influence of oral thought patterns on prose composition. Indeed, in a more recent article, Kane seems to retract from his belief that oral forms contribute to the originality of the African novel.[35] The dominant presence of the author and the single, principal character are now seen as inherited techniques which weigh heavily on the novelist:

> Rares sont les romanciers qui échappent à cette présence abusive [of the author as well as of the main character] héritée de l'oralité. (82)

Whereas twenty years earlier, Kane had shown the inadequacies of European inspired critical approaches

with regard to African writing, he now makes an about-face and reproaches African novelists for not taking cognisance of contemporary, primarily French, structuralist theory and discourse analysis. He distinguishes two characteristic traits of the African novel; concern for realism and committed, if not militant, writing. These he sees as a sign that the African novel is swimming against the current, "dans une indifférence totale des interrogations sur la signification de l'écriture et du structuralisme."(83) Kane views the place and the role of tradition in the evolution of the African novel as a source of paradox, even conflict. In so doing he reduces African prose writing to a dichotomy of choice and is lead to make the following judgement of a contemporary writer from Zaïre:

> Il faut convenir que Mudimbé, pour avoir singulièrement réduit sinon anéantit la part des formes traditionnelles, a pu plus facilement ouvrir son oeuvre aux formes modernes d'écriture romanesque. (86)

In the place of criteria that will illuminate and explain what is specific to African prose writing, Kane measures the African novel by the loosely defined criteria of "formes modernes" or "facteurs de dépassement et de renouvellement," against which he finds it wanting.

Brief mention should be made of other doctoral theses on the subject of oral tradition and the contemporary novel. That of the Ivoirian writer and critic, Amadou Koné, was published in 1985 under the title of Du récit oral au roman.[36] Koné confines his research to the heroic genre and sets out to show that certain modern novels have evolved directly from that traditional form. He then links the transformation of the oral heroic genre to changing historical circumstances. Koné looks at eleven traditional heroic tales that have been transcribed into French and identifies characteristic elements or "topoi" relating to three aspects; subject matter, the hero and certain typical characters, and narrative techniques. He then applies his findings to three novels which he terms "historical" (Nazi Boni's Crépuscule des temps anciens. Paul Hazoumé's Doguicimi and Jean Malonga's Légende de M'Pfoumou Ma Mazono) and to ten other modern novels, published between 1959 and 1976. Having discovered certain formal and thematic similarities between the traditional and the modern texts, Koné deduces that the latter have evolved from the former and he goes on to explain the points of divergence in terms of the changing socio-political context.

As was the case with Kane, while Koné recognises the importance of traditional oral story-telling techniques, he does not pursue the many crucial

aspects that relate to modern prose-writing. Furthermore, his field of reference does not extend beyond the novels of the mid-seventies and so does not take account of the innovative writing of the eighties.

Another interesting doctoral thesis, this time by a Congolese, Bernard Nzoutani-Loumwamou, looks at "la représentation de la tradition à travers la prose congolaise d'expression française." Loumwamou sets out to trace those aspects of modern Congolese fiction that link back to the past and also those that break with traditional orature. He is primarily concerned with direct borrowings (such as proverbial expression and traditional themes) and with certain story-telling techniques (such as frequent digressions and the episodic structure). While he does not investigate any further the cognitive processes involved in oral story-telling, and their possible influence on contemporary creative expression, he gives interesting insight into the traditional meaning of many of the images that appear frequently in modern Congolese novels.

Yet another doctoral thesis submitted to the Sorbonne in 1985 by Sylvain Macayo-Tchitembo, entitled "L'expression de la tradition orale dans les oeuvres romanesques et poétiques de Tchicaya U Tam'Si et de Tat-Loutard," attests to the growing interest in this important domain. Again, however, the investigation

does not go beyond the question of "borrowed" forms, to look at the creative process at a deeper level.

Brief mention should also be made to Sunday O. Anozié's work on the West African novel, Sociologie du roman.[37] Although Anozié confines his study to novels published between 1947 - 1967, his work has the advantage of spanning Anglophone and Francophone writing. An advocate of the structuralist model of literary criticism, Anozié sets out to discover the "thematic structure pattens" of these novels and relates them to the determining realities of their sociological and historical context. In his chapter on "détermination traditionnelle", he looks at the influence of the oral tradition, but primarily in terms of thematic content. With respect to stylistic "borrowings", he observes that certain folkloric elements are used by writers such as Achebe, Bhêly-Quenum or Tutuola, as a form of "embellissement artistique." Indeed, in general, Anozié views the influence of tradition on modern writers in a negative light. Moreover, his schematic presentation of thematic and temporal structures, in the style of Propp and the formalists, sets restrictive parameters to his investigation.

Mbwil a Mpang Ngal, a notable writer and critic from Zaïre, approaches in a different way the subject of orality and the contemporary novel. Ngal chooses not to present his ideas in the form of an academic

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Mbwil a Mpang Ngal, a notable writer and critic from Zaïre, approaches in a different way the subject of orality and the contemporary novel. Ngal chooses not to present his ideas in the form of an academic

critical study but through two novels, which together form a diptych.[38] In the first, Giambatista Viko ou Le viol du discours africain, the main protagonist, Giambatista Viko, is a Westernised African intellectual who is profoundly alienated within his milieu. He is a professor in an Institute and an established poet and essayist. However his efforts to write a successful novel are fruitless and to overcome his inhibitions and frustration he looks to the oral tradition. His aim is to liberate westernised discourse by the magic of orality:

> Mais nous avons été très tôt arrachés et plongés dans celui (l'univers) de l'écrit. Nous avons besoin de le redécouvrir. L'espace acoustique ou plus exactement audio-visuel. Celui du conteur! Quelle richesse indéfinie! Quelle liberté dans l'évolution du récit! Aucune rigidité pareille à celle du roman! Véritable cercle infernal, l'espace romanesque! Je rêve d'un roman sur le modèle du conte. D'un roman où l'opposition entre diachronie et synchronie s'estompe: où co-existent des éléments d'âges différents. D'un univers cinétique: qui engendre un ordre et s'engendre de lui. Cette fécondation du roman par l'oralité que depuis deux ans je m'efforce de réaliser. (13)

Giambatista's project is considered by the authorities to profane sacred African discourse. He and his disciple Niaiseux are condemned by a tribunal to a purifying immersion in nature. Errance, the second novel, traces this expiatory journey to the sources of Africain culture and at the same time, the novel investigates different forms of narrative

discourse. At the end of the search, the dialectical forces of tradition and modernity are reconciled.

The two novels constitute an allegorical treatment of the conflict that arises within a dual cultural heritage and the search for original creative expression. The narration is articulated at two levels, for the protagonists' theoretical debates, concerning the author's relationship to the novel, are at the same time a critical assessment of the text that is evolving. The borderline between poetics and criticism is virtually abolished.

Giambatista Viko's search for new form and meaning is more existential than aesthetic. He is concerned with escaping the restraints of the time-space dichotomy which polarises the author and the reader and he yearns to re-create in the novel the spontaneous immediacy of oral narration. To achieve this, he believes the writer must consciously search for forms of expression which convey thought patterns inherited from tradition. He or she may use certain images that relate to a specific cultural heritage, or create a style of proverbial speech that is inspired from an inner core of traditional cognitive processes.

While Ngal's novelistic form of critical discourse suggests potentially [illegible]n avenues of exploration for African writer it is not his intention to formulate a consistent African literary epistomolgy. He portrays, in fictional form, the

novelist consciously turning to orality in order to recreate existentially a certain mode of narration. This distinguishes him from Kane who, through the study of a limited number of texts, identifies in the novel certain oral elements that the novelist uses unconsciously, being the spontaneous expression of a traditional inheritance.

III

Giambatista Viko's agonises over the dilemma of the writer-reader relationship which, he believes, in the novel loses the immediacy of oral narration. This focusses on a problem that has for several decades preoccupied Western critics. Whereas Giambatista seeks to establish a form of direct narrator-audience communication, French writers from the time of Flaubert have, in reaction to nineteenth century Romanticism, sought increasingly to eliminate the strong presence of the author in the text. Flaubert dreamed of a "pure" narrative form that would exist independently of contextual factors. This was taken up and developed by the structuralists, who advocated that a literary work should be studied as text alone, as an "acte de langage", with no reference to the life and personality of the author.

It is useful to consider the structuralist theory of literature at this point because it highlights some of the fundamental differences that exist between the oral narrative and a wholly literate view of the novel. The most important contribution made by such critics as Gérard Genette, Claude Bremond, Roland Barthes and Tzvetan Todorov, was to refute the traditional form-content dichotomy and to give new meaning to the notion of structure. Instead of seeing form as some sort of envelope into which the content is poured, the Structuralists showed form to be a dynamically integrated structure with its own content. However, they were not as much concerned with the referential meaning of a text as with the description of its constituent elements and the relationships between them. The narrative would be examined and defined in terms of the essential, determining structure. In their attempt to develop a "science of literature" in keeping with other scientific research, they sought to discover what constitutes the *littérarité* of a text. They applied their method to such works as Marcel Proust's A la Recherche du Temps perdu or Gustav Flaubert's novels or Les liaisons dangereuses by Laclos and in so doing, they offered important insights into the way these narratives are shaped.

However, while this approach may be fruitfully applied to certain Western texts, it has serious

shortcomings when applied to African prose writing.[39] The concept of a narrative as a totality, in which all parts are contained in embryo from the beginning, and are ordered by an internal legality, cannot account for the constant digressions and the apparently fragmented structure which typifies African novels.

The notion of fixity, or of relativity to a fixed point, has been exploded by Foucault. What is needed is a theory that can account for relations and multiplicity. The excessive emphasis placed by Genette and others on geometric structure is reductionist and fails to explain other, less tangible but nevertheless powerful elements. As Derrida has demonstrated in his critique of Rousset's study of Corneille, beauty, which is "valeur et force" cannot be subjected to rules and formulas.[40] The structuralists make characterisation and meaning subservient to overall unity. In particular, by not relating the narrative to the extra-literary reality of the referential world, this critical approach encounters problems with respect to contemporary African writing, for it must ignore or dismiss as "non-literary" such important aspects as, for example, committed writing or a clear didactic intention.

The structuralist theory highlights also the question of the relationship between the narrator and the author. Genette picks up on the distinction made by Plato between pure narration or diegesis, where the

author speaks in his own name, and mimesis, where the author seeks to give the illusion that it is another who is speaking. Genette considers the "distance" of the author from the text and he analyses the textual and linguistic implications of the author's relative presence or absence.[41] The terms in which he refers to the function of the author indicate clearly that he considers the author's presence problematic. He advocates prose that be "émancipé de tout patronage narratif," "sans intrusion d'auteur." Yet Genette also recognises that "le récit pur," the total absence of the author, is impossible and would produce a dry and impoverished text.[42]

Writers and critics of this period clearly feel uncomfortable with the apparently irreconcilable dichotomy between author and narrator, language and writing. In Le degré zéro de l'écriture, Roland Barthes sums up what he considers to be the ambiguous nature of the novelistic tradition.[43]

> Elle a pour charge de placer le masque et en même temps de le désigner. (52)

In a similar vein, Nathalie Sarraute gives critical content to the techniques used by the novelists of the "nouveau roman" tradition. The title itself of her collection of critical essays, L'ère du soupçon, is revealing.[44] Sarraute seeks to "unmask" the author who "hoodwinks" the reader into accepting

the conventions of his neo-realistic fictional world.

Because, in Genette's opinion, the novel has never succeeded in resolving in a convincing and definitive manner, the problem of the delicate relationship between "les exigences du récit et les nécessités du discours," he anticipates the "death" of the narrative:

> Peut-être le récit, dans la singularité négative que l'on vient de lui reconnaître, est-il déjà pour nous, comme l'art pour Hegel, une *chose du passé*, qu'il faut nous hâter de considérer dans son retrait, avant qu'elle n'ait complètement déserté notre horizon. (Figures 2 69)

In contrast to this group of French writers, African novelists express no such misgivingss. They move easily and without scruples between the worlds of mimesis and diegesis, at times assuming the role of omniscient narrator, or intruding into the text or, by a process of sublimation, speaking from within the consciousness of the protagonists.

The structuralist method of critical analysis grew out of a purely literate and cartesian cultural context. It therefore cannot adequately account for the specificities of African narrative discourse, which derives from a tradition that is still strongly oral. Clearly, an African literary theory needs to look at such factors as the author-reader relationship and the episodic or vertical narrative structure in

the light of oral narrative techniques. Such an approach is able to explain apparent stylistic or formal "flaws" and "inconsistencies" in the African novel.

The structuralists made an important contribution to literary criticism in focussing on underlying structures, which are reflected at the level of discourse itself. This helps to illuminate the structuring role of images, as will be seen in the analysis of Tchicaya U Tam'Si's prose writing. However, as Derrida demonstrated, structuralism is unable to account for the *force* of a narrative. It cannot explain the dynamism of the contemporary African novel, a dynamism which is intimitely bound up with the writer-reader, narrator-audience relationship.

A fundamental difference between a purely literary concept of narration and oral story-telling, concerns the way in which the text is received. In the oral tradition, the story is recounted to a live audience that responds immediately to the story and the way it is narrated. The listeners' active participation influences the narrator's presentation and helps to shape the narrative. By contrast, a reader reacts to a written narrative as an individual, usually in solitude. The text is fixed in its unique

and final form and any "communication" he may have with the author emanates from his own mind.

However, some interesting perspectives are given to the role of the reader by such diverse critics of the Western literary tradition as Gaston Bachelard, Jean-Paul Sartre and Tzvetan Todorov. Their contribution to critical analysis helps to close the gap between what may seem to be irreconcilable conceptions of the author-reader relationship. In their different ways each of these critics emphasises the notion of a pluralistic reading, that is, of multiple interpretation, limited only by the number of readers for any one text. This non-prescriptive approach is a distinguishing feature of modern Western literary criticism, which breaks away from the aesthetic canons of the eighteenth century and the later positivist schools of thought. It will be useful to take a brief look at what the multiple reading of a text implies with respect to the role of the reader. This will help to understand the complexity of the author-reader relationship for texts that straddle both the written and the oral traditions.

Gaston Bachelard's psycho-analytic approach will be considered in more detail later, in the context of the discussion on the role of the *imaginaire* in creative writing. As will be seen, for him and his successor, Gilbert Durand, reading involves the

release of the dynamic imagination, a dialectical interplay between the writer, the text and the reader.

Nathalie Sarraute represents in many ways the rational, analytical approach that Bachelard refuted most strongly. Yet in her writing, she too, like Robbe-Grillet and Claude Simon, demands the active participation of the reader. A conscious effort is required, to pick up the subtle nuances, to trace the complex, secretive play of *tropismes* that make up her narrative.[45] She pours scorn on the sort of novel that lulls the reader into the complacent and passive observation of a realistic, "slice of life" narration.

Jean-Paul Sartre's theories of literature represent the concrete application of his philosophy, for he develops in literary terms the fundamental concept of existential choice. Of particular interest here is Sartre's analysis of the author-reading public relationship, for he shows this to be central to an understanding of the act of writing. In Sartre's view, not only does the writer choose his public and his subject but the reader too makes a free choice. He chooses to enter into a "pacte de générosité" with the writer; he chooses to believe and in so doing he completes the act of creation. In Qu'est-ce que la littérature?, Sartre expresses in characteristically clear-cut terms the concept of the reader's active role: "La lecture est création dirigée" and again "l'oeuvre d'art est une tâche à remplir."[46]

Tzvetan Todorov, who espouses the structuralist view that literary criticism is a "science" but who escapes some of the restrictive limitations of a purely structuralist approach, recognises that any *énoncé* contains or produces two realities. On the one level there is the story as enacted by the characters but there is also the narrator-reader relation, the discourse by which the *locuteur* seeks to influence the *auditeur*.[47] Again then, the active relationship between the reader and the writer is recognised.

While such a rapid survey runs the risk of over-simplification, it nevertheless serves to indicate the limitations of, to use Roland Barthes' own words, prescribing some sort of "degré zéro" in writing as the hall-mark of a true "écrivain" as against a mere user of words or "écrivant". Not to recognise that the writer chooses an audience and seeks to influence the reader in some way, is to relegate literature to a sterile vacuum, unrelated to the realities of human existence.

With respect to African writing, the complicity of the author is evident and this not only with respect to the strongly committed writing which marked the first generation of writers and which remains a significant element of much contemporary prose. A sense of the author communicating directly with the reader manifests itself in a variety of ways, some overt others more subtle. Often the author

intervenes directly, commenting upon the characters or the action, inviting the reader's response by means of rhetorical questions or conspiratorial "winks". At times, anticipating the reader's unfamiliarity with a particular term or custom, the narration is interrupted by an explanation.

In the early novels, the exotic element is often deliberately developed to cater for the tastes of the largely Western audience upon whom the African writer was dependent. In contemporary prose, explanations of this sort are rare and instead the author assumes that it is the reader's responsibility to become familiar with the historical and socio-political context. Often a particularly moving piece of description reflects clearly the author's intimate knowledge of a particular corner of his or her native land. The tone of personal reminiscence is an invitation to the reader to see it through the eyes of the author. This more subtle manner of communicating with the reader and eliciting a response is reflected at the tonal level, which may be nostalgic, humorous or angry.

When such narrative discourse is viewed from the angle of the traditional art of oral story-telling, the active and all-pervasive presence of the author is put into its true perspective. The ways in which the oral narrator's technique is adapted to prose writing can best be examined in relation to a specific text and this will be done in Part Two, with respect to the

novels of Tchicaya U Tam'Si. Suffice to say here that the traditional story-teller's overriding concerns, the need to entertain his audience and to convey a message of some didactic importance, contribute significantly to an understanding of the dynamic tensions that characterise so much of contemporary African prose.

A clearly African referential world and the special author-reader relationship are distinctive features of African prose writing and the well-disposed reader will willingly make the required shift of perspective in order to contextualise the novel or short story. Imagery however represents a more ambiguous domaine, where forces that determine the writer's specific *imaginaire* may not be easily recognised. Only too often, an African writer is hailed by Western critics and readers because his or her writing seems to satisfy what are essentially Western aesthetic criteria.

Certainly, contemporary critical approaches have shown the way to a pluralistic reading of the literary text and in this sense perhaps, all interpretations of imagery in African discourse are valid. However, when the novels of a Tchicaya U Tam'Si or a Jean-Pierre Adiaffi or a Werewere Liking are read from the perspective of their specific cultural and historic context, it is clear that the dynamics of their figurative expression are very different from those of

Western writing. Their multi-dimensional images function very differently from the notion of metaphoric language that is pivotal to Western aesthetics.

IV

In the following section, an attempt will be made to identify the factors that shape what will be called the **ideo-image**, which is the creation of the **metonymic mind**. Consideration will firstly be given to the way in which African languages are structured and this will be followed by an investigation of those aspects of traditional culture which have bearing on the subject of cognitive processes. It will be particularly important to look at the dynamics of oral composition, for orality, albeit a relatively young discipline, has the advantage of a solid basis of scientific research.

Before proceeding with this empirical investigation however, it is appropriate to explain what is understood by the terms **metonymic mind** and **ideo-image**.

The metonym establishes a relationship based on an association of ideas rather than on shared lexical items. Put differently, the metonym is a semantic relation, based on the contiguity of two ideas, or sensations, that is, their coexistence in the same

mental context.[48] For example, in the expression "we drank an excellent bottle," there is no common lexical link between "bottle" and "wine". The metonym depends on the notion that wine is contained in a bottle.[49]

The metonymic mind which manifests itself in the ideo-image, functions in much the same way: it associates elements which have no immediate lexical link. These elements may be complex, in that they may contain more than one idea. In the language of the linguists, the *signifiant* has one or many *signifiés*, but in the metonym they are in a relationship of reciprocal exclusion. By contrast, the metaphor depends on a degree of intersection between the signifiés. So to describe someone in a state of great fear as "ashen faced" is metaphorical, since there is a common element of greyish colour and even the notion of death. The relationship established by the metonymic image however, may seem quite arbitrary to anyone unfamiliar with the poetic discourse of the writer in question. A concrete example will best illustrate this.

In Tchicaya U Tam'Si's poetry and prose, salt is an important ideo-image. It contains many layers of meaning, or *signifiants*, and by a process of metonymic association, it comes to represent qualities that are not directly related to the lexical meaning of salt. *Le sel* represents inspiration, the spiritual quality that predisposes one to give of oneself; it represents

force and action; it is associated with light and with life. These qualities give life its meaning and savour, just as salt gives savour to food. The ideo-image *le sel* works by an associative relationship of ideas.

> Et le sel en guise de liant
> pour que l'édifice du corps soit défi
> à la hideur grave du tocsin
> (La veste d'intérieur 80)

Le sel, lie all of U Tam'Si's major ideo-images, represents a combination of both traditional associations, which are closely linked to his specific historical and cultural heritage, and also of connations relating to his personal experience or, to use Gaston Bachelard's term, to his unique *imaginaire*.

A crucial factor of the metonymic mind and the evolution of ideo-images, is the relationship between language and thought processes. Language is more than merely the end product of thought, or the final expression of a thought process. Language itself influences, even determines, certain thought processes. As modern linguistic research has shown, it is evident that mother tongue speech patterns and modes of expression are important factors in the development of cognitive processes. An understanding of a writer's particular linguistic environment will help explain his or her specific

manner of conceptualising the world and the way in which experience or poetic vision is communicated. These cognitive processes, formed during early childhood years, shape discourse even when writing or communicating in another language. In order to understand the poetry of Taty Loutard, or the prose of Calixthe Beyala, or the theatre of Bernard Dadié, it is essential to see how, although they write in French, their particular linguistic environment influences their mode of expression. Their writing can be distinguished from that of a mother tongue French speaker, not necessarily on a semantic level but on a deeper structural level.

Linguistic environment varies from country to country and from one generation to another but nevertheless, there are certain factors common to enough sub-Saharan African languages to warrant making some general observations. In investigating certain linguistic factors specific to African languages, it is important to recognise that the languages of Africa fall into several broad families with distinctive structural patterns. This study will therefore be restricted to the Bantu family of languages which, while they cover a wide geographic and demographic area, share some fundamental characteristics.

It will be necessary to begin by considering existing critical approaches based on linguistic factors and following upon this, new avenues for

research will be suggested. Drum language will then be looked at as an illustration of how the particular structures of Bantu languages allow for unique forms of expression.

Léopold Senghor was among the first to try to identify the distinguishing factors of African creative expression. He drew attention to the concrete nature of African languages. This led to his definition of the "analogical image". In his words, the message of the image is conveyed by:

> la *simple nomination* des choses. C'est ce qui fait la poésie de L'enfant noir, le roman de Laye Camara, comme des Contes d'Amadou Coumba de Birago Diop. Ce pouvoir du verbe apparaît déjà et, mieux comme j'ai essayé de le montrer ailleurs, dans les langues négro-africaines, où presque tous les mots sont *descriptifs*, qu'il s'agisse de phonétique, de morphologie ou de sémantique. Le mot y est plus qu'image, il est image analogique sans même le secours de la métaphore ou de la comparaison. Il suffit de nommer la chose pour qu'apparaisse le *sens* sous le *signe*. Car tout est signe et sens en même temps pour les Négro-Africains: chaque être, chaque chose, mais aussi la matière, la forme, la couleur, l'odeur et le geste et le rythme et le ton et le timbre, la couleur du pagne, la forme de la kôra, le dessin des sandales de la mariée, les pas et les gestes du danseur, et le masque, que sais-je?[50]

An *agrégé* in French linguistics, Senghor is better placed than most to make a comparative study of French and African language structures. His focus on the concrete imagery of African expression, which is based on noun forms uncluttered by adjectival or metaphorical structures, shows how, by simply naming

an object, meaning is directly communicated without any further linguistic intermediary. However, Senghor's poetical language lacks scientific precision and is at times mystifying.

More recently, other critics have postulated a critical approach based on a more coherent linguistic analysis of the text. Zadi Zaourou from the Ivory Coast made a stylistic study of Aimé Césaire's Cahier d'un retour au pays natal, in which he set out to establish new directions for the analysis of negro-african poetry.[51]

Zaourou's approach is in the tradition of Bally and the Prague school but, in adapting these European theories to African criticism, he distinguishes two further functions of the word: its symbolic and its rhythmic functions. Without spelling it out, Zaourou's method of stylistic analysis relies heavily on an understanding of the oral tradition. He goes so far as to say that the symbolic dimension of the image, which derives from a specific metaphysical and ethnological context, is beyond the reach of anyone from outside that culture or without a specialised knowledge of it. Jean-Pierre Makouta-Mboukou of the Congo too, postulates that African creative writing is intimately related to tradition and the mother tongue but he does not show in precise terms how linguistic factors determine style.[52] He recognises that specific linguistic, geographic and sociological

contexts result in a poetic language that imposes something of a barrier, preventing the non-initiated reader from penetrating the text and fully understanding the message. Makouta-Mboukou judges the quality of African writing in French in terms of whether it successfully transposes or re-creates mother tongue expressions into French. Such an approach stops short of adequately explaining the stylistic specificities of those African writers who have complete mastery of the French language and whose writing contains no signs of "translation" from their mother tongue. In favouring the message to the detriment of the text, Makouta-Mboukou reverts to the traditional distinction between form and meaning, which runs counter to the contemporary understanding of the sign as an insoluble rapport between signifier and signified.

A third African writer, the Senegalese Makhily Gassama, also bases his stylistic analysis of African writing on a knowledge of cultural context.[53] Less judgemental than Makouta-Mboukou, he postulates that the various attempts made by African writers to find an innovative form of expressionhe be examined from an aesthetical point of view. However, neither Gassama, Makouta-Mboukou nor Zaourou develop their linguistic analyses into a systematic critical approach.

Like all systems, the purely linguistic approach has its limitations. Nevertheless, there are two features of the Bantu family of languages which are particularly relevant for a study of figurative expression and which distinguish them from Indo-European languages. These are tone and nominal form. It is contended that it is these features which allow for concise, lapidary speech patterns, as illustrated in proverbial language or, in the case of creative writing, in the ideo-image.

The nominal systems of Bantu languages allow for a subtle and highly economic play of assocation and connotation. For example, nouns are somewhat loosely grouped into as many as 15 or more classes according to their referential value and they are distinguished by prefixes. For example, the names of trees belong to one class, human beings to another, animals to another. By substituting the prefix, the noun may be moved from one class to another allowing for a subtle play of ambituity or irony. For example, by prefixing the name of a human by the prefix belonging to the animal class, rich innuendos of meaning are created.

Furthermore, Bantu languages are based on a complex system of noun and subject concord, whereby the prefix that determines the noun class is reflected in the verb and associated linguistic elements. This creates strong rhythmic and sonorous patterns which

are exploited skilfully and with great effect by both the oral story-teller and in everyday speech. The mother tongue speaker of these languages develops an ear which is finely tuned to the musicality of language and its capacity to convey meaning. The significance of this with respect to creative expression is evident.

In comparison to Indo-European languages, the Bantu languages generally have a remarkably rich vocabulary. This is particularly true for the concrete evocation of the natural and human worlds. For example, while there may be no generic word for "tree", there are a score of lexical items which name the specific trees within that linguistic zone. Similarly, Théophile Obenga details the ten or so different terms or expressions in Mbochi which are translated by the word "child" or "enfant" in a European language. Each stage in the child's development, or the different circumstances of his life, have a specific name, indicating the importance attached by the Mbochi peoples to this period of human existence.[54]

Where a single word in a Bantu language has a precise referential content, it often requires a whole phrase when translated into a European language. Returning to the Mbochi example, two of the words for childhood are *obosi*, which emphasises the fragile physical aspect of the child, and *ondzesi*, which

focusses on the intellectual faculties of the child, the as yet undeveloped consciousness. Similarly, for the tiny baby of three days to a week, *onyama* indicates the age while *etephe* expresses the fragile nature of the baby. There are yet other words for the baby that is beginning to sit up, for when it begins to walk and for when it reaches the age of three.

The verb system in Bantu languages is equally complex and able to convey a wide variety of tense, mood, aspect and implication. These different forms are indicated by suffixes which, as with the noun classes, allow for subtle rhythmic and sonorous effect.

The rich, concrete nominal and verbal forms make adjectives somewhat redundant and in fact, there are few adjectives in the Bantu language family. Vivid and precise description is achieved by the juxtaposition of two elements, so that the qualities of the one are transposed to the other. It is enough to name the second, referential element, usually taken from the natural world, for the relevant qualities to be understood; no wordy explanations are necessary.

A single example taken from Obenga's work on Mbochi traditional "poèmes-chants" will illustrate this. It is "La yaa osia (Ngondo)" or as Obenga translates it, "Cantique des cantiques mbochi." The poem is a celebration of love, recited by the young people while the play a flirtation game called

mbele.[55] In order to convey the image of a beautiful young girl's well-shaped, strong legs, they are compared successively to the *tsinga*, a fish with a well-proportioned shape, to the great *okwele* tree and to the sound of a troop of wild boar when she walks. The association with the *okwele* tree suggests two important notions. It is the tree used for making drums and it is red in colour. Immediately therefore, the girl is associated with dance and with sensuality. The association is reinforced when her face is described as a distant forest on the horizon.

To appreciate the subtleties of such a description it is clearly important to be familiar with the referential world that is evoked in such detail. However, of even greater interest for the purposes of textual analysis is a comparative study of Obenga's translation, for it focusses on essential structural differences between Mbochi and French. In Mbochi, *imbondo ma otsinga* places in direct apposition, with no further comment, the two terms of the comparison: *imbondo* (legs) and *otsinga* (fish). In his translation Obenga, who is himself a poet and has published in French, makes no reference to the fish. He gives "tes jambes si bien moulées" as the closest rendering of the Mbochi phrase.

Again, it is sufficient in Mbochi to name the distant forest on the horizon for the sense of openness and light to be conveyed. In the French

translation, Obenga feels the need to explain: "Ton visage est calme et net / Comme la ligne d'horizon d'une forêt lointaine!"

This example illustrates how a comparative linguistic approach gives a much clearer understanding of the African writer's poetic expression. The juxtaposed nominal images in the poetry of, for example, Tchicaya U Tam'Si or Jean-Marie Adiaffi, can be directly related to a particular cognitive process by which it is sufficient to name an object for its essential characteristics to be understood. Unlike the free, non-rational association of images found in surrealist poetry, African poets consciously choose the images that will serve as a term of comparison although, as it can be seen, the way in which ideo-images evolve is a highly complex process.

The second distinguishing factor of Bantu languages which is important for an understanding of creative expression is their tonal structure, as distinct from stress patterns. Not only does tone convey a particular cadence to the language, it also has semantic significance in these languages. Many words with the same linguistic form have two or more meanings based on distinctive tonal patterns. This feature has allowed for the development of drum language, particularly in the Central African

countries where dense forest makes communication difficult.

Few scientific studies of drum language have been made and, as it appears that little remains of this dying art, it is uncertain whether much will be undertaken. However, useful reference may be made to a publication by J.F. Carrington, who worked as a missionary during the early 1940's at the Baptist Missionary Society near Stanleyville in the former Belgian Congo.[56] Although Talking drums of Africa relies very much on Carrington's personal observations, and despite a strongly Eurocentric view of the African peoples with whom he worked, it offers some valuable insights into the manner in which drum language functions.

The technique of drum language is based on beating either a pair of drums or more commonly, a single unevenly hollowed-out wooden log drum which gives a high and a low note. The messages are not merely coded signals, like some sort of morse code. The drums truly speak, in that they use a language that reflects semantically the language of that particular group. However, the drums can convey only the tonal quality of the word, not phonetic distinctions. This means that words with the same tonal value must be distinguished by some other means. Carrington gives the example of *songe* (the moon), *koko* (the fowl) and *fele* (a kind of fish), which all have

the same tonal pattern that is, (high, high). (Talking Drums 33-4) When one of these words is used on the drum, it is accompanied by a phrase which distinguishes it from the other words with the same tonal pattern. The moon is "defined" by, "the moon looks down at the earth"; the fowl is, "the fowl, the little one which says *kiokio*"; the fish is, "all the *fele*-fish and all the *mboku*-fish."

Carrington goes on to show how these drum definitions are revealing of daily realities in the life of the people. For example, the plantain is defined as, "the plantain which is propped up." This refers to the fact that the heavy bunches of the plantain will overturn the plant in a tropical storm unless they are propped up by a stout forked stick. Similarly, manioc is defined as, "manioc remains in deserted garden." This apparently enigmatic phrase has a concrete explanation, for the manioc takes a full year to grow and in the hot rainy forest region, the garden is covered with a thick growth of weeds by the time the manioc roots are ready to be harvested. Such an example is yet another illustration of how, in African discourse, apparently hermetic or "surrealist" imagery has only to be contextualised for its meaning to become clear.

Names are an important element of drum language. Not only does each drummer have his own name "signal" but also traditionally, each male member of the group

would have a complex, three-part name. This would identify him firstly, by a personal characteristic, then by part of the person's father's drum name and finally, by a phrase representing the name of the village from which the person's mother came. The example cited by Carrington is illustrative of the vivid concrete images used for drum names. The drum name of Boyele, a drum maker from the Lokele village of Yafolo is given as:

a. *loola lokoki bolongo la*: the spitting cobra whose virulence never abates, son of

b. *bolembo ko la yeto ya likongo bokana wa*: the bad spirit with the spear; mother's town

c. *bato baaka la loola lokoki lwa bainatende*: Yangonde, i.e. the men who were as the spitting cobra whose poison never abates, related to the baEna people.

(Talking Drums 41)

Such drum names may be analysed according to social theme and function as well as stylistically. What is significant for this study of the image is the cognitive process which gives rise to the names. They are based on a salient aspect of the person or of his environment. They reveal a quick, often mocking eye for essential, distinctive traits and these abstract qualities are expressed in concrete terms. There can be no mistaking the sharp, poisoned tongue of Boyele!

The manner of transmitting a message by drum is of interest. The long defining phrases and the need

to repeat them several times to ensure that the message has been received means that it may take up to twenty minutes to convey. In these African cultures, repetition, as in music and dance, is not tiresome or boring but an inherent feature of expression.

Carrington makes two further significant observations with respect to drum language. He shows that it consists of stereotyped phrases, or recognised conventions for distinguishing words of the same tonal value. This is reminsicent of the formulaic language described by Parry and Lord, as will be seen when their formulaic theory is discussed in more detail later. Furthermore, the drum language tends to perpetuate words that have fallen into disuse in the spoken language. When he asked the exact meaning of a word, Carrington often found it was not known and the reply would be: "These words were given to us by our fathers and we do not understand what they mean."

The figurative expressions of poem-songs and drum language illustrate how the linguistic structures of the Bantu languages are exploited in a very specialised way. The resultant form of communication is remarkable for its concision and at the same time for its vivid, concrete imagery. Whether it be language that structures thought, or thought which structures language, clearly there is an intimate link between the lapidary form of the language and the

cognitive patterns or processes of the speaker. This can be confirmed if other visual art forms are considered, such as dance, music and the plastic arts.

Dancing, which is inseparable from music, is an art form that constitutes an integral part of life throughout Africa, be it in the relatively undisturbed world of the isolated villages or in the modern cities. It has its origins in traditional community life and while it has adapted to contemporary conditions, its expressive function remains deeply rooted in present-day consciousness. In his account of 50 years of music from Congo-Zaïre, the journalist and writer Sylvain Bemba presents his philosophical understanding of the role of music, by means of an imagined dialogue between a guitar and an accordeon. The guitar explains to the sceptical accordeon how music lies at the very origin of communication:

> - Elle est là, présente dès les premières manifestations de la vie sociale. La musique est essentiellement langage. Langage de l'esprit quand l'homme, par accumulation de sensations diverses et multiples apprend à hiérarchiser les messages qu'il reçoit de ses sens, trouve en quelque sorte sous forme de plus-value intellectuelle un modèle supérieur d'expression pour écouler le trop-plein de son plaisir intellectuel ou de sa douleur. Langage du corps quand, de tout son être, l'homme accorde ses rythmes intérieurs avec ceux de la nature. L'art c'est, comme on dit, l'homme ajouté à la nature.[57]

In his survey of the traditional literatures of the Mbochi people, Obenga refers to dance as being the "histoire vécue de tout un peuple en sa longue durée existentielle." (Littérature traditonnelle 25) Certainly there can be few parts of contemporary Africa where traditional dancing has been entirely forgotten. Music and dance are therapeutic and binding of the collectivity, be it the members of a Congolese village or a crowd toyi-toying at a political gathering in South Africa. Moreover, the stylised gestures, the mime, even the rhythm, convey a message; they express something of how human beings perceive themselves and their world. Traditionally, different moments in the year are marked by a particular dance, often accompanied by specific musical instruments. The seasons, various agricultural activites, religious or social occasions, call for a distinctive dance language, by which the every-day event is transmuted into an artistic expression of life perceived as a dynamic process.

> Chanter et danser, poétiquement, artistiquement, fait partie de la haute créativité de l'esprit humain, d'autant plus que la vie quotidienne, l'immédiateté est amplement assumée, transcendée dans une perspective d'ouverture, face à l'avenir. (Littérature traditionnelle 25)

It must however be asked to what extent traditional ceremonies and customs influence modern-day life in Africa. The Congo Republic is no doubt

representative of most contemporary African societies, where the *veillée funèbre* is the only remaining widely practised tradition. However, according to Professor August Miabeto, who teaches and researches Congolese oral traditions at the Marien Ngouabi University in Brazzaville, "le souffle de l'oralité" remains embedded in the people's unconscious mind and speech patterns.[58]

To illustrate this, Professor Miabeto refers to the traditional *palabre*, where disputes and questions of village law and custom were debated collectively under the authority of the chiefs. Proceedings during the *palabre* were conducted almost entirely by means of chanted proverbs and figurative expressions, to the accompaniment of drum rhythms. More than mere decorative accompaniment, this "discours tambouriné" was significant at two levels, for the rhythm itself conveyed meaning. This implicit language was inspired from natural sources - bird song or the wind in the leaves. Natural sounds had meaning and this was conveyed in the drum rhythms. In other contexts, drum players "conversed", as a rhythmic dialogue was established between them. Miabeto gives the example of the drums announcing the arrival of an important personnage. Miabeto maintains that, although the precise social functions of the drums has all but disappeared and the *palabre africaine* no longer exists, nevertheless the notion of communicating by

means of rhythm and sound remains. An in-depth investigation of this must be left to the socio-linguists but it would not be irrelevant to point to a vestige of this drum language that has permeated the musical world: anyone attending a jazz concert will be struck by the "dialogue", often engagingly humorus, that strikes up between players, and between a player and his instrument. Music and dancing, then, are a form of coded message by which emotions, values or ideas are represented in stylised and concrete form.

Since Arican art was first "discovered" by the West, there have been many theories put forward about its status and meaning and, like its literatures, African sculture and painting have often been acclaimed in terms of inappropriate aesthetic criteria. The well-known ethnologist Marcel Griaule makes this point when he says:

> On peut dire que l'étude de l'art noir en particulier, a été subjective; elle se confond avec celle des réactions provoquées dans l'esprit des Européens.[59]

One of the continuing debates in this domain concerns the notion that African art is functional or of purely ritualistic significance. Isadore Okpewho contests this thesis and strongly argues that a factor of pure entertainment inspires not only the oral story- teller but also the dancer and the artist.

Most would concur with the middle position, that views African art as being neither purely aesthetic nor entirely functional, and having an important symbolic function. Symbols represent the concretisation of abstract ideas, or in the poetical terms of Senghor, they are "les signes sensibles de forces spirituelles." The rich and varied forms which the plastic arts take in Africa, from masks and wooder carvings to weaving and musical instruments, convey a message. They are a visual, tangible comment on the relationship betweem human beings and their universe. The intention is not to represent nature or people in a lifelike way but to convey an essence, hence the distortion of form. In reducing the object to its essential nature, an effect of great force is achieved, as Kwame Nkrumah explains.

> It is in the moral-philosophical preoccupation in terms of which this portrayal was done which explains its [African art] typical power. It is this also which explains the characteristic distorition of form in African art. In the portrayal of force, whether as forces of the world, of generation and death, or the force of destiny, it was essential that it should not be delineated as something assimilated and overcome and this is the impression which the soft symmetrics of lifelike art would have given. It is to avoid this impression of force overcome that Africn art resorted to distortion of forms.[60]

There are two aspects of traditional African art which are significant for a discussion of the metonymic mind. Firstly, by reducing the object

observed to its essential characteristics or nature, a concise, stylised form is achieved. While harmony and line are clearly important, the purely decorative element is minimal. Secondly, the work of art, be it a mask, a sculpture or a rock painting, is a form of visual language. Shape, pattern and colour have meaning but this symbolic language is not to be understood as some sort of linguistic code.

Calame-Griaule's studies of *la parole* among the Dogon people offer some valuable insights into the status of art and language in a traditional, purely oral, society. For the Dogon, the notion of *parole* includes all forms of expression, be it shape, gesture, music or the spoken word. For example, the decorations on an everyday object such as a hair pin have ontological significance. They may symbolise in meticulous detail beliefs relating to Amma, the creator of the universe. This symbolic language is not a form of writing, with conventional signs representing linguistic elements. Such a "code" would be a closed system, whereas the visual or plastic symbol may signify different things in different contexts. A chevron motif, called "di" (water), in various contexts may mean "the path of the word," or "weaving," or "germination of the seed," or "snake" and so on. In fact, it is the undulating movement conveyed by the chevron motif which is the common element of these different concepts or objects and

which explains why they fall into the same symbolic category.

These insights into the way in which plastic art forms convey meaning are revealing for the literary arts, where similar imperatives seem to determine the way in which the image functions in the text. Objects from the real or natural world are named, without ornamentation. They are juxtaposed without the intermediary of comparative clauses or explanatory markers. In this way, their symbolic significance is conveyed directly and with force. Like the mask or the totem or the fertility sculpture, the ideo-image is a sign, meaningful to those who are able to read it.

The implications of this are important for, just as many objects of African art have ritualistic significance, understood only by the initiated, so too the ideo-image is not immediately understood by the reader who is unfamiliar with the socio-linguistic context of the text. One would hesitate to go as far as Jean-Pierre Makouta-Mboukou, who states that no non-African can fully understand African writing. Nevertheless, it must be recognised that, to take Tchicaya U Tam'Si's poetry and prose as an example, there will often be an element of the ideo-image that a non-Vili cannot appreciate.

Returning now to the verbal arts, there is an aspect of traditional African culture which is undoubtedly significant for the way in which the world is viewed and experience is communicated. Many African writers mention the formative effect upon them of the *veillée*, that moment in the evening when, gathered around the fire, secure beside mother or grandmother, the child listens to the stories and the jokes recounted by the elders, before finally drowsing off to sleep.[61]

Word games, puzzles or riddles, which are used as a prelude to story-telling, constitute an important element of this oral culture. Children in particular enjoy this form of "brain teaser" or epigramatic tongue twister. The riddles play on an association of ideas or images, requiring imagination and mental dexterity to solve. It is this training ground that teaches the child to see and make associations between the real, physical world and private experience.

The skill of playing at riddles is interesting in terms of both image and form. A common structure is the posing of an enigmatic question to which an answer must be given. These riddles, both traditional and of individual creation, are hermetic for anyone unfamiliar with that culture. This particular aspect of the oral tradition offers an important insight into cognitive processes that determine ideo-images. In her detailed study of language and the Dogon people,

Geneviève Calame-Griaule makes a significant observation with respect to word games. They are:

> ... le fait d'une réflexion constamment à l'affût de "signes". Dans cette démarche, le signfiant est mis en rapport avec le signifié dans la mesure où il peut être associé à une série d'autres signifiants qui lui ressemblent et dont les signifiés sont unis par des rapports symboliques dont la "preuve" se trouve dans la réalité matérielle. Nous retrouvons le réseau compliqué, mais précis, des correspondances qui enserre le monde et lui donne, aux yeux des Dogon, sa justification.[62]

Calame-Griaule notes that correspondences are perceived at the phonetic level and that effects of assonance are considered to be semantically significant. She cites as an example the enigmatic formula *ginu niñu ginu nini* meaning "le foyer de la maison, c'est la respiration de la maison." The phonetc resemblance between *niñu*, the house and *ninu*, the human being, is not fortuitous, for the one is perceived as being structured in the image of the other. This is characteristic of the Dogon culture, where complex systems of correspondences are established between human beings and their environment.

Another riddle belonging to the Dogon people and explained by Calame-Griaule, illustrates how these word games establish symbolic relations between the real world, natural forces and cosmological beliefs.

In this they serve to teach the child about his universe:

- *mú bà s'ò dèù-ne mú komá:, dülo-go pàrago vò*
- *kukumi*
- "I have tied up my father's horse in the house, it's tail is outside"
- "smoke"

Calame-Griaule demonstrates how this proverb explains the rain cycle: the clouds are symbolised by the smoke, the sun by the fire inside the house; the horse represents Nommo, the first creature created after the earth, the sky and the water, according to Dogon mythology; here the horse suggests the idea of water and its tail suggests rain. The proverb will be explained to the child as an illustration of how the sun warms the earth and forms clouds which fall as rain. (Ethnologie et langage 462-3)

Two riddles from Obenga's collection give some idea of traditional word games from the Mbochi people of the Congo.

Pe ko pe ko?
- *Kusu pe ipaa pe ipaa.*

Ici la forêt là la forêt?
- La tortue avec sa double carapace.

Ludzindzi e dingi ltolili?
- *Lendeli la dada i dingi onoo.*

Une liane qui encercle la source, qu'est-ce?
- C'est la barbiche de papa qui encercle sa bouche.

Of interest here are the phonetic and rhythmic effects, the lapidary form and the referential world of nature.

In his discussion of the psychodynamics of orality, Walter Ong makes an interesting comparison between the mental processes which determine the syllogism, that fundamental concept of Greek logic, and the riddle, which belongs to the world of orality. The syllogism is self-contained; its conclusions are derived from its premises only. By contrast, persons not trained in this form of reasoning go beyond the statements themselves, to find the solution in their experience of real-life situations. They tend to resist not only defining in abstract terms but also the concept of a closed set, which syllogistic logic represents. For them, life and experience are open-ended and to solve problems one draws on knowledge which goes beyond the words themselves.

Similarly, to solve a riddle, "canniness" is needed, knowledge that is sometimes subconscious. This knowledge derives from a close observation of the forces that determine life. It is a faculty for seeing the symbolic rapport that exists between abstract ideas and the material or natural world. It is this faculty that is particularly relevant to an understanding of the metonymic mind.

Ong's observations are confirmed by Jean Cauvin, a Catholic priest and teacher who spent eight years in

Mali with the Minyanka peoples. He learned their language and shared their life, observing and experiencing at first-hand their traditions and culture. In his book La parole traditionnelle, he too distinguishes between syllogistic or conceptual thought and what he calls *la pensée imageante*.[63] The former, the concept, aims at pure intelligibility, which can be defined in abstract, without reference to humankind or real-life situations. It seeks to discover the universal rather than the particular. The *pensée imageante*, by contrast, expresses second or figurative meaning by establishing the relationship between two concrete situations.

> En effet, si la pensée conceptuelle est plus précise et mieux adaptée à la description "objective" des faits de la nature (pensée technique), la pensée imageante semble plus apte à rendre compte de l'homme, de sa prise de position dans le monde (affectivité), de ses relations sociales; c'est que l'homme n'est pas réductible aux lois de la logique conceptuelle ou de la technique. Il est essentiellement social et libre: et toute affirmation sur l'homme est toujours à reprendre, toujours à nuancer, ce que permettent les images et les différentes touches qu'elles apportent dans la description de l'homme. (La parole traditionnelle 32)

Such a world view, that perceives knowledge as being open-ended, that understands the fundamental ambiguity of truth, that refuses abstract definition, is particularly significant for an appreciation of African writing.

Cauvin draws out another implication of these differing mind processes, which is important to the discussion of the ideo-image. In the literary tradition, there is a clear distinction between denotative and connotative meaning and it is possible to leave much unsaid. The reader will read between the lines and is free to add his own associations. In the oral tradition however, the meaning of the image depends upon precise rules, rules that derive from the functioning of the real world and which will be understood by the speaker and listeners who share a common cultural context. The message is for them quite clear; there is no unspoken meaning or "reading between the lines".

Contemporary African writers may have distanced themselves in time and space from the oral tradition but there remains one aspect of their writing that confirms a firm link with traditional expression and where the *pensée imageante* is clearly illustrated. This is proverbial expression.

Proverbial language is a fundamental feature of all African expression. Théophile Obenga states at the beginning of his chapter on Mbochi proverbs: "On croirait que la langue bantu mbochi est faite uniquement de proverbes (...) tant leur emploi est fréquent, et dans toutes les circonstances de la vie paysanne." (Littérature traditionnelle 280) Even

when Africans express themselves in an European language, a significantly high incidence of proverbs can be observed.

Proverbs have many of the structural characteristics of the word game, albeit on a more extended scale, and their meaning is more complex. Obenga's words with respect to the Mbochi proverb can be applied equally to other cultural zones of Africa.

> On peut dire que le premier but du proverbe mbochi est de dire la sagesse, d'annoncer l'expérience séculaire de la communauté mbochi, d'exprimer sa "philosophie" profonde. (Littérature traditionnelle 280)

The proverb condenses often complex moral or philosophical concepts in a concise, lapidary form, usually based on a concrete image drawn from the real world. It therefore can be used with aptness in various situations of family and social life, calling upon the authority of the ancestors to confirm an opinion, to justify, excuse, blame, encourage or defend. The message, although based on a concrete image, may be enigmatic, even hermetic for a foreigner to that culture.

The Xhosa expression "Maze netholi" is an example of this. The phrase means literally, "Mother with calf," and it is used to express approval for a rightful or fitting situation. It conveys something of the notion of "Congratulations" but with wider

application. At a school prize-giving ceremony, for instance, "Maze netholi" expresses recognition for the achievement of both the prize-winning scholars and also the mothers and teachers, who have contributed to this happy situation.

Often the correspondence established between the abstract idea and the real world is reflected in the phonetic effects. Two more examples, chosen somewhat arbitrarily, this time again from the Mbochi tradition, illustrate the characteristic features of proverbial expression.

> - *Ba sie li sisi eki dzaa?*
> - "Can one criticize the eye when the eyebrow is present?"

The eye and the eyebrow symbolise friendship or kinship. One cannot speak ill of others in front of a friend or relation, for all will be reported back. In this proverb, the images signify at two levels. The concrete picture of the human face and the close proximity of the eye and eyebrow, make the general meaning of the proverb immediately accessible but it also functions at a more profound, metaphysical level. In many African cultures, esoteric relationships are seen reflected in the structures of the human body.[64] Thus the eye and the eyebrow have special connotations for the Mbochi speaker.

- *Kondzi kingi*
- "If one goes to find food in the forest or elsewhere one necessarily runs risks". [In other words "nothing ventured nothing gained"].

This proverb has been chosen because it illustrates the highly condensed form of which the Bantu languages are capable. In fact, like many other proverbs, *kondzi kingi* is often taken as a person's name. The musicality of the expression makes it both striking and memorable.

In oral cultures, the word has a special status. It is to be expected that where one is entirely reliant on the spoken word for communication, one is particularly attuned to innuendoes of sound and rhythmic pattern. More than this, the words may take on metaphysical or sacred significance. In the West, hermetic or cabalistic expression is characteristic of particular literary "schools" or periods, such as that of the surrealists or the writing of the early mystics like St John of the Cross.

In traditional African cultures however, the frontier between profane, and symbolic or enigmatic expression, is difficult to establish, for there is no clear separation between the spiritual and the material, between tne metaphysical and experiential. The word expresses a certain vision of the world, by which human beings are perceived as being at the

centre of a complex system of correspondences. In a world where nothing is gratuitous, words are the symbolic expression of a holistic universe. It is important to take full cognisance of the power of the spoken word in traditional cultures, for it has bearing on the role of the written word in contemporary African writing.

Once again, Calame-Griaule's work on the Dogon people provides valuable material regarding a purely oral society, although it must be emphasised that the findings of ethnologists like Calame-Griaule can serve only to suggest possible avenues of investigation into contemporary African prose. She, like other researchers into traditional cultures, points out the great difficulties facing anyone who does not belong to a particular culture. Given even excellent mastery of the language and an intimate knowledge of the people, it is impossble for an outsider to appreciate fully the many layers of significance contained in words, sounds or images. Nevertheless, certain generalisations may be drawn which will be enlightening for modern African writing.

The Dogon, like most Sudanese peoples, perceive language as being a divine gift enabling them to decipher the systems of signs which constitute their world. By means of words, they are able to establish symbolic links between their daily life, the natural world, the cosmos and their metaphysical and

ontological beliefs. It is sufficient to name a thing to establish this link and furthermore, to assert some sort of control or influence. The word is the form of the Nommo which allows the vital force or *nyama* to be actualised or directed.

So it is for example, that at a funeral, the language of ritual appeases the soul of the departed. Words have a healing power or can cause illness, even death. Certain formulas have a protective power, cause fecundity or sterility, or influence the natural elements to produce rain.

The way in which these relationships are formulated is significant for the discussion of ideo-images. The names of objects are juxtaposed without any need to describe, explain or elaborate, for their relationship is implicitly understood. Such language is denominative not discursive. The word is reverred for itself; its tonal and sensual value, and its incantatory power. Even silence, being the absence of words, is significant.

Such an understanding of the role of language puts into correct perspective the following remarks made by Sony Labou Tansi. Speaking of the magical power of the word, he says:

> Le langage est la marque distinctive de la supériorité spirituelle de l'homme sur les éléments non humains dans l'univers; son laissez-passer à l'Etre Supérieur.

Or again:

> En Afrique nous sommes tous des sorciers du verbe: qu'on parle ou bien qu'on se taise, on parle toujours, on dit.[65]

In his discussion of the psychodynamics of orality, Ong observes that oral cultures encourage fluency, fulsomeness and volubility. The spoken word is a harmonising force, experienced internally, not a visual and thus external entity. This is born out by another African writer, Abiola Irele who, in his essay entitled "African Literature and the Language Question," speaks of the traditional African's feel for language. Ideally, one sees to make every utterance as far as possible memorable.[66]

It clearly emerges then, that the word has a special status and significance in African traditional life. To conclude the discussion of the way in which language forms and structures, reflect the experiential world, a final reference may be made to the ethnologists. In an article, Geneviève Calame-Griaule made some valuable observations of the way in which the Dogon classifications of the natural world reveal their way of understanding and interpreting their world.[57]

Calame-Griaule examines in some detail the terms employed to distinguish different types of insects. These terms, which may be of a metaphorical or metonymic nature, link insects to other categories of

the natural or cultural world. For example, among metaphorical type names, she cites "mouche maçonne harpe-luth" (fly that vibrates in flight), or "herbe mouvette" (because of its form). Among the metonymic names, based on associations of contiguity, Calame-Griaule mentions "coléoptère de la fleur du haricot," after the plant on which it feeds, or "coléoptère de l'excrement du cheval," after the animal with which it is associated for its food, or "sauterelle de l'hivernage" after the season when it makes its appearance. In this way, names of insects express their relationship to the natural world.

More than this however, the insect world reproduces in minuscule the world of human beings. Series of names may be grouped around a key element in the culture of the people. Calame-Griaule takes for her example the blacksmith, who plays a fundamental role in traditional, particularly West African, cultures. In the case of the Dogon people, a distinction is made between the blacksmith who is believed to descend from the first mythical blacksmith, and ordinary blacksmiths of more recent origin. By their names, insects reflect this, and also various elements of the blacksmith's universe; his tools, fire, the colour of the metals with which he works, even the art of pottery, which is the speciality of the blacksmith's wife. According to Calame-Griaule, in this tradition names are never

"innocent" but are revealing of a particular way of thinking or of interpreting the world.

The Dogon systems of classification are particularly complex - not all African traditional societies have developed patterns of correspondence to the same degree. Nevertheless, work done by ethnologists amongst traditional African societies has revealed elements of African ontology which are crucial to an understanding of contemporary creative expression. The precise form and manner in which these beliefs are enacted vary from society to society and they will be considered again more specifically in Part Two, with respect to Tchicaya U Tam'Si's writing. However, it is worth indicating briefly some basic aspects that have bearing on artistc expression.

Firstly, like the Dogon, most peoples of sub-Saharan Africa place humankind at the centre of their systems of reference. This shapes their code of morality, their philosophy and also their societal structures. Social relationships are indeed the cornerstone of communal harmony and cohesion. Furthermore, it may be said that they are peoples for whom the sense of touch is important, who express themselves thrcugh physical contact, and also who dramatise their feelings openly.

Secondly, the traditional African world-view is holistic, in that all phenomena are perceived to be interconnected. Mankind's own close relationship to

the natural world and its cycles is disturbed at one's peril.

The presence of the Supreme Being is indicated through the omnipresent world of the Spirits, who are in direct communication with human beings. Closely allied to this is reverence for the Ancestors, who are believed to intercede in the lives of the living. Life is loved and celebrated for its own sake, not to escape divine wrath or in atonement for human sinfulness.

Such ontological beliefs and practices are illuminating for the semiological analysis of creative writing. Images and names, both common and proper, reflect the way in which the world is viewed and explained. The symbolic value of a word or name is not entirely the creation of an individual poet's imagination; it relates to a system of correspondences deeply imbedded in the traditional culture of that people. This is true not only of oral expression but also of contemporary writing, which is situated on the constantly shifting ground between tradition and modernity, between inherited thought patterns and new ways of understanding the world.

V

Having considered symbolic representation and the power of the spoken word in traditional African

societies, it is time now to focus more specifically on literature itself and in particular, on oral literature. It is not intended to enter into the debate as to whether oral expression may be termed "literature" in the purist's sense of the word's derivation from the latin *littera*. Here literature will be taken to mean creative expression, using the vehicle of language, be it written or spoken. In order to understand the processes of oral composition and the dynamics of what we have called the metonymic mind, it is illuminating to look at the research done by oralists such Albert Lord, Milman Parry and their successors.

The findings of these researchers, who have worked mainly in Eastern Europe, can be compared with Harold Scheub's work amongst the Xhosa and Zulu peoples of South Africa. As yet, little detailed research has been done on oral composition in Africa and even less has been published, so that the findings of the following comparative study are necessarily tentative. It is not possible to do more than identify general principles and potentially productive areas of research, in order to pinpoint the influence of specifically oral techniques in the writing of a particular author.

Parry and Lord examine in detail how the Yugoslavian "teller of tales" or *guslar* performs, while in his book The Xhosa *Ntsomi*, Scheub describes

the Xhosa *ntsomi* tradition.[68] What emerges from these studies is that, while oral traditions differ in detail, in one important respect they are similar. Essential to both is the formulaic expression or what Scheub terms the "core-cliché", which structures the tale and shapes its development.

Before examining more closely these oral traditions, the parameters of the investigation must be clearly established. The oralists are concerned with only oral performance, an art form that reflects very different psychodynamic forces from those that determine the written tale. For the purposes of this investigation into the contemporary African novel, a study of oral composition and in particular, of formulaic expression, is therefore of importance only insofar as it gives some insight into a particular psychocognitive mentality.

Furthermore, it is the way in which this mentality manifests itself in certain stylistic patterns that is of interest, and the content or themes of the oral narratives are here of secondary importance. No attempt is made therefore, to look at oral traditions according to the classification of theme.

In this way it is possible to avoid the pitfalls of the formalists, as exemplified by Vladimir Propp, Chklovski, Eikhenbaum and others of the Russian formalist school. In their study of Russian fairy

tales, they do not give adequate recognition to such important factors as context, conditions of performance and narrator-audience interaction. Their morphological analysis presents a typological classification of themes, whereas a stylistic and semiological survey focusses on the relations between events, and the way in which they are strung together in the narration. Scheub's work is particularly interesting in this respect for, rather than attempting to classify the infinite variants of the *ntsomi*, he demonstrates the high degree of flexibility that exists in the tradition.

Albert Lord defines the formula as, "a group of words which is regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea." (Singer of Tales 4) The important element of this definition is the emphasis on rhythm, which Lord shows to be intimately related to sound patterns. It is the sound patterns and the rhythm which fix the formula into a transmitted and preserved form. Furthermore, in a purely oral tradition, thought processes are determined by such patterns. Lord says:

> Man without writing thinks in terms of sound groups and not in words and the two do not necessarily coincide. (Singer of Tales 25)

Harold Scheub significantly identifies a similar mechanism in the composition of the Xhosi **ntsomi**. He

calls this element the "core-image", which he defines as:

> ... a remembered element of the **ntsomi** tradition, the stable element; it is recalled during the production by means of a complex process of **cueing** and **scanning**, whereby an artist digs into her rich repertory of *ntsomi* images and brings into performance appropriate images and image segments which combine to finish the created work. (Xhosa *Ntsomi* 3)

The nucleus of the core-image is the core-cliché, which takes the form of a song, a chant or a saying. Scheub makes the point that it is the easily remembered rhythmic forms which assure the transmission of the core-clichés and which act as cues in the process of recalling core-images. (Xhosa *Ntsomi* 94) Interestingly, confirmation of this formulaic style of expression comes from the ethnologists. Calame-Griaule identifies in the Dogon *tigé* or poetic expressions, certain homeric-type epithets which have become emptied of meaning but which are retained for rhythmic purposes.[69] These concise formulas convey a striking image in only two or three words, thereby requiring considerable knowledge of the language and its grammatical structures. Furthermore, words are chosen to link up by similar sound patterns.

Undoubtedly, for those who are exposed from an early age to such a tradition of tale-telling, the ear will be attuned to the rhythmic patterns of narration.

These rhythmic patterns constitute more than a stylistic device. They are a determining factor in the process of recall and related thought processes.

The core-cliché and the formula play a dynamic role also in structuring the development of the tale. The themes, or recurrent elements of narration, are what Scheub has termed "core-images" and he shows how the skill of the narrator lies in the way she (for in the Xhosa tradition it is usually women who are the tellers of tales) strings together the different thematic elements. His work finds parallels in Lord's examination of the way the Serbo-Croatian tale is structured. Themes may be substituted, added or omitted, elaborated or simplified, so that while the essence of the story does not change, it is re-created in a different way in every performance. Again, it is the way in which the narrator links the elements by means of repetition, parallels, balance and opposition, that measures his success as a performer.

As described by Parry and Lord, the Serbo-Croatian *guslar* underwent a long apprenticeship in order to learn the techniques of composition and tale-telling. In this, the *guslar* resembles the West African *griot*, who is a professional story-teller. In Central and Southern Africa the practice is somewhat different, for everyone is a potential performer. Scheub in fact emphasizes that most, if not all,

members of an audience also perform themselves, starting as quite young children to tell tales, perhaps to their parents or friends, and patterning themselves upon performances that they have witnessed. The techniques of composition are acquired progressively, through practice and correction or suggestion from the audience. Those who have a special aptitude for performance will become known and respected for their skill.

The process has important implications regarding the narrator-audience relationship, for the successful narrator must elicit and control the audience's participation. This sense of a collective activity is significant. Both the Parry-Lord oralists and Africanists such as Scheub emphasise that the performer sees him or herself as a preserver of tradition.

> Proper social responses within Xhosa traditional communities are idealized and dramatized in production, and the need for order is fulfilled by the structural patterns which define and support custom. Dramatic catharsis becomes something more than a psychological purgative associated with entertainment: in the *ntosmi* tradition, it purges the audience of anti-social views and attitudes antithetical to Xhosa tradition, and it is simultaneously a method of internalizing proper and productive social relationships. (Xhosa *Ntsomi* 173)

Both Lord and Scheub emphasise that the oral narrator does not change the thematic elements and that his artistry resides in the manner in which he

performs the tale, adapting his presentation to suit the contextual imperatives of time, place and audience. He links together remembered themes, patterned by conventional expresssions and song. This leads to one of the main objections that have been raised against the Parry-Lord formulaic theory, for it seems to suggest too mechanistic a form of creation. What, one may well ask, of the artist's originality?

The notion of originality is a touchstone of modern Western aesthetics. This is underscored by the fact that "borrowings" from an undeclared source risk the censure of plagiarism. Western critics who have unquestioningly applied this criterion to African literature have been dismissive of works that appear to have contributed nothing new, being merely the retelling of an old story. The criticism levelled at Amos Tutuola's Palm Wine Drunkard is but one example of this.

In his introduction to Lord's The Singer of Tales, Harry Levin pinpoints the need for re-assessing this criterion, which Western critics are inclined to believe to be of universal application:

> It may be that we ought to re-examine the concept of originality, which is relatively modern as a Shibboleth of criticism; there may be other and better ways of being original than that concern for the writer's own individuality which characterizes so much of our self-conscious fiction. (Singer of Tales x)

Lord himself advises that, in the domain of aesthetics, we should not seek to judge but to understand and indeed, his research serves as a concrete example of how, by listening to and studying creative expression in its true context, one arrives at a deeper and more accurate understanding of it.

Seen in the context of performance then, it is clear that the core-cliché, core-image, formula and theme have a traditional rather than aesthetic significance. In fact, as Lord points out, through habitual usage, the meaning of a formula becomes vestigial, connotative rather than denotative. He gives as an example, the expression "drunken tavern" which has come to mean merely "tavern". Yet because of its acoustic pattern, it is maintained and the audience recognises and understands its role in the narration. In the case of Scheub's core-cliché, be it a song or a proverbial saying, the audience shows its appreciation by joining in or answering. The interplay between traditional elements and individual artistic talent is subtle and complex. It is difficult for the Westerner to grasp the idea of fluidity, of an essence existing in multiform. In the context of orality, the concept of the "original" and its "variants" makes no sense. Each performance is a recreation that exists only for the duration of its performance.

Before turning to modern creative writing to examine more fully the rapport between traditional narrative techniques and the ideo-image, an oral text will be analysed in order to focus on certain striking stylistic features of oral composition relative to this discussion. The example is a single poem-song taken from Théophile Obenga's Mbochi collection and as such, can give only a glimpse into the rich artistic resources contained in any one oral tradition. The choice is necessarily an arbitrary one, chosen from one of the very few published collections of oral texts from the French speaking zones of Africa.[70] These collections are themselves arbitrary, for as yet there exists no substantial record of any one African oral tradition to rival those of Parry, Lord and Foley, amongst the Serbo-Croatian peoples of Yugoslavia.

Furthermore, it must be remembered that the transcribed poem given below can be only an impoverished version of the original poem-song, which would normally accompany the *ikango*, a sacred, liturgical dance. The written form cannot recreate the musical accompaniment, the gestures, the facial expressions or the dance rhythm, beaten out with the feet and hands. Finally, as with all translation, much of the connotative and sonorous power of the original Mbochi is inevitably lost. However, Obenga is both historian and poet and, while he at times

allows himself a rather free translation, he succeeds in transmitting much of the musical and evocative qualities of the original spoken text.[71]

Ambi ma nyaa ayuru

Ambi ma nyaa ayuru a pendi a ndzoyi mo
oyii 1
Nganga no di li dzwe no ophemba
No ngombi o yii la nda

Kani ba akulu akulu ba bina ikango ma akaphi
Nganga no di li dzwe no opemba 5
No ngombi o yii la nda

Waa o kosi mo onoo o leri alongo
A tindi wa okwere okoo wa a kweri bvuma
Nganga no di li dzwe no ophemba
No ngombi o yii la nda 10

Bini abia ba phanda bini ophanda e
Lo pfa bvusa ba ikambi le phi ebvuo dua anganga
Nganga no di li dzwe no ophemba
No ngombi o yii la nda

Oyuru mo iboo olombi ekona 15
Nganga no di li dzwe no ophemba
No ngombi o yii la nda.

(Littérature traditionnelle 72)

Les selles des femmes

Les selles des femmes sont plus volumineuses que celles de l'éléphant [t/o]
Maître, c'est vrai que tu t'en vas en voyage
Mais à qui as-tu confié ton art?

Les *kani* de taille moyenne dansent l'*ikongo* en sautillant [t/o]
Maître, c'est vrai que tu t'en vas en voyage
Mais à qui as-tu confié ton art?

Quand on se blesse à la bouche, on est obligé de lécher le sang [t/o]
On l'envoie couper l'*okoo*, il a abattu le grand arbre *bvuma* [t/o]
Maître, c'est vrai que tu t'en vas en voyage

Mais à qui as-tu confié ton art?

Vous pendant que les autres se procurent les talismans, vous ne le faites pas [t/o]

Et quand vous serez dans le besoin, vous vous
mettrez encore à la recherche des *nganga*!
[t/o]
Maître, c'est vrai que tu t'en vas en voyage
Mais à qui as-tu confié ton art?

Une femme dans un hameau est un *olombi* obligeant
Maître, c'est vrai que tu t'en vas en voyage
Mais à qui as-tu confié ton art?
(Littérature traditionnelle 73)

This poem-song is part of ancient Mbochi tradition, that of an agrarian culture, as is reflected in the natural imagery of its referential world: the elephant, sugar cane, the *fromager* tree and the *olombi* fish. It is a sample of traditional oral poetry that is particularly rich in terms of both stylistic features and thematic allusion. Of particular interest is the number of proverbial expressions and sayings, for which Obenga gives invaluable explanations for the non-Mbochi reader. In alluding to the infidelity of women, the graphic comparaison of "les selles des femmes" to those of the elephant is typical of the earthy, caustic humour of peasant peoples, especially, as Obenga points out, "si l'on sait comment l'éléphant se comporte à ce sujet!" Similarly, like the *olombi* fish, which is small but very tasty, a young woman in a small village is the object of much amourous attention. The adjective *ekona*, which means "brave, valiant, obliging," describes the fish but clearly indicates the qualities of the woman. Less immediately accessible is the saying, "Quand on se blesse à la bouche, on est obligé

saying, "Quand on se blesse à la bouche, on est obligé de lécher le sang." Obenga explains that the mouth is the best place to be wounded, for the blood can be licked and thus the *along* or "liquide vital" returns to the human body instead of being wasted on the ground. By implication, the blood of the *kani* or chiefs is precious, for it is the sacred blood of the initiate.

A typical feature of African oral performance is the ambivalent attitude shown towards the chief. While his power and position is acknowledged, a discreet jibe will poke fun of a weakness or foible. Here the chief, who is small of stature and suffering from a complex because of it, is portrayed as spoiling the noble *ikango* danse, as he hops up and down. In a very concise way, the proverb links the lack of physical height to a moral or spiritual deficiency.

The question-answer form of the poem-song is a common feature of oral literature. Here, the rhetorical question challenges the absent *nganga*. Walter Ong describes this dynamic interaction as agonistic, a form of verbal and intellectual combat expressing human struggle and conflict.

The musicality and the rhythmic patterns of this poem-song will be evident even to a non-Mbochi speaker, despite the absence of musical accompaniment. The rhythm is created primarily by various forms of repetition and these are worth examining more closely.

The single, strongly consonantal word *nganga*, repeatedly placed at the beginning of a line, establishes a forceful beat which would undoubtedly be echoed by stamping feet and clapping hands. It is part of the recurrent phrase which structures the poem, the rhetorical question that challenges the absent *nganga* and which has metaphorical significance. The *ophemba*, meaning journey or walk, here signifies also death, which is an uninterrupted journey. *Ngombi* is the word for a Mbochi musical instrument, a sort of zither. And so, to whom will the *nganga* pass on his art? However, here it is a question not of musical but of magical art; the powers of the *kani*, his exploits, his sacred person.

The rhythmic pattern, then, underscores the essential significance of the poem-song. The almost liturgical or incantatory repetition appropriately emphasises the *kani* and the *nganga*, two of the most powerful members of Mbochi society. The repeated question, which acts as a refrain, marks the progression and shapes the poem-song, by means of strong, rhythmic motion.

Assonance is central to the musical and rhythmic effects. The noun-prefixes of this Bantu language, which lend themselves to rhythmic exploitation, are used with particular effect in the phrase *Akani ba akulu akulu ba bina ikango ma akaphi*. (line 4) The

mockery of *akulu akulu* to describe the small stature of the *akani* is unmistakable.

A comparison between the Mbochi poem-song and the French translation illustrates the concision of the African language. A striking feature of Obenga's work is the way he often has to use a long line or more, to translate two or three words of the original Mbochi. The contracted linguistic structures of the African language are particularly effective for placing two ideas strikingly in contrast, thus communicating the symbolic content by means of juxtaposition rather than explanation. So it is with the image of one sent to cut the paltry *okoo* or sugar cane, (line 8) and who fells the mighty *bvuma* or kapok tree.

These techniques of oral creative expression provide valuable insight into contemporary African literary discourse. It is not suggested that African writers today are imprisoned in traditional poetic modes, but reading their work in the light of oral narrative techniques illuminates features of the imagery which are, in many ways, formulaic. Again, this is not to say that the ideo-images are traditional or stereotyped or that they have no original imaginative power. However, they resemble the formula or core-cliché in two ways. They are firmly embedded in a particular cultural context, familiar to those who share that tradition but not

immediately accessible to an outsider. Furthermore, they pattern, structure and mark the progression of the narrative or poem. To take the analogy any further would be to limit and deform the poet's discourse. The ideo-images of a writer such as U Tam'Si are multi-dimensional, being the complex expression of both a collective and also an individual identity. In this they are the creations of his own poetic universe yet they reflect psychocognitive processes similar to those that are manifest in formulaic expression.

Formulaic-like imagery, rhythmic patterns, the juxtaposition of opposing ideas, enigmatic traditional yings; these are the dynamics of a specific creative process, the reflection of mind patterns characteristic of oral composition. Writing demands very different cognitive processes; Walter Ong maintains that writing has transformed human consciousness more than any other single human invention. As he says, a literate person cannot fully recover a sense of what the word is, for a purely oral people within a culture untouched by the knowledge of writing. The literate person will always have a mental vision of the written word. In Orality and Literacy, Ong examines the psychodynamics of writing, which he shows to be an essentially autonomous discourse, independent of time and place.

It offers the possibility of correction, for expressing precise, analytic thought and it leads to increasing "introspectivity".

What does this mean for a transitional culture, where oral traditions remain strong and where, in the span of a single lifetime, it is possible to move from a state of primary orality to complete literacy?

Albert Lord states categorically that, while there can indeed be a **period** of transition between oral and written style, there can be no such thing as a transitional **text**. To the question of whether there can be a single individual who would think or compose in a manner that combines the two techniques, he says:

> I believe that the answer must be in the negative, because the two techniques are, I submit, contradictory and mutually exclusive. Once the oral technique is lost, it is never regained. The written technique, on the other hand, is not compatible with the oral technique, and the two could not possibly combine, to form another, a third, a "transitional" technique. (Singer of Tales 129)

Lord goes on to support this position by means of a formulaic analysis of compositions by literate performers.

However, Lord's standpoint is that of technical composition and he does not investigate creative expression at a deeper, psychognitive level. Clearly, in the consciousness of an individual or of a cultural group, there can be no clear divide between

cognitive processes. In the transition from orality to literacy, thought patterns are both shaped by, and in turn determine, the different modes of expression. Such cross-influences remain particularly significant in Africa, where the division between the lettered and the illiterate are not strongly upheld by class and social divisions. The situation is not as it was in medieval Europe for example, where writing and reading skills were the preserve of the monasteries, the clergy, the patriarchal families or even some wealthy merchants. The ordinary people remained virtually untouched by the existence of written texts.

Lord recognises that a situation of diglossia may indeed exist in a given society, that oral and literate techniques may co-exist, but in different domains. Today, a *guslar* may well be capable of writing for the purposes of communication at an official or technical level.

John Foley takes the question of diglossia further. In The Theory of Oral Composition, he makes a survey of contemporary scholarship in this field.[72] His own belief in the importance of the "the complex interaction between the two modes of communication and representation" has led to the founding in 1986 of the journal Oral Tradition. The objective of this journal is to provide a forum for continuing discussion of the "grey area", of the influence of oral tradition on written literature, as well as being an organ for the

development of research in the domain of Oral Theory in general.

Orality and literacy may well be two different techniques for two different uses. Yet stylistically it is possible to identify elements that are manifestations of inter-related psychodynamics. It would indeed be strange if there were to be no mutual influence. It is in the light of this that a semiological and stylistic analysis of modern prose writing from Africa must take into account the underlying cognitive processess of the metonymic mind.

VI

Having examined at some length the ways in which speech patterns and cultural heritage may determine the poetic discourse of a modern writer and, in particular, the formation of ideo-images, it is useful now to consider the work done by Gaston Bachelard and his successor, Gilbert Durand, on the formation of images within the *imaginaire* or imaginary mind.

Bachelard was fascinated by Freud's work on the relation between the unconscious mind and artistic expression. As a psychoanalyst, Freud was interested in literary works because they represented, in his view, the imaginary satisfaction of unconscious desires. He and others, such as Charles Mauron or Charles Baudouin, analysed literary works in order to

identify the writer's personal mythological universe. This they maintained which would help them to understand the workings of his subconscious mind and therefore his life.

Bachelard's concern was not to study human beings through their fantasies and neuroses but he believed, nevertheless, that the systematic study of literary images was a means of analysing the psychology of literary imagination. In reaction to some of the erudite critics of his time, who placed undue emphasis on an essentially intellectual understanding of creative writing, Bachelard hoped to contribute to a renewal of literary criticism. He emphasised the "valeur passionnelle" of the poetic image which cannot be reduced to the fixed form of an intellectual symbol.

It is as well to preface the discussion of a critical method based on psychoanalytic principles by recognising an important limitation; to explain myth and image in terms of the human psyche risks losing sight of the literary text. For example, to relate Stendhal's imagery to his early childhood experiences, as J.P. Weber attempted to do, subjugates creative expression to biographical events.[73] Furthermore, in the absence of a detailed and intimate knowledge of the writer, the critic cannot avoid making an arbitrary, even subjective selection of significant experiences in the writer's life.

Bachelard and Durand however, did not limit themselves to exploring the imaginary mind of a single writer. They believed that an individual poet's imagary is deeply rooted in universal, archetypal images. Bachelard speaks of "une réalité identique et universelle de l'imaginaire."[74] His method was to investigate the poetic discourse of a cross-section of poets, French, English and German, primarily of the Romantic period, and he showed in four separate studies, how their imagery related to the archetypal images of earth, air, fire and water.[75] Durand's *mythocritique* takes this classification further and establishes constellations of images, made up of *schèmes, archétypes* and *régimes*.[76]

An inherent weakness of such universalist theories is that they blurr the cultural specificities of different people and societies. Furthermore, all categorising tends to be reductionist, and a system based on the alchemists' four elements cannot fully account for the diverse sources of inspiration informing both Western and African creative expression. Notwithstanding these limitations, Bachelard and Durand offer some valuable insights into the nature and functioning of the poetic image. Of particular interest is the notion that a writer's imagery is fundamentally coherent and that it relates back to what Bachelard calls "les sources oniriques." He believes this profound region of the writer's

imaginary mind to be part of the collective unconscious. The analysis of an individual poet's imagery or symbolism will reveal that they have their roots in a vaster, more ancient, symbolic imagination. In the words of Durand: "le chef d'oeuvre ouvre le mythe personnel sur une mythologie collective ressentie dans les profondeurs d'un peuple." (Structures anthropologiques 218) This theory is particularly significant for African creative expression, where images such as water, the tree, or blood, cannot be dissociated from traditional ontological belief.

Bachelard's major contribution to the reading of literary texts is the way in which he showed the image to be a dynamic process, not a static idea. The poetic image is in a sense only a starting point. He believed that the image exists in the unconscious mind before it takes the form of an idea. It emerges into the conscious mind in the form of a continuously dialectical process, involving the intellect and the imagination. This dialectic leads to a synthesis, or to patterns of correspondence, that are perceived within the depths of the *imaginaire*. For example, Bachelard demonstrates the link, imagined not intellectual, between *le ventre* and concepts of the cave, the furnace of *le forgeron*, the mother, birth, sleep and death. These images cannot be understood objectively and rationally. Furthermore, Bachelard

shows the *imaginaire* of the reader to be an essential element of the process. By responding with empathy, and emotionally rather than intellectually, the reader brings the image to completion.

In L'eau et les rêves, Bachelard's analysis of the water image, which he considered to be one of the most powerful, is particularly interesting. It illustrates both the relationship between the individual and the collective *imaginaire* and also the dynamic, dialectical nature of the image.

Bachelard is not concerned with *pittoresque* or superficial imagery; his aim is to discover the roots of "la force imaginante," what he calls "l'imagination matérielle." This is the imagination that experiences images in their elemental form, before they have been intellectualised:

> Ces images de la matière, on les rêve substantiellement, intimement, en écartant les formes, les formes périssables, les vaines images, le devenir des surfaces. Elles ont un poids, elles sont un coeur. (L'eau et les rêves 2)

Further on he says:

> L'imagination n'est pas, comme le suggère l'étymologie, la faculté de former des images de la réalité; elle est la faculté de former des images qui dépassent la réalité, qui *chantent* la réalité. Elle est une faculté de surhumanité. Un homme est un homme dans la proportion où il est un surhomme. On doit définir un homme par l'ensemble des tendances qui le poussent à dépasser l'*humaine condition*. (23)

Bachelard attempts to trace images to their deepest source and he then groups them into what he calls "complexes". For example, certain water images relate to the imaginary journey, the crossing, the barque which carries one across the river to death. Bachelard identifies these images as being signs of the "complexe de Caron". The "complexe d'Ophélie" groups together water images expressing melancholy, *le néant* or suicide by drowning. In a particularly insightful chapter, he shows how the poetic imagination experiences the femininity of water. Water contains the notion of birth and regeneration; it represents maternal milk, the source of life; it is profoundly sensual. Water is also inextricably bound up with the concept of purity and of cleansing; pollution is experienced as a sacrilege committed against nature. In Bachelard's terminology, the water image is an expression not only of the material imagination but also of the dynamic imagination; it contains the dialectic forces of calm tranquillity and also violence. It has both healing and destructive qualities. When violent, it expresses cosmic anger.

Bachelard was working within the framework of the European literary tradition but his exploration of fundamental images, such as that of water, is illuminating when applied to African imagery and symbolism. The paradoxical, at times esoteric, language of Werewere Liking, Calixthe Beyala, or Sony

Labou Tansi defies rational explanation and here Bachelard's philosophy offers valuable insight into the working of the imaginary mind.

This can be particularly well illustrated by looking at Tchicaya U Tam'Si's writing, where water is one of the key ideo-images. There is one important reservation to be made however; where Bachelard looks for the source of the *imaginaire* in the depths of the human psyche, Tchicaya U Tam'Si's water imagery finds its source in traditional ontology. His introduction to one of the legends in Légendes africaines is significant in this respect. In African ontology, water is one of the primary elements for it contains "la force vitale" and it is a key image in legends relating the beginning of life or of the world.

> ... l'homme reçoit d'elle ce qu'il faut pour étancher sa soif de grandeur, de merveilleux courage. Dans ses profondeurs, l'eau garde tous les mystères du commencement. L'eau est source de vie. Pour s'en convaincre, il faudrait lire cette légende qui, en pays batéké, veut que la femme soit fécondée lorsqu'elle va puiser l'eau à la source. C'est l'habitacle de tous les génies, les meilleurs et les pires! C'est pourquoi l'eau, comme le feu, est violente et non violente. (Légendes africaines 85-6)

Such a perspective is fundamentally important for a reading of U Tam'Si's poetry where the water ideo-image is a synthesis of related images such as the rain, sea, blood, the menstrual cycle and the moon.[77] It is an ideo-image that acquires layers of

significance, from its appearance in his earliest poems through to his later collections and his prose writing. The following examples will illustrate the complex relationship that exists within the poet's *imaginaire* between the heritage of the past and individual experience.

> La plaie qu'on lave au courant de l'eau
> Les songes plongent pris en défaut
> Mais le chant se recrée sur l'esquif.
> "Sauvetage"(Le mauvais sang 25)

This short extract contains most of the traditional ontological beliefs related to water; its cleansing properties, its symbolic role as the source of life, its dialectical role in the voyage of life through to death. In the context of the whole poem, however, these connotations acquire new perspectives. Water is the source not only of life but also of poetic inspiration ("Les songes plongent..", "le chant se recrée.."); the wound washed by the water represents the spiritual absolution and renewal of a people betrayed and destroyed by colonial exploitation. In a preceding verse, blood suggests sanctification, betrayal, sacrifice and revenge:

> Morts détrompés, morts sanctifiés,
> bientôt le temps sera sang sur flammes
> rendez-vous donc vendez-nous vos âmes
> pour que refleurissent les trophées!

The "sauvetage" of the title represents the rescue or the spiritual salvation of the individual and of a people; of one who "betrayed" his country by leaving it and of the ancients, who allowed themselves to be conquered. The water is that of the ontological river of life and also that of the Congo river.

A poem taken from a later collection, La veste d'intérieur, illustrates how the water ideo-image becomes increasingly complex. La veste d'intérieur was published some time after Epitomé and Le Ventre, where U Tam'Si had expressed his disillusion and despair at the betrayal of Patrice Lumumba. "Les eaux croupies" opens La veste d'intérieur and establishes a new mood. In U Tam'Si's poetic discourse thus far, "eaux croupies" has come to signify disillusion and death. However, in La veste d'intérieur a new dimension is added to the water ideo-image. The poem begins:

> On s'essuiera l'âme
> nous nous sècherons les pieds
> Tout sera verdoyant
> l'eau départagera le ciel et la terre

The message here is of hope and of new beginnings; of emerging from the stagnant waters of despondency, of wiping away false illusions. The verb "départagera" conveys the sense of both deciding between, and separating, opposing factions. Water then will play a conciliatory role. It offers a new

vision of harmony, for when the elements of water, air and earth are united, there will be growth and fruition, both physical and spiritual.

The poem ends:

> Il y a Tibériade[78] dans chaque hance d'eau
>
> Je dis prenez cette terre par la main
> afin que tarissent les eaux croupies
> et le maïs avec une barbe
> plus affolante que ce nid dans ce coeur.

Here the spiritual dimension is deepened and the message of renewed hope in fraternal love is confirmed. The allusion to contemporary, political realities in Africa is clear but the greater, metaphysical dimension is not lost. In many African ontological systems, the art of working clay, of combining water and earth, lies at the very beginning of creation. Interestingly, for Bachelard, clay or dough are important elements of the material imagination. In modelling forms, life is created and an ideal equilibrium is obtained between the two elements, between liquid and solid. This act of creation satisfies a profound impulse and represents spiritual and metaphysical liberation.

At this point in U Tam'Si's poetic discourse, the water ideo-image has acquired layers of meaning that go beyond the original ontological significance. He has taken an element rich in traditional connotation and has consciously developed it into his own, multi-

dimensional signifier, which reflects both the collective and the personal and whose temporal dimension spans the mythical past and the socio-historic realities of the present.

Before leaving the discussion of the water ideo-image, a short extract from U Tam'Si's prose will illustrate how the accumulative significance of the ideo-image informs the whole of his creative discourse, be it poetry, the novel or indeed theatre.

> Ici, l'eau est la seule fumure, mais elle lave l'humus, l'emporte ailleurs où c'est loin de la misère du village. Souci du laboureur.
>
> En arrivant, sa mère lui fera un récit de cette sorte en caressant ou en se souvenant de la barbe du maïs ou de cette odeur qui fait saliver qu'a le maïs sur pied après la floraison. Fleur sans éclat que celle du maïs. Sèche et laide. (Ces fruits si doux 257)

This passage comes near the conclusion of the novel, where Gaston is approaching the end of his agonising journey, which represents both a personal and a collective cleansing process. The spiritual, initiatory journey is described in language particularly rich with metaphysical connotation. In this passage then, water is primarily a cleansing element, a symbol of rebirth intimately associated with renewal of the land. The profound inter-relatedness of water with the woman is expressed in the reference to Gaston's mother. The dominant figure

of his childhood, she represents warmth and security and furthermore, as the provider of food, she is an integral part of the natural cycle, a symbol of Mother Africa.

Significantly, as in "Les eaux croupies," water is associated with maize. As one of the staple food crops of Africa, the immediate significance of the maize image is clear. However, in U Tam'Si's discourse its recurrence signals not only collective but also more personal connotations. The image of the dry maize plant, capped by the tassle of pale, insignificant flowers, with its distinctive smell [illegible] the hot sun, bearing a cob with a strange, silky [illegible], expresses vividly remembered sensations, dating [illegible] poet's childhood. Here, reference can again be made to Bachelard, who says of the role of memory in material imagination:

> Mais le pays natal est moins une étendue qu'une matière; c'est un granit ou une terre, un vent ou une sécheresse, une eau ou une lumière. C'est en lui que nous matérialisons nos rêveries; c'est par lui que notre rêve prend sa juste substance; c'est à lui que nous demandons notre couleur fondamentale. (L'Eau et les rêves 11-12)

From these examples, the importance of Bachelard's contribution to an understanding of the ideo-image can be seen. In attempting to psychoanalyse "la rêverie littéraire," he shows the

way to a more profoundly connotative interpretation of imagery. This is particularly helpful for African writing, where the past weighs heavily on the present, and where the individual expresses also the collective. Bachelard plunges into the individual psyche to discover the universal, archetypal image. In African writing that deeper dimension emerges from a traditional heritage, the mythical past of a people.

In exploring various critical approaches to discover their contribution to a syncretic method which it is argued, is the most adequate to encompass the distinctive elements of African writing, it becomes evident that the various threads converge and find their poetic expression in what has been called the ideo-image. In conclusion therefore, it is as well to try to highlight briefly the essential characteristics of this multi-dimensional signifier.

The ideo-image is the concretisation of an abstract idea, expressed usually in terms of natural imagery relating directly to the African world. In poetic discourse it works by juxtaposition, in concise metonymic forms, reflecting the cognitive patterns not only of African languages but also of traditional artistic expression, be it the plastic or the verbal arts. The ideo-image becomes a form of short-hand in the individual poet's creative writing. It develops

progressively, acquiring layers of meaning which reflect both the collective consciousness and personal experience. As the name implies, it is as much a poetic as an intellectual response, both the unconscious expression of a cultural inheritance and a conscious choice of denotative elements capable of conveying a message of contemporary significance. The most powerful ideo-image contains an inner dialectic which enables it to express the profoundly paradoxical nature of the human condition.

The ideo-image is evident to differing degrees in the poetic discourse of different writers. Not all develop the same degree of densely figurative writing as do Tchicaya U Tam'Si or Sony Labou Tan'Si or Werewere Liking. Yet all contemporary African writers occupy a position somewhere midway on the scale between pure orality and total literacy; all retain strong, profound links with their traditional heritage. A semiological analysis of the ideo-image, which takes as its terms of reference the oral tradition as well as the contributions made by the major contemporary theories of literary criticism, will illuminate the complex interweaving of the past and the present, of the various elements inherited from a dual, or multiple, cultural heritage. More than anything else, it is this very complexity which characterises African writing.

NOTES

1. Gilbert Durand, Figures mythiques et visages de l'oeuvre (Paris: Berg International, 1979) 153.

2. Abiola Irele, The African Experience in Literature and Ideology (London: Heinemann, 1981) 4.

3. Es'kia Mphahlele, "Negritude revisited" in The African Image (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1974) 83-4.

4. "surprendre l'acte créateur," Amélavi Amela, "Littérature africaine et critique traditionnelle," Présence Africaine 139 (1986) 10-19.

5. Jacques Derrida, "Cogito et histoire de la folie," L'écriture et la différence (Paris: Seuil, 1967) 53-4.

6. Wole Soyinka, Myth, Literature and the African World (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1976) viii.

7. Isidore Okpewho, Epic in Africa (NY: Columbia UP, 1975).

8. Tzvetan Todorov, "Les catégories du récit littéraire," Communications 8 (Paris: Seuil, 1981) 157.

9. Théophile Obenga, Littérature traditionnelle des Mbochi (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1984)

10. Jean-Pierre Makouta-Mboukou, Introduction à l'étude du roman négro-africain de langue française (Abidjan: N.E.A., 1980) 242.

11. Interesting parallels may be drawn between the non-dialectic blurring of cultural diversity and class difference inherent in the Negritude ideology and that of Black Consciousness. In an article published in English in Africa 10.1 (May 1983) Kelwyn Sole draws out the implications of an ideology based on assumptions of an undifferentiated, shared black identity.

12. See in particular Jean-Pierre Makouta-Mboukou, "De l'aliénation au salut du corps" Introduction à l'étude du roman 132-41.

13. Irele, A. The African Experience in Literature and Ideology (London: Heinemann, 1981)

14. G.M. Gugelberger, ed. Marxism and African Literature (London: James Currey, 1985) 84.

15. Chidi Amuta, The Theory of African Literature (London and New Jersey: Zed Books Ltd, 1989) 7.

16. Wole Soyinka, Myth, Literature and the African World 66.

17. Terry Eagleton, Marxism and Literary Criticism (London: Methuen, 1977) 19.

18. Raymond Williams, Marxism and Literature (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1985) 212.

19. Chidi Amuta The Theory of African Literature 117.

20. "Autour du fleuve essentiel" Round table discussion with Tchicaya U Tam'Si, Sylvain Bemba, Maxime N'Débéka, Sony Labou Tansi. Debate led by Daniel Maximin. Notre Librairie 92-3 (mars-mai 1988) 9-13.

21. Gugelberger, Marxism and African Literature 3.

22. Henri Arvon, Marxist Esthetics (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1973) xxiv.

23. Lucien Goldmann, Pour une sociologie du roman (Paris: Gallimard, 1964) 345.

24. Chidi Amuta, Theory of African Literature 81.

25. For a representative cross-section of opinion within this debate, see Ingrid de Kok, and Karen Press, eds, Spring is Rebellious: Arguments about cultural freedom (Cape Town: Buchu Books, 1990)

26. The expression is Georg Gugelberger's in Marxism and African Literature vi.

27. Mphahlele, "The African Personality" in The African Image 73.

28. "Autour du fleuve essentiel," round table discussion, Notre Librairie 92-3 (1988) 11.

29. This despite Gugelberger's disparaging dismissal of "worn-out bourgeois vocabulary of formula, catalogue, parataxis and theme (Milman Parry, A.B.Lord)..." Marxism and African Literature xiii.

30. Janheinz Jahn, Manuel de littérature néo-africaine (Paris: Resme, 1960)

31. For an overview of current research in this field, see J.M.Foley, The Theory of Oral Composition (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1988) 94-111.

32. Sony Labou Tansi, Les sept solitudes de Lorsa Lopez (Paris: Seuil, 1985).

33. Mohamadou Kane, "Structures: sur les 'formes traditionnelles' du roman africain", Revue de Littérature Comparée 48 (1974) 536-68.

34. Mohamadou Kane, Roman africain et tradition Thèse d'Etat, U de Lille III, Lettres et Sciences Humaines, 1977-78 (Dakar: N.E.A., 1982).

35. Mohamadou Kane, "Les paradoxes du roman africain," Présence Africaine 139 (1986): 74-87.

36. Amadou Koné, Du récit oral au roman (Abidjan: CEDA, 1985)

37. Sunday O. Anozié, Sociologie du roman, (Paris: Aubier, 1970).

38. Mbwill a Mpaang Ngal, Giambatista Viko ou Le viol du discours africain (Lumumbashi: Alpha-Oméga, 1975), (Paris: Hatier, 1984).
L'errance (Yaoundé: Clé, 1979).

39. The debate around the question of what structuralism can or cannot do for African fiction is illustrated in the opposing points of view expressed by Sunday O Anozié, who is probably the strongest African proponent of the structuralist approach, and Anthony Appiah. See Henry Louis Gates Jr ed. Black Literature and Literary Theory (New York: Methuen, 1984).

40. Jacques Derrida, "Force et signification," L'écriture et la différence (Seuil, 1967) 32.

41. Gérard Genette, "Discours du récit," Figures III (Paris: Seuil, 1972) 67-273.

42. See for example "Proust et le langage indirect," Figures II (Paris: Seuil, 1969) 223-94.

43. Roland Barthes, Le degré zéro de l'écriture (Paris: Seuil, 1953)

44. Nathalie Sarraute, L'ère du soupçon (Paris: Gallimard, 1956)

45. Nathalie Sarraute devised this concept to give concrete expression to the intangible "psychological impulses," the instinctive reactions, that are concealed beneath the surface of daily social intercourse.

46. Jean-Paul Sartre, Qu'est-ce que la littérature? (Paris: Gallimard, 1948) 57, 61.

47. Tzvetan Todorov, Poétique de la prose (Paris: Seuil, 1971) 38-39.

48. Gérard Genette gives the credit to Stephen Ullman for having been the first to identify in Proust's writing typically metonymic transpositions. Gérard Genette, "Métonymie chez Proust" Figures III (Seuil, 1972) 41-63.

49. Henri bonnard, Procédés annexes d'expression (Paris: Editions Magnard, 1983) 71.

50. Léopold Sédar Senghor, "Comme les lamantins vont boire à la source," Poèmes (Paris: Seuil, 1984) 158-9.

51. Z. Zaourou, Césaire entre deux cultures (Dakar: N.E.A.,1978).

52. Makouta-Mboukou, Introduction à l'étude du roman

53. Makhily Gassama, Kuma. Interrogation sur la littérature nègre de langue française (Dakar-Abidjan: N.E.A., 1978)

54. Théophile Obenga, Littérature traditionnelle des Mbochi (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1984) 140-3.

55. Théophile Obenga, Littérature traditionnelle des Mbochi (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1984) 204-09. The poem is too long to be reproduced here.

56. J.F.Carrington, Talking Drums of Africa (London: Carey Kingsgate Press, 1949)

57. Sylvain Bemba, Cinquante ans de musique du Congo-Zaïre (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1984) 22.

58. Professor Miabeto, personal interview, Marien Ngouabi University, Brazzaville, 28 May 1991.

59. Marcel Griaule, Masques dogons (Paris: Institut d'Ethnologie Musée de l'Homme, 1983) 787.

60. Kwame Nkrumah, Consciencism A Philosophy and Ideology for De-Colonisation (Panaf, 1966) 65.

61. Idrissa Ouedraogo, a film director and producer from Burkino Fasso, said about his film Yaaba (1989):

"Yaaba" began with the memory of a tale of my own childhood and of a sort of nocturnal education. Where I come from, this nocturnal education is acquired between the age of seven and ten, just before falling asleep, if one is lucky enough to have a grandmother. (Cinematic notes, Cape Town Film Festival, May 1989)

62. Geneviève Calame-Griaule, Ethnologie et langage: La parole chez les Dogon (Paris: Gallimard, 1965)

63. Jean Cauvin, La parole traditionnelle (Issy les Moulineaux: Editions Saint-Paul, 1980)

64. A full discussion of this with respect to the Dogon peoples is given by Calame-Griaule in part one of Ethnologie et langage (21-89)

65. Sony Labou Tansi, interview, Bingo 374 (mars 1984) 70-2

66. Abiole Irele, "African Literature and the Language Question," The African Experience in Literature and Ideology 57-8.

67. Geneviève Calame-Griaule, "de l'infiniment petit à l'infiniment grand: observer, nommer, classifier," Présence Africaine 62 (1981) 47-57.

68. Alfred B Lord, The Singer of Tales (Massechusetts: Harvard UP, 1960); Harold Scheub, The Xhosa *Ntsomi* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975).

69. Calame-Griaule, Ethnologie et langage 480-81.

70. Calame-Griaule has done some invaluable work in this respect among the Dogon people. Although primarily an ethnologist, she has made a detailed study of their oral literature in Ethnologie et langage and in an article entitled "The Oral Tradition as an Art From in African Culture," Présence Africaine 47 (1963): 197-214, she makes a fine literary analysis of a Bambara song.

71. Obenga's interpretation of the poem-song is not offered as a definitive version for there is divided opinion amongst fellow Mbochi regarding Obenga's explanations of the poem-songs in his collection. However, the question of alternative meanings for specific images does not have direct bearing on the principle of creative techniques.

72. John Foley, The Theory of Oral Composition 107ff.

73. J-P Weber, Stendhal. Les structures thématiques de l'oeuvre et du destin (Paris: SEDES, 1969)

74. Gilbert Durand, Les structures anthropologiques de l'imaginaire 438.

75. Psychanalyse du feu (Paris: Gallimard, 1938); L'Eau et les rêves (Paris: Corti, 1942); L'Air et les songes (Paris: Corti, 1943); La Terre et les rêveries de la volonté (Paris: Corti, 1948).

76. Gilbert Durand, L'imagination symbolique (Paris: P.U.F., 1983); Figures mythiques et visages de l'oeuvre, de la mythocritique à la mythanalyse (Paris: Berg International, 1979); Les structures anthropologiques de l'imaginaire. Introduction à l'archétype générale (Paris: Dunod 1987).

77. Interestingly, Roger Godard points out that in Vili, the word *ngonda* means the month, the moon and the menstrual cycle. Trois poètes congolais (Paris: Harmattan, 1985) 75.

78. Sea of Tiberius which, in the Gospels, is given the name of Sea of Galilee.

PART TWO

CHAPTER THREE

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE CULTURAL MILIEU OF THE CONGO REPUBLIC

At an international symposium organised by the French Ministry of Culture at the Sorbonne in February 1983, Professor Joseph Zi-Kerbo, the historian from Burkino Fasso known for his Histoire de l'Afrique Noire, presented a cogent exposition on the pivotal role of culture in the process of a nation's development. Culture, he said:

> apparaît comme matrice dans le passé et comme projet dans l'avenir. La nation est une communauté qui pousse sur des racines culturelles, singulièrement la langue.[1]

Africa has experienced in a particularly acute way the confluence of traditional cultural practices and modern, foreign influences. Often the effects of this encounter are destructive but at the same time, new and dynamic fields of creativity have opened up.

Literature is one of these and creative writing is amongst the richest and most rapidly evolving spheres of a modern African nation's culture. Yet, more than any other art form, a nation's image of itself, as expressed in its literature, reaches audiences that are for the most part not African.

In Part One, consideration was given to the problems that this situation creates, whereby African literatures are often misunderstood by readers formed in different cultural environments. It was argued that it is incumbent upon the reader and the literary critic to become as familiar as possible with the historical and socio-political context of that writing in order to understand the dynamics of its particular symbolic and linguistic universe. This can be a formidable task, compounded by the fact that the relation of the writer to his or her society is a dialectical process that cannot be reduced to measurable time and space, as documented by the historians and the ethnologists. Being neither historian nor ethnologist, the literary critic's perspective is quite different; it is the cultural milieu from which the writing emerges, and which is in turn modified by that writing, that must be investigated. Accordingly, in order to provide the necessary basis for a critical analysis of Tchicaya U Tam'Si's work, this section will focus on those historical or ethnological factors which provide an understanding of the Congolese cultural milieu.

What follows then is not a comprehensive history of the country that is today known as the Congo Republic but an attempt to foreground the significant moments that help to explain the people's sense of identity and the forces that shape the imaginary mind.

The dialectics of the historical process will be illustrated by a constant movement between the past and the present, in order to show how the contemporary society from which a host of distinctive writers has emerged is inextricably bound up with its past.

Any reading of a piece of modern Congolese prose or poetry would be incomplete without some knowledge of the pre-colonial history of this region. This has been documented by, amongst others, Théophile Obenga, Martial Sinda, Dominique Ngoïe-Ngalla and Georges Balandier. They have revealed the existence of great kingdoms as powerful and as sophistocated as those of Mali and Ghana in West Africa. The southern region of the present-day Congo was part of one of the best organised and most flourishing of these kingdoms, that of the Kongo, which covered over 1 500 sq km. and which stretched down into the present-day Angola as far south as Luanda, or Loanda as it was called. The kingdom was founded during the 9th and 10th centuries and the founder king, Ntinu Wéré is believed to have taught his people the art of metal work, which provided them with both arms of war and agricultural instruments, factors which led to their dominant position in the region. According to tradition, the mythical centre of the Kongo was Kôgo-dya-Ntotila, in northern Angola. Later it became known as San Salvador (the modern-day Sao Salvador) after Francisco

de San Salvador, a Mukongo Capucian monk. This city was to be the royal capital until 1665, when the last of the Kongo kings, Dom Antonio I was defeated by rival chiefs, who had enlisted the aid of the Portuguese.

From the early 16th century to the mid-17th century, the Kongo kingdom was a region of stablility and prosperity, giving rise to a robust and confident people, conscious of their superiority over their neighbours. The sense of an ancient and powerful ancestory is often singled out by contemporary Congolese writers and historians to explain elements of modern Congolese thought. Martial Sinda, himself a Bakongo, or Bas-Kongo, says of his people during the French colonial period:

> Dans le même temps où ils se mettaient à l'école des Blancs, les Bakongo se considéraient comme les premiers parmi les Africains. La certitude, venue du passé, d'être un peuple élu, a toujours dominé la pensée Bakongo.[2]

Another feature of the early history of the Kongo which can be seen to reflect in contemporary thought patterns, is the fact that the Bakongo region was an important zone of cultural contacts and commercial activities. Georges Balandier's authoritative work on contemporary social structures of this part of Central Africa and their relation to the pre-colonial period, details the complex systems of trade and commerce

which operated at the time of the first European arrivals. The markets were central to this, providing a social meeting place as well as a focal point for commercial exchanges. Secure in their position of economic superiority, the Bakongo were open to foreign ideas and they welcomed innovation.

According to Georges Balandier and Martial Sinda, this ability to adapt to new influences led the Bakongo to establish early contacts with the colonial forces.[3] Interface with Portuguese traders and missionaries dates from 1482, when Diego Çâo landed at the mouth of the Congo River. The Europeans were greeted with great interest by the Kongo sovereigns and the powerful provincial chiefs. They were keen to learn from the European material culture, which they quickly saw as a means of reinforcing their position of power and authority. In this the Bakongo manifested a characteristic trait, which was to be their strength and an important factor in the history of the resistance of the Congo people to later forms of domination. Their modernist spirit combined with their well-developed economic network made it more difficult for the French and Belgian colonial administrations to establish control of the region.

Seen in this historical perspective, some of the regional distinctions and conflicts in the modern day Congo Republic can be explained. The most economically active areas in the south, the Pool,

Bouenza, Niari and Kouilou districts, are predominantly Bakongo while to the north in the Plateaux and Cuvette districts are to be found the Batéké peoples. The latter were pushed back by the Bakongo as they migrated northwards and they never participated fully in the economic systems of the region. More conservative in their reaction to outside influence, they were looked down upon by the "modernist" Bakongo.

Today these tensions continue to be significant factors in both the political and the cultural life of the Congo. In the three decades since independence, political power was progressively arrested from the hands of the Bakongo by representives of the more sparsely populated northern regions. The National Conference in 1991 brought to the fore these north-south ethnic divisions and at its conclusion, the voting for an interim government reflected clearly the desire to safeguard against a re-entrenchment of power in the hands of a minority ethnic group. Strong contenders for the position of interim Prime Minister had little chance of being elected if they were from the north.

Of particular interest with respect to cultural configurations is the fact that the overwhelming majority of established writers are from the southern Bakongo districts.

A second important factor emerging from the pre-colonial history of this central African region, which has bearing on the cultural life of the modern-day Congo, is the intricate and ambiguous relation of Christian teaching to traditional beliefs. The Bakongo people's ability to adapt to and assimilate new ideas manifested itself at the time of their first contacts with the Portuguese missionaries. The Christian belief in a single all-powerful creator and the afterlife of the spirit was sufficiently close to Animistic beliefs and Ancestral worship for it to be easily assimilated[4]. The early missionary church made rapid advances and the first black bishop was ordained in 1518[5].

But the ease with which Christian dogma was accepted meant that conversion was superficial and Animism continued to exist alongside Christianity. Indeed, many Bakongo had strong reservations towards the White man's religion. This was understandable in the light of the profoundly equivocal role played by the missionaries; generally speaking, evangelisation was imposed from the outside in an authoritative and intransigent way, showing little understanding for the religious customs of the African people. Furthermore, the early Portuguese missionaries and clergy were closely implicated in the slave trade.

Today, four centuries later, the Christian church is firmly implanted in modern Congolese society but

the way in which Christian dogma is interpreted and relates to traditional practices remains ambiguous and at times contradictory. As in the past, Christian and Animistic beliefs continue to exist side by side. On the one hand, the Catholic Church is strongly present, this despite two decades of Marxist-Leninist rule. Indeed, while publicly rejecting Christian beliefs, the Party leaders could be seen slipping off in the evenings to visit not only the curé but also the local *nganga* or *féticheur*.

It is apparent that the majority of Congolese will, in time of trouble, do the same; like André Sola in Tchicaya U Tam'Si's Les méduses, they will consult both their priest and the *féticheur*. While many may profess scorn for such practices, syncretism is defended by others. In the view of the historian Dominique Ngoïe-Ngalla, the Congolese are profoundly Christian "in their own way", which may not always conform to standard Christian dogma; indeed, says Ngoïe-Ngalla, perhaps they conform more to Christ's image of the Christian than do many Westerners.[6] The symbiotic relationship that has developed between Christian and Animistic beliefs is difficult to measure. While most traditional religious rites and ceremonies have disappeared from the towns, the profound respect which is paid to the dead bears witness to the fact that the ancestors are still believed to intervene in the daily existence of the

living[7]. This "syncretic mentality" is expressed in symbolic form at many levels of daily life and the following example will serve as an illustration. When the National Conference finally drew to a close in early June 1991, after three months of tense deliberations had brought to an end more than twenty years of repressive single-party Marxist-Leninist rule, the Congolese people were called upon to participate in a nation-wide ceremony of cleansing. On the final Sunday, they were asked to go together to the cemeteries to clean the graves in rememberance of the hundreds of political assassinations that had taken place during the previous two decades. Following upon that, all over the country church services were held, together with traditional cleansing ceremonies. These symbolic acts signified a breaking with the past, forgiveness and the start of a new era.

Today however, few Congolese would openly profess to being Animist; indeed Animism is generally equated with fetishism. Professor Ngoïe-Ngalla regrets that the traditional understanding of the forces of life should be reduced in this way to the status of mere witchcraft. He believes that fetishism must be clearly separated from true Animism which, as a dynamic vision of life and the human condition, enables people to realise themselves fully. Ngoïe-Ngalla expresses articulately a notion that appears as

a common thread running through the writing and critical discourse of writers as different as Sylvain Bemba, Emmanuel Dongala, Guy Menga, Tchicaya U Tam'Si, Sony Labou Tansi or Tchichellé Tchivéla, to name only a few of those who shape the literary and cultural milieu of the Congo. Animism is part of a cultural patrimony with which the Congolese people must keep contact if they are not to be alienated:

> Il faut une ouverture, un débouché sur quelque chose qui compte. Il faut accepter un processus dialectique de dépassement, tout en restant soi-même avec les pieds sur deux rivages. C'est l'unique chance....Il y a en nous plusieurs étagements; dans le soubaissement il y a tout un entassement de cultures anciennes. Ce que je crains, si on essaie de les refouler, si on se ferme à ce bouillement intérieur, si on ne s'ouvre pas, ça va se terminer par une grande névrose.[8]

Such notions of syncretic interfusion characterise Congolese writing. The high incidence of legendary themes and the multidimensional images reflect a dialectical interplay between the past and the present, revealing how the writer experiences the forces of history that have fashioned the society of which he is an integral part.

The diverse, often conflicting influences of Western and African cultures, of modern and traditional life styles, are nowhere more apparent than in the syncretic sects that abound, especially in the southern towns and cities of the Congo today. The

roots of many of them can be traced back three centuries to Béatrice du Kongo, who founded the Antonian movement. More recently, the years preceding independence were marked by the birth and rapid spread of two major syncretic movements known as Matsouanism and Kimbangism. These messianic faiths played an important political role, in that they gave impetus and direction to growing demands for liberation. Being a specific feature of this region's colonial history, they need to be examined in some detail.

It should be noted here that their success can in part be explained in terms of the syncretic mentality of the Bakongo people, which reconciles easily the twin roles of the spiritual and political leader. It is always dangerous to identify elements that would appear to characterise the consciousness of any one cultural group, since each individual experiences in a unique way his relation to that group. Nevertheless, the tendency to endow political leaders with prophetic or mystical powers seems to be a significant feature and explains in part why a man such as Denis Nguesso was able to maintain his position for as long as he did. Interestingly, the prophetic figure is a recurring image in Congolese writing. This may be in the form of a mysterious preacher, as in Tchicaya U Tam'Si's Les méduses, or a modern political leader with extraordinary powers, as in Sylvain Bemba's Léopolis or his hero Emmanuel

Nung'Udu in Le dernier des cargonautes. Mystic protagonists abound in Jean-Pierre Makouta-Mboukou's prophetic novels, such as Les dents du destin or Les exilés de la forêt vierge. Accounts of legendary heroes also abound, as in Guy Menga's tales of the adventures of Moni-Mambou. Jean Malonga, the doyen of Congolese writing, recounts in La légende de M'pfoumou Ma Mazono, the life of a mythical hero who is believed to have introduced the traditional values of Congolese society to his people.[9] More recently, Emmanuel Dongala has returned to the legendary past of the Bakongo people with his story of Mankunku in Le feu des origines. Even foreign political leaders may be bestowed with prophetic powers in the popular mind, as is seen in Guy Menga's Case de Gaulle, where Kibélolo's veneration for De Gaulle illustrates how he was viewed by many in this part of Africa. Patrice Lumumba, reverred as a martyr of African liberation, is a recurring figure in U Tam'Si's poetry and in Sylvain Bemba's prose.

The symbolic dimensions of these prophetic figures in literature become clear when they are seen in an historical context. Béatrice du Kongo, André Matsoua and Simon Kimbangu all died martyrs in what were essentially liberation struggles. In the opinion of Martial Sinda, they remain dominant figures in Congolese thought because they express the dream of a reunited Kongo, restored to its former grandeur. Be

that as it may, to understand what these figures signify in the popular mind requires some knowledge of their historical existence.

Béatrice du Kongo, or Dona Béatrice Kimpa Vita, lived from 1684 to 1706 in the southern region of the Kongo kingdom, near San Salvador. She was of a noble family and had an excellent Bakongo and Christian education. In 1704, Béatrice believed she was visited by Saint Antoine who gave her the mission to restore the kingdom to the young King Pedro IV, who had been chased from the royal city of San Salvador by his rivals, aided by the Portuguese. She was to found the Antonian movement which had widespread popular support. The Antonians aroused the anger of the Catholic Church by questioning such sacred institutions as marriage and the confessional. They reworded liturgical prayers, such as the "Salve Regina" and called it the "Salve Antoniana" and they claimed that Jesus, the Madonna and Saint Francis originated from the Congo. The Antonian teaching blended the sacred with the secular, calling for political unity and reconstruction. This was the first Bacongo attempt to Africanise the imported European church. Béatrice was regarded by the Capucians and the Catholic missionaries as a heretic and a threat to the Church. Under their influence, the weak young King Pedro IV allowed himself to be persuaded that Béatrice represented a political threat

to him. She was imprisoned and after a sham trial, was burned to death on the stake.

The Kingdom was deeply divided over the issue, since the people believed her to be a saint and a symbol of national restoration. She subsequently came to be regarded as an early martyr in the struggle for Congolese self-determination and freedom from foreign domination.

In Le messianisme congolais, which is based on his doctoral thesis, Martial Sinda sets out to vindicate the image of Béatrice du Kongo whom the Catholic chroniclers had portrayed as a hoaxter and a sorceress. He elevates her to the level of a national heroin and his impassioned words give some indication of how she is perceived by many Bakongo people today.

> Restauratrice du Congo, Dona Béatrice nous appartient à nous tous Congolais. Chaque génération montante lui remodélera un visage toujours plus magnifique. Des drames et des comédies lui redonneront d'autres visages au théâtre et au cinéma. Des statues qui célébreront sa mémoire se dresseront partout au Congo-Brazzaville, au Congo-Kinshasa et en Angola du nord indépendant. Une date fixée de commun accord par les gouvernements des trois pays sera choisie pour commémorer chaque année sa vie et son oeuvre.
>
> Si pure, si droite, si attachante, si courageuse, si belle, Dona Béatrice Kimpa Vita dont nous tenons à faire revivre à jamais le souvenir nous invitera désormais, nous et nos descendants, à un voyage spirituel à travers les siècles. (58)

Written in the early seventies by an idealistic young Congolese studying in France, these words may

well give rise to some ironic smiles, since the contemporary entrenchment of national boundaries has reduced such a vision of reunification to an anachronism. However, Sinda's words give some insight into the symbolic role that Dona Béatrice du Kongo plays in the Congolese *imaginaire*.

The Antonian movement prefigures the messianic movements of the twentieth century, movements which, in the words of Balandier, represent a "reprise d'initiative de la société dominée."[10] They share similar aims; the restoration of the Kongo Kingdom, the creation of political unity, the construction of a national Church and the safeguarding of independence.

The emergence of Kimbanguism and Matsouanism is integrally related to the history of this central African region. The early Portuguese monopoly had soon been challenged by the Dutch, the British and the French, all eager for a share in the slave trade. By the end of the XIXth century, the Belgians had entered the race. French dominance was assured in 1880 with the signing by Savorgnan de Brazza of a treaty with local chiefs. This was followed in 1883 by a second treaty which established the sovereignty of France over the kingdom of Loango. Three centuries of slave trade had reduced the population to such an extent that resistance to the gradual military penetration was weak.

Under French colonial administration, the Congo, known as Moyen Congo, was part of Afrique Equatoriale Française (A.E.F.). For the next half-century, concessions were to be given to private companies which exploited the region's resources far more than they developed it. Successive French Administrations showed less interest in their possessions in Central Africa than in Afrique Occidentale Française (A.O.F.). A factor that symbolises more than any other this dark period in the history of the Congo was the construction of a railway line linking Brazzaville with Pointe-Noire at the coast. It is estimated to have cost 20 000 lives and every family was affected directly or indirectly. Today the Chemin de Fer Congo-Océan (C.F.C.O.) is a vital if tenuous trade link with the outside world yet it reverberates with conflicting associations in the *imaginaire* of the Congolese people and it is a recurrent ideo-image in the literature. The mechanisms of the *indigénat* have been documented by the historians and social scientists but a definition from literature succinctly portrays the effects upon the people's psyche of that particular French form of colonial administration, which resembles in many ways the South African Nationalists' apartheid rule. In Tchicaya U Tam'Si's Les phalènes, as expectations reach fever pitch with rumours of the imminent abolition of the *indigénat*,

Prosper reflects bitterly on what it has meant for the people:

> C'est quoi d'ailleurs, l'indigénat? C'est nous plus la crasse de tous les mépris, une crasse nauséabonde qui ne fait pas un bel habit à qui la porte. La fin ça signifie nous sans cette couche de crasse. Cette crasse fait d'un homme un sale nègre. Un nègre n'est pas tout à fait un homme, c'est un macaque, un singe, une bête, si l'on veut, une bête de somme, en somme! (72)

It is this sense of profound alienation that forms the background to the rise of such charismatic leaders such as André Matsoua and Simon Kimbangu, around whom the powerful messianic movements grew.

Simon Kimbangu was the founder of Kimbanguism or N'Gounzaism (*N'Gounza* = the prophet). He was born in 1889 at Nkamba, to the north of Thysville in the former Belgian Congo. Educated at a baptist mission, Kimbangu was to create, in opposition to the imported European religion, an all-African religious movement similar to the Ethiopian and Zionist movements of Southern Africa. The conclusions reached by Maurice Leenhardt, writing about Ethiopianism in South Africa, apply equally to Kimbanguism;

> I
> L'Ethiopisme est un mouvement social d'un peuple réclamant ses droits au moment précis où il prend conscience de lui même (sic), et de l'oppression dont il est l'objet de la part d'un gouvernement étranger.

II

L'Ethiopisme est causé:
Par les lois restrictives du code indigène anglais;
Par la malveillance des blancs;
Par les erreurs et le manque de souplesse et d'art pédagogique de plusieurs missionnaires.[11]

Kimbanguism was totalitarian in its demands; it called not only for a complete break with the European missions, but also ordered the destruction of all fetishes and an end to sorcery, in a society where social upheaval had led to a proliferation of such activities. The only element of the traditional religion that was maintained was the worship of the ancestors. As a movement, it attempted to institute order and a sense of national identity among the people. In reaction to the repressive Belgian administration, it was a grass roots expression of revolt against colonial rule. Its religious chants were inspired by the Biblical stories of protest and revolt which led to the unification of the Jewish people.

Simon Kimbangu was arrested, condemned to death, reprieved and deported to Katanga in 1912, where he eventually died in 1951 in an Elizabethville prison. However, his death contributed more to the strengthening than to the destruction of the movement which he had begun for, in the eyes of the people, he was a martyr, a divine saviour or messiah, the liberator of the oppressed. After his deportation,

the church became clandestine, giving rise to elements of secret initiatory practices, myth and mystery.

Today Kimbanguism is an officialy recognised church with many adepts who still believe that Kimbangu will return in triumph to punish all those who betrayed him and to recompense all those who have remained faithful to him.

Across the river in the French colony, the Bakongo people followed closely the events unfolding in the Belgian Congo. The rising forces of self-determination and reconstruction led thousands of catechists and ministers to resign from their church and to join forces with the Kimbanguists. Mass protests led to armed intervention and Kimbangu's church was outlawed in the French Congo. But a new movement, led by André Matsoua, was to give fresh impetus to the Bakongo people's demands for independence.

André Matsoua was born in 1899 near Brazzaville. A brilliant pupil at the Catholic mission school of M'Bamou, he did not have the means to continue with his studies and he became a catechist. He soon showed himself to be an excellent orator. His popularity grew steadily and from this time dates his ambition to become a great leader of the Bakongo people. From the beginning, he was to be a more political than religious leader and it was only after his death that the Matsouanist movement took on messianic

proportions. Having decided to abandon his post with the Catholic mission, Matsoua worked for a short while in Brazzaville and then realised his ambition to go to Europe. Far from being an anti-colonialist revolutionary, Matsoua believed that Africans should learn from the White people and he was inspired by an ardent desire to learn and to widen his experience. He was convinced that the suffering and injustices inflicted upon his fellow Bakongo could be resolved through negotiation.

Once in France, Matsoua signed up with one of the Senegalese regiments to fight in the Moroccan war, after which he returned to Paris where he found work and, at the same time, furthered his studies through evening classes. Believing that the problems of the colonies could be solved legally, and in order to speak as an equal with the French authorities, Matsoua applied unsuccessfully for French citizenship. While in Paris, he made contact with other Congolese and together they founded in 1926, the "Association amicale des originaires de l'Afrique Equatoriale Française" (the Amicale). Although instituted primarily to help and to "raise the moral and intellectual level" of Congolese people in France, Matsoua used the Amicale to defend systematically the interests of his exploited compatriots in the Congo.

The Amicale obtained official and legal recognition in France but when a deputation was sent to the Congo, tc make known their programme to the people, their beliefs in negotiation with the French authorities were dashed. Several of the delegates, and eventually Matsoua himself, were arrested. Matsoua's trial and sentence to exile in Tchad gave rise to prolonged demonstrations and unrest in Brazzaville. During his years in exile, the now clandestine movement became increasingly violent in its demands for freedom from colonial represson. In 1935 Matsoua escaped from surveillance and found his way to France. When war was declared. he enrolled in the French army. He had not lost his faith in the good will of the French authorities who, he believed, would recognise the human ideals for which he stood. However, with the war, repressive measures in the colonies increased and several militant Amicalists were condemned to death and executed in public. Matsoua was arrested in Paris where he was recovering from wounds and was sent back to the Congo for trial. His trial in 1941 was politically orchestrated and he was allowed no defense. Sentenced to forced labour for life, Matsoua died in prison in 1942 and was summarily buried.

The fact that Matsoua was refused a ritual burial and that his body was not seen by the people was perhaps the greatest mistake made by the French

authorities, for the people refused to believe that he was dead. The Amicalist movement took on a religious character and the man Matsoua was transformed into a Christ-like figure around whom crystallised the deepest aspirations and dreams of the people. As in the case of Simon Kimbangu, today many people are still awaiting the triumphal return of André Matsoua.

There have been numerous successors to Kimbangu and Matsoua, albeit with less widespread popular support, and a feature of contemporary Congolese society is the existence of prophetic movements which continue to resist strongly any Western influence. At the same time, these movements tend to become inward-looking and to lack social, economic and political commitment. As such, they have been viewed with some suspicion by successive governments and their standing in the community is ambiguous.

If the history of the messianic movements has been developed in detail, it is in order to illustrate how important in the national consciousness is the prophetic leader, who refutes death and who leads his people to self-determination. In the popular mind, such a leader is easily conferred with messianic qualities. As the Congolese writer Guy Menga has said: "the people of the Congo need their heroes."

Yet the role of the heroic or prophetic figure is profoundly ambiguous, for the dividing line between belief in an inspired leader and blind superstition is

a fine one. In the three decades since independence, the concept of the messianic leader has been exploited by despots who, in the name of the people, have claimed for themselves superhuman powers - and priviledges. The popular tendency to deify political leaders is satirically evoked in contemporary Congolese writing, with that characteristically dialectical pattern of thought which expresses itself in multi-facetted symbols.

A recurrent figure is that of the power-crazy tyrant, who has himself called "Guide providentiel" (Sony Labou Tansi's La vie et demie), or "Guide-Eclairé-Père-de-la-Nation" (Maxime N'débéka's Equatorium), or "Tonton Hannibal-Ideloy Bwakamabé Na Sakkadé" (Henri Lopes' Le Pleurer-Rire), or "Berger Suprême, Père de la Nation" (Tchichellé Tchivéla's L'Exil ou la Tombe). Like Nnikon Nniku, Tchicaya U Tam'Si's toilet cleaner who becomes the president and Guide of the Nation in Le destin glorieux du Maréchal Nnikon Nniku, most of these megalomaniacs come from lowly beginnings, usually the lower ranks of the army. Having imposed themselves by force upon the nation they institute various forms of mass worship in order to maintain their tyrannical reign of terror.

Side by side with these tragi-comic figures, are to be found prophetic, at times mythical leaders who, like Matsoua, courageously defy the established power system and, when executed or assassinated,

miraculously refuse to die.[12] Such figures, who move in a fictional universe filled with ambiguous symbolism, represent in literary form the complex imbrication of the past and the present, which charaterises the Congolese *imagi Jre*.

The euphoria that accompanied independence for the Congo in 1960 was short-lived. The modern history of the Congo Republic has followed a cycle similar to that of many African states; at independence a "moderate" leader, President Youlou was elected with the indirect support of the out-going colonial power; three years later, the "trois glorieuses" of 13, 14 and 15 August 1963 saw him deposed by a military coup, with the widespread support of the people. This marked the beginning of the progressive establishment, in the name of popular unity, of a single-party state; in another army coup in 1968, the last civil leader, Massamba-Débat, was ousted and the military took over. A period of increasing oppression began under the rule of Marien Ngouabi and, following his assassination in 1977, under that of Colonel Denis Nguesso Sassou. Corruption and economic mismanagement led to the collapse of the country's infrastructures, huge foreign debt, widespread unemployment and poverty. Dissatisfaction with the repressive regime reached a peak in late 1990, when a National Conference was called for. After more than three months of

deliberations, during which members of the previous government were called before the Conference to answer to accusations of crimes against the country and the people, an interim government was elected in June 1991. Under the leadership of Archbishop Monseigneur Ernest Kombo, it was given the mandate to prepare the country for multi-party elections in 1992.

The story of how more than twenty years of repressive Marxist-Leninist rule was brought to an end without bloodshed, by a process of debate rather than through violent physical confrontation, distinguishes the Congo from most of her African neighbours. Whether it will be possible to maintain the fragile equilibrium remains to be seen but nevertheless, this period of Congolese history will undoubtedly be reflected in years to come, in cultural and literary idiom. It will be interesting to follow the new concerns and avenues of expression that will be explored in the as yet unwritten works. However, since these questions fall outside the parameters of the present study, the account of such immediately contemporaneous historical events as the National Conference is appendixed. Nor is it necessary to analyse the political dimension of issues such as neo-colonialism, revolution and counter-revolution, army and single-party rule. What is important for this investigation into the contemporary cultural milieu of the Congo, is to see how the people and in particular

the writers, have reacted to political events over the past three decades.

One of the most distinctive elements of Congolese society that is reflected in literature is the pervading spirit of ironic questioning and criticism; of resistance to perceived injustices or abuse. The refusal to be silenced is a feature of prose writing and theatre in particular, although much poetry too falls within the parameters of resistance poetry. Notably since the early eighties, creative writing has focussed on the theme of corrupt political leadership. Indeed, in the view of Léopold Pindy-Mamonsono, a senior office-bearer of the now defunct Union des Ecrivains Congolais and himself a poet, most Congolese novelists maintain an essentially political discourse and their protagonists play an overtly political role. While this would seem to be an over-simplification that risks impoverishing the rich variety of contemporary Congolese prose is an interesting statement in that it points to the committed nature of that writing. Most authors of note would concur with the opinion of President Tonton's *maître d'hôtel* in Le Pleurer-Rire of Henri Lopes:

> ...un livre d'Africain vivant en ces temps et qui se respecte, ne peut être qu'engagé.[13]

Repressive colonial and neo-colonial rule have dominated the country's history from before the

publication of the first Congolese novel in 1953 until the contemporary period. No concerned writer could escape being deeply involved in the political realities that impinged upon public and private life. Like Tchichellé Tchivéla, they felt the need to be a "responsible witness" whose writing would be like "des grondements de tonnerre dans la case des consciences assoupies."[14]

However, the dividing line between literature and political statement is easily blurred and Mamonsono's observation comes dangerously close to relegating Congolese prose to the latter category. In fact, the writer's critical eye encompasses a broader and a more profound range of concerns, questioning not the ideological system itself but the way human beings behave within certain systems. The best writing succeeds in portraying the complexity of that behaviour in the rapidly, often violently changing socio-political environment that characterises contemporary Africa.

An overall look at published works from the Congo reveals an interesting pattern in the way that writers have responded to socio-political mutations. To illustrate this, it is worth considering in some detail Henri Lopes' writing, which spans two decades from the 1970's to the present time.[15] When his evolving artistic viewpoint is compared with that of other significant writers, the recurrent pattern that

emerges indicates the degree to which, consciously or unconsciously, these writers not only mirror, but are also shaped by, changing historical realities. This is true even of those who, like Henri Lopes or Tchicaya U Tam'Si, have lived for long periods out of Africa. Although physically removed from the Congo they appear to remain mentally and spiritually rooted in that society.

Like so many of his compatriots, Henri Lopes spent many formative years in France, where he completed his secondary and tertiary education. Having obtained a degree and the D.E.S. in History, he taught for two years in French *lycées* near Paris before returning to Brazzaville in 1965, to a post in the Ecole Supérieure d'Afrique Centrale.

Although he had been in France at the time of the revolution that removed President Youlou from office, like most of the educated elite of that period, Lopes was an enthusiastic supporter of the events which led to the creation of the Mouvement National de la Révolution (M.N.R.), recognised by the law of 20 July 1964 as being "the expression of the people's will." His loyalty remained unshaken with the departure of President Massamba-Débat in 1968, which marked the end of civilian government, and he became a member of the Parti Congolais des Travailleurs (P.C.T.) when it was formed in 1969. He was rewarded by a rapid ascension in the administrative and political ranks: from 1976-

68 he was Director General of Education, from 1969-71 Minister of National Education, in 1972 Minister of Foreign Affairs and from 1973-75 Prime Minister. From 1977-80 he was Minister of Finance.

Lopes' first literary publication, which appeared in 1971, shows that his promotion to powerful adminstrative posts had not cut him off from the realities of his society. Tribaliques is a collection of eight short stories that resemble a series of vignettes portraying Congolese society ten years after independence. Lopes' merciless eye focusses upon the contradictions and the injustices that emerge during a period of transition, when human weakness and greed perpetuate the wrongs of the colonial era. He portrays the hypocrisy of corrupt administrators and the evils of tribalism and nepotism. At the same time, he raises the complex issue of the role of women in a changing society.

There is a certain tenderness in Lopes' treatment of human weakness and confusion; he himself is part of that society and as such, his questioning represents also his own self-questioning. In his first novel, La nouvelle romance, which appeared in 1976 just after his term as Prime Minister, Lopes examines the position of African women faced with the conflicting cultural and societal values brought about by rapidly evolving relations with the West. Lopes' concern is for the human suffering and confusion that these

tensions give rise to and again, while he clearly remains loyal to the society of which he is a part, and for which he was intimately responsible, his uncompromising eye allows for no glib, idealistic treatment of complex problems. Indeed, he offers no solutions and the novel ends on an open-ended question: will Wali resolve the apparently incompatible demands of education, career and her husband, who cannot or will not evolve beyond his traditional role?

It is in Sans tam-tam (1977) that Lopes' disillusion with egoistical and corrupt party leadership begins to become evident. This epistolary novel represents a powerful criticism of ideologies that lose sight of people and human values. Lopes does not as yet question the ideals of the revolution but rather the way those ideals have been applied. Gatsé, the loyal party member who prefers to remain a rural teacher than accept the post of Cultural Counsellor in Paris, writes to his friend in Brazzaville:

> Aye! L'indépendance octroyée. Elle ne nous a donné qu'un hymne, un drapeau, des ambassadeurs et un décorum. Les coeurs et les esprits à ce stade respirent encore les miasmes de la servitude. L'indépendance n'est pas non plus le souvenir des sociétés d'avant la traite, l'âge d'or des royaumes et des empires. Elle se forge et se cimente dans la sueur, la boue et le sang. (109)

From his vantage point within the high echelons of government, Lopes sees better than most how the ideals of the revolution have been diverted and he calls for the decolonisation of the minds of the people and leaders alike.

When his next novel Le Pleurer-Rire was published five years later, in 1982, Lopes had resigned from all political posts and was Deputy Director General at U.N.E.S.C.O. in Paris, responsible for the Cultural and Communications section. Lopes has always remained intensely loyal to the Congo and it was only upon his return to Brazzaville in 1991, where he was one of the first to address the National Conference, that he revealed in a courageously honest and moving speech, the depth of his disillusion with the P.C.T. and the abusive military regimes of Marien Ngouabi and Denis Nguesso. Nine years earlier, however, Le Pleurer-rire reflected clearly his rejection of violent military despots, of neo-colonial and materialist values that the single-party regimes perpetuated, and of the leaders' lack of concern for their fellow beings. This is an innovative novel in terms of structure and expression; the linguistic violence conveys the horror and ridiculousness of President Tonton Hannibal-Ideloy Bwakambé Na Sakkadé, the military roughneck who, by means of a coup, creates for himself a position of unlimited powers.

A silence of eight years was broken with the publication in 1990 of Le chercheur d'Afriques, a novel which measures the full distance that Lopes had travelled in the intervening years. The reader is taken through a kaleidescope of scenes, from pre-independence village life to modern-day Brazzaville, to Nantes and back to the Congo, as André, the black man with green eyes, tries to discover the truth about his father. The text resounds with autobiographical echoes but it is more than a personal search for identity. Lopes' own experience typifies the confrontation between Africa and the West, between the traditional and the modern, from which few of his fellow Congolese have escaped. His concern for his society has not changed but he has come full circle, in that he views the dilemmas that confront him and his fellow beings through the prism of an individual's spiritual and emotional universe. The social fresco gives way to an intimate, at times lyrical account of André's painful reconciliation with himself. The images of Africa convey a sense of profound love and nostalgia for a world into which he can never be fully reintegrated, thanks to circumstances of birth and history.

An over-view of the published works of other major Congolese writers reveals a similar pattern to that traced by Henri Lopes. The spirit of resistance, that in the early novels is directed against the

injustices of the colonial era, soon becomes redirected against the perpetuation of those wrongs in the form of neo-colonialism. As they focus on what they perceive to be the betrayal of revolutionary ideals, the writers find themselves courageously confronting those very regimes which they had initially supported. Disillusioned with Marxist rule, they resist the progressive suppression of individual expression and the invasion of private life whereby, in the words of Sylvain Bemba, "on a voulu entrer dans notre petit jardin."[16]

Over a period of two decades, as writers denounced the increasingly severe forms of repression introduced under single party rule, they seem also to have undergone a personal evolution. Emmanuel Dongola sees this as the development of a more cosmic, universal vision. Whereas his first novel, Un fusil dans les mains un poème dans la poche reflects his active involvement during the revolutionary period of the sixties, his last novel, Le feu des origines, represents an attempt to capture the meaning of life itself.[17] Sylvain Bemba predicts that this trend will increase and themes depicting socio-political realities will be replaced by more introspective, intimate or psychological concerns.

This development reflects changes in Congolese society. Aside from the evolving political scenario, there is a growing degree of individualism which is

replacing traditional, extended family structures. Habits change slowly and the Congolese are a convivial people who enjoy collective participation in their daily life. However, economic constraints and Western influences are gradually introducing the concept of a single family unit. According to Bemba, the sense of individual identity and private possessions was born when the practice of receiving a salary was instituted in the Congo. Be that as it may, traditional values which determine individual existence in terms of the community's needs are inexorably being replaced by a growing sense of individual rights. This change of emphasis is clearly reflected in Congolese prose, although there is not the same degree of concern for the inner self and private suffering that is to be found in much Western writing.

In this description of the Congo's cultural milieu, it is possible to identify a second common factor which, together with the spirit of resistance, characterises Congolese society and is strongly reflected in the literature. This is a concern and respect for human beings, which manifests itself in various domains of daily life. A visitor to the Congo will be struck by the absence of aggression in interpersonal contacts. An attitude of open receptivity indicates a recognition of the other's worth and a willingness to engage with the other.

Furthermore, in this meeting with the other, there is a remarkable absence of cynicism; until it is proved to be otherwise, the Congolese will generally accept their fellow beings for what they appear or claim to be. This is a rare quality in a world dominated by a spirit of competitiveness and where human relations are all too often based on the assumption that the other is a potential rival. The absence of cynicism is not a sign of naïvety but rather an expression of belief in the other's fundamental humanity. Nor does such trust imply a passive, uncritical approach - on the contrary, the right to question and to criticise is strongly defended - but what distinguishes Congolese society is the fact that this confrontation takes place at the level of debate.

The tradition of the *palabre africaine*, the process by which problems were discussed and solved collectively in the *mbongi*, or central meeting place, appears still to be deeply rooted in the Congolese consciousness. At a national level, the recent National Conference is perhaps the most striking example of this manner of dealing with conflictual issues by debate, where strong feeling is contained at the level of verbal rather than physical violence. Indeed, despite the considerable socio-political tensions that pervade society, there is a remarkable absence of physical violence and the crime rate is low.

To embark upon a rigourous study of contemporary Congolese society, in order to substantiate and explain such empirical but nonetheless significant observations, is beyond the scope of this work. Furthermore, the degree to which modern behavioural patterns can be traced back to features of traditional life must be left for the historians and the social scientists to discover. For the purposes of this survey of the present-day cultural milieu, it is enough to observe from experiential evidence that a high value is placed on human life. It is this concern that determines the Congolese writers' world view; central to their work is the question of how society shapes the lives of ordinary men and women, with their potential greatness and their tragic flaws. This is the common theme that runs through the rich variety of form and expression.

The term "humanism" is to be avoided, for it is one which has become suspect in the African context. It has been used so widely and in such loose ideological terms that it conveys no precise meaning. Congolese writing reflects something more concrete; an emotional involvement of the writer with his or her fellow beings and a commitment to issues concerning the human condition. This concern extends beyond the immediate realities of the Congolese situation. The novelist and dramatist Sony Labou Tansi gives articulate expression to this universal view of

humanity. He believes that, by means of language and laughter the writer, be he Latin American or Soviet or Congolese, has the means to transmit a vision of "une collectivité qui s'appelle une possibilité humaine."[18] His message is intended not only for Africa but for all people. Sony expresses, often in shocking, violent language and imagery but also with much humour, his refusal to be the victim of this "univers pollué," dominated by stupid and cruel despots.

An interesting characteristic of Congolese writers is their interest in exploring and extending the expressive potential of the different literary genres. Few confine themselves to either poetry or prose or drama.

Pindy-Mamonsono believes that most, if not all, Congolese novelists begin with poetry and turn to prose only at a later stage. He maintains that if one were to take account of both unpublished and published works, poetry is the most widely practised literary genre in the Congo. He distinguishes several reasons for this. Firstly, poetry allows for the figurative, allusive expression which corresponds to a natural style of speech among the Congolese, in preference to bald, direct statements. Secondly, most contemporary Congolese writers still have some memory of village life and traditional oral forms of entertainment. As the elders recounted tales of the past, "gonflement"

or inflated forms of expression and exaggeration were techniques commonly used to entertain the audience and to teach an appreciation of the spoken word. Finally, despite the Western-style school programmes introduced by the French colonial administration, Francophone African writers had an influential model in the poetry of Léopold Senghor, even if they did not all identify with Negritude ideology.

It is difficult to ascertain the real extent of poetry writing, since much remains unpublished. However, when asked about it, most writers admit to having poetry in manuscript form lying in drawers. Others have published small volumes at their own expense and the occasional roneoed publications compiled by literary groups contain primarily poetry. Poems are also a regular feature in weekly papers, such as La Semaine Africaine.

Yet a contemporary survey of published works shows that prose writing predominates. This fact should be interpreted with caution, since it must be remembered that for Africa, metropolitan publishing houses play a decisive role in shaping national literatures and the fortunes of individual writers. The selection of texts for publication and the "discovery" of new writers are determined by the tastes of a largely Western public which has a distinct penchant for prose over poetry and drama.

Be that as it may, most Congolese writers have explored the short story or the novel, even though the latter is a relatively new literary form in Africa, having been introduced during the colonial period. The first novel to be published by a Congolese was Coeur d'aryenne by Jean Malonga. It appeared in Présence Africaine in 1953 and was followed in 1954 by his second novel, La légende de M'Pfoumou Ma Mazono. It was, however, only in the seventies that Congolese fiction came into its own and the eighties saw a remarkable development of prose writing. Here Congolese writing differs from many other zones of Francophone Africa, where the first novels were strongly influenced by nineteenth century French realism. In general, Congolese novelists have escaped this formative influence and their work is distinctive for its highly innovative nature, in terms of both expression and form. While it is difficult to single out any one writer, Sony Labou Tansi's writing offers a striking illustration of the vigour and inventiveness that characterise the best of Congolese prose. Labou Tansi's fictional universe functions contemporaneously at two levels; multi-dimensional imagery and his explosively challenging style extend the narrative beyond the confines of specific time and space, however anchored in Congolese realities his story may be. He uses symbolic language, a characteristic of most Congolese writing, both as a

device for escaping the censors and also to express his vision of the integral relationship between individual human lives and universal humanity.

However, for Labou Tansi the dramatist, it is theatre that plays the most important role in the cultural life of a society because, in his view, it provides the best means for human beings to emerge from their solitude and to learn to speak and listen to each other. The tenacity and the vivacity of Congolese theatre, which has survived long years of censorsip and material difficulties, justifies a closer look at its origins and history.

Unlike West Africa, where the development of modern theatre has been well documented, no in-depth survey has been made of the state of the art in the Congo and there are few archival records.[19] The major source of information, apart from local newspapers, are the people themselves who have been actively involved in theatre since its beginning. Such an empirical investigation is possible since Western-style theatre in the region is a recent phenomenon, confined mainly to Brazzaville and to a lesser extent to Pointe-Noire. These accounts, based on personal memory, contain many factual variations and contradictions and they often lack objectivity. However, they have the value of giving an authentic,

living insight into what is a relatively small but highly dynamic domain of cultural life.

Guy Menga's description of his entry into theatre illustrates the zone of convergence between traditional dramatic manifestations and Western theatre. Like most of his contemporaries among that first generation of writers, he has clear memories of village life which centered around the *mbongi*. Here the villagers ate the two main daily meals and day-to-day matters concerning the villagers were dealt with. But the *mbongi* was also the place where the villagers gathered in the evening to sing and play music, recount stories and legends, or act out scenes from daily life. Menga's village was on the main route to Brazzaville and he remembers taking part in *veillées* where groups of travellers gathered around the evening fire during the dry season. Later, as a student in Brazzaville, he would listen to the itinerant story-tellers to be found in the populous districts of the town. From this it was a natural step to follow with interest Western style theatre, usually in the form of French classical plays, that was introduced to Congolese audiences by the Catholic and Protestant missions. Later, he remembers the *centres culturels*, set up in the fifties by the French Governor General, Bernard Cornut-Gentil, which provided a venue for small amateur groups. The intellectual elite or *les évolués* also came to know French theatre through the

annual visits of professional French theatrical groups from the Comédie Française and the Grenier de Toulouse.

After independence, these visits came to an end and the cultural centres were closed or transformed into venues for the Alliance Française. The new mood in the country demanded a theatre that spoke more directly of Congolese realities and indeed, the sixties was a period of considerable theatrical activity. Several theatrical groups were created, notably the Association du Théâtre Congolais (A.S.T.H.E.C.O.), later to become the Théâtre National Congolais (T.N.C.) and the Théâtre d'Union Congolaise (T.U.C.). The pioneers of this period were Guy Menga, Patrice Lhoni, Maurice Battambica and Ferdinand Mouangassa who established his own group "Les Kamango" in Pointe-Noire.

Without a theatre or adequate stage and without any form of financial assistance, it required a high degree of dedication to survive. Both then and now, Congolese theatre centres around poeple who direct their own company, write the plays and produce them. Much of their own meagre financial resources go towards ensuring the survival of the group and the actors are often unpaid. In 1969, after the Panafrican Festival in Algiers, a national company, the Centre de Formation et de Recherche d'Art

Dramatique (C.E.F.R.A.D.) was created in the former premises of the Alliance Française in Brazzaville.

The plays of this period tended to be realistic historic dramas, dealing with uncontroversial subjects. In the view of Sylvain Bemba, what may be considered to be the start of modern Congolese theatre was marked by the production at the Alliance Française of Brazzaville in 1965 of La marmite de Koka-Mbala by Guy Menga.[20] Here, for the first time, the audience was offered a dramatised reflection of their society and their major preoccupations. In this play Menga deals with the conflict arising from the confrontation of traditional practices and modernity. La marmite won the Grand Prix of the Concours Théâtral Interafricain organised by the national French radio and television network O.R.T.F.[21] There followed a vogue of plays dealing with the disruption of traditional life and values. At the same time, there was a wave of theatrical activity in schools, many of which had small companies for which the pupils wrote their own plays. These were characteristically militant and strongly ideological. Towards the end of the seventies, a period of stagnation set in. Discouraged by material difficulties, many groups disbanded and the surviving productions lacked innovation. Oppressive politicisation was taking effect.

On 13 March 1979, the theatre-going public of Brazzaville was offered the première of Sur la tombe de ma mère, produced by Sony Labou Tansi and his group Rocado Zulu Théâtre with among others, Nicolas Bissi and Marie-Léontine Tsibinda.[22] This marked the beginning of a new and highly creative era in Congolese theatre. Working without a venue of their own, often without electic light, in the face of increasing state obstruction, this dynamic group set about a theatrical revolution. Gesture, movement and verbal invention replaced conventional heavy scenery and static dialogue. Courageously defiant of repercussions, using laughter as a weapon, they highlighted the ridiculousness and the injustices prevalent in their society.[23] Reporting in La Semaine Africaine in 1980, Sylvain Bemba, veteran theatre critic and himself author of several important plays, saw Labou Tansi's group as a sign that Congolese theatre was emerging from its crisis and entering a period of revival.[24] Rocado Zulu Théâtre has rapidly established an international reputation, winning important awards at the annual Festival International des Francophonies at Limoges and touring in both Europe and America.

Western theatre-goers are often shocked by the physical and verbal violence of Labou Tansi's plays and the exuberant interminglings of genres. However audiences back home, less conditioned by the

conventions of Western theatre, have no difficulty in understanding the dynamic synthesis of traditional African metaphor, both physical and verbal. Recently, the ever innovative Labou Tansi organised a "theatrical happening" up the Congo River as far as Bangui in the Central African Republic. He brought together over a hundred artists of all nationalities: writers, film directors, theatrical people, photographers and also scientists (for Labou Tansi maintains that all those who ask themselves questions about the world are poets.) For a month they lived on a boat, stopping off at villages along the river and offering performances of the play Bébé Kabé which had been previously rehearsed for event. While on board, the participants filled their time with discussion, spontaneous performances, music and readings.

This venture was also a parody of the infamous Paris-Dakar rally, whereby scores of foreigners plough their way across Africa, regardless of the people and the places they pass and careless of the damage they may do to the environment. Labou Tansi's project of "cultural tourism" sought to show how a country can be visited with respect, how contact with other peoples and cultures stimulates self-questioning and discovery. Certainly, despite the tensions experienced by 100 people forced upon each other's close company during a month, the experience was an unforgettable one and Labou Tansi is keen to repeat

it. This time it will be on a smaller scale. Together with a theatrical group in Switzerland, he will work on a play that centres around the theme of the tree, being one of mankind's most profound mythical symbols. They will bring the play to the Congo and will again give performances in villages along the Congo river.

Labou Tansi's active, practical involvement with theatre does not stop there: in the face of official obstruction and the state's refusal to provide an adequate venue for theatre, he and his company are engaged in building their own theatre themselves, beginning with the making of the bricks. Again, the emphasis is on creating something that is a reflection of the Congolese reality, in terms of building materials and architectural design. There will be permanent exhibitions and a restaurant offering African cuisine which, Labou Tansi points out with his usual ironic humour, resembles closely Portuguese cuisine.

The Rocado Zulu Théâtre is not alone in creating innovative theatre in the Congo. By 1983 there were fifteen theatrical groups centered around C.E.F.R.A.D. Amongst them was the Kimpa-Vita Théâtre, which played in national Congolese languages. In general, these groups were directed by young actors and playwrights who produced plays of vigourous, even virulent social comment, firmly anchored in African and more

particularly Congolese socio-political realities. Many of these groups lacked the experience and the dedication needed to survive the lack of facilities and the financial pressures. By the end of the eighties, only four groups remained.

The National Theatre and the National Ballet are two companies supported in principle by the state, although this is not translated into any significant form of financial assistance. The two remaining independent companies are Rocado Zulu Théâtre and Nguŋga, meaning "the bell which chimes the hour."

The latter artistic group was created by Matondo Kubu Turé, a sociologist at the Marien Ngouabi University. It made its first appearance in June 1980 with a show whose title was inspired by a line by Maxime Ndébéka; La vie diminue ici ... elle s'allonge là. Poet-actor-academic, Matondo Kubu Turé creates on stage a collective happening of music, dance and pantomime. Conventional decor is replaced by human form and movement and the text, often created collectively by the actors themselves, comprises an eclectic *mélange* of modern scientific or technical language and excerpts from Congolese authors, interspersed with proverbs and poetry in Lari or Lingala. A recent production, a chantefable entitled Nkasa which is performed over two evenings, is composed of ten Congolese national languages.

Kubu Turé wages what Sylvain Bemba terms "a linguistic civil war." He uses the stage to confront and to explore the language issue; for him language is not merely a question of communication but one of identity, both personal and national. In a country where French has become almost the mother-tongue of the elite, Kubu Turé resists the "francophonisation" of Congolese values and he plunges the audience into the the world of African cosmogony.

At the same time, Kubu Turé does not fall into the trap of attempting to recreate a mythical African paradise from the past, for he deals with problems of the present, such as unemployment and deficient health services. He attempts to show on stage that the answer to these problems is a collective one; the plays are not only written and choreographied collectively but furthermore, individual stars are replaced by a collective hero who expresses the consciousness of the group. Sometimes the face is masked in order to emphasise anonymity. Co-ordinated movement, dance patterns and choral singing or chanting all emphasise this concept of shared action and experience.

Kubu Turé has always made considerable use of texts from Congolese writers and in 1989 he created the Alima Scène (Association Libre pour des Initiatives Multiformes de l'Art), a theatrical group which works on unedited Congolese texts. In May 1990

he put on a solo production entitled U Tam'Si poète congolais to show that U Tam'Si's poetry is not incomprehensible as many would claim. In 1990, after many successful productions, Kubu Turé left the Nganga group.

No survey of Congolese theatre would be complete without making mention of Sylvain Bemba, who has written some ten plays, several of which have received awards in the Concours Théâtral Inter-africain.[25] Making extensive use of symbolic language, Bemba deals with contemporary socio-political problems such as corruption and megalomaniac leaders, showing how the lives of ordinary people are affected.

Tchicaya U Tam'Si too has written a powerful parody of corrupt leadership. As the title Le destin glorieux du maréchal Nnikon Nniku suggests, the play makes great use of ironic word play and sound effects. The stage directions require an exuberant array of lighting and technical effects, making it a challenging play to produce. His last play, Le bal de Ndinga, produced posthumously in 1987 by Gabriel Garan and his Théâtre International de Langue Française, is a both moving and ironically humorous representation of a man caught up in the tragic folly of Africa, where dreams of independence turn to nightmares.

Such popular support for contemporary theatre is not shared by the authorities. Initially Rocado Zulu Théâtre and Ngunga were recognised by awards in the

second and third Festival Communal de Théâtre in 1980 and 1982, and Nguŋga won the National Theatre Prize in July 1981. However, subsequent attempts to silence these dramatic groups forced them into a phase of resistance and struggle for survival. Decades of party rule and increasingly difficult daily conditions of life took their toll on audiences so that, after the first night, the actors often played before empty seats.

Nevertheless, these small groups of committed and dedicated actors continued to brave the censors and confront the authorities with issues that concerned the ordinary people. In this they exercised that right to criticise which is profoundly embedded in the Congolese mentality. It dates back to the time of the kings of the Kongo kingdom where, at his accession to the throne, the practice of public insult was traditional. The king's adversaries would attack him and his proponents would praise him.

However, this tradition has found little support from successive contemporary regimes who have had no sympathy with the bold socio-political comment conveyed by the new generation of theatre. Today, with the disruption of single party rule and the hope of a democratically elected government, it remains to be seen what support will be given to theatre.

Within days of the conclusion of the National Conference, which for months had restricted cultural

activities, a Festival of Total Theatre had been organised to take place early in July 1991. It included exhibitions of paintings, African ballet, talks by Matondo Kubu Turé and the painter Trigo Piula, poetry readings and several plays. The Rocado Zulu Théâtre was joined by Alima Scène Théâtre and three younger groups, Tthea 7, Scorpion and Kongo Dia Ntoteia, with a play written and directed by Massengo Ma Mbongoi. Such a dynamic and wide-ranging programme reflected the new spirit of hope and confidence that was sweeping the country at the time and it augured well for a new era of creativity.

Writing and writers in the Congo have always been influenced both directly and indirectly by the various forms of censorship, imposed firstly by the French colonial administration and later by the single party state. During the colonial period, official support was given only to those writers who accepted to work within the system and this ensured that the available literature by African authors was suitably bland and uncontentious. Congolese school children were taught the French classics, which were considered to exemplify the best in terms of style and form. Those Congolese who sought to speak out against the system developed what was a natural inclination for symbolic expression into a subversive language: the first freedom songs were the Kimbanguist and Matsouanist

chants which, although they took the form of traditional sacred songs, were more militant than religious in content. At independence, after the initial short-lived period of free expression, as writers became increasingly disillusioned with the way the revolutionary ideals with which they had identified were being subverted, they found they had to express their criticism with caution. While many left the Congo in the seventies, others remained and continued to voice their criticism. Censorship during the next two decades took an interesting form. The controversial writer himself was left relatively untouched but his writing was made unavailable in the country and anyone trying to promote the sale of such texts faced imprisonment.

Associations of progressive writers, such as the Association Nationale des Ecrivains du Congo, headed by Emmanuel Dongola and to which the leading progressive writers such as Sony Labou Tansi, Marie-Léontine Tsibinda, Tchichellé Tchivéla belonged, was disbanded by the state and replaced by an unwieldy national structure headed up by the Minister of Culture and administered by officials whose qualifications were less literary than political. This Union Nationale des Ecrivains et Artistes Congolais had scores of branch offices throughout the country, each with a heavy bureaucratic machinery, ostensibly created to encourage local writers.

However, as no money for publishing texts was available, they served merely as collection houses for manuscripts. The strong ideological bent and frequent cases of plagiarism meant that this Union Nationale was viewed with suspicion and ostracised by most writers of credibility. The few thousand francs made available by the Ministry of Culture, compared to the millions paid to sporting associations, was further swallowed up by cultural bureaux whose role was to promote popular literature in factories and businesses but who in reality were instruments of party ideology.

These attempts to make writing conform to party lines succeeded only in hampering creative expression and creating deep divisions and mistrust between those writers who were willing to work with the Union Nationale and those who refused to conform.

With the removal from ower of the P.C.T. however, there is widely shared hope for a new era of free expression and creative activity. A new Association Nationale des Ecrivains du Congo (A.N.E.C.) was formed in late 1991, as an affiliate of PEN Club International of London, with Emmanuel Dongola as President and supported by leading writers such as Sony Labou Tansi, Marie-Léontione Tsibinda, Tchichellé Tchivéla and others. Their first activity is to organise, in association with the Department of African Literature and Civilisation at Marien Ngouabi University, a literary symposium on Tchicaya U Tam'Si'

writing. They have also launched a poetry and short story competition around the U Tam'Si themes of water, fire, the forest and the madman.

It remains to be seen how developments in the political arena will affect this surge of cultural activity. Furthermore, it is certain that material constraints will continue to be an inhibiting factor. Successive governments have failed to develop the country's many rich resources and most manufactured materials have to be imported. Paper is one of these, even though the Congo has vast forest reserves. Consequently, books are a high cost luxury, not easily affordable for even the intellectual elite. There is no public library system serving the small towns and villages and in Brazzaville, the state library is inadequate.

It is commonly said that the Congolese do not read literature and this is substantiated by a survey made in 1985.[26] The active reading public is small and the majority of these readers confine themselves to newspapers or books required to improve their qualifications. For those who read more than light novels and serialised stories, French authors such as Sartre and Camus vie for popularity with African writers. A limited reading public and a poor economy make publishing in the Congo a risky business and foreign publishers must be relied upon, so completing the vicious circle.

Congolese writers are obliged to accept that, while they may write with a potential African reading public in mind, their real public, to use the Sartrian distinction, is to be found mainly in metropolitan France.

The lack of a local publishing house is perhaps the greatest single handicap for writers in the Congo today. Isolated attempts by individuals to establish a private publishing business have been abandoned in the face of material difficulties. Even to produce a literary review is problematic, given the cost of paper, the lack of photocopying machines, poor communications, and slow and expensive distribution services out of Brazzaville. No attempt was made by the Ministry of Culture to set up a state publishing house. Party control of the national radio and television imposed restrictive ideological criteria on the choice of literary texts for broadcast.

The situation is similar in neighbouring countries where publishers such as Nouvelles Editions Africaines in Dakar lead a precarious existence. Even Présence Africaine, the oldest established African publishers, has limited resources and certainly cannot answer the needs of all Francophone Africa. Sometimes writers undertake to have their text printed at their own expense but there are few who can afford it. Congolese writers are therefore dependent upon such

powerful French publishing houses as Hatier, Editions Clé, P.J. Oswald, l'Harmattan, Silex.

While it is thanks to enlightened editors like Pierre Jean Oswald and Robert Laffont that many African writers found the international public that they deserve, nevertheless the dependence on foreign publishers has important implications for African writing. Naturally, the publishers must keep in mind the tastes and expectations of their real, largely European public, however sympathetic they may be to the needs of a potential African public. For this reason, efforts by informed French critics, such as Arlette Chemain, to interest publishers in Congolese poetry have had little success, given the French reading public's preference for fiction. In any event, African poetry is difficult for the non-African reader, since the symbolic language requires considerable effort and knowledge of the African context. Consequently, as it has been seen, published Congolese writing is dominated by the novel.

Of more serious implication for Congolese writing is the fact that French publishers and public alike are formed in a literary tradition that is very different from that of Africa; they have little patience for extended, saga-like narrative; they are uncomfortable with the exuberant, innovative language and style and are shocked by the "violence" done to the French language by writers such as Sony Labou

Tansi. Inevitably, Europe imposes its own criteria and African writers are obliged to conform if they wish to be read. Those who are lucky enough to be "discovered" by a metropolitan publisher may have to trim and modify their manuscripts, while the publishers' choice in itself has significant if less easily quantifiable implications. By singling out certain writers who, for the right or wrong reasons, are most likely to correspond to the tastes of the metropolitan French reading public, publishers play a powerful role in determining who becomes a successful [illegible]. The manuscripts they choose not to publish [illegible]y well be fine examples of creative expression [illegible]s of African aesthetic criteria but the discouraged author, should all efforts not be abandoned, is very likely to adjust style and theme to suit the publisher's requirements.

A personal anecdote recounted by Sylvain Bemba illustrates in a small way the great cultural gap that exists between African writers and even the best informed of French publishers.[27] Bemba, who has the advantage of now enjoying an international reputation and whose opinion is therefore carefully considered, tells how he happened to be in Paris just before the publication of his latest novel, Léopolis. He visited the publishers, where they were in the process of choosing the cover picture. He was not at all happy with the illustration that was being proposed for his

Léopolis; it was to have been a realistic picture of lions and a forest.

Bemba took the opportunity to criticise the choice of cover for Sony Labou Tansi's play Parenthèse de sang. For Bemba the African, the illustration is too realistic: it shows a Congolese soldier in camouflage, complete with automatic rifle, standing over a young civilian compatriot, with the grass roofs of the village in the background. Both men are smiling - a misleading introduction to the absurd and violent tragedy that follows. However, Bemba's main objection was that the unambiguous realism of the picture restricts the sense, allowing for no subtlety or complexity of interpretation. The African reader would look for symbolic meaning, in this case a visual sign bringing together various elements, rather than imposing a single definitive message.

The cover that was finally chosen for Léopolis is inspired from paintings of Ethiopian emperors with crouching lions at their side. These lions convey multiple symbolic meaning: they suggest physical strength, power and the royal city. In this case, differing cultural perspectives were successfully reconciled but, unfortunately, not all Congolese writers are in a position to influence their publishers in that way.

The final word in this survey of the cultural milieu of the Congo is given to women writers. In the Bakongo women have traditionally occupied a relatively important role. These are matriarchal societies, where lines of lineage and family relationships pass through the mother. Nevertheless, while the authority of the woman in the home is unchallenged, her contribution to society has been limited to the domain of home, husband and children. In recent years, however, this has been changing and women have been taking on new roles. Increasingly, women are participating actively in economic, political and cultural fields and a growing number of women have a university education.

In literature, the female figure is often assigned a central role not only as a metaphysical symbol of life and creativity but also, more recently, as an important element in the processes of social evolution. In Guy Menga's La marmite de Koka-Mbala, Lemba the king's wife is a strong guiding influence, as is the wife of king Ngana-Mayala in Ferdinand Mouangassa's play of that name. Sony Labou Tansi's novels are dominated by such powerful female figures as Chaïdana and Estina Bronzario. The progressive emancipation of the woman is reflected across Tchicaya U Tam'Si's fresco of Congolese society, from the period before independence to contemporary times; the first novels portray the strongly supportive but

discreet presence of Juliette and Sophie while in Ces fruits si doux Mathilde, wife of Gaston, is a professional person in her own right and is as politically involved as her husband.

Yet these new representations of the woman are made by male writers and few women have themselves ventured into the world of writing to express their own perceptions of their womanhood. The first publications by women writers were collections of poetry. Marie-Léontine Tsibinda, who played leading roles in the early years of the Rocado Zulu Théâtre, is also the most active Congolese woman writer. Her first poems appeared in 1978 in the university review La saison des pluies and were later published under the title Poèmes de la Terre. This has been followed by the publication of three more collections of poetry and several short stories, broadcast by Radio France Internationale or published in reviews. A new edition of poems illustrated by the painter Hengo Michel is planned. A second well-known woman writer is Alice Valette who, although somewhat isolated in Pointe-Noire, has established a reputation as a short story writer. However, as Marie-Léontine has pointed out, as yet no woman writer can claim to live from her pen; family responsibilities and increasingly today, her active contribution as a wage earner, leave little time or energy for creative writing.[28] Occasional short stories which please R.F.I., or publications at

the author's expense, make only a faint impression on the literary world and women writers remain relatively unknown to the Congolese reading public. As the Congo enters the next period of its history, it is to be hoped that society will develop so as to allow the pioneers of women's writing to achieve their full development and create a strong following among their compatriots.

It is against this broadly sketched background that Tchicaya U Tam'Si's novels are to be read. His writing life spanned some 35 years, from the pre-independence period and into the revolutionary period that followed.

Although he left the Congo for Paris in 1946 at the age of 15, to accompany his father Jean-Félix Tchicaya, who had been elected *député* for the Moyen-Congo at the French National Assembly, U Tam'Si never broke his emotional and spiritual ties with the mother country.[29] Between 1959-60, he returned to Africa as a journalist and chief editor of the Congo, in Kinshasa, from where he witnessed in person the events that followed independence. An ardent admirer of Patrice Lumumba, he was deeply shocked and disillusioned by the latter's betrayal and death and the theme of the martyred leader-prophet was to pervade his poetry in Epitomé and Le ventre. From Paris, U Tam'Si followed the gradual disintegration

of the ideals of independence and the usurpation of power in the name of revolutionary principles. This period is chronicled in his four novels, Les cancrelats, Les méduses, Les phalènes and Ces fruits si doux de l'arbre à pain. His theatre reflects a similar movement from liberatory idealism to disillusionment.

U Tam'Si distanced himself from the successive ruling powers in the Congo and remained committed to his vision of a re-united Congo, freed of colonial and neo-colonial domination. Although he seldom returned to the Congo, he maintained close contact with family, friends and particularly with writers. Greatly admired by the younger generation of writers, he was always ready to give advice and encouragement.

Tchicaya U Tam'Si was an vigorous proponent of African writing. His own writing remained remained firmly rooted in the physical, cultural and spiritual realities of the Congo. His pseudonym, meaning "little leaf which speaks for its country", is a fitting reflection of the concerns which determined his creative life.

NOTES

1. Joseph Ki-Zerbo, "Pas de développement réel sans renaissance culturelle," Semaine Africaine 1517 (3-9 mars 1983): 6.

2. Martial Sinda, Le messianisme congolais et ses incidences politiques (Paris: Payot, 1972) 16 note 2.

3. Georges Balandier, Sociologie actuelle de l'Afrique noire (Paris: Quadrige/P.U.F., 1982). Martial Sinda, Le messianisme congolais 15-58.

4. Unlike West Africa, the Central African regions of the Congo and Zaïre have been left untouched by Islam, separated as they are from the north and east by dense forest and high mountains. Today Senegalese and Lebanese traders are to be seen in the bigger towns and many Congolese have adopted the flowing West African robes or *boubou*. However, Islamic influence remains minimal.

5. Dom Henrique, son of King Alfonso of the Kongo was the first Christian bishop of black Africa. Sinda, Le messianisme congolais 32 note 2.

6. Dominique Ngoïë-Ngalla, personal interview, Brazzaville, 6 June 1991.

7. In the southern towns and cities, weddings and funerals are the only traditional ceremonies that are still celebrated collectively. A brief description of a contemporary funeral will illustrate the harmonious interplay of syncretic beliefs. The funeral ceremony for a member of the Tchicaya family at Pointe-Noire began with Mass in the Catholic Mission Church at Loango, where this old, royal family originated. At the cemetery, the mourners were greeted by a small group of dancers, themselves true "sons and daughters" of the area. They wore around their neck strings of the long grasses that traditionally denoted the death of a notable and as they danced and intoned the ancient chants, they accompanied themselves with rattles, gongs and two wooden drums. The contrast between old and new, Africa and the West, was everywhere to be seen; the masked dancers performed against a background of smart Western dress and elegant, brightly coloured *pagnes*; muted Catholic prayers followed the high-pitched traditional chants; French, spoken in the warm and vigorous tones of the region, interspersed with Vili, the language of the Kouilou district; gravestones engraved

with the names of the early missionaries, most of whom died young from malaria, lie alongside the tomb of Tchicaya U Tam'Si, together with those of his father, Félix, and other members of his family. This moving celebration of joy and sorrow illustrated graphically the complex interweaving of syncretic influences that characterises contemporary life and which finds its expression in multi-facetted symbolic language.

8. Dominique Ngoïe-Ngalla, personal interview, Brazzaville, 6 June 1991.

9. Jean Malonga was the first Congolese to publish a novel: "Coeur d'Aryenne," Présence Africaine 16 (1954) 161-285.

10. Georges Balandier, Sociologie actuelle 421.

11. Maurice Leenhardt, Le mouvement éthiopien au sud de l'Afrique de 1869 à 1899 (Paris: Académie des Sciences d'Outre-mer, 1976) 145.

12. One of the most striking examples of this is found in the Sony Labou Tansi's novel La vie et demie (Paris: Seuil, 1979). The hero, Martial, continues to haunt the despotic *Guide Providentiel*, despite being cut up into pieces, made into pâté and forcibly consumed by his wife and daughters.

13. Henri Lopes, Le pleurer-rire (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1982): 123.

14. "Tchichellé Tchivéla, auteur de Longue est la nuit," La Semaine Africaine 1402-3 (19 juin-2 juillet, 1980) 14.

15. Tribaliques 1971 (Yaoundé: Editions CLE, 1983).
La nouvelle romance (Yaoundé: Editions CLE, 1976).
Sans tam-tam (Yaoundé: Editions CLE, 1977).
Le Pleurer-Rire (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1982).
Le chercheur d'Afriques (Paris: Seuil, 1990).

16. Sylvain Bemba, personal interview, Brazzaville, 6 June 1991.

17. Emmanuel Dongola, Un fusil dans les mains un poème dans la poche (Paris: Albin Michel, 1973).
Le feu des origines (Paris: Albin Michel, 1987).

18. Sony Labou Tansi, personal interview, Brazzaville, 28 May 1991.

19. See in particular Robert Cornevin, Le théâtre en Afrique noire et à Madagascar (Paris: Le livre africain, 1970).

20. Guy Menga, La marmite de Koba-Mbala suivi de L'Oracle 1966 (Yaoundé: CLE, 1976).

21. See Part One, Chapter One for a detailed account of the Concours Théâtral Interafricain's influence in the development of African playwrighting.

22. The name Rocado Zulu Théâtre originates from a play of words. In French *rocade* refers to the most direct route, usually in a military context. Labou Tansi conceives of theatre as the means of saying things in the most direct possible way without engaging in direct confrontation. *Zulu* in Labou Tansi's mother tongue, means "the sky" and by extension "happiness" for, in Congolese mythology, one looked at the sky with both fascination and questioning. Space is seen to symbolise the journey. For Labou Tansi, language brings one back to one's history and is a means of resistance to the continuous invasion of one's being that is suffered under colonial and neo-colonial regimes.

23. The motto of Rocado Zulu Théâtre, containing characteristic Labou Tansi neologisms, is "On ne honte pas, on ne peure pas, on joue."

24. Sylvain Bemba, "Vers un renouvellement de la crise et un réveil du théâtre congolais?" Semaine Africaine 1392 (3-9 avril 1980) 9,11; suite 1393 (10-16 avril 1980) 10-11.

25. Full details of published and unpublished theatre are given in the Bibliography of Congolese writing.

26. Marc Talansi, "Qui lit quoi au Congo?" Notre Librairie 92-3 (1988) 192-8.

27. Sylvain Bemba, personal interview, Brazzaville, 6 June 1991.

28. Marie-Léontine Tsibinda, "La littérature congolaise au féminin," La Semaine Africaine 1608 (7-13 mars 1985) 14.

29. For a detailed biography of Tchicaya U Tam'Si, see Appendix B.

PART TWO

CHAPTER FOUR

THEMATIC CONCERNS

Each of Tchicaya U Tam'Si's four novels may be read as an individual work but together they make up a tetralogy that spans two generations in the history of what is today the Congo Republic, from the turn of the century to the early 1960's after the country became independent. U Tam'Si began writing his epic narrative in the early 1950's but had difficulty in interesting the French publishers in his manuscript. Finally it was accepted by Albin Michel and the first in the series, Les cancrelats, was published in 1980. This was followed by Les méduses ou Les orties de la mer in 1982 and Les phalènes in 1984. The last in the series, Ces fruits si doux de l'arbre à pain was written in the mid-1980's and published in 1987[1]. The tetralogy is loosely structured around the Ndundu family, beginning with Thom'Ndundu's return to the Congo with his children Prosper and Sophie and ending when Prosper's son Paulin has reached adulthood. However, whereas Prosper and Sophie are the main protagonists in Les cancrelats and Les phalènes, they remain in the background in Les méduses and Ces fruits si doux. While oblique references to them establish the links that hold the series together, in Les méduses, the narrative moves from Brazzaville to

Pointe-Noire and is centred around three friends, Elenga, Muendo and Luambu In Ces fruits si doux, the narrative moves back to Brazzaville, now capital of the newly independent Congo Republic. Prosper's son Paulin has returned after concluding his studies in France but centre stage is given to Judge Poaty and his son Gaston. Together, the four novels create something of a panoramic kaleidesope, with minor figures and sub-plots woven between the threads of the central narrative. Indeed, although events unfold chronologically, this narrative is not a family saga of the kind familiar to Western readers.

To understand how it is structured it needs to be set in the context of traditional African oral composition. If one looks at the legendary stories of heroes such as Sundjiata or, coming closer to the Congo, M'pfoumou Ma Mazono, one is struck by the profusion of characters and events whose thematic link to the main protagonist is often tenuous. In different versions of the same story, the order of events and the names will vary.[7] However, historical accuracy is not the main concern of the narrator; the great leaders of the past are recalled because of the qualities they portray. The manner in which they respond to challenges, the courage with which they face up to suffering and even defeat, their leadership abilities and their visionary powers, all these are held up as spiritual qualities to which later

generations should aspire. It is in this way that the episodic nature of the narrative is held together by an underlying philosophical concept.

I

Turning now to U Tam'Si's epic narrative, a clue to the philosophical framework can be found in what was to have been the title of his original manuscript: "Les étapes d'un devenir."[3] This title focusses on the concept of becoming, the unfolding of a destiny. The indefinite article emphasises, not the individual's destiny but human destiny, as exemplified by the life of individuals. Indeed, on turning the last page of the last novel, the reader is left with the predominant impression of having accompanied numerous protagonists through the many stages that mark the path towards understanding the meaning of their life.

This is reinforced semiologically in the text, for the path is a recurring ideo-image in the narrative, from Les cancrelats to Ces fruits si doux. At the beginning of Les cancrelats Ndundu, the parental link between Prosper and his dead grandfather Mué Mbumbh Buangh, introduces the image of the path in axiomatic terms.

> Le bon chemin n'est pas tracé à l'avance. Le bon chemin n'est pas plus facile que le mauvais. Il

> suffit d'éviter celui qui ne mène nulle part. Il arrive qu'un chemin s'arrête quelque part d'autre que le lieu de ta destination. Mué Mbumbh Buangh le disait. Il le répétera à Prosper quand il sera temps. (Cancrelats 11)

Later Prosper consciously searches for the way:

> Le chemin parcouru: Prosper était tout entier sur le chemin parcouru. C'est vrai, il ne voyait pas ni où il l'avait conduit, ni où il le conduisait, ni où il le conduira! Il savait qu'il avait déjà beaucoup marché et qu'il était décidé à aller encore de l'avant, le plus loin possible. (Cancrelats 228)

In Les phalènes he feels himself climbing up a steep and slippery slope:

> ...c'est sa vie sur cette pente raide sur laquelle il s'échine, ce mât de cocagne qui est plus glissant plus il s'approche du sommet. (Phalènes 243)

In Les méduses Luamba sees his life in the same terms as he makes his way along the beach or through the inland with his wife Julienne and the child. Apparently innocent references to a path have an accumulative effect, so that the reader becomes increasingly aware of the symbolic overtones in such phrases as: "tout Mabindu, maintenant, suivait la route de la Mission avec son détour pour se rendre à la mer." (Cancrelats 27) Of even greater significance are the initiatory journeys undertaken by Prosper, Luambu, Sophie and Gaston Poaty and which

will be looked at in some detail later in this chapter.

Whether it be the main protagonists or any of the many secondary and even minor figures who appear and disappear in the narrative, the quest is the same. Each in their own way and in different contexts respond to a fundamental rhetorical question: "Qu'est-ce que c'est que la vie d'un homme?" It is a question that does not presuppose an answer. On the contrary, Tchicaya U Tam'Si would seem to be saying that any attempt to give a simple, clear answer only deforms the truth. It is the very complexity and the apparent contradictions inherent to human existence that constitute part of that truth.

The quest for understanding, both of self and of the world, begins with Prosper and ends with Gaston. It takes on increasingly metaphysical overtones and raises such issues as that of the role of the individual within the collectivity, suffering and self-sacrifice.

In Les cancrelats Prosper does not seem to travel very far along the path towards self-realisation. He himself frequently refers explicitly to his lack of understanding. He is imbued with a sense of malaise and he allows himself to be carried along unresistingly by events. At times he seems close to renouncing all effort to understand:

> Pourquoi s'expliquait-il si mal sa vie? Pourquoi ne comprenait-il pas sa vie? Aller au fond des choses, c'est les perdre de vue. C'est perdre toute chance de les comprendre...(Cancrelats 262)

The anguish he suffers sets Prosper apart from the unconscious masses of Poto-Poto, who live only for the febrile distractions of Saturday evenings to alleviate the misery of their lives. Prosper does not realise it but the very fact that he is conscious of moving in an existential void is in fact a first step on the path of enlightenment.

His malaise stems from his awareness that in some way his life is a perpetual compromise. As an *évolué*, who returned to Africa as a child and who was educated at the mission school, he was set apart from his compatriots from the start. He himself accentuates his differentness; he transforms his name from Mpob to the French sounding Pobard; later, when he has children, he insists on speaking French in the home and it is his ambition that his son Paulin should be sent to France to study. Prosper believed that he had within him something that destined him for a life above that of the common lot:

> Quand il se remaria, à l'église cette fois-ci, avec la fille de Ferdinand Tchizing, tout lui permettait de croire que quelques changements devaient se produire dans sa vie. Et Juliette l'avait exalté au point qu'il crut qu'il lui était même possible d'aller au-delà de lui-même, au-delà de cette frange de lui-même où grouillait quelque chose qu'il imaginait important, glorieux. (Cancrelats 257)

But his ambitions are not realised and nothing distinguishes him from the thousands of people who, like him, move by instinct or by reflex but who have no identity. He has lost the ability to face up to the "sarcasms" and the "whims" of life. He no longer has the will to assert himself.

Luckier than most men of his age, Prosper escaped being conscripted into forced labour on the roads and the Congo-Océan railway line. Yet this serves only to increase his sense of isolation, even of humiliation. In his state of listlessness, the words of his wife's uncle, old Nkondi, haunt him: "Pour bien vivre il faut prendre une décision." He knows that it is only actions, even the most insignificant gestures, that give any meaning to life but he is unable to see any sense or justification for his own actions and so he cannot understand himself or his life. "Cette forêt de gestes pour ne pas savoir le but de sa destinée, n'est-ce pas un luxe?" (Cancrelats 228)

It is the death of a young mechanic that marks a turning point in Prosper's life. He learns how a certain Masamba, in order to protect and strengthen his fellow striking railway workers, stepped forward claiming to be the leader and was led away to be shot by the militia. Prosper ponders over the meaning of this apparently senseless death and suddenly he

understands. One does not live for oneself but for others:

> C'est grâce aux autres qu'on a la certitude qu'on a une main et quelle main! Une tête et quelle tête! (Cancrelats 280)

It seems to Prosper that he has been cured from a long illness. Ceremoniously he calls Juliette, Sophie and Félicien Luembard, who had brought the news of the strike, to witness his transformation. However, his new-found energy is soon replaced by a feeling of resignation. He trembles inwardly, for he foresees that the path ahead will be a difficult one, bringing suffering to them all.

There follows a passage which illustrates clearly the profound interrelatedness between people and events and the importance of intuitive understanding. The text itself reflects this free movement between the world of the spirit and the material world for, without any of the conventional signals that mark progression in time or place, the scene changes to Sunday morning and Léa's bad dream. She awakens sobbing, believing her parents have fallen into the well which they have in the courtyard of their home. When her mother asks her to fetch water from the well, she refuses and will not allow her mother to go either. Just then they hear a shout from Prosper: he has nearly fallen into the well! For Sophie it is

quite clear. The dead had spoken to Léa in her sleep. Being a child, she listens to them but the adults pay no heed - to their peril. Prosper tries to brush off the incident but he is affected by it; the warning is clear to the whole family. Prosper, who so often lost his balance in the past and picked himself up, had been saved from a fatal fall: by whom? Surely by the spirit of his deceased father. For Prosper this is un urmistakable sign that he has a task to perform.

And so Prosper accepts to take a leading role in the political ferment that preceded independence for the Congo. In choosing to commit himself, he takes an important step towards establishing his identity. Although at times exhilarated at the prospect of a world where he will be able to face the White man as an equal, he does not delude himself into believing that generations of repression will be eradicated overnight and the people transformed. "Est-ce qu'une armée d'infirmes fait des prodiges?" he asks himself. His ironic eye prevents him from losing himself in the pre-election frenzy and he does not hide from the sober reality of human weakness and failure. He perseveres, believing that even if he himself does not see the results of what he is trying to do, his children will benefit.

In this, Prosper makes an existential choice but not in the Sartrian sense of it. He recognises that it is his responsibility to create his own being or

identity, but his is not a world devoid of all pre-existent value systems. He knows that he has a place in a complex pattern of forces which link him with all life, with both those around him and also the spirits of the dead. In order to give meaning to his individual existence, he must identify with the collective life of his community, past and present.

Prosper's political involvement is greatest in Les phalènes, where he plays a leading role in party politics during the period leading up to the elections. Yet the theme of commitment is played out primarily at the level of human relations. In Prosper's mind "le parti est pour que la vie des gens ressemble de moins en moins à celle des bêtes." (Phalènes 200) People, like moths, need a light to give meaning to their life. However the moth image, which gives this third novel its title, is an ambiguous one for the moths are compulsively attracted by light. They fly suicidal circles around it, leaving behind them the ashy dust of their wings.

Perhaps Prosper's commitment is equally futile, for he is betrayed by friends, and many former adherents allow themselves to be bought by their opponents so that his party loses the elections to Abbé Lokou (the thinly disguised depiction of Abbé Fulbert Youlou, who came to power in 1960 with the strong, if veiled, support of the outgoing French

Administration). What then, if anything, has Prosper learned along the difficult path he has followed across these two novels? The thoughts of Gaston Poaty, in Ces fruits si doux, put Prosper's failure in the right perspective. Gaston too, is the victim of treachery and false rumours. Yet he realises that without ideals, without "cette ivresse de son âme," his life has little meaning. At the same time, he cannot expect to change the world: "Rêver de l'avenir est une chose, fabriquer l'avenir en est une autre. Plus ardue." (Ces fruits 232) Similarly, Prosper does not turn the political tide in the Congo nor does he realise his dream of a united people.

Yet, as a person, he has come a long way. Running parallel to his political activities is the story of Prosper's involvement with Aimée Volange, wife of a French Administrator, and the resolution of this painful dilemma is a significant stage on his path towards self-understanding.

Prosper is profoundly disturbed by the conflicting tensions of loyalty to his wife and passion for his mistress. In many, ways his suffering illustrates the malaise of one caught between two worlds. For it is more than the age-old conflict between loyalty and passion; Juliette represents the values of Africa and Aimée, despite her defiantly "liberal" views, epitomises Western ways. The strong physical attraction that Aimée and Prosper feel for

each other develops into a passionate relatonship but, what in the beginning is referred to as their "idylle" does not last. The knowledge of his dishonesty towards his wife and his friend André, Aimée's husband, weighs heavily on Prosper. Not even the thought of having a white mistress, which represents some sort of revenge against the colonial administration, can disguise the reality of his betrayal.

Significantly, parallel to Prosper's affair with Aimée runs the drama of Pambault's mad infatuation for Jeanne, "la perle de Kin." Jeanne's deception destroys Pambault and, as he witnesses his friend's collapse, Prosper is forced to weigh up the intoxicating madness of physical passion against a relationship built on loyalty and mutual respect. More importantly, as he resolves these conflicting forces, he reaches a deeper understanding of himself and of what is required of him.

No two women could be more different than Aimée and Juliette. The former is outspoken, demanding and ambitious for Prosper. She stops at nothing to satisfy her wishes, regardless of the hurt she may inflict. Undoubtedly her love for Prosper is sincere but it is possessive and egoistic. Her will to dominate makes their lovemaking a form of annihilation. She wants to penetrate the deepest recesses of Prosper's being, to transform him to her

own image of what he should be. She lacks the delicacy of the true friend who respects the hidden being of the other. There is a saying that the three friends of Les méduses understand: "On ne regarde pas dans les yeux. On ne regarde pas dans le nez."

> Est-ce qu'on regarde dans le corps? Il faut l'ouvrir: autant dire donner la mort. (Méduses 148)

In contrast to Aimée, the "démon d'exigence", Juliette asks no questions. Yet her silence does not denote a lack of concern or understanding.

> Juliette est vive. Elle est comme ces eaux alanguies, des eaux qui siestent - l'expression française 'd'eau morte' est inconvenante ... alanguie, c'est beau, oui, c'est beau! - enveilleuse! Des eaux dormantes ont des songes et des cauchemars. Elles grouillent de vies latentes - sans des tumultes qui sont des silences pour nos oreilles humaines. (Phalènes 176)

Her loyalty to Prosper is absolute, despite her knowledge of his deceptions and failures. She waits and reflects within herself and when Prosper asks for her opinion, she answers with a wisdom that reaches beyond his immediate question. More than that, Juliette represents the family, both living and past. And so Prosper comes slowly to accept that he cannot cut himself off from his roots. In identifying himself with Aimée and with the world she represents,

he is denying his own identity. He is forgetting who he is:

> D'abord il oublie qu'il est, lui Prosper, en même temps Sophie, Léa, Paulin et ... elle, Juliette; tous à la fois. Ensuite, il oublie qu'elle n'est pas à elle seule l'oreille de tous ceux qui ne sont plus et qui ne sont pas sans bouche, aussi et pour autant ... Bo . Mais que chaque membre lui parle de ce qu'il est, cela suffit-il? C'est enfreindre la modalité d'usage ... Le plus séant serait qu'il ait une conversation à fond avec tous ses membres à lui, mais pas qu'avec elle seule sur ce qu'il doit faire qui engage leur vie. Le plus séant serait d'interroger la poussière sur la tombe de ceux qui ne sont plus, qui ne sont pas sans oreilles, ni sans bouche non plus. (Phalènes 178)

Prosper is spared from having to make a conscious choice between Aimée and Juliette, for Aimée returns to France. She takes with her however young Paulin. Consciously or unconsciously, in this way she hopes to ensure her possession of the fath r through the son.

The passionate letters Prosper receives from her prolong his state of confusion, until the moment of illumination comes when he learns that Aimée has given birth to a daughter, their daughter. Her letter announces that she intends naming the baby Marie-Antoinette, not realising that this is the name of Prosper and Sophie's mother, who had died when they were very young. For Prosper, it is as if their mother has been ressuscitated. Ironically, Aimée herself has reaffirmed his bonds with Africa and freed him of his dependence not only on her, but also on his