

THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF ANGLOPHONE AFRICAN  
NOVELISTS TO THE NOVEL

by

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### ABSTRACT

The works of important Anglophone African novelists, in particular those who have contributed to the growing body of literary criticism, support their claim that there is a distinctive African novel. Their novels clearly demonstrate the attachment of the novel form to the specific cultural, social and political milieu in which it is produced. The thematic concerns of Anglophone African novelists have far-reaching effects on their treatment of subject-matter and on their narrative methods. The structures of certain important novels reveal patterns of experience which are typical of African societies. Symbols and motifs which are used to further structural development in many novels are derived from situations existing within the culture and from traditional oral literature. In depicting character, novelists emphasize African social values and develop characterization with reference to the present problems facing individuals in contemporary African societies. Verbal and narrative style in the novels are also clearly influenced by local idiom and the patterns of the indigenous languages. In general, novels by Anglophone African novelists show how the social motivations of the novelist and his cultural situation control his development of themes and his exercise of technique.

## RÉSUMÉ

Les oeuvres d'importants romanciers africains d'expression anglaise et surtout de ceux qui ont contribué à l'essor de la critique littéraire démontrent qu'il existe un roman africain bien distinct. Ces oeuvres révèlent clairement le rapport qui existe entre la forme du roman et le milieu culturel, social et politique dont il est issu. Les préoccupations thématiques des romanciers africains anglophones ont des répercussions profondes sur la façon qu'ils abordent leurs sujets et sur leur choix de méthode narrative. Les structures de ces romans laissent entrevoir des expériences types qui sont caractéristiques des sociétés africaines. La symbolique utilisée pour faire avancer la structure de nombreux romans découle de l'état d'être de la culture africaine contemporaine aussi bien que de la littérature orale traditionnelle. En décrivant leurs personnages, les romanciers mettent l'accent sur les valeurs socio-culturelles africaines et développent ces personnages dans le contexte des problèmes particuliers auxquels fait face l'Afrique noire contemporaine. Le style verbal et la technique narrative des romans subissent clairement l'influence des dialectes locaux et celle des langues autochtones. En général, les oeuvres des romanciers africains de langue anglaise indiquent la façon dont les motivations sociales et le contexte culturel du romancier exercent un contrôle sur le développement de ses thèmes et l'exercice de sa technique.

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## INTRODUCTION

In reviews and extended critical studies of novels written in European languages by black Africans since the end of World War II, certain novels identified by the Western critic as neo-African are shown to have common preoccupations which distinguish them from novels written by Europeans.<sup>1</sup> This literature written by black Africans is further considered, by both Western and African critics, to have developed unique characteristics.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, it has been argued that a separate aesthetic conceptual viewpoint distinguishes African literature from European writing in the same languages.<sup>3</sup>

In the African context, statements by some African authors not only indicate that a clear concept of an African aesthetic exists for them but also point to the need for African writers to continue to seek artistic criteria which are especially applicable to their situation. Wole Soyinka has stated, for example, that Camara Laye's The Radiance of the King "remains our [Africa's] earliest imaginative effort towards a modern literary aesthetic that is unquestionably African and secular."<sup>4</sup> Also, Chinua Achebe has observed that there seems to be a genuine need for African writers "to pause momentarily and consider whether anything in traditional African aesthetics will fit their contemporary condition."<sup>5</sup>

In the Western context, critic Charles Larson has observed for example: "The problem of the African novel in

regard to its reception in the West might realistically be called a problem of comparative aesthetics."<sup>6</sup> Larson asks himself at the beginning of his analysis of the difference between the Western and the African novel:

. . . if these novels [African novels] are often so widely at variance with the Western form of the novel, is this simply a matter of cultural backgrounds, or is it something else? . . . What is it, finally, that gives the African novel its pattern and form?<sup>7</sup>

As African novelists "emerge onto the world stage"<sup>8</sup> they develop an increasing awareness of their need to establish the answers to such questions themselves.

The need for African writers to develop an indigenous African criticism and to declare their stand on critical issues has been consistently urged by Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe. Achebe has been cited as "the most vicious critic of the European critic."<sup>9</sup> By 1972, however, Achebe showed himself less hostile to foreign critics. In an interview with Ernest Emenyonu, himself a harsh critic of Western critics, Achebe, asked for his judgment on the criticism of African writing by Western and African critics, replied:

I am not going to come down heavily on one side or the other. Until you have serious criticism by Africans of Africans, there are certain dimensions that are bound to be missed in the criticism of African writing. By serious criticism, I mean that the critic actually reads and understands the work he is criticizing.<sup>10</sup>

Nigerian publisher and critic, Joseph Okpaku, made a similar point when he remarked: "Critical standards derive from aesthetics. Aesthetics are culture-dependent. Therefore critical standards must derive from culture."<sup>11</sup>

The cultural factor then is important in African criticism. Moreover, writers often refer to "culture" in a broadly conceived way. Ezekiel Mphahlele has observed, for example, that true critical standards for African writing would evolve out of the African situation from the interaction of various social and political factors involving the democratization of education and the efforts of the intellectuals reaching the people.<sup>12</sup>

These selected instances of the reactions among African authors and critics throughout the sixties show them responding to questions about Western standards of criticism being used to evaluate African writing. By the seventies, there was less preoccupation with the effects of Western criticism, but the awareness of the need to develop an indigenous African criticism became stronger. In addition to essays and papers already published by African writers, full-scale critical texts began to appear, among them Ngugi Wa Thiongo's Homecoming (1972), Kofi Awoonor's The Breast of the Earth (1975), Chinua Achebe's Morning Yet on Creation Day (1975) and Wole Soyinka's Myth Literature and the African World (1976). It is true that in Ngugi's and Achebe's case what we have are collections of essays previously published, but the opportunity afforded the individual author of bringing together what he had to say on critical issues helped in the move towards the creation of a recognizable body of criticism. A revised edition of Ezekiel Mphahlele's The African Image originally published in 1962 appeared in 1974.

A reassessment of the earlier hostility to Western critics was also taking place among some African writers and critics. Following on their earlier protests against some Western critical viewpoints, certain African authors and critics were beginning to find that the African critic's assumption that his essential 'inside knowledge' about the social realities behind the creative works automatically helped him to produce more valid criticism was not always true. Disenchantment with this trend in African criticism helped to reconcile African writers in part to European and American critics. Thus Solomon Iyasere wrote in an article entitled "African Critics on African Literature: A Study in Misplaced Hostility", which appeared in 1975:

Looking back over the criticism and the creative writing by Africans in recent years, I think we Africans have been guilty of neglect. We have expended our efforts staking a futile claim on African literature, wasting precious time, attention and vigour on Western critics to the neglect of African texts.<sup>13</sup>

The search for an African aesthetic would continue, but, as D.S. Izevbaye made it clear, the call "for African critical 'concepts', 'standards' or 'criteria' was not a rejection of established modes of literary study like structuralism, neo-Aristotelianism and the like."<sup>14</sup> African authors writing in a language such as English could not deny that the critical tools offered by Western literary theory have a place in the study of work which is the product of a synthetic culture. The tradition of writing in English in the African context clearly belongs to a "synthetic Afro-European" rather than to a

"vernacular traditional" culture.<sup>15</sup>

While admitting their debt to the tradition of writing in English, African writers claim that differences between the African and European cultural contexts must create differences in the aesthetic character of the African novel. This claim is substantiated in the first place by the far-reaching and crucial ways in which the changing socio-cultural context has supplied the content and themes of the novels and in which cultural symbols and images are woven into the texture of certain novels.

The conscious search for an African aesthetic is motivated by factors both within and without the African society. In the first place, the African oral tradition was one which did not record a theoretical position about literary genres. Therefore if the African novelists wish to influence the direction of the modern novel they have very consciously to set about making their contribution to existing practice. Moreover, because writing takes colour and value from its specific background, African writers naturally wish to have some say in determining the standards for evaluating their writing. Some writers have stated their position on the matter of critical standards very strongly. In the second place, the African writers under discussion here have been especially open to outside influences because of their use of a European language, their reliance on foreign publishers in the early stages of novel writing and, in many instances, extended periods spent outside their countries for political and academic reasons.

The attempt by African novelists to formulate a literary aesthetic may also be seen as part of the process of

adapting the novel form to suit the demands of the African literary context. The primary aim behind this attempt by African novelists is to relate their novels to their own oral tradition and to the specific social context in which they write. Thus, while their work remains part of a tradition of writing in English, its position in the ongoing African tradition of verbal art may also be clarified. The African oral tradition has also been mentioned by some Western critics as a major influence upon the content and the form of African creative writing. Albert Gérard has observed for example: "It is clear that creative writing in Africa today is still strongly influenced by the literary traditions of the past as regards both form and content."<sup>16</sup>

Because many of the earliest African novels were also published abroad and circulated among a largely Western readership, the early critical responses to the work of African novelists came from foreign critics working within an already defined Western literary tradition. For example, the Western critic "discovering" the African novel would have well-defined specifications for evaluating the genre. Some African novelists have found such criticism limiting and have clearly indicated their intention to work variations into the novel form to assert their freedom to work outside the norms set by the European writer. As Chinua Achebe observed:

. . . we are late starters. I mean really late - after the prizes are all given out and the track judges have packed up their things and gone home. Such late starters are generally very conscientious. Though no one is looking, they will cut no corners.

That is why, for instance, we must now have our own debate on art for art's sake, why we must have pundits decreeing to us what is or is not appropriate to literature; what genres are for us and what we may only touch at our peril; why literary legislators pass laws telling us what social and political roles artists may (but more usually, may not) perform.<sup>17</sup>

The questions identified by Achebe for the late starters involve the definition of African literature, questions as to whether African literature can be written in non-African languages, the extent to which the African writer can be universal or objective in outlook and the extent to which political themes are suitable preoccupations for the African novelist. These questions, together with others about modifications of novel structure arising from contact with the African oral tradition, constitute major points of concern for the African novelists whom we intend to study in this dissertation.

African novelists clearly have reasons for wanting to contribute their views on the practice of the novel. They succeed in making a contribution because the artistic dilemma which forces them to articulate a position is unique to their situation and can be shown to affect significantly the content of their novels and their approach to form. Their approach to novel-writing shows that it is not possible to outline specifications for the content of the novel without considering modifications of form. In relating their contributions to the existing practice of the novel, one may enquire whether these have significantly altered one's view about the relationship

between the specific and the wider context of the novel.

This study then calls for an examination of both critical statements and novels written by black African writers. The materials which are to be reviewed in this examination are from the published interviews, conference papers, essays and novels in English by contemporary black African writers from East, West and South Africa. These three regions cover a wide geographical area. One of the factors linking the development of the novelists under discussion here is that they are all writing in the same language. Another factor is that they are writing from a similar historical background, despite some variations in their political and social history. This study combines a discussion of principles and criteria for novel-writing set out by Anglophone African novelists in their conceptualization of their art with a study of some of the practices in literary works by them. The emphasis is on the novelists' theoretical formulation and analyses of the novels are meant to be demonstrative.

Not all practising Anglophone African writers attempt to explain their purposes and methods or even to comment on finished works of their own or of other writers. The names of novelists like Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, James Ngugi,<sup>18</sup> Kofi Awoonor and Ezekiel Mphahlele will naturally appear over and over as they have written full length critical texts. While the author's views do not necessarily provide answers to all problems of literary interpretation, they can, at least, help readers to understand the nature of literary activity and its

relation to the culture in which it takes place. The writer who indulges in critical commentary is, of course, naturally suspected of using the methods of critical theory and analysis to justify his own practice and this, indeed, may often be the case. Even where the author limits his purpose and specifies an intention to explain his methods and to clarify the nature of his craft, objections may be raised to his assertions because of the gap which exists between the writer's critical statement of intention and his achievement in literary practice as evaluated by the independent critic.

Despite the various objections which have been made to authors performing the roles of critics, authors' viewpoints continue to inform literary criticism. In the tradition of the English novel, it may be observed how authors' opinions have influenced criticism. The same is true of poetry. Few students attempt to study the development of English poetic theory without recourse to the views of William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, W.B. Yeats or T.S. Eliot. Academic criticism of both poetry and fiction developed only after a basis for theory and analysis had been laid by creative writers. Creative writers have since, with very few notable exceptions, continued alongside professional critics to contribute to the theory and criticism of literature and of literary genre. Once the record of the creative writers' views exists, scholars continue to consult it. Where writers fail to make public or formal statements in essays, conference papers, extended critical texts and interviews, their letters and private papers are often consulted.

This happens because scholars are convinced that, despite the pitfalls of authorial self-indulgence, the practising artist has valid insights to offer into the nature of the work which he has created.

While it is true that the writer is limited to the formal perspectives open to him from the tradition in which he works, each new piece of writing within a genre alters these perspectives and necessitates a continuing attempt to adjust our definition of generic types. One can therefore recognize affinities of form and content among novels without limiting new attempts to write novels. Statements by practising African novelists can help the reader to recognize possibilities for new adaptations of the novel form. Where African novelists are found to be articulating views on the novel which are different from those which have been traditionally advanced in Europe and the West, one must determine whether such views inform their practice of the novel. Furthermore one must determine whether any of the positions which African novelists have taken in their discussions of the novel constitute a new or significant contribution to our existing theories of the genre.

Our intention in the chapters which follow is to describe some of the considerations underlying the Anglophone African novelists' approach to the novel form and to examine their practice in selected novels. In the first section, chapters 1-6, we will present a general discussion based upon a representative sample of novels. In the second section, chapters 7-9, which will be separately introduced, we will

examine in detail three novels by three novelists whose works have been of major importance to the development of the African novel.

In chapter 1, we shall describe the circumstances in which the African novel has developed and relate its development to the European tradition of the genre. In chapters 2 and 3, we shall identify the circumstances which give rise to particular themes in African novels and show how such themes help to make these novels distinctive. In chapter 4, we shall deal with the effects of the local environment on the novelists' use of English. Our intention in this chapter is to show how the development of local dialects of English and the presence of the indigenous languages have helped to shape the African novelists' verbal and narrative style. In chapter 5, we shall examine some ways in which Anglophone African novelists have related aspects of narrative structure to patterns of experience in African culture. In chapter 6, we shall show how the types of characters depicted in important novels and the values which the novelists emphasize reflect the special problems of modern African societies. These chapters, like those in the second section, will demonstrate some of the ways in which influences from the social context have modified the form of the African novel and contributed to its distinctive character.

FOOTNOTES TO INTRODUCTION

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Albert S. Gérard, "The Neo-African Novel," Africa Report, IX, 7 (July 1964), 3-5; John F. Povey, "Changing Themes in the Nigerian Novel," New African Literature and the Arts, ed. Joseph Okpaku (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1966), pp. 27-41.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, "An interview with Janheinz Jahn," Ufuhamu, IX, I (Spring 1973), 34.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Omolara Leslie, "African Aesthetics and Literature," Ufuhamu, IV, I (Spring 1973), 4-7.

<sup>4</sup> Myth, Literature and the African World (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 126.

<sup>5</sup> Morning Yet on Creation Day (London: Heinemann, 1975), p. 21.

<sup>6</sup> The Emergence of African Fiction, Rev. ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972), p. 9.

<sup>7</sup> The Emergence of African Fiction, pp. 9-10.

<sup>8</sup> The phrase is Chinua Achebe's. See Morning Yet on Creation Day (London: Heinemann, 1975), p. 21.

<sup>9</sup> "Some Conversations with African Writers," ed. Lewis Nkosi, Africa Report, IX, 7 (1964), 21.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with "Ernest and Pat Emenyonu" Africa Report, XVII, 5 (1972), 26.

<sup>11</sup> "Tradition Culture and Criticism," Présence Africaine, LXX, (1969), 139.

<sup>12</sup> The African Image. Rev. ed. (New York: Praeger, 1975), pp. 84-85.

<sup>13</sup> African Literature Today, VII (1975), 26.

<sup>14</sup> "The State of Criticism in African Literature," African Literature Today, VII (1975), 3. See also "The Criticism of Modern African Literature," Perspectives on African Literature, ed. Christopher Heywood (London: Heinemann, 1971), pp. 9-24.

<sup>15</sup> The quoted phrases are from D.S. Izevbaye, "The State of Criticism in African Literature," African Literature Today,

VII (1975), 3. For such viewpoints coming from the authors themselves see Kofi Awoonor, In Person, ed. Karen Morell (Seattle: University of Washington, 1975), pp. 133-160.

<sup>16</sup>Albert Gérard, "Preservation of Tradition in African Creative Writing," Research in African Literatures, I, 1 (Spring 1970), 35. Gérard does, however, show that this is truer of the drama than the novel.

<sup>17</sup>"Thoughts on the African novel," Exile and Tradition: Studies in African and Caribbean Literature. ed. Rowland Smith, Bristol, Longman, 1976, pp. 5 & 6.

<sup>18</sup>Elsewhere in this thesis Ngugi is referred to as Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, a name which he later used.

CHAPTER 1

THE PRESENT CONTEXT OF THE NOVEL

Both foreign and African critics of the African novel agree that it is a literary genre that has been totally imported and imposed upon the developments from indigenous verbal art forms.<sup>1</sup> Where other types of narrative, drama and poetry are continuous in the African tradition and serve functions in a preliterate society, the novel, as Ezekiel Mphahlele has pointed out, serves a function which cannot exist except within a literate society, and because it is new in Africa, it creates for the African novelist problems concerning style, content and structure.<sup>2</sup> Such problems exist, in the first place, because African novelists are aware of differences between the nature of their experiences and those of Western novelists. Therefore there seems to be a need to modify the novel written in the African context by certain adjustments in approach and technique. In the second place, African novelists are using a medium which has developed a high degree of sophistication over a period of approximately three hundred years and the novels written by them are assessed according to already established standards. Clearly then, there is also the need to determine whether standards developed in different circumstances are valid ones for judging novels written by Africans.

In the sense that the novel belongs within a context in

which literacy is well established and that it communicates and solicits responses individually from the reader, the novel is discontinuous with traditional African oral narrative. In the sense that it attempts to explore concepts relating to existence and to depict aspects of life, the novel form continues the tradition of the indigenous oral narrative. The novel is, however, a more discursive form than either drama or poetry and as a written mode is capable of greater sophistication of method and complexity of organization than an oral composition; thus the African novelist's use of the term 'novel' to describe his extended prose narratives, identifies them with a tradition for which specific criteria have been identified and developed.

One of the problems in defining the novel is that the term has become a rather loose designation for fictional narratives of varying patterns and length. The novel has in fact superseded other forms which belong to the broad class of prose fiction narratives. Few people sit down today to write an allegory or a romance and when someone does he may well find his work very generally referred to as a novel. The book This Earth My brother by the Ghanaian novelist Kofi Awoonor illustrates this case very well. Awoonor has given this book the subtitle "An Allegorical Tale of Africa." In speaking to his interviewer in Palaver, he refers to it as a "prose poem" and then simply as "the book." His interviewer, however, uses the term 'novel.'<sup>3</sup> This Earth My Brother claims affinity with allegory in its attempt to make the experiences of the hero reflect those of Africa herself and to relate the incidents of

the novel to certain metaphysical conceptions. At the same time, Awoonor relies on the narrative devices of realistic fiction in its alternating prose chapters. As in the novel, the emphasis in This Earth My Brother is on the individual character and his relationship to a particular social reality.<sup>4</sup>

In discussing the African novel, then, we shall define the novel as an extended prose narrative which presents human beings interacting with each other within a clearly indicated historical context. The course of the narrative illuminates the behaviour of certain characters within particular social contexts, and relates their behaviour to a specific set of values. Although the novel may illustrate a point of view or attempt to inform opinion, it must reveal a certain artistry or form. The novel may deal with fantasy or the supernatural but neither one provides its central frame of reference. The novel is thus defined largely by its function, though, as subsequent discussion will show, it has developed distinctive formal characteristics. Hence, it is possible to judge the extent to which an extended prose narrative conforms to our expectations of the novel genre. The function of the novel, as critic John Reed has pointed out, "in general determines the novel form."<sup>5</sup>

The African novel, on the surface, satisfies certain obvious criteria involving length, general areas of concern and style as have been developed for the Western novel in English.<sup>6</sup> While it is possible to argue that African novels cannot be fully appreciated, only as offshoots of the European novel, one

cannot avoid discussing them within the framework of novel practice developed in the West. One examines the African novel in English, using criteria developed for the study of the novel in English generally, while noting that the African novel has sources of enrichment not directly known to the Western critic. In his defence, the Western critic notes the African writers' use of the term 'novel' to describe their extended narratives produced in English.

Compared with other written forms, the novel developed fairly early in South Africa. Albert Gérard has described the South African novel as a fairly well-developed form in vernacular languages, particularly South Sotho.<sup>7</sup> Thus, though the novel dominates the written literature of South Africa, only about seventeen percent is written in English or European languages. This reflects the policy of the South African government which encourages the development of tribal languages and prevents the study of English in order to exclude black Africans from political and economic power. In West Africa, on the other hand, only about seventeen percent of the written literature is in African languages. The European language most used is English but about an equal amount of prose fiction is produced in French and English.<sup>8</sup> In East Africa, novels in vernacular languages are more recent than in South Africa. Judging by the following remark from Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, the novel form made a relatively late appearance in East Africa. Ngugi observed in an interview published in 1973, "In 1954 about the time Ekwensi and Tutuola were producing modern novels,

Okot p'Bitek produced a modern novel in Luo, Lak Tai."9 In East Africa, in addition to the challenge from the vernacular languages, English is challenged by Swahili which has attained the status of a lingua franca there. Still about fifty percent of the publications there are in English, but poetry predominates.<sup>10</sup>

The three areas mentioned so far, South Africa, East Africa and West Africa, cover a wide geographical spectrum. One of the factors linking the development of the novelists under discussion here is that they are all writing in English. This makes it easier to compare and evaluate the statements which they make about the novel. To a certain extent too, they are writing from a similar background of experience, and thus literary critics and social scientists are able to trace, for the African continent, stages through which the societies as a whole pass.<sup>11</sup> Their common historical predicament has provided African novelists coming from widely dispersed geographical areas with common themes for their writings.

In accounting for the emergence of the novel at a particular stage in English literature, some critics emphasize the effects of social changes on narrative interest and form. These critics see a certain conception of reality produced by a particular philosophical outlook which also informs codes of behaviour and ways of regarding human experience. Medieval romance could not continue to satisfy the eighteenth century reader since the circumstances of the society had changed considerably. The age itself required a new form of prose fiction which was to take a particular view of man and of

society. Ian Watt sees the novel as reflecting most fully the "individualist and innovating reorientation" of Descartes' method, whereby the pursuit of truth is perceived as an individual matter, logically independent of the tradition of past thought. The novelist, Watt observes, rejected a traditional orientation and placed an emphasis on the particular and the individual in presentation of character and setting.<sup>12</sup> The essential character of the novel was its realism:

Previous literary forms had reflected the general tendency of their cultures to make conformity to traditional practice the major tests of truth: the plots of classical and renaissance epic, for example, were based on past history or fable, and the merits of the author's treatment were judged largely according to a view of literary decorum derived from the accepted models in the genre. This literary traditionalism was first and most fully challenged by the novel, whose primary criterion was truth to individual experience — individual experience which is always unique and therefore new. The novel is thus the logical literary vehicle of a culture which, in the last few centuries, has set an unprecedented value on originality on the novel; and it is therefore well named.<sup>13</sup>

The novel, as the "literary vehicle of a culture", is thus seen by Ian Watt as a reflection of a mode of perceiving reality and is at the same time modelled upon the reality which is perceived. Conceived in this way, the novel is constantly evolving and the criteria for evaluating the novel are constantly under review. As Northrop Frye observes, "every great writer who lived in a different time or cultural orbit from ourselves is a challenge to the assumption on which our evaluative statements are made."<sup>14</sup> African novelists, writing in a different cultural context from that in which the novel emerged, can

then be expected to throw further light on the possibilities of the novel genre which varies according to cultural environment, and thus make further contributions to the practice of the novel.

In their attempt to distinguish the novel as a specific genre, British seventeenth and eighteenth century writers of prose fiction made comparisons between the novel and the heroic epic, on the one hand, and the novel and the romance, on the other. The heroic epic, though written in verse, represented one type of extended narrative depicting character and human behaviour and demonstrated universal truths about man in his social and cosmic environments. Although the romance as an extended prose narrative could be regarded as closer to the novel in style, it was, for many writers, associated with exaggerated romantic fantasy and idealistic codes which, in the new social context in which they found themselves, no longer seemed, for serious writers, to be a complex enough form through which to reflect on human experience. The novel was nearer to the epic both because of its seriousness of purpose and its moral concern. Writers, however, emphasized the concern of the novel with ordinary people as opposed to those of the select world of the epic even as they made clear its fidelity to nature (believable human beings in an identifiable historical setting), as opposed to the world of romance.

The main distinctions drawn between novel and romance therefore, were in attitude to subject matter, choice of setting and approaches to characterization. The romance form made more

( use of supernatural settings and often projected events into the past or into exotic settings. The novelist dealt with the modern contemporaneous state of society, "the familiar relation of such things, as pass every day before our eyes."<sup>15</sup> The novel which emerged in the eighteenth ~~century~~ varied in type from that representing character interaction in clearly identifiable social and domestic settings to picaresque adventure stories which were not essentially different in style from romance, except in the declared purpose of the author.

Because many of the early attempts by authors to define the novel form were as well defences of the genre, authors stressed their moral concern and the social relevance of their writing. Thus another difference between novel and romance lay in authorial attitude. The novelist set out to teach something and, even where his manner was detached and ironic, this was usually assumed to be a subtle device by which he singled out the more discerning among this readers. The didactic approach, from the inception of the genre, was an accepted characteristic of the novelistic mode. The novelist had a perception to share with his reader and that perception was related to the world of events within which writer and reader coexisted.

In the approaches to the novel mentioned above, the original fictional modes of legend and romance are absorbed by an increasing historical consciousness to produce a more realistic type of fiction. (The romance form was, of course, not altogether superseded by that of the novel. Romance continued to be written side by side with the novel, but the

(

appearance of the novel form as that dealing with serious moral themes meant that the romance was free to develop in other ways). The modern African novel develops in a literary environment marked by a strong historical and social awareness. The African novelists' inability to avoid explicitly social and political themes can, in the context of this discussion, be seen as a controlling influence on the novel, hindering its escape in the African context into that "programmatic avant-gardism"<sup>16</sup> described by Susan Sontag, in a 'developed' society like the United States of America.

The academic critic's approach was different from that of the early English novelist. He was able to study the genre, after its development and general acceptance, and was not concerned primarily with justifying the existence of the novel. Taking a more detached view of the genre, critics traced the form back to its beginnings in other forms of narrative, noting in particular, as Henry James, himself a novelist, did its affinities with the romance. Such a study as Erich Auerbach's Mimesis describes the development of narrative techniques which led to the emergence of the novel. Auerbach shows that many of the formal properties which characterize the novel genre were present in earlier European literature and argues that the novel emerged as narrative began to take on greater social interest and was set within a specific historical context and locale.<sup>17</sup> Northrop Frye makes similar observations about the continuity of narrative and again points to the specificity of the social context to which the novel relates:

Myths of gods merge into legends of heroes, legends of heroes merge into plots of tragedies and comedies; plots of tragedies and comedies merge into plots of more or less realistic fiction. But these are changes of social context rather than of literary form, and the constructive principles of story-telling remain constant through them, though of course they adapt to them.<sup>18</sup>

Similarly, Robert Scholes observes that the novel is "the result of the flow of fictional impulses from both romance and satire attracted toward history by a growing historical consciousness in the late Renaissance and the Age of Reason." Scholes notes not only the novel's attachment to history but also, like Frye, the merging of one generic type into another. Scholes continues:

In the course of this movement the rogues and whores of picaresque became the rakes and coquettes of comedy. The heroes and heroines of romance and tragedy became the men of feeling and women of virtue who populate sentimental fiction. Realism as a fictional technique, then, can be seen as the curbing of satirical and romantic attitudes in response to scientific or empirical impulses, which were also taking shape as journalistic, biographical and full-blown historical types of narrative.<sup>19</sup>

African novelists accept the novel, as it was originally conceived, as a viable artistic form which is ideal for social commentary. They recognize too, as Western critics of the novel have pointed out, the continuity in the art of story-telling of which the novel is a part. Being closer to their own oral traditional than the contemporary Western novelists are to theirs, they can demonstrate the continuity of narrative forms by drawing upon other fictional forms such as legends and folktales which exist, along with written narrative in their societies.

The novel, as described by English novelists and their critics, not only attempts to explain human society within an historical context, but also portrays an increasingly complex reality. In trying to distinguish the world of the novel from that of the romance, eighteenth and nineteenth century novelists affirmed the fidelity of the novel to nature. The truth of the work to nature was reflected in the probability of the incidents described and their coming within the ordinary course of everyday experiences as opposed to the exotic world of romance. In addition, characters in the novel were to be believable, and their actions in accordance with their own natures. In rejecting the world of the romance for that of "sober probability," eighteenth and nineteenth century writers in English focussed on identifiable social milieux and attempted to achieve representational accuracy in presenting them. The resulting correspondence between actuality and the world of the novels invested the novelists with the roles of social critics. Their pursuit in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries of representational accuracy often led novelists to depict "grim" social realities. This gave their work something in common with that of the socially committed twentieth century novelist. Thus, in the tradition of English writing, continuing from the eighteenth century, novelists have accepted certain social functions.

More recently, however, novelists have disagreed about the kind of effect they wish their writing to have on their readers, and, in fact, many modern novelists see the assumption of a specific social function as a limit upon their freedom as

artists. The novelists' difficulty of identifying clearly their social function is due, in particular, to the increasingly complex reality with which successive novelists deal. Changes in the conception of reality in many Western societies have been brought about by scientific discoveries and changes in philosophical mood. These changes in the conception of reality have consequently influenced approaches to the novel and are reflected both in the works of the novelists and in the views of their critics. Where Tobias Smollet, an English novelist in the eighteenth century, attempted to give "a large diffuse picture of life comprehending the characters of life, disposed in different groups and exhibited in various attitudes,"<sup>20</sup> Henry James, another novelist writing in English in the late nineteenth century, was interested mainly in conveying to his readers his characters' "process of vision."<sup>21</sup> As the American critic Robert Scholes has observed: "The old realistic novel has always assumed that a readily ascertainable thing called reality exists and that we all live in it; therefore it is the only thing to write about."<sup>22</sup> The modern English novelist, however, emphasizes the discrepancy between art and reality. Virginia Woolf, writing in 1919, made this point very clearly:

Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display...?<sup>23</sup>

In fact, by the late nineteenth century, the limitations of a realism which confined itself to the documentation of everyday

incidents had become clear.

The concept of the novel in English, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, became more organic. Henry James, for example, described the novel as "a living organism,"<sup>24</sup> identifying a concept of form that was more than a set of techniques for projecting social issues and for copying reality. George Eliot wrote of "the vulgar coercion of conventional plot,"<sup>25</sup> and Thomas Hardy observed that the novel was more than "an exemplification of the art of story-telling." Like James, he insisted that the novel "should be an organism."<sup>26</sup> The concept of form, as it was described by Henry James, was used to resist the notion of the "story" as the prime vehicle "carrying the novel along and "message" as the main goal of the story. James wrote in a letter to Hugh Walpole: "Form alone takes, and holds and preserves substance - saves it from the welter of helpless verbiage that we swim in as in a sea of tasteless tepid pudding..."<sup>27</sup> James wrote this at a time when there were strong didactic tendencies among creative writers and much emphasis on the social purposes of art. These strong didactic tendencies, as we have seen in James' case, provoked a strong opposite reaction. Developing from this reaction in the late nineteenth century against the emphasis on the social reference rather than on the artistic form of the work, there has been an increasing tendency in the twentieth century Western novel to underplay social realism in order to better reflect a multi-valent reality. Social realism, as a mode for the novelist has not, however, been abandoned; the scope of the novel has simply been extended.

The evolution of the novel genre in English thus shows, on the writers' part, attempts to combine in varying degrees, experiences related to physical reality with their imaginative perceptions which may have their chief source in the writers' own psychological attitudes and mental preoccupations. On the readers' part, novels may derive their appeal from their relatedness to an objective reality which they experience in common with a writer or from a writer's ability to present them with something unusual in his portrayal of his individual perceptions. In dealing with objective reality, novelists work within particular historical and social settings. In their search for an individual perception of truth or a significant conclusion about reality, they select, rearrange and synthesize the data of experience. The freshly constituted picture of reality which each novelist creates, has both a 'content' and a structure which other novelists subsequently use, adapt, or change.

The usefulness or social value of the work of art may be readily recognized in its intellectual content, any beneficial effects which the contemplation of it affords and its ability to increase the readers' awareness by reflecting experience. Aesthetic value, however, is more problematic. The formal characteristics of the literary work, novelists have argued, are aspects of its meaning and content. Still the relative ease of defining a social purpose on the writer's part and of determining social relevance has led, as Susan Sontag pointed out, in an essay written in 1964, to an emphasis on message as distinct

from aesthetic quality.<sup>28</sup> An important aspect of discussion of the novel genre is to resolve this question of value in interpreting the meaning of the work.

Since the writers may draw on the same sources for the material which forms the substance or content of their work, the same content may exist for writing in different genres. The presence of a structure and a characteristic style which give a particular form to the work becomes a significant factor in the discussion of a generic type. There has been, in the twentieth century, a tendency among critics to direct critical discussion of the novel more and more to its artistic value as it is seen in the writer's technical skill. Mark Schorer, for example, observed, in an essay originally published in 1948:

When we speak of technique, then, we speak of nearly everything. For technique is the means by which the writer's experience, which is his subject matter, compels him to attend to it; technique is the only means he has of discovering, exploring, developing his subject, of conveying its meaning and finally of evaluating it. And surely it follows that certain techniques are sharper tools than others, and will discover more, that the writer capable of the most exacting scrutiny of his subject matter will produce works with the most satisfying content, works with thickness and resonance, works which reverberate, works with maximum meaning.<sup>29</sup>

The preoccupation with form has often resulted in a tendency to explore the genesis of the work through the work itself and to investigate the possibilities of the medium. In fact, some Western critics have seen the tendency to relate the creative work to recognizable social issues as one which lessens its artistic value. Robert Scholes has observed, for example:

To the extent that an author resolves the elements of his utterance into unequivocal units, speaking to us in his own voice about referents immediately perceivable, he approaches the lower limits of verbal art.<sup>30</sup>

Despite this tendency to equate structural and stylistic complexity with primary value in the novel, a point of view which emphasizes its social value continues to assert itself. George Lukács, for example, has criticized the tendency to emphasize technique and to devalue content. Lukács has observed of the connection between form and content:

It is the view of the world, the ideology or weltanschauung underlying a writer's work, that counts. And it is the writer's attempt to reduce this view of the world which constitutes his 'intention' and is the formative principle underlying the style of a given piece of writing. Looked at in this way, style ceases to be a formalistic category. Rather it is rooted in content, it is a specific form of content.<sup>31</sup>

The views put forward by Schorer and Lukács reflect the two main approaches to novel criticism in the twentieth century. Critics like Mark Schorer and Robert Scholes are concerned to develop a poetics of the novel comparable to that which has been developed for poetry. Thus, there develops a form of criticism which stresses the importance of the novel as a verbal structure which seeks rather to create symbolic referents to reality than to give a convincing imitation of reality. Man, Lukács argues on the other hand, is the focal point of the world of the novel, and the concept of man determines the image of man and the world-view which is projected in a novel and also determines its style and form. The view that content is a formative principle in

determining style is also implied in the view of the Anglophone African novelists under discussion.<sup>32</sup>

The tendency to stress technique, on the one hand, and social value, on the other, reflects the conflict in Western technological societies between individual inclination and the mass norm against which it asserts itself. Neither Schorer nor Lukács thinks of technique as describing merely formalistic categories. What they attempt to determine is what gives impulse and direction to the work over and above the technical devices which can be readily identified and may cause the novels produced in one cultural context to be different from that produced in another. This question, as we shall see, in the next chapter, provides a major preoccupation for Anglophone African novelists who assert that novels which are produced in Africa are different from novels which are produced in Europe and the West.<sup>33</sup>

The clearly organic nature of the novel form and the difficulty of discussing structural and stylistic features as things separate from the content of the novel suggest that, as the African novelists claim, the form of the novels written by them will be modified by factors in the environment in and about which they are written. The modifications, African novelists argue, can be expected from two sources. These are the socio-cultural situation of the present which forces them to define a particularly African mode, but one which is also adaptable in a rapidly changing environment, and the indigenous African oral tradition which offers both ready-made technical structures and a philosophy or way of perceiving existence.

Various factors in the African environment have combined to produce among novelists a particular view of reality and of art and its function in the society. An examination of the practice of the novel by writers within particular national groups or geographical areas will, as we shall see, show the effect of these environmental factors on the novel. The 'sociability' of the novel, as Michel Zeraffa has remarked, has endowed it with significant cultural, political and ideological functions. Zeraffa has observed:

Even more than poetry, for example, fiction comes to express ideas of nationhood and national renaissance in colonies or countries which have recently gained independence. The novel as a social institution is manifest in the number of novelists awarded the Nobel Prize for literature or given academic posts, and the profoundly sociological implications of the rewards available to writers.<sup>34</sup>

An examination of the contributions of Anglophone African novelists to the practice of the novel will centre largely on the specific factors in the African environment which have created divergences in viewpoint, between African novelists writing in English and Western writers in English who have influenced the development of the genre. Common areas of concern exist for both African and Western novelists because of their general concern with man in the universe and man within a particular social environment. Anglophone African novelists have also inherited the technical and stylistic range developed for the novel by English novelists before them. African novelists, however, do not regard themselves as merely continuing in a tradition begun elsewhere. They undoubtedly owe much to Western novelists, as is attested in many published statements,<sup>35</sup>

but their novels disclose unique thematic materials because of specific factors in their environment.

The contemporary African novelist, as we shall see in the next two chapters, finds himself, for various reasons, largely in reaction against the preoccupation with form and the self-conscious approach to art which it engenders. He sees social factors as the primary inspiration of the work and the clarification of social issues as the primary responsibility of the writer. At the same time, he has been in contact with the Western tradition of the novel in English and is aware of the difficulties involved in the novelist's continuing attempt to reflect reality through the verbal medium. Like contemporary novelists writing in English elsewhere, the African novelist has experienced changes in his physical environment which have been brought about by industrialization and by scientific and technological advancement. Scientific advancement has demonstrated the limitations of an approach which sees human beings only in terms of their social relationship and physical needs. The disruptions which the impact of Western scientific culture has introduced into traditional African societies, however, oblige novelists constantly to emphasize a concern with social reality. By demonstrating the relevance of his work to his specific social context, the African novelist can, like the English eighteenth century novelist, invest himself with moral authority. Like the early English novelists at the start of the novel tradition, contemporary African novelists recognize a need to justify their literary activity.

In a period of rapid social change and political upheaval in African societies, the novelists have undertaken the task of explaining or clarifying the particular historical reality which their societies are facing. In the interest of reaching their local readership, they have decided to emphasize the biographical element in their writing, as they attempt to note, understand and "set things straight." In their novels, the debates among characters and the internal debates within the characters themselves, are often intended to throw light on an historical question or a current issue. The Western reader, who exists within a context where this conflict between social and aesthetic values has been exhaustively discussed though not definitively resolved, may complain of the lack of complexity in the writing which is produced.

Factors in the global as well as in the African social environment have also increased the tendency for African novelists writing in English to place significant value on the social relevance of their literary work. East African historian and novelist Ali Mazrui has commented, for example:

One of the striking features of world trends in the 1960's has been the emergence of relevance as a moral imperative ... This revolutionary fever for relevance has been most dramatically illustrated in students' movements from Berlin to Berkeley, from Tokyo to Dakar. The demand of youth for greater relevance has been part of a fundamental re-examination of the values of modern civilization.<sup>36</sup>

The efficiency of modern communications media in industrialized Western societies and in urbanized communities within Asian and

African societies, with information being made readily available to the public, has led to a politicization of demands at all levels. Advertising campaigns help to create needs which are often in excess of resources. This is particularly true of developing societies. The creative writer, to the extent that he is aware of the contemporary social climate, starts from an involved position. The novelist's acceptance of a commitment to use his art to improve or reform society may conflict directly with the other aim of his art which is to convey essential and universal truths behind everyday experience. While recognizing a general social responsibility, individual African novelists, like earlier novelists in the tradition of writing in English, will be found to be divided on the question of the extent to which they should involve themselves in political issues. For the most part, however, Anglophone African novelists view the novelist's political commitment as an extension of his social commitment.

In Western societies, the creative writer has functioned as a member of an intellectual élite, but in the ongoing processes of social and political change he has lost any significant function as an organizer of public opinion,<sup>37</sup> or a source of political ideas. Since the gaining of political independence in many English-speaking African societies, however, revolutionary social and political changes have created an environment in which it has become difficult for many writers to avoid political activism. The writers for the most part, from the very fact that they write in English, are identifiable

as part of a small educated urban élite thrown into close contact with politicians who attended the same schools and who live in the same urban areas. Outside this rather closely knit group (knit by education, common standards of living, and language, though not necessarily political views) are the large groups from different rural areas, groups often distinguished from each other by a different local language. As part of a small English-speaking élite, the African writer has been near to the centre of things. His situation is therefore quite different in this respect from that of the Western writer.<sup>38</sup>

The existence of a live oral tradition within the African literary environment is another factor which distinguishes the situation of African novelists writing in English from that of Western novelists writing in English. Only certain parts of African societies have been exposed to industrialization and advanced technology. The African writer still has access to traditional materials for his art and traditional methods of conveying perceptions of reality or of human experience. The myths and symbols of the traditional African society, as Abiola Irele, a Nigerian critic, has observed, can still function as a vitalizing force in African writing:

The African gods continue to function within the realm of the inner consciousness of the majority of our societies, and the symbols attached to them continue to inform in an active way the communal sensibility. It has thus been possible for our poets in particular to evoke them as a proper and indeed integral element of their individual imaginings.<sup>39</sup>

In African societies, the novelist writing in English is also experiencing and aiding in the shift from an oral to a

written literary tradition. This shift creates a new demarcation in the African literary context between factual and imaginative writing. As Albert Gérard has observed:

In non-literate societies, imaginative oral art is the undifferentiated medium of all intellectual activity. It contains the whole body of the group knowledge - philosophical, historical, and scientific .... The primary purpose of oral composition does not reside in aesthetic achievement. Art and beauty are subordinated to the expression, preservation and communication of memories and values that are essential to the survival of the society and to its sense of collective identity. The clear-cut demarcation established by modern Western thinking between scientifically ascertained fact and imaginative interpretation is therefore irrelevant: any amount of hyperbolic or allegorical distortion is legitimate, providing it serves the ultimate societal purposes. Writing and the cultural attitudes with which it is usually associated gradually introduce a previously unknown division of labour.<sup>40</sup>

The social function of the African novelist is thus enlarged because of the responsibility which passes on to him from the oral tradition and because of the part he plays in establishing a literary tradition in writing. Again too, the point may be made that in his hands the novel will show a certain merging of forms because of the lack of a clear-cut demarcation between certain areas of knowledge.

In Western societies, the novel in English emerged in contexts in which the oral tradition had long been superseded by the written one. The split between the humanist and scientific traditions and the development of behavioural sciences serving very specific social functions have, to a large extent, released the novel from a primarily social or

commonplace role. Written narrative in African societies, as has been pointed out, in its earlier stages takes on, as a matter of course, some of the functions of the oral tradition of which it is both the extension and the replacement. Thus, the novel from its beginnings serves commonplace as well as creative-imaginative functions. Until various disciplines, which have been long established in the West develop with specific reference to African societies, the commonplace functions of the novel continue to be emphasized. In addition, within the novel genre in the West there has been, since the end of the nineteenth century, a differentiation of type between the classical and the popular novel. There are, in the West as well, other distinctions between novels according to subject matter, as in the distinction between historical novel and detective story. Thus, the 'classical' novelist has been further freed to follow experimentalist trends, since he need not assume a direct responsibility for creating a readership. He automatically draws a readership from among the more sophisticated of a relatively larger group of readers.

African novelists, however, first have to create a reading public in the various societies in which they live. African communities, especially those outside industrialized urban areas, are largely preliterate. The African novelists writing in English are using, besides, a language which is, for most Africans reading their works, a second language. In their task of creating a readership for their novels, African writers in English have a further constraint to establish the relevance of their work to the experience of their readers.

Modern African novels are characterized by a high degree of social and political reference and the specificity of their social and political reference gives them a quality of realism. In reading African novels, one sees the novel renewing its connections with history and biography, although the methods of the novelists are not always representational. Many novels reflect the complexity of existence and relativism of viewpoint through their authors' exploitation of verbal structures and heightening of symbolic effect. However, even when a supernatural setting is used, realism is present in the novelist's direct reference to specific social, moral and political issues in contemporary Africa. Novels dealing with urban settings may show a strong anti-romanticism which give them heightened realism. Specificity of social reference is achieved too, through the writers' frankness with regard to bodily functions and detailed descriptions of the physical minutiae of everyday life.

The question of the readership - an important one for determining style - for whom the Anglophone African novelists write is complicated by the fact that African writers depend largely on foreign publishers. On the publication of their work, African novelists have further to depend on influential critics and reviewers who often determine the kind and extent of readership which their novels command. The Western novelist's appeal is often based on his established reputation, reviews and advertisements. The publication of a novel often sets into action a complex mechanism involving publishers, reviewers and public relations personnel who take care of the

publication which is being launched. The African writers have yet to have this kind of mechanism established in their own societies. Their dependence on foreign publishers and the fact that they write for readers in their own societies, who use English as a second language, must also have an effect upon the African novelists' approach to the novel form. At each stage we see them having to take into consideration factors which are not generally present in the situation of the Western novelist writing in English.

In claiming that the African novel has characteristics which distinguish it from novels produced elsewhere, Anglo-phone African novelists, as we shall show in Chapter 2, are not simply reacting against Western influences or displaying a narrow racial sentiment. Instead they show an awareness of questions, which have preoccupied Western novelists, about the nature of literary art in relation to society and its institutions. Their attempt to formulate their own theories of the relationship of art to society and to discover the ways in which the practice of an art form is influenced by its social environment needs to be examined as part of the developing poetics of the novel.

FOOTNOTES TO CHAPTER 1

<sup>1</sup>See, for example, O.R. Dathorne, "The African Novel: A Document to Experiment," Association for African Literature Bulletin (1965), 18; J.P. Clark, "Our Literary Critics," Nigeria Magazine, No. 74 (Sept. 1962), 80.

<sup>2</sup>African Writers Talking, ed. Duerden and Pieterse (London: Heinemann, 1972), p. 104.

<sup>3</sup>See Palaver, ed. Lindfors et al. (Austin: University of Texas, 1972), p. 55. See also African Authors, ed. Donald Herdeck (Washington: Black Orpheus Press, 1973), p. 50.

<sup>4</sup>This Earth My Brother is discussed in Chapter 5.

<sup>5</sup>See "Between Two Worlds," Makerere Journal, No. 7 (1963), 4.

<sup>6</sup>The term 'novel' has become a rather loose designation for fictional narratives of varying patterns and length. Critic John Reed has observed, for example: "In writing about the African novel it is convenient to call anything a novel which uses the form of the novel, although the form of the novel is determined by certain functions, which need not be functions of every literary work written in the novel form." "Between Two Worlds," Makerere Journal, No. 7 (1963), 4.

<sup>7</sup>Four African Literatures (Los Angeles: University of California Press, n.d.), pp. 104-109.

<sup>8</sup>Per Wastberg. "Themes in African Literature Today," Daedalus (Spring, 1974), 136-137.

<sup>9</sup>"Tolstoy in Africa: Interview with Ngugi Wa Thiong'o," Ba Shiru, V, 1 (Fall 1973), 21.

<sup>10</sup>Per Wastberg, "Themes in African Literature Today," Daedalus (Spring 1974), 137.

<sup>11</sup>See Chapter 2.

<sup>12</sup>The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Fielding and Richardson (London: Chatto and Windus, 1957), p. 14.

<sup>13</sup>The Rise of the Novel, p. 13.

<sup>14</sup>"Contexts of Literary Evaluation," Problems of Literary Evaluation, ed. Joseph Strelka (University Park: Penn State University Press, 1969), p. 15.

<sup>15</sup> See Clara Reeve, The Progress of Romance (New York: The Facsimile Text Society, 1930), p. 111.

<sup>16</sup> Against Interpretation (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1967), p. 11.

<sup>17</sup> Legend, Auerbach points out, conveyed a harmonized but static impression. The novel conveys a reality that is confused, contradictory and vacillatory. Out of this reality, the novelist attempts to create a harmonized, complex impression of things. See Mimesis (New York: Princeton University Press, 1956), pp. 19-23.

<sup>18</sup> Anatomy of Criticism (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), p. 51.

<sup>19</sup> Structuralism in Literature: An Introduction (London: Yale University Press, 1974), p. 135.

<sup>20</sup> Dedication to Ferdinand Count Fathom, ed. Damian Grant (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 2.

<sup>21</sup> Walter Besant and Henry James, The Art of Fiction (Boston: Cupples and Hurd, n.d.), p. 74.

<sup>22</sup> The Fabulators (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 136-37.

<sup>23</sup> "Modern Fiction," Collected Essays II (London: The Hogarth Press, 1966), p. 106.

<sup>24</sup> Walter Besant and Henry James, The Art of Fiction, (Boston: Cupples and Hurd, n.d.), p. 68.

<sup>25</sup> "Leaves from a Notebook: Historic Imagination," The Impressions of Theophrastus Such, cited in Miriam Allott, Novelists on the Novel (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1959), p. 247.

<sup>26</sup> "The Profitable Reading of Fiction," Life and Art (New York: Greenburg, 1925), p. 69.

<sup>27</sup> Selected Letters, ed. Leon Edel (London: Rupert Hart Davis, 1956), p. 202.

<sup>28</sup> Against Interpretation, p. 11.

<sup>29</sup> "Technique as Discovery," The Novel: Modern Essays in Criticism, ed. Robert Murray Davis (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall Inc., 1969), p. 75.

<sup>30</sup> Structuralism in Literature, p. 28.

<sup>31</sup> "The Ideology of Modernism," Twentieth Century Literary Criticism: A Reader, ed. David Lodge (London: Longman, 1972), pp. 475-76.

<sup>32</sup> See the Introduction to this dissertation and Chapter 2.

<sup>33</sup> The effect of social context on the novel has been noted by important Western critics. See, for example, Walter Allen, "Interview with Lewis Nkosi," Africa Report IX, 7 (1964), 10; Northrop Frye, "Contexts of Literary Evaluation," Problems of Literary Evaluation, ed. Joseph Strelka, p. 15; Malcolm Bradbury, "An Approach Through Structure," Towards a Poetics of Fiction, ed. Mark Spilka (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977), pp. 4-8.

<sup>34</sup> Fictions: The Novel and Social Reality (London: Penguin 1976), p. 14.

<sup>35</sup> See, for example, Ezekiel Mphahlele, Palaver, ed. Lindfors et al., p. 42; Kofi Awoonor, Palaver, ed. Lindfors et al., p. 61.

<sup>36</sup> "Africa and the Crisis of Relevance (in Modern Culture," Présence Africaine, No. 72 (1969), 9.

<sup>37</sup> Critic Steven Marcus, for example, commenting on the novel in England and the United States, complains of the "inability to deal with society, the poverty of ideas ..." "The Novel Again," The Novel: Modern Essays in Criticism, ed. Robert Murray Davis, p. 287.

<sup>38</sup> See Chapter 2.

<sup>39</sup> "Tradition and the Yoruba Writer: D.O. Faguna, Amos Tutuola and Wole Soyinka," Odu, n.s. No. 11 (January 1975), 93.

<sup>40</sup> Four African Literatures (Los Angeles: University of California Press, n.d.), pp. 51-52.

CHAPTER 2

CULTURAL AND SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF THE  
AFRICAN NOVEL

The circumstances of their history, as many African novelists have stated, resulted in a devaluation of African cultural achievement.<sup>1</sup> This, as Ali Mazrui, Kenyan novelist and social scientist, has pointed out, was further encouraged by the absence of writing in Africa, which also helped "to aggravate a sense of cultural inadequacy among Africans during the colonial period."<sup>2</sup> Cultural reinforcement and cultural liberation have, as a result, provided strong motivations in African writing.<sup>3</sup> African novelists have expressed the view that the novel in Africa should promote African cultural values and that it will develop particular characteristics and functions because of its cultural context. The relationship between the novel and its cultural and social background is therefore crucial to any formulations which Anglophone African writers make about the novel. This chapter examines the claims for the existence of a distinctively African novel as they relate to its subject-matter and themes.

Attempts by African novelists to define African literature raised questions about the national origin of the author, the extent to which it is possible to identify a specifically African subject-matter and the authenticity of the treatment of experiences described in the novel.<sup>4</sup> The majority

of African novelists have found a definition which simply takes into consideration works originating in the African continent unsatisfactory, because such a definition includes writers with different cultural and racial affinities. In their attempts to identify the unique characteristics of their literary achievement Anglophone black writers from East, West and South Africa have therefore declared a cultural affinity which excludes Arab writers. They identify, however, qualities which they have in common with French-speaking black African writers South of the Sahara.<sup>5</sup> Although some black Anglophone African writers are unwilling to use race and colour as a basis for excluding other African writers from sharing a common aesthetic,<sup>6</sup> most are agreed that, in Africa, racial experience is an important factor in determining aesthetic orientation. Admittedly, people living under similar geographical conditions develop common responses to their environment, but such behavioural patterns as are induced by geography are not, black African novelists agree, sufficient bases for a common aesthetic outlook. A common aesthetic outlook, they argue, is derived instead from psychological factors which are the result of complex and wide-ranging processes of racial, religious and social interaction.<sup>7</sup> Few practising Anglophone African novelists would disagree with the following statement by Cyprian Ekwensi:

. . . African writing is writing which reveals the psychology of the African. I use the term psychology very broadly to embrace reactions to situations and the social order, religious beliefs, interpretations of moral codes, inter-relationships within the family. These factors

interacting create the African character<sup>8</sup>  
which gives the stamp to African writing.

This process of relating literature to society has been a standard procedure for writers who are seeking to discover the unique quality of their literary achievement. During the late nineteenth century, American writers, for example, claimed that the special conditions of development in America had produced a literature which was clearly distinguishable from that of the English.<sup>9</sup> As members of an immigrant society, American writers, in spite of the diversity of the cultural backgrounds of their people and the variety of environmental factors to which they were exposed, by the nineteen thirties, established their claim to a distinctive national literature.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, at the beginning of the twentieth century, reacting against cultural and political domination by the English, writers of the Celtic Revival argued that the character of Irish literature including that written in English was necessarily different from that of English literature.<sup>11</sup> The difference was attributed to factors of history and cultural background and national disposition.<sup>12</sup>

Like the American writers, Anglophone African novelists base their claim to a distinctive literary achievement on common experiences at the national level and on the shaping influences of their specific social environment. Like the writers of the Celtic Revival, Anglophone African novelists argue that they have their own special perception of existence and areas of experience which are unfamiliar to those who belong to a different cultural environment. Like both the Americans

and the Irish, the Anglophone African novelists are motivated by the urge to decolonize their literature. The claims made by Anglophone African novelists to a common aesthetic basis for their work are, however, more extensive than that of either the Americans or the Irish, because the African novelists are attempting to identify common tendencies in writing which is produced among several national groups which include peoples of various ethnic origins.<sup>13</sup>

The Anglophone African novelists' claim that there are common tendencies in African novels written in English which distinguish them from other novels written in English must also be seen in relation to the assumptions behind English literary theory which finds its points of reference in shared European tradition beginning with the Greek poet Homer.<sup>14</sup> The criticism which was important for the English writer, Matthew Arnold, observed at the end of the nineteenth century was criticism which regarded Europe:

. . . as one great confederation bound to a joint action and working to a common result; and where members have, for their proper outfit a knowledge of Greek, Roman and Eastern antiquity and of one another.<sup>15</sup>

English itself, T.S. Eliot later observed "a composite from so many different European sources," indicated the unity of the European tradition.<sup>16</sup> In proposing a common historical experience, an interlinked cultural tradition and a similar religious outlook as the bases for a shared literary aesthetic, Anglophone African novelists are asserting the existence of a unified outlook in their literary tradition which is similar to that which has been identified for Europe.<sup>17</sup>

Understandably European critics, anxious to correct former wrong assumptions about African culture, have emphasized the variety of cultural, social and linguistic forms within sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>18</sup> The diversity of forms within African societies is, however, only one-half of the picture; the other half shows an underlying unity. As Basil Davidson has observed, for example:

Most of the populations of Sub-Saharan Africa (and it may well have been true of North Africa before the Arab invasions of the eighth century) have shared close relationships to a single body of cultural beliefs and modes of behaviour. That is why a purely regional study of the African past can never hope to yield the true keys to an understanding of Africa, nor reveal the richness of experience that lies within a pattern and social process continental in their scope.<sup>19</sup>

An obvious example of a single body of cultural beliefs which is shared by various African societies is that relating to the continuing communication between the living and the departed ancestors.<sup>20</sup> In the modern period, a common sociocultural experience which the people in all three regions have had, is the coming of the European, the recognition that he intends to remain in Africa, and the need to adjust to his presence.<sup>21</sup>

In spite of the complexity of the language situation in Africa, there are also certain distinctive features which the indigenous languages tend to have in common. Joseph Greenburg has observed:

Although we cannot prove an ultimate unity of all African languages, there are, just as in other aspects of African culture, features which set off Africa from other areas of the world. These result from later contacts among the languages of the continent, on a vast scale

and over a long period. Practically none of the peculiarities listed below as typical are shared by all African languages, and almost everyone is found somewhere outside of Africa, but the combination of these features gives a definite enough characterization that a language, not labeled as such for an observer, would probably be recognized as African.<sup>22</sup>

The language situation described in the final sentence of Greenburg's observation exactly mirrors the literary situation. It is the combination of features, and not necessarily their exclusiveness to the African context, which marks the literature as African. We cannot, in fact, expect to find the whole range of features which we identify as African in any one particular work.

Further unifying factors in the African literary context are created by the problems which African societies experience in common at the national level in contemporary times.<sup>23</sup> With the development of nationalism in several African states, Anglophone African novelists also make conscious efforts to promote ideas of African cultural unity. In relation to the African literary context, they recognize, as T.S. Eliot had earlier observed in relation to Europe, that "those countries which share the most history are the most important to each other with respect to their future literature."<sup>24</sup>

Anglophone African writers are certainly aware of differences among themselves. Black African writing in English is, of course, not one unit, but as Chinua Achebe has admitted, "a group of associated units,"<sup>25</sup> and the Kenyan experience is alien to the South African "in its cultural specifics."<sup>26</sup>

Separate nationality and differences in cultural practices are

not, however, as the European example has shown, sufficient to defeat the notion of a common literary tradition. In Europe, the idea of "an international fraternity of men of letters subscribing to common standards" was found to be "perfectly compatible with national loyalties, religious loyalties and differences of political philosophy."<sup>27</sup> The claim that African novelists have sources that are peculiarly their own, and that these sources create distinctive features in the literature which they produce is clearly not unusual. The claim for a common African literary tradition, like the claims for a common European tradition, brings together three elements, the local tradition of a particular people, a common tradition derived from the cultural and political interaction among ethnic groups over a long period, and a common inherited literary tradition reaching the group of writers under discussion through the English language.<sup>28</sup> The third element is increasingly modified by the conscious attempts of contemporary African writers to emphasize the uniquely African features in their writing.

Differences, in basic patterns of experience, between European and African societies are distinguishable in the themes which preoccupy the African novelists, in their depiction of character and in the symbols of expression which they derive from their cultural context. The simultaneous existence of the oral<sup>29</sup> and written traditions in contemporary African societies is also an important difference between the African and European literary contexts. Despite the wide geographical

diffusion of folktales, for example, there are those which are peculiar to the African continent and show similarities in plot, motif and character types.<sup>30</sup> In African societies, the simultaneous existence of the novel and an oral literary tradition which has not been eclipsed by the written tradition<sup>31</sup> means that African novelists may draw directly on the methods of composition developed in a context of non-literacy. In the West, the novel, at the inception of the genre drew largely on other written forms such as romance, autobiography, the private letter, history and journalism.

In contrast to the oral tradition, the Western literary tradition is linked to a scientific tradition and to the technological developments arising from scientific discovery. Technological progress alters social relationships and behavior, and has a direct effect on literary production. As Nigerian critic, E.N. Obiechina, has observed, technological progress has also made for a greater diversity of viewpoints and allegiances among creative writers in Western cultures.<sup>32</sup> The African novelists' ability to draw on a common oral tradition increases their feeling that they share a common outlook. In addition to its influence on verbal expression and narrative technique, the oral tradition provides a source of common concepts, symbols and images for African novelists. As we shall show in detailed discussions of selected texts, some Anglophone African novelists have also fitted the contemporary situations which they depict in their novels into traditional plot structures provided by oral narrative. In later chapters we will examine the ways in which Anglophone African novelists

incorporate peculiarly African concepts, symbols and images into the structures of their novels. In this chapter we will continue our investigation of the subject-matter and themes which distinguish the African novel.

The process of bringing new raw material into fiction is itself, as English critic Walter Allen has pointed out, a kind of innovation.<sup>33</sup> The introduction of new material into the genre continually raises possibilities for altering its conventions. Alterations introduced into the romance form in Don Quixote, for example, contributed to the development of the novel genre.<sup>34</sup> The novel itself was recognized as a new genre when prose narrative began to include characters drawn from particular social backgrounds and emphasized the individualization of character.<sup>35</sup> In the process of identifying the unique characteristics of the African novel, African novelists can point first of all to subject-matter which is peculiar to the African novel.

An examination of African novels reveals the extent to which they are dominated by similar themes and dramatize common social dilemmas. A common topic in novels from East and West Africa is the relationship of the Western-educated African to his society. This subject-matter arises directly from the historical situation of both regions which have recently been through the stages of colonization and decolonization. The novelists' method of handling this subject-matter varies according to specific factors in each local context. For example, in most West African novels, the Western-educated individual whose experiences are the focus of the novel is a

university graduate and in some instances, one who has travelled to Europe or the United States.<sup>36</sup> In East African novels, the contact with Western institutions is more restricted, as was the situation historically. Few of the individuals whose situations are used to project the conflict between Western and traditional African values are university graduates.<sup>37</sup> In spite of differences in local background, however, the conflict in novels from both regions centres around the duty of the individual to the society. Important themes relate to the futility of the pursuit of progress conceived in Western terms,<sup>38</sup> and the relevance of traditional values to contemporary African societies. The local problems in the South African novel are admittedly not identical. The problem of colour is important here. The heroes are often confined to a kind of underworld which has little contact with European culture. The primary concern of the non-white South African is political liberation.<sup>39</sup> There are, however, similarities in the concerns of the novelists from South Africa and those from West and East Africa. These are demonstrated, for example, in novels such as Peter Abrahams' A Wreath for Udomo, which treats the problems of a leader in an independent black nation and Jordan K. Ngubane's Ushaba, which projects the clash of African and European worldviews. Novelists from Anglophone Africa are commonly concerned with themes related to the collision of European and African cultures. In their novels, the theme of sacrifice is persistent. Characteristically novelists depict situations which point up the necessity for the individual to put the interests of the community first.<sup>40</sup>

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Local conditions of life and thought are also imprinted on African novels through the novelists' use of concepts which are peculiar to African societies. Such concepts may be related to rituals which belong within a specific locality but which show correspondences with practices observed in other localities.<sup>41</sup> For example, both Ngugi Wa Thiong'o writing about East Africa and Ayi Kwei Armah writing about West Africa have incorporated into the structures of their novels references to the rites of passage<sup>42</sup> by which their societies mark and ritualize the transition of the individual from one stage in the society to another. In Ngugi's The River Between, the physical growth of the hero Waiyaki is related to the successive rituals which link the processes of physical growth to the process of social integration. In Armah's Fragments, the experiences of the hero Baako are related to the recurrent pattern of the rites of passage, in order to bring out the contrast between the situation of the individual within the uninterrupted cycle of the traditional ritual and Baako who has become isolated from the society.

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Correspondences in social attitudes may also be noted. In Zulu society, for example, pythons symbolize "togetherness, undivided oneness."<sup>43</sup> Although there is no specific injunction against killing the python, it is regarded with respect and fear as being the strongest and most dignified of creatures. One may compare this view of the python from South Africa with that described by Chinua Achebe who uses the python in Arrow of God as a symbol of the inviolable and inexplicable aspects of Igbo communal life in West Africa. Examination of further

examples shows the extent to which local ideas and beliefs which are incorporated into the structure of a novel from one region of Anglophone Africa may find correspondences of ideas and beliefs in another. The existence of such correspondences support the Anglophone African novelists' claim that there are shared sources of subject-matter available to them, which are peculiarly African.

The incorporation of beliefs about the supernatural world also has its effect on the African novel. In many African novels the supernatural is treated as an extension of the real world. Where in the Western novel supernatural events belong outside the normal everyday existence, in the African novel they are often treated as part of the actual rather than the imagined.<sup>44</sup> The effect of this is observable on characterization, for example. Character is often depicted so as to bring out the duality of the character's existence. Important characters are sometimes depicted as belonging half to the human and half to the spirit world.<sup>45</sup> This may have an effect on the handling of causation in the novel and the depiction of motivation in character.<sup>46</sup> This use of the supernatural is in keeping with the concept of reality which exists in African societies<sup>47</sup> and is clearly one of the aspects of African psychology to which Cyprian Ekwensi referred when he observed that African writing must reveal "the psychology of the African."<sup>48</sup> One cannot contradict the argument that the particular reactions of characters "to situations and the social order, religious beliefs, interpretations of moral codes,

interrelationships within the family"<sup>49</sup> have an effect on characterization and plotting in the novel.

The inclusion of materials from the popular tradition helps further to emphasize the distinctiveness of African novels. Myth, legend and folklore<sup>50</sup> also supply models for characterization, enhance the subject-matter and reinforce the themes in African novels. They provide parallel situations for purposes of comparison and contrast. The African novelist's ability to relate the novel to myth, legend and folklore creates links between the novel and its African readership and again provides him with a very specific means of "incorporating the culture of his people into his writing;"<sup>51</sup> for the materials from the popular traditions are not simply the creations of one individual, but creations which have involved the community over a period of time. This is a point which is clearly brought out by Ngugi Wa Thiong'o in his later novels, A Grain of Wheat and Petals of Blood. The use of folklore, legend and myth is, in a sense, a means of involving the African readers in the creative activity of the African novelist. The reliance on materials from the popular tradition is a common characteristic of African novels. The existence of correspondences in the oral narratives found in different areas of Africa further supports the African novelists' claim to a shared tradition.<sup>52</sup>

The inclusion of cultural materials in the structure of the novel is one method by which African novelists reflect the special conditions of the development of the novel in Africa. The values which the novel promotes and the nature of the writer's commitment also affect the novelists' presentation

and are also an aspect of subject-matter. For example, in the African novel self-sacrifice on behalf of the community is usually depicted as a virtue. Personal suffering is linked to moral and social causes. The individual's experience is constantly related to the collective experience of his society. Where an individual becomes aware of his isolation, he seeks to discover the means by which he can be reintegrated into his community. In the novels of Chinua Achebe and Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, for example, characters do not effectively survive the loss of the sense of community. Final recognition of one's isolation from the community results in spiritual and, in some instances, physical death. In Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's novels characters who become isolated from the community may disappear without trace.<sup>53</sup> In Chinua Achebe's novels, they are swept aside by the forces which they attempt to confront.<sup>54</sup> In other novels like Armah's Fragments and Why Are We So Blest, the mental asylum looms in the background. This view that the individual cannot effectively survive his state of isolation is in contrast to a tendency in the contemporary Western novel in English, in which characters are often able to justify their positions as outsiders and to blame the society for misunderstanding them.<sup>55</sup>

As we indicated earlier, a purpose which shapes the African novelists' approach is his commitment to assist his society in the process of decolonization. This means that African novelists may choose to ignore those experiences related to the individual in the global context if these do not at the same time reflect peculiarly African concerns. For example, in

keeping with the goals of the new nationalism in African societies, many major Anglophone writers have expressed the view that the African novelist should avoid painting pictures of futility and despair. Chinua Achebe, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o and Wole Soyinka clearly disapprove of Ayi Kwei Armah's depiction of heroes who are largely victims of self-imposed loneliness and despair, although they do not dispute Armah's merits as a novelist.<sup>56</sup> One notices too in more recent novels such as Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's Petals of Blood and Wole Soyinka's Season of Anomy, an emphasis on the themes of social regeneration and a clear attempt to give meaning and form to the chaotic events of recent African history.

The cultural values which the Anglophone African novelists attempt to assert clearly influence their treatment of subject-matter. For socio-political reasons also, as we shall show in Chapter 3, Anglophone African novelists present particular views of social behaviour, which have a further effect of giving a common focus to characterization in the African novel. This may be observed both in relation to the types of characters which are of most interest to the novelists and the areas of character interaction on which novelists concentrate. The "presence of a motive in the authorship of the novel"<sup>57</sup> thus controls its content and presentation, as African novelists have argued.

In relating the novel so closely to forms existing within their culture, Anglophone African novelists see themselves as exercising a certain integrative function in their societies. One result of the introduction of Western culture has been to

C create a separation between the élite and popular culture by making a distinction between literate and non-literate members of the society. In seeking to accommodate popular forms within the novel, Anglophone African novelists create a symbolic link between the narrower élite culture and the broader African culture in which artistic achievement was linked to other types of social activity. Thus the attempt to synthesize modern and traditional elements within the novel form also registers a process which is taking place in the society.

The Anglophone African novelist's attempt to retain the social function of artistic activity as traditionally conceived in African societies cannot be fully sustained. Up to a point African novelists can emphasize particularly African social concerns and incorporate into the novel elements from African oral tradition. However, they live in a global context in constant contact with other societies and share similar concerns. Ironically these writers who feel committed, because of their historical situation, to bringing the novel within the reach of a popular readership in Africa write in English. This circumstance automatically limits their readership to the Western-educated African middle-class and English-speaking peoples outside of Africa.

O The relationship which Anglophone African writers attempt to establish between the novel and its cultural context is given clearer focus by a brief comparison of their views with those expressed by the negritude writers in French-speaking West Africa. The concept of negritude embodied primarily a commitment to establish the value of African cultural experience as an

C inspirational source for the creative writer; the African cultural context would provide the writer not only with his themes but also with the sources of imagery and symbolism. Implied by the philosophy of negritude as explained by Leopold Senghor was the view that there was a common Black cultural experience and that the references and symbols which the African writer sought would be valid for all people of African descent. "Objectively speaking," Senghor observed on one occasion, "negritude is the whole system of values not only of black African peoples but also of Black Americans and even of black peoples of Asia and the Pacific."<sup>58</sup> The attempt by the negritude writers to provide an all-embracing aesthetic for all black peoples has been criticized from several viewpoints by Anglophone African novelists. David Rubadiri, for example, has declared that negritude, "a word . . . which in many cases is used loosely to embrace all Negro art and the Negroness or blackness of African artistic activities," must be stopped before it gains power as a value judgment.<sup>59</sup> Kofi Awoonor has disparaged "the fanciful remnant of theories with a Diasporal construct, theologies of the black aesthetic."<sup>60</sup> Chinua Achebe, who has always tried to avoid being dogmatic, has distinguished between black literature from Africa and other "revolutionary" literature, noting details related to the specific situations in different societies.<sup>61</sup> The aesthetic which Anglophone African novelists attempt to define is limited to black Africa and is more than a reaction to Europe. For this reason it also requires more than a reversal of European values and symbols.

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A reversal of European values may be seen, for example, in Leopold Senghor's affirmation of "black soul," his view of the black man as emotional man in a state of relative innocence<sup>62</sup> and his distinction between the African "child of nature" and the Western "technological man."<sup>63</sup> In making this distinction, Senghor has attempted to identify as a positive value, a categorization which was already expressed in European literature. Implied also in Senghor's philosophy of negritude was a belief in Africa as a regenerative force in the modern world. For example, in his poem, "Prayer to Masks," Senghor referred to Africa as "the leaven that the white flour needs."<sup>64</sup> This view of Africa as a regenerative force in the modern world reverses the traditional image of Africa in Western literature.<sup>65</sup> Such ideas, as Wole Soyinka has observed, took too much colouring from European ideas and do not effectively convey the African world-view.<sup>66</sup>

The idea that Africa retained healing values in a world which has largely been dehumanized by the pursuit of technological progress and can therefore exercise a moral force in the twentieth-century global context has been adopted by few Anglophone African novelists.<sup>67</sup> For the most part, Anglophone African novelists reject both the assumption of the "innocence" of Africa and the further assumption that global problems and the plight of Western man are their primary concerns as creative writers.<sup>68</sup> We find rather an insistence among Anglophone African novelists that the African novelist should direct his attention to African social concerns rather than to bridging

the gap between Europe and Africa. There could be, Wole Soyinka pointed out in 1967, "no further distractions with universal concerns whose balm is spread on abstract wounds, not on the gaping yaws of black inhumanity."<sup>69</sup> This need to explore the African's dilemma first is clearly indicated by the many novels which depict political corruption in local African regimes, and condemn the pursuit of the products of Western technology in contemporary African societies. It is seen especially in more recent novels such as Ayi Kwei Armah's Why Are We So Blest, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's Petals of Blood and Wole Soyinka's Season of Anomy. In Why Are We So Blest, for example, the destructive relationship of the African hero, Modin, with the white American girl, Aimée, symbolizes the predicament of the African who is entangled in the plight of the West. Both Ngugi and Soyinka also emphasize the necessity for the African to seek the cures to his society's illnesses within the context of the African world-view.

The negritude writers of West Africa have also expressed the view that the success of creative writing produced by Africans can help to counter theories of the superiority of European culture in a very practical way.<sup>70</sup> Despite criticism from Anglophone novelists,<sup>71</sup> this aspect of negritude shows similarities to the earlier phases of what has been defined as "cultural nationalism" among Anglophone African writers.<sup>72</sup> We may compare for example, the point of Chinua Achebe's observation:

. . . I believe it's impossible to write anything in Africa without some kind of commitment, some kind of message, some kind of protest. Even those early novels that look like very

gentle recreations of the past--what they were saying in effect, was that we had a past.<sup>73</sup>

with that of the following statement by Camara Laye:

I believe this type of aesthetic commitment [creative writing] is more valuable to our civilization than a specific protest on racial grounds. I also believe that it counters any theory of the superiority of other cultures in a very practical way.<sup>74</sup>

Both novelists show similar cultural concerns, but the directions in which these concerns move them are not identical. The negritude writers, as Camara Laye further stated, are concerned less with topical issues and more with "the timeless quality of the specific values of [their] culture."<sup>75</sup> The essentially cultural and non-political intention informing the negritude movement was also emphasized by Senghor when he observed: "Negritude as a cultural movement is not racism: not even an 'anti-racist racism,'"<sup>76</sup> Anglophone African novelists insist, however, that the novelist must attempt to point a social direction for his society.<sup>77</sup>

In this chapter, we have substantiated the claims made by Anglophone African writers that they have literary sources which are peculiarly their own. Admittedly their insistence that the novel should faithfully reflect the African socio-cultural environment means that they are writing largely within the conventions of eighteenth and nineteenth-century realism. African novelists have, however, clearly introduced new material into their novels. Their special preoccupations have given a particular focus to themes and characterization. The availability of peculiarly African concepts, symbols and images

and of motifs and plot structures from African oral narrative provides opportunities for varying narrative method in their novels. Important too are African ideas about the nature of reality. The depiction of the supernatural world as an extension of the material world (rather than as an alternate world) extends the temporal dimension of the novel genre. This treatment is in clear contrast to that in the Western novel which has been distinguished by its limitation of action and character, to specific historical time and place.

The development of a characteristically African literature in English must, however, ultimately depend on the existence of an African readership. The Anglophone African novelists' readership in their own societies is limited by the fact that they write for readers who use English as a second language. Like the Western writer, too, they face competition from other sources, such as the radio, press and television and find that their readers are more attracted to sources of factual information than to fiction. Where the themes and subject-matter of their novels are concerned, the influence of global problems must eventually make itself felt in the present context in which African societies exist, and the exclusiveness of subject-matter cannot be maintained. For the present, however, the special political dilemmas which African societies face exert a further controlling effect on the subject-matter and themes of the African novel.

FOOTNOTES TO CHAPTER 2

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Chinua Achebe, "The Role of the Writer in a New Nation," Nigeria Magazine, No. 81, (1964), p. 159; Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, "The African Writer and His Past," Homecoming (London, Heinemann, 1972), pp. 39-46. Wole Soyinka, Myth Literature and the African World (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), pp. 107-108.

<sup>2</sup> "The Patriot as Artist," African Writers on African Writing, ed. G.D. Killam (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press), 1973, p. 75.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Chinua Achebe, "The Novelist as Teacher," New Statesman, 29 January 1965, p. 162; Wole Soyinka, "The Writer in a Modern African State," The Writer in Modern Africa, ed. Per Westberg (New York: Africana Publishing Corp., 1969), p. 21; Obi Egbuna, Dem Say: Interviews with Eight Nigerian Writers, ed. Bernth Lindfors (Austin, Texas: University of Texas), p. 16; "Declaration of African Writers," Research in African Literatures, VI, 1 (Spring, 1975), 58-59.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, "Attempt to Define African Literature." African Literature and the Universities, ed. Gerald Moore (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1965), pp. 84-85.

<sup>5</sup> "African Writers," Africa Currents, No. 2 (Summer 1975), 19-24.

<sup>6</sup> The white South African writer, it has been pointed out is not necessarily excluded. See, for example, Chinua Achebe, "Thoughts on the African Novel," Exile and Tradition: Studies in African and Caribbean Literature, ed. Rowland Smith (Bristol: Longman, 1976), p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> Africa Currents, No. 2, (Summer 1975), 19-24.

<sup>8</sup> "Problems of Nigerian Writers," Nigeria Magazine, No. 78 (September 1963), 218.

<sup>9</sup> See Howard Mumford Jones, The Theory of American Literature (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1966), pp. 118-150; Preface to The Reinterpretation of American Literature: Some contributions toward the understanding of its historical development, ed. Norman Foerster (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1928), xi-xii.

<sup>10</sup> Hence American writers have had a strong voice in determining critical standards. The African writers, like the American

writers before them, attached great importance to the establishment of Literature Studies relating specifically to their continent.

<sup>11</sup>See, for example, A.E. [George Russell] The Inner and Outer Ireland (Dublin: Talbot Press, 1921), p. 5; Ernest Boyd, Ireland's Literary Renaissance (New York: John Lane Co., 1916), p. 399; Robert O'Driscoll, "Return to the Hearthstone: Ideals of the Celtic Literary Revival," Place, Personality and the Irish Writer, ed. Andrew Carpenter (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1977), p. 59.

<sup>12</sup>W.B. Yeats, for example, has pointed out that Ireland had escaped "the yoke of the Roman Empire, the secularization of the Renaissance and the material domination of the Anglo-Saxon world." "The Celtic Element in Literature," Essays (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1924), pp. 213-231.

<sup>13</sup>Ethnic groups refer to people bound together by ancestry and culture and is different from race. The concept of race is still much debated about. See, for example, Michael Banton and Jonathan Harwood, The Race Concept (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1975).

<sup>14</sup>See, for example, T.S. Eliot, "The Unity of European Culture," Notes Towards a Definition of Culture (New York: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1949), pp. 113-128.

<sup>15</sup>"The Function of Criticism at the Present Time," Essays in Criticism (London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1902), p. 39.

<sup>16</sup>Notes Towards a Definition of Culture, p. 115.

<sup>17</sup>In "Tradition and the Individual Talent," The Sacred Wood, 7th ed. (London: Methuen and Co., 1960), p. 49. T.S. Eliot observed that "the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer . . . has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order."

<sup>18</sup>See, for example, Ruth Finnegan, Oral Literature in Africa (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), p. 48.

<sup>19</sup>Which Way Africa, 3rd ed. (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1971), pp. 30-31.

<sup>20</sup>See, for example, Jomo Kenyatta, Facing Mount Kenya (London: Heinemann, 1979), p. 232; Mazizi Kunene, Introduction to Zulu Poems (New York: Africana Publishing Corp., 1970), p. 17; also John Mbiti, African Religions and Philosophy (London: Heinemann, 1975), p. 159.

<sup>21</sup>This is true of other areas which were colonized, but different patterns of colonization developed according to the nature of the original society. See, for example, Philip Mason, Patterns of Dominance (London: Oxford University Press, 1971).

22 "Africa as a Linguistic Area," Continuity and Change in African Culture, ed. William R. Bascom and Melville J. Herskovits (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 22.

23 These are discussed in Chapter 3.

24 Notes Towards a Definition of European Culture, p. 117.

25 Morning Yet on Creation Day (London: Heinemann, 1975), p. 56.

26 Ezekiel Mphahlele, Voices in the Whirlwind (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), p. 96.

27 T.S. Eliot, Notes Towards a Definition of Culture, pp. 121-122.

28 In the European context, T.S. Eliot has observed for example, that there are three elements in every art, "the local tradition, the common European tradition, and the influence of the art of one European country upon another." Notes Towards a Definition of Culture, p. 117.

29 David Buchan has made a useful distinction between "oral" referring to "a particular method of composition derived from the exigencies of the non literate state" and "oral" referring to the general word-of-mouth tradition. See "Oral Tradition and Literary Tradition: The Scottish Ballads," Oral Tradition, Literary Tradition: A Symposium, ed. Hans Bekker Nielsen et al. (Odense: Odense University Press, 1977), p. 56.

30 See Ruth Finnegan, Oral Literature in Africa, p. 336.

31 See Ruth Finnegan, Oral Literature in Africa, pp. 520-521.

32 See Culture, Tradition and Society in the West African Novel, p. 32.

33 Introduction to The Novelist as Innovator, ed. Ian Watt et al. (London, BBC: 1965), xiii.

34 See Rosalie L. Colie, The Resources of Kind: Genre-Theory in the Renaissance, ed. Barbara K. Lewalski (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), p. 30; Frederick Karl, "Don Quixote as Archetypal Artist and Don Quixote as Archetypal Novel" in A Reader's Guide to the Development of the English Novel in the Eighteenth Century (London: Thames and Hudson, 1975), pp. 55-67.

35 See, for example, Walter Allen, The English Novel: A Short Critical History (London: Phoenix House Ltd., 1955), p. 39. Ian Watt, The Rise of the Novel (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1960), pp. 15-21.

<sup>36</sup>Examples immediately come to mind: Dr. Kawa in Lenrie Peter's The Second Round, Obi Okwonkwo in Chinua Achebe's No Longer at Ease, Baako Onipa in Ayi Kwei Armah's Fragments and Amamu in Kofi Awoonor's This Earth my Brother. There are, of course, exceptions.

<sup>37</sup>In the East African context one thinks readily of the heroes of Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's novels, Lombe in David Rubadiri's No Bride Price and Ntanya in Peter Palangyo's Dying in the Sun. While there are exceptions, the heroes in the East African even more than in the West African novel tend to conform to type.

<sup>38</sup>The general point brought out is the pursuit of material goods and the divorce between man and his physical environment.

<sup>39</sup>See Chapter 3.

<sup>40</sup>This corresponds with views existing within the societies. See, for example, Jomo Kenyatta, Facing Mount Kenya, p. 309. In this connection, Alex La Guma's novels are an important contribution from South Africa.

<sup>41</sup>See, for example, Benjamin C. Ray, African Religions: Symbol, Ritual and Community (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Princeton University, 1976), p. 32.

<sup>42</sup>See Victor Turner, "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passages," The Forest of Symbols (Cornell University Press, 1967), pp. 93-94.

<sup>43</sup>See, for example, Axel-Ivar Berglund, Zulu Thought-Patterns and Symbolism (London: C. Hurst and Co., 1976), p. 61.

<sup>44</sup>In the Gothic novel, for example, the supernatural was presented as another world which was outside of the normal. When absorbed into the Western novel it is depicted as transcending the everyday world.

<sup>45</sup>As, for example, Ezeulu in Chinua Achebe's Arrow of God, Amamu in Kofi Awoonor's This Earth My Brother and Ihuoma in Elechi Amadi's The Concubine. Some East African novels are structured around beliefs about life after death and continuing communication between the living and the dead. Examples are Ali Mazrui's The Trial of Christopher Okigbo and Stanlake Samkange's On trial for My Country.

<sup>46</sup>See Chapter 6.

<sup>47</sup>John Mbiti has observed, for example: "For the majority of peoples . . . the next world is in fact geographically 'here,' being separated from this only by virtue of being invisible to human beings." African Religions and Philosophy, p. 159.

<sup>48</sup>See Cyprian Ekwensi's statement quoted on page 44.

<sup>49</sup>See Cyprian Ekwensi's statement quoted on page 44.

<sup>50</sup>William Bascom has pointed out problems encountered when applying these basically European classifications to African prose narratives. Where these terms occur in this thesis, myths deal with a remote past, principally with non-human characters and are regarded as sacred and true by the people to whom they belong. Legend purports to be the history of the people--what they believe to be true about their history though fact may be mixed with invention. Folktales cover a variety of narratives dealing with humans and non-humans and are linked to no particular time and place. See William Bascom, "The Forms of Folklore: Prose Narratives," Journal of American Folklore, LXXVIII, (1965), 4-5.

<sup>51</sup>Gabriel Okara, Dem Say: Interviews with Eight Nigerian Writers, ed. Bernth Lindfors (Austin, Texas: University of Texas, 1974), p. 46.

<sup>52</sup>See note 30 above.

<sup>53</sup>For example, Karanja in A Grain of Wheat. Often the shadow of the mental asylum looms for the hero at the end of the novel as for Baako in Fragments, Godfrey Munira in Petals of Blood and Ezeulu in Arrow of God.

<sup>54</sup>For example, Okwonkwo in Things Fall Apart and Ezeulu in Arrow of God.

<sup>55</sup>The concept of the outsider in Western literature has been discussed, for example, by Colin Wilson in The Outsider (Boston: Houghton Mifflin and Co., 1956).

<sup>56</sup>See, for example, Chinua Achebe, Morning Yet on Creation Day, p. 25; Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, Homecoming, pp. 55-56; Wole Soyinka, Myth, Literature and the African World, p. 116.

<sup>57</sup>The phrase is from William Abraham, The Mind of Africa (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1967), p. 87.

<sup>58</sup>"Negritude and Modernity," Contemporary African Literature, ed. Edris Makward and Leslie Lacy (New York: Random House, 1972), p. 439.

<sup>59</sup>African Writers Talking: A Collection of Radio Interviews, ed. Cosmo Pieterse and Dennis Duerden (New York: Africana Publishing Corporation, 1972), p. 144.

<sup>60</sup>In Person: Achebe, Awoonor and Soyinka, ed. Karen L. Morell (Seattle: University of Washington, 1975), p. 136.

<sup>61</sup>See, for example, Interview with Ernest and Pat Emenyonu, Africa Report, XVII, 5 (1972), p. 23.

<sup>62</sup>"Negritude et Humanisme," Liberte I (Paris: Seuil, 1946), p. 24.

<sup>63</sup>Liberte, I, p. 102.

<sup>64</sup>Modern Poetry from Africa, ed. Gerald Moore and Ulli Beier (London: Penguin, 1970), p. 53.

<sup>65</sup>Africa often symbolized "an area of darkness" or an unexplored territory in which the strength of the European intellectual tradition (rationalism) could be tested, as for example, in Joseph Conrad's The Heart of Darkness and Graham Greene's The Heart of the Matter.

<sup>66</sup>Myth, Literature and the African World, p. 127.

<sup>67</sup>David Rubadiri, though rejecting negritude expresses a similar view. See Interview with Joseph Kariuki, Africa Report, IX, 7 (1964), 14. See also Ali Mazrui, "Africa and the Crisis of Relevance in Modern Culture," Présence Africaine, No. 72 (1969), 20.

<sup>68</sup>See, for example, Wole Soyinka, African Writers Talking, ed. Duerden and Pieterse, p. 174; Chinua Achebe, Morning Yet on Creation Day, p. 24.

<sup>69</sup>"The Writer in a Modern African State," The Writer in Modern Africa, ed. Wastberg, p. 21.

<sup>70</sup>See, for example, Camara Laye, "The Writer and His World," Interview by Steven Rubin, Africa Report, XVII, 5 (1972), pp. 20 and 22.

<sup>71</sup>See, for example, David Rubadiri, African Writers on African Writing, ed. G.D. Killam, p. 145; Ayi Kwei Armah, "African Socialism: Utopian or Scientific," Présence Africaine, No. 64 (1967), 18.

<sup>72</sup>See E.N. Obiechina, Culture, Tradition and Society in the West African Novel, pp. 14-17; Ali Mazrui, African Writers on African Writing, ed. Killam, p. 75.

<sup>73</sup>Palaver, ed. Lindfors et al., p. 7.

<sup>74</sup>"The Writer and His World," Interview with J. Steven Rubin, Africa Report, XVII, 5 (1972), 22.

<sup>75</sup>"The Writer and His World," Africa Report, XVII, 5 (1972), 20.

<sup>76</sup>"Negritude and Modernity," Contemporary African Literature, ed. Makward and Lacy, p. 439.

<sup>77</sup>See, for example, Chinua Achebe, Palaver, ed. Lindfors et al., p. 6; Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, Homecoming, pp. 65-66; Kofi

Awoonor, Palaver, ed. Lindfors et al., pp. 49-50; Wole Soyinka, The Writer in Modern Africa, ed. Wastberg, p. 21.

CHAPTER 3

THE POLITICAL REFERENCE OF

THE AFRICAN NOVEL

Common political experiences among ex-colonial African societies have placed them in a special relationship with each other and have created further links between the works of novelists from Anglophone areas of Africa. These common political experiences may, in the first instance, be attributed to similarities in cultural outlook (described in the previous chapter), to the extent that cultural beliefs influence the methods of social organization.<sup>1</sup> More important for our purposes, however, are those common political experiences in African societies which have resulted from their relationship with European societies during a period of commercial interaction and later of colonial rule. The political situation of African societies in relation to Europe has not only provided African novelists with a common background of events to draw on for the subject-matter of their novels, but has also given them a common purpose in writing. African novelists have asserted that one of the results of the European presence in Africa was the devaluation of African cultural achievement by both Europeans and Africans.<sup>2</sup> As a result, as Ali Mazrui has pointed out, the African needed to prove his ability to master Western culture.<sup>3</sup> The ability to write a novel then, as Chinua Achebe has further pointed out, carries political implications

for African novelists.<sup>4</sup> Another common purpose which African novelists have identified is to counter the denigratory portrayals of African life and character which had worked towards the political disadvantage of African societies in their interaction with Europe.<sup>5</sup>

The main subject-matter of African novels relates to the disruption of African social institutions by European mercantile and capitalist policies. In their trading relationships and later during the period of colonial rule, European nations exerted political control on African societies, and brought about modifications of traditional African social structures. African political institutions were subordinated to those of the colonial powers. This led to the manipulation of traditional groups, such as the chiefs in the British system of indirect rule, headmen and clerks holding minor positions in the economic sector and school teachers helping to establish Western secular education in African societies. These groups mediated between Western and African societies. To the extent that members of these groups served the purposes of the colonial power, they became alienated from their societies, and were often regarded as collaborators with the Europeans against their own people. The "man of two worlds" and the essential ambivalence of his role is one of the main themes of the African novel.

A further result of European political control on African societies was the replacement of subsistence economies with export-oriented ones. In the area of agriculture, for

C example, this led to a concentration of the ownership of land in the hands of European minorities. The centrality of land to the social structure is another major theme of the African novel. The undisturbed possession of the land, in the novels of Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, for example, is a symbol of the stability of the community. The kind of use which is made of the land-- as a means of sustaining the people who live on it or as something to be exploited for profit--becomes in many African novels one of the fundamental contrasts between traditional African and modern European cultures.<sup>6</sup>

European political control on African societies was also used to promote the development of industrial urban centres which led to the division of labour along non-traditional lines and to controls on the movement of people within the society. African novelists examine the results of these changes from collective to individualist societies and the devaluation of the person of the African are common themes in the African novel. The presence of such themes in the African novel demonstrates the truth of the novelists' assertion that in the African context cultural and political issues are interrelated.<sup>7</sup>

O The themes of the African novel approached from a cultural perspective in Chapter 2 may thus be restated in political terms. In both instances--cultural and political-- they relate to the different ways in which the colonial presence has affected African societies. The common political experiences of their societies direct the Anglophone African novelists' attention to the same types of characters in which

their cultural predicament leads them to show interest. Their common political experience also leads Anglophone African novelists to explore the same concepts, and in some instances provides them with common symbols of expression. Distinct stages may, however, be recognized in the novelists' exposition of their political themes.

The circumstances in which independence had been achieved in West and East African states had led in the immediate post-independence period<sup>8</sup> to assumptions about the writer's accountability to his society and to direct comparisons of his role with that of the politician, both by practising writers and by their critics.<sup>9</sup> One common function which was identified for both writers and politicians was that of destroying enslaving ideologies and providing a reassessment of the historical role of black Africans.<sup>10</sup> In their works, novelists have also been able to depict sympathetically the human environment in which their writing takes place and to describe their societies from the inside. These purposes stand but clearly in earlier novels such as Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart and Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's The River Between. In these novels, the novelists' attention is clearly on the impact of European culture on African social systems and the connection between the breakdown of African social institutions and their political subordination to the Europeans.

The main preoccupation of the South African novelist is the clash of the political objectives of white and non-white racial groups in South Africa. South Africa has been independent since 1910, but under conditions that have intensified

racial conflicts to a greater degree than in West Africa. In areas of East Africa like Kenya where there had been a tendency for conflicts to develop along racial lines as in South Africa, there has been in recent times a shift of emphasis from colour to class conflict. This is brought out, for example, in Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's latest novel Petals of Blood. Conflicts between black and white races in Africa, however, have been part of the experience of all Anglophone African societies and constitute a common area of experience. Racial conflicts clearly have political as well as cultural consequences.

Situations in the pre-independence period which have contributed directly to the subject-matter of the Anglophone African novel in the immediate post-independence period relate to the efforts by missionaries and colonial administrations to change cultural practices which expressed fundamental beliefs of the African people and which had a direct effect on their political well-being. In novels such as The River Between and Weep Not Child, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o has shown how cultural practices such as circumcision, other initiation rites and the system of age groups<sup>11</sup> relate to the political structure of Kikuyu society. Ngugi also shows how systems of land tenure and methods of using the land interact with other aspects of culture. Chinua Achebe has similarly used his novels to make the connection between cultural and political life in West Africa. In Arrow of God, for example, Ezeulu's giving of evidence against his clan in a land dispute, and the attempt of the British commissioner Winterbottom to make him a warrant

officer in the service of the British administration conflict with his cultural situation. Achebe shows how the political role which Ezeulu is pushed to assume conflicts with his symbolic function, within his culture, as the intermediary who must apprehend and destroy the danger which threatens his community.<sup>12</sup> This interaction of cultural and political factors, following on the break-up of tribal systems and the displacement of African communities, is also demonstrated in the South African novel. In A Walk in the Night, for example, Alex la Guma has presented situations which show the effects of the breakdown of African cultural and political institutions on black and coloured people who are crowded into urban ghettos. Political events thus provide Anglophone African novelists with common themes, although the specifics of the situations presented may vary.

Novels which depict the later post-independence period<sup>13</sup> in East and West Africa focus primarily on conflicts arising from the clash of nationalist ideals and economic imperatives in the newly-independent states. A typical situation is that described in Peter Abrahams' A Wreath for Udomo.<sup>14</sup> Abrahams depicts the conflicts which follow when Udomo, the leader of an independent black African state, attempts to hold on to popular support and at the same time, for economic reasons, to carry on negotiations with a powerful white neighbouring state which seeks his help in suppressing a black liberation movement. National leaders also faced the problem of creating a central authority within nations comprised of ethnic groups which had formerly conducted their political affairs independently. The

difficulty of establishing the authority of the central government served to isolate the political leaders from the people. National political leaders often found themselves challenging local groups in an attempt to contain them within the central authority which spoke for the nation as a whole. Such situations which are generally reflected in novels from East and West Africa supply a continuing theme in the African novel.<sup>15</sup>

Post-independence difficulties in West and East African societies also resulted from the attempts of the new political élite to maintain their own power. The ruling classes soon recognized interests of their own which were separate from those of the masses. Most of the novels published since 1966 deal with political corruption among African politicians. Novels such as Chinua Achebe's A Man of the People, David Rabadiiri's No Bride Price, T.M. Aluko's Chief the Honourable Minister and Robert Serumaga's Return to the Shadows reveal the bitterness and violence which attended party politics.

In addition, novelists depict the struggle between older politicians, many of them retaining influence within the traditional political structure, and younger Western-educated men. This type of opposition is reflected, for example, in the conflict between Chief Nanga and Odili in A Man of the People, Chief Taiwo and Freddie in Cyprian Ekwensi's Jagua Nana and in the uneasy coalition between Chief Odole and Alade Moses in Chief the Honourable Minister. Novels such as Ayi Kwei Armah's The Beautiful Ones are Not Yet Born and Fragments and Wole Soyinka's The Interpreters register the novelists' disgust with

the ruling élite and the frustration of the intellectual.

These novels published from 1966 on show clearly the growing involvement of the novelists in national politics. The novelists' attempt to look critically at the local political situation often brought reprisals from the politicians with whom they had shared a common political interest in the immediate post-independence period. In Nigeria, for example, Wole Soyinka was detained by the government of General Gowon during the Nigerian Civil War.<sup>16</sup> More recently, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o was imprisoned by the Kenyan government.<sup>17</sup> The prestige of the novelists both within and without their own societies was something which their local politicians had come to fear. In their own societies, Anglophone African novelists had the prestige which is associated with the written word in recently pre-literate societies which are attempting to catch up with technologically advanced societies. Writing in English, the African novelists addressed themselves to a wide foreign readership. The situation in East and West Africa has not, however, been as extreme as that in South Africa which has resulted in a literature which has been produced largely in exile. The situation of exile is one which, in the South African's case, has led to further politicization of the writer's role.<sup>18</sup>

As a result of the increasing politicization of the African writer's role, the problem of the writer's political activism has itself become subject-matter for the novelist. The question of the writer's political activism has been given sustained treatment by Ali Mazrui in his novel, The Trial of Christopher Okigbo. In this novel, Mazrui raises the question

whether the writer who takes a side in a political conflict in his society is acting in his capacity as an artist or as a citizen. Mazrui asks which of these roles should supersede the other.

The case of the Nigerian poet, Christopher Okigbo, who died fighting on the Biafran side in the Nigerian Civil War, assumed importance for all African writers. Okigbo's decision, to engage actively as a partisan in this war was one which writers in other African states, as Ngugi Wa Thiong'o has pointed out, might be called upon to contemplate. "The potential of a Biafran type conflict," Ngugi observed, "exists in every African country that has doggedly refused to dismantle capitalism and colonial economic structures."<sup>19</sup> Ngugi's statement suggests two possible roles for the writer--a partisan role during a situation of military conflict and an activist role in support of a revolutionary ideology to transform the social organism. In Petals of Blood, Ngugi attempts to deal with the latter type of political activism. In The Trial of Christopher Okigbo Mazrui attempts to deal with the former.

The question which Mazrui poses is whether Okigbo, in losing his life in a partisan cause, had not neglected his duty as a writer. In fact, should Okigbo's duty as a writer, by reason of his special gifts as a poet, transcend that owed, as a citizen to his society? Mazrui also uses Okigbo's case to examine the conflicting claims of ethnic, national and pan-African loyalties on the African intellectual.

Hamisi Salim, the counsel for defense in The Trial of Christopher Okigbo, is identified as a Kenyan and a Muslim.

Kenya soon after independence had had her own nearly averted crisis arising from rivalry between different ethnic groups for power in the new national government. The counsel for "damnation" is Kwame Apolo-Gyamfi who is identified as a Ghanaian--from the African state in which the concept of pan-Africanism developed. Apolo-Gyamfi accuses Okigbo of refusing, on the one hand, to mix art with nationalism and, on the other, to fight in the civil war on the Biafran side. The decision made by the leaders of After-Africa who judge the case is in Apolo-Gyamfi's favour; the writer's first commitment is to his art. For some novelists, Mazrui's attempt to separate art and politics seems artificial.<sup>20</sup> The question of political activism is one which novelists, like Ayi Kwei Armah, Wole Soyinka and Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, have looked at in more recent novels. These novelists allow the question to apply more broadly to the situation of the intellectual and to political activism in a more general sense. Soyinka and Ngugi are more concerned with discovering a process of reconciling what Mazrui clearly regards as conflicting processes. Armah's novel, Why Are We So Blest, however, tends to reveal a basic incompatibility between the role of the creative intellectual and the effective revolutionary activist.

The Anglophone African novelists' preoccupation with the question of political activism for the Western-educated intellectual constitutes a third stage<sup>21</sup> in their exposition of political themes. In the novels published since 1973, novelists continue to depict political corruption in their societies, but they also examine the relevance of Western political institutions to contemporary African societies and explore solutions

which might be relevant to the problems faced by these societies.

In Wole Soyinka's Season of Anomy, for example, the hero, Ofeyi, is depicted as an intellectual with long-range insights for his society, who attempts to exert a creative revolutionary force against the politicians who are depicted as short-range manipulators of political power.<sup>22</sup> Ofeyi is clearly a character with whom Soyinka identifies.<sup>23</sup> Like the creative artist, Ofeyi is shown attempting to mediate between the traditional past and modern African society which has been subjected to the influences of Western twentieth-century commercialism. Soyinka attempts to convey through the novel form his conception of the creative individual attempting "a visionary reconstruction of the past for the purposes of a social direction,"<sup>24</sup> and discovering a guiding philosophy for his society from within his own cultural environment. The novel charts the hero's journey, not so much toward self-discovery, as towards the discovery of practical solutions for his troubled society. This is true also of Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's Petals of Blood in which Ngugi depicts the development of two intellectuals, Munira who has never "willed anything to happen"<sup>25</sup> and Karega who is involved in trade union activities, in relation to the changes taking place within their social environment. Munira's self-absorption and Karega's commitment to the larger society are established very early in the novel. The important discovery for Karega at the end of the novel is that his place and his identity as part of a closely-knit social unit are assured, and that there is hope of resolving the problems of the society. Petals of Blood is again

an attempt to convey through the novel form a particular concept of the individual's role in a situation of social change and to analyze in turn the effects of the process of change on the individual.

In Season of Anomy and in Petals of Blood, Wole Soyinka and Ngugi Wa Thiong'o have also successfully used the novel form to explore the concept of revolution and the nature of political revolutionary activity. Neither novelist, however, loses sight of the literary perspective. Both novelists find their symbols of expression within their political environment. Both novelists depict the sudden impact of the capitalist economic system upon a cooperatively organized rural community which has, up to the point at which the story begins, been isolated from the influences of twentieth-century commercialism. Season of Anomy, in its formal structure, expresses the kind of organic unity which Soyinka is attempting to define for the society. Soyinka uses the stages of growth of the cocoa seedling as a metaphor for the development of a well-integrated community life and as a means of organizing his narrative structure in the novel. The metaphor of the seed which dies only to give birth has, of course, been used before, but in this instance it is specifically related to the political and economic life of West African societies. Cocoa, as J.B. Danguah has pointed out, "revolutionized" the whole life of the Gold Coast and became one of the main cash crops of West Africa.<sup>26</sup> The cocoa plant thus serves as a symbol marking West Africa's absorption into the money economy (presented in the novel as a kind of spiritual

death) but at the same time provides a concrete image for the process of social regeneration. Soyinka thus expresses opposite processes in the same image. This notion of duality<sup>27</sup> and the cyclic concept of existence<sup>28</sup> which are embodied in the image of the cocoa seedling are inherent in the African world-view.

In Ngugi's Petals of Blood, the central metaphor of the journey is related to the specific political context of the novel. The journey as a metaphor is common enough in the novel and, in fact, is sometimes said to be its basic motif.<sup>29</sup> In Petals of Blood, the journey as a metaphor takes on special significance from the number of changes in the society to which it refers simultaneously. Petals of Blood describes the transformation of the village of Ilmorog into a modern city. Ilmorog changes from an agricultural to an industrial environment, from a pre-literate to a literate culture, from tribal to non-tribal modes of settling disputes, from a collectively organized to an individualist society and from a pre-capitalist to a capitalist economy in its journey into the post-independence era. The four main characters in the novel are also depicted on journeys which bring them together in Ilmorog. Although they remain in Ilmorog and attempt to coordinate their existences, they soon become launched again on separate courses of development within the changing environment of Ilmorog. The novel itself then is constructed in terms of an interwoven pattern of journeys. The journey is a metaphor for describing both the inner changes in the individual and the transformations of the society. It is also a device for creating narrative continuity; the narrative pattern is modeled on the processes which the novel describes.

The social context thus provides both the subject-matter of the novel and the basic metaphor for developing its themes.

Our survey of the Anglophone African novelists' political subject-matter shows them focusing on particular character types. In the political as in the cultural context, the novelists' attention turns primarily to a class of characters who mediate between Western and African societies. Such characters include, for example, the factor during the period of the slave trade, local chiefs to whom authority was delegated by the colonial administration, the middleman in economic exchanges and the political élite in the post-independence period who are often forced to set aside national ideals because of economic interest. In secondary roles, the middleman is often depicted as an exploiter or betrayer of his own society.<sup>30</sup> As the main character of the novel he assumes a more complex role. As a link between two modes of existence, his experiences are usually designed to illuminate the relationships between African and Western societies, to explore the possibility of reconciling the two modes of existence or to emphasize the African's need to seek a social direction for the present by reconstructing elements from his own past.

By relating the political middleman to the concept of the intermediary, Anglophone African novelists demonstrate the interaction between the political and cultural contexts. They are thus demonstrating in their novels a point which they consistently assert in their statements about the connection between culture and politics in African societies. In the cultural

context, as we pointed out in Chapter 2, the concept of the intermediary is related to characters in the novel whose position in the society gives them an actual or symbolic role as a mediator between the society and forces confronting it from without. In the cultural context, the intermediary is conceived of primarily as one who stands between and attempts to reconcile oppositions between material and spiritual, secular and religious and traditional and modern influences. Different novels show the degree to which the hero is able to harmonize the opposed influences. In the political context, the intermediary is primarily conceived of in terms of the relationship between African societies and the West or of the masses and the ruling political élite. In the South African novel this role may be interpreted very literally. In Jordan K. Ngubane's Ushaba, for example, the role of the intermediary falls upon the black servants who move between the suburbs inhabited by the white middle class and the reserves in which the blacks are socially isolated.<sup>31</sup> In East and West African novels there is an increasing tendency to identify the intermediary with the creative writer and the educated intellectual. These observations are borne out when we compare, for example, an earlier group of novels such as Chinua Achebe's A Man of the People, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's The River Between, David Rubadiri's No Bride Price with later novels such as Ayi Kwei Armah's Why Are We So Blest, Wole Soyinka's Season of Anomy and Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's Petals of Blood. Another tendency which can be noticed when we compare these novels is the novelist's increasing preoccupation with the nature of political commitment. In the second set of novels, it

is not enough for the novelist to use the hero simply to expose political corruption in his society; the hero is used rather to explore directions for the politically committed person. This situation in the novel reflects the later positions taken by Anglophone African novelists in their statements about the role of the writer in modern African societies.<sup>32</sup> Wole Soyinka's Season of Anomy, for example, may be seen as a clarification of the role which he described for the writer in his address to the African-Scandinavian Writers' Conference in 1967.<sup>33</sup> The metaphor of "the transitional gulf" sustained throughout the novel refers both to the period of social change through which the society is passing and to the gap between spiritual and material existences which this change creates in the individual life. The hero's search for political solutions is part of a larger search to harmonize divergent aspects of his personal as well as his social existence. The political situation provides concrete images which reflect the disorientation within the individual.<sup>34</sup>

The course of events in various African societies, as we have shown, increased the Anglophone African novelists' preoccupation with political themes. In the first stage, the assertion of the value of African cultural institutions was regarded as part of a wider political protest against European domination. In the second stage, novelists criticized political events within their own societies. In the final stage, novelists attempted to point a social direction. There is a shift not only in the nature of the novelists' political involvement but also in his method of dealing with his subject-matter. The earlier manner in the Anglophone African novel amounts to

description of and comment on what was happening in the society at a particular time. Later novels attempt to mirror the process of change. The focus shifts from events to processes and the novelist attempts to relate the creative artistic process to the revolutionary political process and sees the one reflected in the other. In their statements about their art, major Anglophone African novelists, in the later period which we have examined in this chapter, have consistently spoken of a revolutionary element in it which is a force for change in the working out of the historical experience of their societies. Wole Soyinka, for example, in a talk given in Seattle, Washington, in 1973, related the creative artistic process to revolutionary political processes suggesting that art "revolutionizes" the existence of the individual by "liberating" his creative powers and changing his concept of himself.<sup>35</sup> "Contained in our work," Kofi Awoonor asserted on a similar occasion, "are endemic revolutionary processes. . . ."<sup>36</sup> Ngugi Wa Thiong'o has spoken of the novelist's need to give "moral direction and vision" to the "revolutionary struggle taking place within his society."<sup>37</sup> The later novels of Ngugi, Soyinka and Ayi Kwei Armah show that this is not simply idle talk. Anglophone African writers have, in fact, asserted the concern of the novelist with conveying processes rather than with merely documenting events and it is in their treatment of political themes that they have been best able to demonstrate what they mean by this.

The belief that literature can enlighten the individual in the society about his social condition and create in him the

courage and determination to transcend that condition is, of course, not new. It is, as Charles Glicksberg has pointed out, a fundamental principle of Marxism.<sup>38</sup> Anglophone African novelists have not, however, simply adopted this belief from elsewhere. They have clearly shown how it has been derived from their particular historical circumstances. The Anglophone African novelists' belief in the revolutionary force of art is a natural corollary to their response to their earlier colonial situation and their attempt to show that a people whose culture was once disvalued, being apprised of the value of their own cultural institutions, may utilize them for purposes of social regeneration.<sup>39</sup> The extent to which literature can change political attitudes and social behaviour cannot, however, be effectively measured.

In their statements and in their novels, as we have shown in this chapter, Anglophone African novelists have brought out the connection between culture and politics in African societies. Politics supplies not only the basic subject matter of the Anglophone African novel but also some of its basic metaphors and motifs. It contributes to the development of a special form of the novel; that is, to a characteristic mode of conveying experience. The main tendency in the African novel is to show that political subject-matter and creative literary activity are not incompatible. This runs counter to the direction in which the mainstream of Western novel criticism has moved in the twentieth century.<sup>40</sup> Anglophone African novelists, in fact, attempt to use the concern with politics as a controlling

influence on the novels which they produce; that is, they regard it as a circumstance which causes them to focus on similar themes and character types and to generate similar symbols and images, thus reinforcing their claim to have produced a distinctly African novel.

FOOTNOTES TO CHAPTER 3

<sup>1</sup>See, for example, Daryll Forde, Introduction to African Worlds: Studies in the Cosmological Ideas and Social Values of African Peoples, ed. Daryll Forde (London: Oxford University Press, 1954).

<sup>2</sup>See, for example, Chinua Achebe, "The Role of the Writer in a New Nation," Nigeria Magazine, No. 81 (1964), 157; Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, "Towards a National Culture," Homecoming (London: Heinemann, 1972), p. 11; Wole Soyinka, Myth, Literature and the African World (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), pp. 107-108.

<sup>3</sup>"The Patriot as an Artist," African Writers on African Writing, ed. G.D. Killam (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1973), p. 75.

<sup>4</sup>In Person, ed. Karen Morell (Seattle: University of Washington, 1975), p. 30.

<sup>5</sup>See note 2 above.

<sup>6</sup>See, for example, Wole Soyinka's Season of Anomy and Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's Petals of Blood which are discussed later in this chapter.

<sup>7</sup>See, for example, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, Homecoming, p. 26; Jordan K. Ngubane, Preface to Ushaba (Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1974).

<sup>8</sup>We refer to the period 1958-1965. Naturally themes are carried over from one period to another, and we are attempting to distinguish emphases only.

<sup>9</sup>See, for example, William Abraham, "Some Conversations with African Writers: Interviews by Lewis Nkosi, Africa Report, IX, 7 (1964), 17; J.P. Clark, Palaver: Interviews with Five African Writers in Texas, ed. Lindfors et al. (Austin: University of Texas, 1972), pp. 19-20; Okot p'Bitek, Africa's Cultural Revolution (Nairobi: Macmillan, 1973), p. 47; Wali Obiajunwa, "The Individual and the Novel in Africa," Transition, IV, 18 (1965), 33.

<sup>10</sup>See, for example, Chinua Achebe, "The Novelist as Teacher," The New Statesman, 29 January 1965, pp. 161-62; Wole Soyinka, Myth, Literature and the African World, p. 108.

<sup>11</sup>The age-group system, for example, involves cultural practices which mark the movement from one age level to another and corresponding social duties and responsibilities at various levels.

<sup>12</sup>For an extended discussion, see Chapter 7.

<sup>13</sup>We refer to the period 1966-1972.

<sup>14</sup>This novel first published in 1956 is somewhat outside but it strikingly foreshadows the period which we are studying.

<sup>15</sup>See, for example, John Munyonye, A Wreath for the Maiden (London: Heinemann, 1973); Chinua Achebe, A Man of the People (London: Heinemann, 1966); Ayi Kwei Armah, Fragments (New York: Collier Macmillan, 1971); Wole Soyinka, Season of Anomy (London: Rex Collings, 1973); Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, Petals of Blood (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1977).

<sup>16</sup>See The Man Died (London: Rex Collings, 1973).

<sup>17</sup>See, for example, Africa Currents, No. 14, (Spring 1979), 5-7.

<sup>18</sup>See, for example, James Olney, Tell Me Africa: An Approach to African Literature (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973); Nadine Gordimer, "English-Language Literature and Politics in South Africa," Aspects of South African Literature, ed. Heywood (New York: Africana Publishing Co., 1976), pp. 99-127.

<sup>19</sup>"The Writer in a Changing Society," Homecoming, p. 50.

<sup>20</sup>See, for example, Chinua Achebe, Morning Yet on Creation Day (London: Heinemann, 1977), pp. 53-54.

<sup>21</sup>The third stage also includes novels published earlier, for periods overlap to some extent.

<sup>22</sup>Ofeyi in Season of Anomy and Modin the hero of Ayi Kwei Armah's novel Why Are We So Blest are related to Prometheus of classical mythology. Prometheus' situation, as E.A. Havelock has pointed out, can be taken as typical of the alienation of the intellectual in any society "so far as the power structure . . . tends to develop its own laws of preservation, which operate . . . at the expense of those long-range insights which the intellectual feels called upon to furnish." See Foreword to Prometheus (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1968), vi.

<sup>23</sup>Ofeyi's experiences described in Season of Anomy are similar to Soyinka's experience described in The Man Died, an account of his imprisonment during the Gowon regime. Soyinka

also compares his situation with that of Prometheus. In The Man Died, he wrote of himself in prison, "My liver is mended. I await the vultures for there are no eagles here!" The Man Died (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1975), p. 206.

<sup>24</sup> See Wole Soyinka, Myth, Literature and the African World, p. 106.

<sup>25</sup> Petals of Blood (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1978), p. 18.

<sup>26</sup> See The Akan Doctrine of God (London: Frank Cass and Co. Ltd., 1968), p. 158. Danguah has observed that the seed is "a vehicle for the life of the race" since it neither lives nor dies for itself but has value "only in dying for the race."

<sup>27</sup> See J.B. Danguah, The Akan Doctrine of God, pp. 157-158; Chinua Achebe, "Chi in Igbo Cosmology," Morning Yet on Creation Day, pp. 93-103. See especially pp. 94-95.

<sup>28</sup> The cycle, as Wole Soyinka observes, "ensures the constant regenerative process of the universe." Myth, Literature and the African World, p. 18. See also Mazizi Kunene, "South African Oral Traditions," Aspects of South African Literature, ed. Christopher Heywood (London: Heinemann, 1976), p. 34; John Mbiti, African Religions and Philosophy (London: Heinemann, 1969), p. 121.

<sup>29</sup> See, for example, Maurice Z. Shroder, "The Novel as Genre," The Novel: Modern Essays in Criticism, ed. Robert Murray Davis (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1969), p. 44.

<sup>30</sup> Such characters include, for example, Chief Batoki in Season of Anomy, Chui and Ezekeli in Petals of Blood, Chief Izongo in Gabriel Okara's The Voice and Chief Nanga in Chinua Achebe's A Man of the People.

<sup>31</sup> In Alex La Guma's novels The Stone Country and In the Fog at the Season's End, the hero as intermediary moves between the people living in a kind of underworld and the daylight world from which they are excluded.

<sup>32</sup> See, for example, Chinua Achebe, Palaver, ed. Lindfors et al., p. 7; Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, "Towards a National Culture," Homecoming, p. 13; John Munyonye, Dem Say, ed. Bernth Lindfors (Austin: University of Texas, 1974), p. 40; Kofi Awoonor, The Writer in Modern Africa: African-Scandinavian Writers' Conference, Stockholm, 1967, ed. Per Wastberg (New York: Africana Publishing Corp., 1969), p. 31.

<sup>33</sup> See The Writer in Modern Africa, ed. Wastberg, p. 21.

<sup>34</sup> This seems to be what David Rubadiri was attempting to do in No Bride Price. See comments on that novel in the chapter on Character.

<sup>35</sup> See, for example, In Person, ed. Karen Morell, pp. 125-126.

<sup>36</sup> See In Person, ed. Karen Morell, p. 145.

<sup>37</sup> "Wole Soyinka, T.M. Aluko and the Satirical Voice," Home-coming, p. 66.

<sup>38</sup> The Literature of Commitment (Lewisberg: Bucknell University Press, 1976), p. 45.

<sup>39</sup> This goes back to the early statements such as Chinua Achebe's "The Novelist as Teacher."

<sup>40</sup> The tendency to see literature as a social product gave rise to the opposite tendency exemplified in the New Criticism in the mid-twentieth century. The publication of John Crow Ransom's The New Criticism is usually seen as the beginning of a new phase in criticism in which social and historical considerations are subordinated to considerations of aesthetic intentions in the work. See, for example, Towards a Poetics of Fiction, ed. Mark Spilka (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977).

## CHAPTER 4

### ENGLISH AS A LINGUISTIC MEDIUM

#### FOR AFRICAN NOVELISTS

Certain historical factors, as we saw in Chapter 3, have conspired to promote English as a national language in many African states. Anglophone African novelists are agreed that they cannot readily shift to writing in a local language for both literary and extra-literary reasons. On the one hand, they have inherited the novel form through the received languages of Europe and, on the other hand, they must, for socio-political reasons, as we saw in the last two chapters, use a language which will make their novels available to the widest cross-section of readers within their nation states. They regard the use of a common language at the national level as a necessary measure in the process of detribalization and the movement towards cultural integration at both national and continental levels. Paradoxically, the common language which African novelists are obliged to use is a foreign language which was inherited during the colonial period.

The acceptance of a commitment by African novelists writing in English to help to shape the values by which their societies can survive involves also the acceptance of a commitment to ensure that what they write is accessible to their local readership. Because these novelists, despite their familiarity with English, use it as a second language, they encounter

problems related both to the limitations of their own experience as English language users<sup>1</sup> and to the more general question of the capacity of one language, in this case English, to convey the modes of perception of experience characteristic of another such as an indigenous African language.<sup>2</sup> In the first place, the African writer using English as a second language does not have a range of registers similar or equal to that of persons using English as a first language. This is true also of the characters of whom the African novelist writes. In the second place, the African novelist must be able to suggest, through English, nuances of meaning and speech patterns and rhythms belonging to another language, and to describe experiences and activities unique to the African cultural and social experience. Such experiences and activities are largely characterized by the vocabulary and speech rhythms particular to the indigenous language.

The process of adapting the style of the English language to suit the needs of his situation commits the African novelist writing in English to experimentation. Moreover, in experimenting with the English language, the African novelist is committed to developing an African style of English. This aim is complicated by the fact that Anglophone African novelists are dispersed over a wide geographical area and belong to a variety of ethnic groups. They do not share a common first language and the popular dialects developing from English vary from locality to locality. An African style of English is thus possibly an abstraction. Yet the search for an identifiably

African style of English is aimed not only at creating an adequate medium through which identifiably African experience is filtered but is also aimed at clarifying the extent to which one's perceptions and subsequent record of an experience are formed by the language which one uses to describe them.

Specific questions arising in the situation of the African novelist writing in English relate to the extent to which a language like English, created largely in other cultural environments can capture the rhythms of life and of speech existing in a specifically African cultural environment and the extent to which the use of a second language as his creative medium inhibits the African novelist. African novelists also ask themselves whether it is necessary for the African novelist using English as a second language to think in his first language and then translate his thoughts and perceptions into English, and whether the processes of urbanization and the contact with the vernacular language can so change the quality of the English used by the African novelist as to promote an identifiably African style of writing in English.

In addition to those questions which relate directly to the African literary context in English-speaking Africa, there are others which relate more generally to the poetics of the novel. These questions involve such considerations as the extent to which literary language draws on language actually used by speakers within the society, and to which innovations in the novel form reflect tensions in the society.

The language situation in Africa where, until recently,

European languages were given more official recognition than any of the indigenous languages is traced back to the period of European colonialism during which ethnic groups were often broken up. The dispersal of different language groups across different national frontiers was also a strongly marked feature of pre-independence attempts to settle territorial boundaries. One result is that many Africans are multilingual - multilingualism being also a consequence of the earlier movement of peoples due to internal conquest and trade. During the colonial period when European languages became official languages used across national frontiers, there were advantages for Africans who could use effectively the language of the ruling foreigners. The knowledge of European languages thus became "capital" in the process of an individual's social and economic improvement, since most business was conducted in them.<sup>3</sup>

The influence of the vernacular languages is, however, still strong in most British territories. Albert Gérard has observed that, with the British territories administered largely by indirect rule in West and East Africa in the earlier stages of British colonial administration, and with the concern of Protestant missionaries to make the Bible available to the indigenous African population in their native language, many writers have remained attached to their mother tongue.<sup>4</sup> However, in West African territories such as Ghana, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, at the time of independence, no common indigenous language had emerged to take precedence over English and the practical decision has been to retain English as the language

of wider communication to be used in official and national business. Despite the growing recognition that only a superficial type of national integration can be achieved through English, the African writer wishing to reach a wide cross-section of the nation must use English. As the Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe has observed of his situation, "In Nigeria you couldn't talk about Nigeria one minute longer if you were to remove the English language, as the country is today."<sup>5</sup> Also in an earlier statement made in 1964 on "The Role of the Writer in a New Nation," Achebe had said in a discussion about the language question:

In this discussion I am leaving out writers in the various Nigerian languages. It is not that I underrate their importance. But since I am considering the role of the writer in building a new nation I wish to concentrate on those who write for the whole nation whose audience cuts across tribe or clan. And these, for good or ill, are the writers in English.<sup>6</sup>

The use of the English language, as Achebe and other Nigerian writers saw it, was essential to the creation of a modern national literature. Nigeria is a typical though extreme case in Anglophone West Africa where, in each nation state, the many vernacular languages in use are seen as a barrier to political unity, and where English seems to be a tool in the attempt to resist political fragmentation.

In South Africa, the Bantu languages which have been used for literary purposes since the mid-nineteenth century are close competitors with English.<sup>7</sup> Again, however, for Black South Africans, English became a means of indicating a degree of socio-cultural unity among writers belonging to different

language groups but needing to present a common front. The South African writer was less concerned with the problem of establishing cultural authenticity<sup>8</sup> and more concerned with communicating his protest within South Africa and to the outside world. Black South African writers needed, too, to resist being forced back into their native reserves and being cut off from contact with political and intellectual movements outside South Africa. Thus, with the systematizing of apartheid and the Bantu Education Act of 1953 which enforced separate education for Black Africans in the vernacular languages, South African writers do not have the same need as West Africans to resist the "colonizing" effects of the use of the English language. Creative writing in English by South Africans is, in fact, encouraged by the political pressures which force Black South African writers whose works have been banned by the South African government to leave South Africa.

In East Africa, the churches, though at a later stage than in South Africa, influenced the development of written vernacular languages. Ali Mazrui has pointed to a certain ambivalence in attitudes to the teaching of English to Africans, both among Colonial Office officials and Christian missionaries.<sup>9</sup> Also in 1927, the decision was taken by the governments of Uganda, Tanganyika and Kenya, then under colonial rule, to promote Swahili as a common African language throughout East Africa. In Uganda, there was both missionary and African hostility to this decision and to the attempt to introduce Swahili into the schools. Among the Buganda and the Buroga

ethnic groups, the attempt had to be abandoned.<sup>10</sup> There was, however, sufficient encouragement in the East African region as a whole for Swahili to develop as the lingua franca not only in the countries now known as Tanzania and in Kenya but also in parts of Burundi, Malawi, Mozambique, Rwanda and Zaire. In Kenya and Tanzania, Swahili has come to be regarded as a viable alternative to English, and in both these countries, English has had to give way to Swahili as an official and national language.<sup>11</sup> Thus in 1967 Swahili, encouraged for official uses immediately following upon independence, became the national language of Tanzania<sup>12</sup> and in 1971 was declared Kenya's official language.<sup>13</sup>

The influence of Swahili in East Africa and on the African continent generally has been further encouraged by the resolution by the African Writers' Union in 1975 to promote the use of Swahili on the African continent. The resolution entailed the decisions:

. . . to adopt Swahili as the logical language for the African peoples and to promote the use and enrichment of Swahili at all levels for the present and future needs of the continent. In this connection it was resolved that the proposed African Co-operative Publishing House should adopt the policy of translating every work it publishes into Swahili and that schools should substitute Swahili for less viable subjects in their curriculum.<sup>14</sup>

In East Africa, then, English is less established as the lingua franca than it is in West Africa or in South Africa. However, although Swahili is gradually becoming in East Africa the language to use on a large number of occasions on which English would formerly have been used, like English, Swahili also functions as a second language. East Africans using

English and Swahili find it necessary to speak at least one local language in addition.<sup>15</sup>

We find then in the regions under study a situation in which the majority of the readers may be expected to be more articulate in a vernacular language than they are in English, while the majority of writers, having undergone a high level of Western education, are more articulate in English. This was the situation in which the modern African novel in English started out. In 1961, the Nigerian writer Mabel Aig-Imokhuede wrote of the situation in West Africa as follows:

The situation in West Africa at the moment is such that a writer who writes in English hoping that his books will be read by his own people is a writer without a public. The great mass of the people is illiterate and of the literates a considerable number is limited only in [sic] their vernacular languages. From this has arisen a situation - a situation in which the writer cannot reach the majority of his public because he has grown so far from that that he cannot be understood.<sup>16</sup>

The situation has not changed much since Aig-Imokhuede wrote. In 1973, for example, Nigerian novelist John Munyonye stated that he writes more fluently in English than in his native language Igbo.<sup>17</sup> Another Nigerian novelist, Kole Omotoso, gave the following reasons for writing better in English in a statement made in 1973:

I have attempted quite a lot of things but I think, because of my education, I write better in English than in Yoruba. I have been involved in Western things for too long, and I've read more in English than I've read in Yoruba, and from time to time, I still wonder i [sic] should be writing in Yoruba or in English. It was only recently that I decided it didn't really matter much which choice I make.<sup>18</sup>

A further reason for writing in English is that the African writer expects to reach a wider cross-section of people than if he wrote in an indigenous language, even in languages as widely used as Yoruba, Hausa, and Igbo are in Nigeria, for example. In an article published in 1964, Cyprian Ekwensi observed that the novel-reading audience in English and French far exceeded the same audience in any of the indigenous languages.<sup>19</sup> This situation exists despite the fact that only about ten per cent of Africans are fluent in French and English taken together.<sup>20</sup>

In using some of the vernacular languages, novelists may also, as Ekwensi has pointed out, encounter problems related to their accepted written form within their communities. Of the Igbo language, for example, Ekwensi explained:

The Igbo writer has the unfortunate heritage of finding himself in an atmosphere of controversy so far as the accepted written form of his language is concerned. Today the authorized form of Igbo is spoken seldom, if at all. I am free to tell a story in Igbo to my parents or my friends, but if I wrote that same story, it wouldn't be accepted as standard Igbo. This is a controversy which still rages today. The Christian missions tried to solve the problem by inventing a form of Igbo that they called "Union Igbo" which for many, many years and even up to now, still serves the needs of the literate Igbo reader. But the education authorities still prefer a kind of School Certificate Igbo which is not real, and therefore is not alive. Nobody speaks like that. That is why I cannot write in that Igbo. My original folk stories were written in Igbo, but they were not acceptable without proper editing by the authorities who controlled written Igbo.<sup>21</sup>

It is clear from Ekwensi's remarks that, apart from the problem of not having a set orthography, the vernacular languages also

bring to the writers wishing to use them for literary purposes problems similar to those faced by the African writers who use English. Neither in the cases of many vernacular languages nor in the case of English has a sufficiently flexible written medium for creative purposes been developed. In the case of the vernacular languages it is mainly an oral literature which exists and the novel form is new to this oral literary tradition. English, on the other hand, where written, has served mainly utilitarian or formal functions in most African societies. The novel form, as the African novelists are aware, shows a complex variety of language functions and places greater strain on the structural and lexical resources of the languages than spoken communication, on the one hand, and business and official language, on the other.

Two main sources of enrichment for his style exist for the African novelist who is experimenting with the Africanization of English. One is in the popular speech forms in the ghettos of the urban centres where traditional African speech habits are adapting to the requirements of the urban environment and to the needs of people communicating through English across different ethnic groups. The urban context also significantly alters types of social relationships and behaviour to resemble those in urban areas outside Africa. The speech rhythms of urban dialects are heavily influenced by "pop" culture. The type of "pop" culture disseminated in the urban centres is conveyed by the electronic media and brings with it cultural influences often from European and Western cities in which it originates.

The novelist is, it is true, able to distinguish the "feel" of different urban environments even within the African continent. Thus the "staccato rhythms" of jazz affecting the speech in the crowded "native" quarters of South African cities may be distinguished from those of pidgin in the West African cities.<sup>22</sup> However, it is clear that popularization and Africanization of a speech form are not necessarily the same thing.

Dialectal variants of English which arise in situations in which English is acted on by local experience and is coloured by contact with local languages would seem at first glance to be a means through which the African novelist might capture the rhythms of life and speech which exist in the African cultural environment. Pidgin and creole, however, develop a multiplicity of regional varieties. Each variety taken separately does not represent an identifiably African style of English. The fact that writing from different localities may be distinctly influenced by different local languages, however, strengthens the Anglophone African novelists' argument that environmental factors exert control on the type of novels which they produce.

The West African writer, for example, as Ngugi Wa Thiongo has pointed out, has available to him a wider range of registers than the East African writer within the English language system. Contrasting the situation of the West African novelist with his own, Ngugi has commented:

These writers are fed linguistically from below . . . They are fed by the idiom of speech of the people about whom they are writing. You find that, on the whole, West Africans have been in a lot more contact with the English language than East Africans. And you find West Africans

have even developed a form of English that is peculiar to the West African scene as Pidgin English. So that somebody like Chinua Achebe finds it easy when he is portraying a character to fall back on Pidgin English as a form of characterization. Meanwhile, we shall be content merely to capture everything of ordinary life and speech, using the so-called standard English.<sup>23</sup>

Elsewhere Ngugi has compared the situation of the African writers in general with that of the West Indian novelist, who like the West African, has a creole variety of language available to him. Ngugi commented:

. . . the African writer in fact has got this added problem . . . whereas people like George Lamming or an English writer can get narrative value from the 'slang', from twists of language from his community. We have got to get the slangs and the twists of language in a different language and then try to put that into English . . . not many Africans speak English anyway and even those who speak it don't use it as their normal language. It is not what they use every day, at breakfast, lunch, when they make jokes and so you're getting nourishment, linguistic nourishment in a different medium and then trying to use the English medium to create.<sup>24</sup>

The alternative mode of expression for the African who uses English is, as Ngugi has suggested, his local African language. The presence of African indigenous languages, then, may be seen as an influence which make the forms of expression in Anglophone African novels different from those in novels written in English elsewhere.

Where the African novelist belongs to the locality in which popular varieties of English have emerged, he can see problems connected with the relationship of the English dialectal variant to the local indigenous language. The use of

pidgin or even of creole to represent speech of an informal type cannot, for example, serve for all casual occasions, since speakers with a first or native language will tend to fall back upon their native language in circumstances where their knowledge of English proves inadequate. This is true for intimate situations and ones in which an individual is under great emotional stress. The writer who is attempting to represent such situations may find creole, which is not necessarily the first language of the character of whom he is writing, limiting. Chinua Achebe's view, for example, is that only a limited use can be made of pidgin. Achebe has observed:

I think that pidgin has a possibility in a particularly limited sense. I do not think it has enough flexibility to carry all that I want to say. I can see its possibility on the stage. I can see its possibility in certain forms of dialogue, not just in dialogue of any particular class of people, because it goes through all classes of Nigeria. A man who spoke Standard English would use pidgin for a certain purpose, and I think it could be used in that way in literature. You could also probably know a couple of poems written in pidgin. I think you can do that, but I don't think you can sustain a novel in pidgin.<sup>25</sup>

Pidgin, as Achebe has viewed it, is limited not only in its possibilities for effective dialogue but also as a means of maintaining narrative sequence.

South African writer, Ezekiel Mphahlele, commenting on the use of non-standard varieties of English by African novelists, also holds out little hope for pidgin or even the highly developed Kriol [krio] of Sierra Leone as a literary language. Mphahlele has stated:

. . . I do not think pidgin has a chance of developing beyond (the) talkative, if expres-

sive level. It has no fixed grammar, like for instance, Kriol as spoken in Sierra Leone. Pidgin is not spoken in West African homes, as Kriol is: people improvise as they go along, and anyone who speaks English can soon learn to communicate in the language by chopping and changing, shifting and shuffling, picking up the stock words to replace standard English ones. Another reason - and this goes for Kriol too - is that there is a mad rush for Africans to become literate; we want to learn quickly to master the linguistic tools by which we can seize power in the broadest sense of the word. Standard English provides these tools most readily as the language of science, technology, the arts and so on. We can't be content with half-literacy which is what pidgin represents to us.<sup>26</sup>

As a South African, Mphahlele sees the pidgin spoken in West Africa as a structureless "mish-mash" which is not sharp enough for a literary language. The complexity and variety of pidgin have thus made it difficult for African authors, at present, to predict how it will ultimately function as part of the literary language. The tendency is to create forms of English which are consciously influenced by the patterns of the indigenous languages.

An important consideration for the Anglophone African novelist when discussing the uses of pidgin and creole for literary purposes, however, is, of course, whether he is speaking with reference to a distinctly urban context in which there is a necessity to show his characters communicating across ethnic groups rather than to a rural one with greater cultural homogeneity. It is clear that, in the former instance, pidgin is important in establishing the situation of characters, while, in the latter instance, it is not. In the latter instance too, it may have no greater capacity than Standard English for

capturing the rhythms of the indigenous local languages. A transliteration or translation of expression from an indigenous language into Standard English with the introduction of certain types of imagery may indicate more effectively the speech rhythms of the indigenous language.<sup>27</sup> The African characteristics of the English used by the novelist are then indicated by the "deformations" wrought upon English syntax and idiom.

Another factor which inhibits the African novelist's use of the full range of non-standard English usage is, of course, the influence of the novelist's own social background in which he might not be sufficiently exposed to non-standard usage. Most novelists writing in English are part of an educated élite in their societies and live in circumstances much different from those in which they started out. Novelists like Chinua Achebe, Ayi Kwei Armah, Wole Soyinka, Ezekiel Mphahlele, Cyprian Ekwensi, Kofi Awoonor and Gabriel Okara have had formal teaching positions, lecturing in English literature at University level or writing for or directing broadcasting services in their societies. These novelists work, too, as Ezekiel Mphahlele has pointed out, with the knowledge that their African readers are often persons aspiring towards full literacy in Standard English and may be unsympathetic to the use of pidgin or creole. For historical and social reasons the West and East African novelists, especially, turn to their indigenous languages rather than to regional dialects of English as a primary means of Africanizing their use of English.

The same problems do not seem to exist in the English

language situation in South Africa as have been noted in East and West Africa. Comments on the use of English coming chiefly from Ezekiel Mphahlele suggest that, there, the idiomatic forms of English which are suitable for literary purposes are related to Standard English. Mphahlele has commented:

South Africans began to be published in journals and in this way they could do violence to Standard English and carry their audience with them exploiting a popular kind of English. It is more likely here than anywhere else in Africa that we shall see one mode of English succeed another owing to the restlessness of the situation. In other parts of Africa, English is too often a political medium rather than a staple means of communication among common workers, rather than an instrument that can be tossed and twisted about in the concourse of human relationship and activity within a given cultural context.<sup>28</sup>

Except for unusual novels like Jordon K. Ngubane's Ushaba, in which the novelist is deliberately attempting to combine a Zulu mode of perceiving and reporting events with the novel form, or Ezekiel Mphahlele's Chirundu which shows a very conscious use of Bantu imagery,<sup>29</sup> the English language used by South African novelists is less marked by speech patterns from indigenous languages. Novelists like Alex La Guma and Peter Abrahams use a highly idiomatic "cosmopolitan" type of English. That is, their usage, except in passages of dialogue, is not distinguishable from the popular idiom of British and American fiction to the extent that Chinua Achebe's, Wole Soyinka's or Gabriel Okara's usage is. La Guma and Abrahams also show a much more flexible style of English than most East and Central African novelists. A comparison of the writers' educational background

shows that these differences in usage and in the "mastery" or rejection of popular idiom is not a result of differences in their educational level. One is therefore led to assume that linguistic innovations in the works of African novelists generally reflect underlying tensions in each society.

Other stylistic devices which help to localize the reference of a work include the introduction of words from the local indigenous language of the writer or his characters, particularly in dialogue passages. These may include formal conventions of address - fixed forms used in public and official transactions, exchanges among persons of the same age group, persons of different rank or persons filling social and familial roles in traditional settings. These exchanges, as our discussion of Chinua Achebe's Arrow of God in Chapter 7 shows, are integrated into a idiomatic form of English. In addition, Achebe takes the name of an object such as ofo (the chief's staff) and incorporates it into a phrase, for example, "to hold up his ofo against"<sup>30</sup> (to hold his own against or resist). This becomes an idiomatic expression rooted in local context. Such expressions are important not only because they colour the style of the writing but also because they contain references which help to establish setting. This is true also of proverbial expressions, names, prayers and samples of local oratory.

Extensions of this technique of colouring English through references to local context are the allusions to religious and social ceremonies. On the one hand, these references are important for the response they excite from those who are

familiar with them. On the other hand, they again help to identify and to colour setting for those readers to whom they are unfamiliar. Each set of readers need not respond in the same way, although the total effect of introducing such devices contributes to an identifiably African style. Here, however, clearly the expectations of the local audience and the foreign audiences will be different. The former, though expecting to find more things in an African novelist's work that they recognize as familiar, and the latter, though expecting to find more things that they recognize as strange, will regard their findings as characteristically African. Similarly, the actual recording of prayers and examples of local oratory may have two separate effects on a novelist's local and foreign readership but may contribute to what is identifiably African about his work. Thus the same technique used by novelist may be designed to elicit different responses among different groups of readers, while furthering the novelist's progress towards a distinctively African style.

These stylistic devices mentioned so far are ones which emphasize setting or atmosphere. Comparisons, illustrations and allusions employed by the writer may also help to localize his use of English through direct references to incidents and experiences unique to various African localities. The concept of an identifiably African style of English may thus be realized both through concrete references and through attempts to abstract the essence of one language and to infuse it into another.

The symbols which the writer uses may also be a means of identifying his work as specifically African. In many African

novels, there are pointed references to symbols traceable to African life and culture. In the African cultural context, for example, the circle as a symbol is specifically related to the people's everyday existence. In traditional African society, as South African writer Mazizi Kunene has observed:

The concept of the circle contained in it the idea of the family, of time division, of periods of existence, of the very shape and form of the universe. Even the circular structure of the house emphasized this philosophy.<sup>31</sup>

In both Western and African contexts, the circle symbolizes continuity, but in each context it derives further meaning from its social and physical environment. In Ayi Kwei Armah's Fragments, for example, the circle as a symbol clearly has more meaning than would be present if Armah were simply relating his use of it to Western literary tradition. In Fragments, Armah associates the circle with traditional African society which was homogeneous and interdependent. The circle is contrasted with the square which Armah associates with Westernized technologically-oriented societies. In this novel, the transition from round to square symbolizes the passing of the old order. This literary device in the novel has a point of reference in the social environment in the change from round to square houses.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, in both Western and African contexts, the dance is associated with organic as contrasted with mechanistic form. In the Western literary context, the dance has been regarded as a concrete expression of the aesthetic idea. It assumes symbolic importance because it is a form of activity in which intellect and emotion and vehicle and expression are fused.<sup>33</sup>

In the African literary context, the idea of fusion is still present, but only as it relates to traditional African dance which is often contrasted with Western-style dancing. In a novel such as David Rubadiri's No Bride Price, for example, the traditional dance is a symbol of the "old order" and of a stable and homogeneous society. The traditional dance is contrasted with the Western-style dance which is associated with urban existence and a fragmented society. In the African context, the dance as a literary symbol clearly derives further significance from its function in the social existence of the people about whom the novelist writes. In this instance the African novelist's use of symbols, an important aspect of his verbal style, again demonstrates the profound effect of social context upon the form of expression in the novel.

A consideration of the African novelist's use of English dialectal variants and local indigenous language to colour his style in English also draws attention to the ways in which language is used to effect characterization. For, as Gabriel Okara has remarked, "From a word, a group of words, a sentence and even a name in any African language, one can glean the social norms, attitudes and values of people."<sup>34</sup> The use of a particular variant within a language system, in a dialogue sequence, may inform the reader about the social class, geographical origin, age, temperament, typical preoccupations and affectations of a character. The use of linguistic markers to effect characterization has assumed special importance in the African literary

context. Under colonial rule and in the immediate post-independence period, mastery of the European language conferred status on the speaker and helped to distinguish members of an educated élite from the rest of the society. African novelists have caricatured the speech mannerisms of certain characters very effectively for purposes of satire and ridicule. In Season of Anomy, for instance, Wole Soyinka makes sustained use of speech differentiation as a means of distinguishing character. In his characterization of the Governor of Temoko prison, for example, Soyinka emphasizes mannerisms of speech. Cerebus, the trusty, is significantly dumb - a man carrying out orders without question until the hero, Ofeyi, with his eloquence sparks off rebellion in his mind. In caricaturing the prison governor through his use of language, Soyinka makes affectations of language symptomatic of deeper confusions within the governor's life. In many other African novels, the confusion resulting from a character's attempt to display his eloquence, also symbolizes the confusion of values in his mind.

While at one level the coalescence of Western and traditional African forms of expression in a character's speech or reflections provides a source of humour, at another level, it helps to convey processes of transition within the individual and within the African social environment. This is brought out clearly, for example, in the case of such characters as Amamu in Kofi Awoonor's This Earth My Brother, Ofeyi in Wole Soyinka's Season of Anomy, Joe in Robert Serumaga's Return to the Shadows and Chief Nanga in Chinua Achebe's A Man of the People. In

addition, the African novelist's attempt to relate Western and African traditions through his use of language reflects the way in which Western and African cultures exert an influence on each other in African societies. The fact that the African novelist is operating with two cultural systems, is clearly an important aspect of his attempts to use language to distinguish character.

In the African context, the English language, as we have shown, is acted on by local human experience and by contact with the local language. The novelist's use of proverbial expression may also serve to relate the language more closely to the local context. Proverbial expressions, to begin with, highlight features of word play, special characteristics of a local language, such as reduplication, and special sound effects, such as onomatopoeia and alliteration.

In many African novels, proverbial expressions function as an ornamental device; they colour the speech of the characters in the novel. Characters also fall back upon the "wisdom" of the ancestors, which is enshrined in the proverb, and use this selectively to persuade others or to help themselves to adjust to their situations. This dependence on the "wisdom" of the past demonstrates the interconnectedness of past and present. The proverb may, however, also be applied as an accepted truth with which to combat a new idea. It is epigrammatic, axiomatic, and sententious, but limited in its application. The use of the proverb thus enables the African novelist to achieve a special type of irony, for while the proverbial saying represents an accepted truth, it is also, like the oracular pronouncement of

the Greek sybil, imprecise in meaning and highly dependent on context for clarification of meaning. A particular proverb is often contradicted by another which is similarly authoritative. Wisdom, as the African novelist can reveal through the ironic use of the proverb, does not exist in the simple acquisition of the stored up "wisdom" of the past but in the proper application of it to help one in adjusting to the present. The use of the proverbial saying, with the importance of context in fixing and clarifying its meaning, enables the Anglophone African novelist to project a form of irony unique to the context in which he writes. The proverb, as we shall show in Chapter 7, may also become a prop to the thematic structure, and function as a narrative device in the novel.

The dialect varieties of the English language in African societies and the indigenous languages which exist along with them provide the novelist, as we have seen, with some means of Africanizing his use of English. The novelist draws on the actual language of the people, though only to a limited extent, as the rest of this chapter shows. The literary language used by the novelist is, like the novel itself, a partial fiction. That is, it is something which is made up for a special purpose, though it must of necessity draw on the raw materials of life - in this case the rhythms of speech existing in the specific social context. It is clear also that the novelist's choice of language reflects some of the underlying tensions in the society, and, in particular, attitudes to language. His use of English is, to begin with, a result of his

historical situation. His need to Africanize his use of English is the result of his effort to create an audience in the society. His choice of English rather than an indigenous language to write in comes out of the aspiration to have a national literature which will satisfy persons from various ethnic groups.

As many Anglophone African novelists have pointed out, however, a language is more than a set of techniques for communication or self-expression. Thus the different particulars of a language reflect different psychological orientations and different habits of perceiving and interpreting experiences. Each language may thus be said to further a certain conceptual framework.

Although the question as to the extent to which language shapes our perceptions still remains open, the idea that our notion of the 'real' world is largely dependent upon our language habits is one which is generally supported by the anthropological linguist. Clyde Kluckhohn has observed, for example:

Every language is also a special way of looking at the world and interpreting experience. Concealed in the structure of each different language are a whole set of unconscious assumptions about the world and life in it. The anthropological linguist has come to realize that the general ideas one has about what happens in the world outside oneself are not altogether "given" by external events. Rather, up to a point, one sees and hears what the grammatical system of one's language has made one sensitive to, has trained one to look for in experience.<sup>35</sup>

An important question then for the novelist who is writing in a foreign language relates to the way in which the perception of events may be integrated into the novel through his use of.

language. That is, if the perception of an event takes place in one language and the subsequent record of the event is made in another language, how effectively can the quality of the experience in the first language be conveyed through the second.

At the Makerere College conference in Kampala in 1962, an important question raised was how an African writer should face up to the problem of translating, into a foreign language, thoughts and feelings that originally operate in his mother tongue. Ezekiel Mphahlele has summed up the feeling at the conference thus:

It was generally agreed that it is better for an African writer to think and feel in his own language and then look for an English transliteration approximating the original. In any case, we concluded that the richness of English goes a long way to compensate for any difficulties. But a writer should not fear to do violence to standard English if he finds it cumbersome.<sup>36</sup>

The term "transliteration" suggests that the writer must make an attempt to retain the character of the original language in which he is thinking and feeling. "Transliteration" also implies more of a word for word substitution than an idiomatic translation from one language to the other, but leaves the novelist free to decide where he wants to establish primary correspondences between the original and the transliterated version, whether in rhythm or syntax or in the type of imagery he uses, for example. Anglophone African novelists have taken different positions on the best way of finding a style of English which will approximate that of their own native languages. Their viewpoints, when examined, also show that for some writers,

this process of "transliteration" is less deliberate than it is for others. On the one hand, the writer may see himself arriving naturally at a synthesis between the languages with which he operates, while, on the other hand, he may see himself imposing the patterns of his native language on English by a very deliberate process. Four viewpoints are examined below to demonstrate these differences.

In attempting to impose Ijaw syntax on English words, Gabriel Okara tries to get the best of both languages. Okara wrote in an article published in 1963 of the method he later used in his novel The Voice to represent in English, as directly as possible, the syntax and speech rhythms of his native language:

As a writer who believes in the utilization of African ideas, African philosophy and African folk-lore and imagery to the fullest extent possible, I am of the opinion the only way to use them effectively is to translate them almost literally from the African language native to the writer into whatever European language he is using as his medium of expression. I have endeavoured in my words to keep as close as possible to the vernacular expressions. . . .

In order to capture the vivid image of African speech, I had to eschew the habit of expressing my thoughts first in English . . .<sup>37</sup>

Okara's attempt to "translate literally" or to "transliterate" from one language to another has certain drawbacks. Okara's method limits his linguistic range in English and the kind of social environment which he is able to project in his novel.

Chinua Achebe has been far more successful than Gabriel Okara in creating a language which not only conveys a particular quality of experience, but can also aid characterization and

add dramatic quality to the narrative structure of the novel. Achebe is a novelist who is not aware of carrying out a deliberate process of transliteration. In a discussion at the University of Washington, Seattle, in 1973, he observed in answer to a question as to whether he thought in Igbo and then wrote in English or whether he thought originally in English:

When people talk about thinking in English or thinking in Igbo, I really don't know how it is done. When I am thinking, I am thinking. What happens is this: the language, the character, the scene, everything comes together in my mind. I don't separate the language in which a particular story is told from the story itself. Therefore, if I am thinking about the chief priest in Arrow of God, then I'll be thinking, I imagine, in his language, trying to see what is happening through his eyes. That is probably what you mean by thinking in Igbo. But I have never been able to stop and say, "I am now thinking in Igbo; I am now thinking in English." . . . On the other hand, if I am writing about Winterbottom or his group, then I try to see the world as they see it and in their language. I don't think it is simply a question of words. The words are important, but not all important. It's language in a deeper sense. Their view of the world, their feeling, their conception of the world, which is different; it is not just words.<sup>38</sup>

What the writer is trying to recreate, Achebe suggests, is a way of perceiving events and he works with what he imagines to be the individual perceptions of his characters. These imagined perceptions influence the way in which the writer formulates expression. The adaptations of language, in the novel, Achebe's remarks suggest, reflect by a natural process the different facets of linguistic change and adaptation taking place within the societies. The writer, sensitized to these changes and adaptations, projects them through characters in his works, but

his method does not necessarily submit to analysis. For Achebe, the process of creating a particular style of language is inextricably bound up with the process of creating character.

Achebe's viewpoint may be compared with that of Kofi Awoonor who describes a more conscious synthesis on the writer's part. In Awoonor's experience, it is the writer who is the bridge between one language and another. Of his own experience with English and his native language, Ewe, Awoonor has observed:

I move from one linguistic dimension into another totally different, sometimes violently different one. But I use myself only as a bridge, a unifying factor. Within me these two things exist side by side so I move across these boundaries with, I hope, absolute ease.<sup>39</sup>

Awoonor is conscious of merging not only two languages but also two modes of perception. As his novel shows, other types of integration as, for example, that between prose and poetry, are possible. Awoonor brings out the idea that the African writer reflects, through language, the transitional state of the individual and the society.

Ezekiel Mphahlele also sees the form of expression used by the African writer as a reflection of the cultural synthesis taking place within his society. Like Achebe, however, Mphahlele finds the process of linguistic synthesis difficult to analyse and has observed: "It is not easy for me to peg the point at which I stop thinking in my mother tongue and begin to think in English and vice versa."<sup>40</sup> Like Achebe, Mphahlele has also emphasized the writer's need to envisage the particular type of character through whom the experience is conveyed. "The African writer who is worth anything listens to the speech of his people,

to the ring of dialogue in his home language and struggles to find an approximation of the English equivalent."<sup>41</sup>

Because they use a "foreign" language as a literary medium, Anglophone African novelists place great emphasis on the need to reflect the culture of the society to which they belong and the idiom of the common people. They feel that in this way they can distinguish their use of English from that which is practised elsewhere. However, as they have recognized, the reflection of cultural mannerisms produces only superficial kinds of differences in the use of language. As a result, African novelists have had to go further to superimpose the structures and the habits of cognition indicated in one language (an indigenous African language) upon another (English). Gabriel Okara's method, for example, is one which gives equal value to both languages in which he operates. Chinua Achebe, on the other hand, accepts the structure of English as it is given to him and decides what characteristic of his own language must be represented in his rendering of English to suggest his characters' way of observing and reflecting on experience. Consequently, the language created by the novelist may not actually be spoken by existent individuals. When Gabriel Okara represents the character of Ijaw syntax, and uses English words at the same time, he is not writing a language which is actually spoken either by an Ijaw or an English speaker. Similarly, when Chinua Achebe envisages how a particular fictive character might phrase an utterance to convey a particular mental process or psychological orientation, he is not necessarily copying the

speech of an existent person. For both, the important thing is to convey a distinctively African context of language. Each writer's style of expression is different, but taken together they constitute a form of language which is specifically related to the African social context. Like the other aspects of the African novel examined here, the African novelist's use of English brings out the notion of transition. Through his use of language also, the Anglophone African novelist is able to convey what he considers to be the significant cultural experience of the individual in contemporary African society.

FOOTNOTES TO CHAPTER 4

<sup>1</sup> Peter Young, writing of the consequences of living in a largely bilingual environment has observed:

The languages will have specialized purposes in the life of the user. The first language takes first place in everyday living and in his affections, while English is for him the language of formality, the language of school and the struggle for social advancement. It is rarely the language of relaxation. The natural result of this is that, at a level below only the most proficient uses of British or American English, there is no general occasion for informal registers in the English the West African uses, for their place is taken by the vernacular. ("The Language of Literature in English," The English Language in West Africa, ed. John Spencer (Harlow: Longman, 1971), p. 178.

<sup>2</sup> Chinua Achebe has given an example of this in his essay, "English and the African Writer." Using an example from Arrow of God, Achebe shows two ways of presenting the same idea. The form of one (taken from his novel) is in character with the African setting while the other is not. See Contemporary African Literature, ed. Makward & Lacy (New York: Random House, 1972) pp. 430-431.

<sup>3</sup> See Ezekiel Mphahlele, "The Language of African Literature," Harvard Educational Review, XXXIII, 2 (1964), 304.

<sup>4</sup> See Albert Gérard, Four African Literatures (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), p. 382, and Ali Mazrui, "Islam and the English Language in East and West Africa," Language Use and Social Change, ed. W.H. Whiteley (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 182.

<sup>5</sup> In Person, ed. Karen Morell (Seattle: University of Washington, 1975), p. 27.

<sup>6</sup> Nigeria Magazine, No. 81 (1964), 160.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, A.C. Jordan, Towards an African Literature (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), pp. 37-51.

<sup>8</sup> See Ezekiel Mphahlele, The African Image, rev. ed. (New York: Praeger Press), p. 244.

<sup>9</sup> See "Islam and the English Language in East and West Africa," Language Use and Social Change, ed. W.H. Whiteley.

<sup>10</sup> See History of East Africa, ed. Vincent Harlow et al., (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 525.

<sup>11</sup> Pierre Alexandre has pointed out that some countries use the terms "official" and "national" interchangeably. See "The Politics of Language," Africa Report XVIII (July-August 1973), 19.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Wilfred Whiteley, Swahili: The Rise of a National Language (London: Methuen, 1969), pp. 3 and 112, and M.H. Abdulaziz, "Tanzania's National Language Policy and the Rise of Swahili Political Culture," Language Use and Social Change, ed. W.H. Whiteley, pp. 160-176.

<sup>13</sup> Swahili became Kenya's official language, replacing English. Under a decree, announced on July 4, 1971 by President Kenyatta, all government functions, including parliamentary proceedings would be in Swahili. See Africa Research Bulletin: Political, Social and Cultural Series, II, 7 (1974), 3318

<sup>14</sup> "African Writers," Africa Currents, No. 2 (Summer 1975), 23. The Co-ordinating Committee of the Union of African Writers then included, among others, Ayi Kwei Armah, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o and Wole Soyinka.

<sup>15</sup> See Wilfred Whiteley, Swahili: The Rise of a National Language, pp. 98-101

<sup>16</sup> "On Being a West African Writer," Ibadan, No. 12 (June 1961), 12.

<sup>17</sup> Dem Say, ed. Bernth Lindfors (Austin: University of Texas, 1974), p. 39.

<sup>18</sup> Dem Say, ed. Lindfors, p. 49.

<sup>19</sup> "African Literature," Nigeria Magazine, No. 83 (December, 1964), 294. See also, Kofi Awoonor, African Writers Talking, ed. Dennis Duerden and Cosmo Pieterse (London: Heinemann, 1972), p. 34.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Pierre Alexandre "The Politics of Language," Africa Report XVIII (July-August 1973), 16. See also, Africa 71 (New York: Africana Publishing Corp. 1970), p. 24 re relative numbers of English and French Speaking Africans.

<sup>21</sup> Dem Say, ed. Lindfors, p. 33.

<sup>22</sup> This is largely the point of Ezekiel Mphahlele's article "The Language of African Literature," Harvard Educational Review, XXXIII, 2 (1964), 298-305.

- <sup>23</sup>Ba Shiru, V, 1 (1973), 23.
- <sup>24</sup>African Writers Talking, ed. Duerden and Pieterse, p. 131.
- <sup>25</sup>In Person, ed. Karen Morell, p. 45.
- <sup>26</sup>"The Language of African Literature," Harvard Educational Review, XXXIII, 2 (1964), 299.
- <sup>27</sup>On this use of imagery, See Ch. 9.
- <sup>28</sup>"The Language of African Literature," Harvard Educational Review, XXXIII, 2 (1964), 304-305.
- <sup>29</sup>See, Ch. 9.
- <sup>30</sup>Arrow of God (London: Heinemann, 1965), p. 200.
- <sup>31</sup>Introduction to Zulu Poetry (New York: Africana Publishing Corp., 1970), p. 18.
- <sup>32</sup>Claudia Zaslavsky has observed that, to the older people in African societies, the transition from round to square or oblong houses represents the passing of an old order. See Africa Counts (Boston: Prindle Weber & Schmidt, 1973), p. 163. See also Susan Denyer, African Traditional Architecture: An Historical and Geographical Perspective (New York: Africana Publishing Co., 1978).
- <sup>33</sup>See, for example, Frank Kermode, Romantic Image (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957), p. 71.
- <sup>34</sup>"African Speech - English Words," Transition, 111, 10 (1963), 15.
- <sup>35</sup>From Mirror for Man (New York: McGraw Hill, 1949) repr. in Introductory Readings on Language, ed. W.L. Anderson and N.C. Stageberg, 3rd. ed. (New York: Holt Rinehart & Winston, 1970), p. 42.
- <sup>36</sup>"Conference of African Writers," Nigeria Magazine, No. 76 (March 1963), 74.
- <sup>37</sup>"African Speech - English Words," Transition III, 10 (1963) 15.
- <sup>38</sup>In Person, ed. Karen Morell, pp. 28-29.
- <sup>39</sup>Palaver, ed. Lindfors et al., p. 49.
- <sup>40</sup>"The Language of African Literature," Harvard Educational Review, XXXIII, 2. (1964), 304.
- <sup>41</sup>"The Language of African Literature," Harvard Educational Review, XXXIII, No. 2. (1964), 303.

## CHAPTER 5

### STRUCTURAL FEATURES AND NARRATIVE

#### DEVICES IN THE AFRICAN NOVEL

The African world-view, as major Anglophone African novelists have pointed out, is one which harmonizes areas of existence which are separated in Western thought.<sup>1</sup> "The very idea of separating the manifestations of human genius," Wole Soyinka has observed, "is foreign to the African world-view."<sup>2</sup> This unwillingness to separate aspects of human existence is reflected in the literary context in an approach to the novel which assumes that its form is necessarily affected by its content.<sup>3</sup> Our purpose in this chapter is to show some of the ways in which major Anglophone African novelists, in their attempts to develop a particular focus for the novel and to convey their own perception of reality, have modified it as an artistic medium. We have found that, although they have relied largely on techniques which have been developed by Western novelists, some Anglophone African novelists have so related their use of these techniques to basic patterns of experience within their own culture that they have produced a distinctive African novel. The artistic design of certain important novels will be found to depend upon the conception of society, the folk traditions and the historical patterns existing within African societies. Where Anglophone African novelists use motifs which are basic to the novel genre, they may also apply them in a

distinctive way. In this chapter we will examine primarily three aspects of novel structure--the use of the narrator, the use of the journey motif as a device of narrative continuity and the treatment of time in selected novels by major Anglophone African novelists.

South African novelists have been largely excluded from this discussion. Until recently South African novelists did not contribute significantly to structural innovation in the novel. The political situation in South Africa, as South African novelists have themselves observed, has given rise to novels which lean more toward non-fictional modes of writing such as autobiography and journalism.<sup>4</sup> The South African novelists' main aim has been to convey a realistic and moving picture of the situation of black and coloured people in South Africa and so they emphasize the social reference of the novel by relating it primarily to non-fictional forms.<sup>5</sup> Except for Ezekiel Mphahlele's Chirundu, which will be discussed in Chapter 9, and Jordan K. Ngubane's Ushaba, in which he adapts certain techniques of the Zulu umlando to the novel by relating the role of the narrator in the novel to that of the narrator in a traditional oral genre,<sup>6</sup> the South African novelists whose work we have examined have not brought their local literary traditions to bear on the novel form. In Ushaba, Ngubane has produced a work which is part political tract and part narrative fiction.<sup>7</sup> It depicts events and characters realistically; the tone of the narrator is prophetic, and is one which we associate with Bantu heroic poetry.

In novels by East and West African writers, there has been a noticeable attempt to relate aspects of narrative structure to aspects of African social life. This is true of the handling of point of view in certain novels. In Petals of Blood, for example, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o relates his use of the narrator to the cultural context of the novel and the function of narrative in the life of the people. In the first place, Ngugi personifies the community and, in the second place, he introduces story-telling at various points in the novel and attempts to re-create its function in the daily life of the traditional African community. Petals of Blood is a complex of several narratives which might be separately distinguished. These include myths about the remote past, legends which relate to heroes of the past and accounts of recent happenings.<sup>8</sup> These are told by various narrators from different temporal and emotional perspectives.

Petals of Blood is written in four sections. The first chapter is recounted by a third person omniscient narrator who sets the stage for the unfolding of the action. The opening of the novel anticipates the ending of the action; the events which are subsequently described show how the action developed to that point. In Chapter 2, Ngugi introduces a composite personality who takes over the role of narrator. This composite personality registers the reactions of the village to Godfrey Munira, one of the central characters who has been introduced in the first chapter. He observes:

But Munira stayed on, and after a month we were all whispering--was he a little crazed--and he

not so old? Was he a carrier of evil?  
--especially when he started holding  
classes under the acacia bush near the  
place rumoured to be the grave of the  
legendary Ndemi, whose spirit once kept  
watch over Ilmorog Country. . . .<sup>9</sup>

The village is depicted as a live entity which is affected by Munira's presence. Ngugi not only projects the idea of the corporate life but also attempts to give it a personality which, like that of the individual, can be altered by the course of events. The corporate personality reacts in a different way to the presence of Abdullah, another of the main figures in the novel. When Munira and Abdullah meet for the first time, the composite narrator observes:

Abdullah was a newcomer to Ilmorog. He and little skinny Joseph had come into our midst in a donkey-cart. . . . We used to crowd his little shop and look curiously at his stumped leg and his miserable face and listen to his stream of curses at Joseph. Soon we were glad that we had a place from which we could get salt and pepper.<sup>10</sup>

Here the composite narrator is used to give a direct and detailed impression of village activity in a very brief span. He disappears when Munira who has been the focus of attention rides out of the village. At this point there is a switch to third-person narration. Later when Munira returns to Ilmorog and meets Wanja, the third of the four main characters, the composite narrator is once again introduced. The narrator notes Wanja's appearance in the village:

Within a week she too had become one of us, the new object of our gossip. She was Nyakinyua's granddaughter, this we knew. . . . We watched her comings and goings.<sup>11</sup>

The corporate personality does not appear very much in

the second and third sections of the novel. He emerges strongly, however, at the beginning of the final section to comment on the transformation of Ilmorog from an agricultural village to an industrial city. The tone in this section suggests that the community has been overcome by a force which it has no power to resist. The narrator comments, for example, on the demolition of the compound of the village seer:

So we stood and watched as the machines roared toward Mwathi's place. We said: it cannot be. But they still moved toward it. We said: they will be destroyed by Mwathi's fire. Just you wait, just you wait. But the machine uprooted the hedge and then it hit the first hut. . . . The two huts were pulled down. But where was Mwathi? There was no Mwathi. He must have vanished, we said and we waited for his vengeance. Maybe he was never there, we said, and the elder who might have helped, Muturi, had suddenly become deaf and dumb at the sacrilege.<sup>12</sup>

The demolition of the compound of Mwathi, the village seer, is a concrete image of the destruction of a way of life held together by a set of beliefs. The village, in fact, looks on at its own death, which is conveyed through this image. Significantly this is the last appearance of the composite narrator. By presenting the corporate viewpoint through a collective first-person narrator, Ngugi has attempted to translate into technical terms the idea that the community is a living presence whose life changes with the lives of the individuals who comprise it.

Ngugi uses the third-person narrator in Petals of Blood to link the action of the novel in the traditional way. He also uses the third-person narrator to complement the function of the first-person composite narrator; the third-person narrator thus

helps to recreate the communal history and to relate the events of the novel to a larger pattern of events remembered over time within the community. This function is also shared by the character Nyakinyua. Nyakinyua, Wanja's grandmother and a clan elder, is a link between the past and the present. Nyakinyua's tales about remote events in the clan's history include mythic elements about the origin of her people and stories of events which actually took place in the past but which are modified in their account to express the aspirations of the people. Ngugi uses these tales together with certain functions of the third-person narrator to put the events of the novel into perspective as ones which cover merely a brief period in the long genealogical and political history of the clan. In this way he brings out simultaneously the repetitive and yet cyclical pattern of the communal existence.

The stories relating to Nyakinyua's personal history and the recollections of the central characters, Munira, Abdullah, Wanja and Kareja, provide another type of narrative. These personal recollections are introduced in various situations. An event in the present touches a chord in the character's memory; his story is a kind of groping back into the past for an explanation of the present. These personal histories not only provide a multi-perspective on the events described in the novel but also contribute to the impression of a community which is steeped in a tradition of story-telling.<sup>13</sup> Ngugi has thus shown one possible direction for the African novelist wishing to make his distinctive contribution to the novel form.

In addition to the problem of establishing an angle from which events are seen and an agency for linking them, consideration of narrative progression in the novel also raises the problem of a central motif or a mechanism for setting the events of the story in action. The opening motif sets up a probable situation which can effectively be used to introduce a chain of events and a variety of characters and to promote their interaction. It serves both as a means of ensuring narrative continuity and of synthesizing action in the novel. In the Western novel, the quest or journey has been described as the principal motif for launching the action. Thus Charles E. Nnolim has observed:

From the earliest novels in Western literature it has been in the nature of the novel genre to record the protagonist as on a journey or a quest, as he goes forth on a search--sometimes for a treasure, often for a father figure . . . The protagonist usually moves about spatially --from a narrow environment to a broader one (most often it is from the village to the city). But concurrent with this physical movement is a metaphorical one (experience and maturation are gained). Some novels of the bildungsroman type may concentrate only on the metaphorical "journey" so that the movement is temporal rather than spatial.<sup>14</sup>

The key elements of the quest outlined above are the movement outwards from a confined environment to a wider one and the accompanying discovery. In the process of making the discovery, the character learns something not only about the world through which he journeys, but also about himself. The quest idea is so vital to the Western novel form that it may even be looked on as providing the whole subject matter of the novel. Thus, Fredric Jameson has observed:

. . . the privileged subject matter of the novel is the search in a world in which neither goals

nor paths are established beforehand. It is a process in which we witness the very invention of those problems whose solution is the story.<sup>15</sup>

The quest, as African novelist Kofi Awoonor, has observed, is also the typical pattern of African folklore in which:

. . . the man or animal hero or heroine departs in order to acquire knowledge, wealth, food and the wherewithal for survival in an uncertain world. The features of the quest are the trials, labors, revelations which the hero experiences on his journey.<sup>16</sup>

In both traditions, Western and African, this basic situation of the quest of the folk hero is transferred to the contemporary context. In the novel, however, the main protagonist is always human and his characteristic environment a social one, realistically depicted. His situation may be so treated as to illuminate a moral and spiritual problem.

The modern African context produces two basic situations which fit into the concept of the novel as depicting a journey. There is the movement of persons from village to town in search of employment and education. There is also the further voyage out from the homeland to the metropolitan countries for education and professional training. Both these situations can be fitted very directly into the archetypal pattern of the voyage out, initiation and return outlined above as the typical pattern in the Western novel and in African folklore.<sup>17</sup> The quest depicted in the novel may not, however, as has been pointed out, involve an actual physical journey. It may express the concept of the journey through search, induction into a process or initiation

into a community. The stages of physical and intellectual growth of an individual human being may also be envisaged as a journey.

In many African novels, the journey, whether it involves actual physical movement from one place to another or not, is related to a recognized "structure of positions"<sup>18</sup> through which the individual in the traditional African society passes and to the rites which mark the individual's progress from birth to death and from one stage of corporate existence to another. In traditional African societies, as John Mbiti has observed:

Physical birth is not enough: the child must go through rites of incorporation so that it becomes fully integrated into the entire society. These rites continue throughout the physical life of the person, during which the individual passes from one stage of corporate existence to another. The final stage is reached when he dies and even then he is ritually incorporated into the wider family of both the dead and the living.<sup>19</sup>

In using the journey motif, major Anglophone African novelists often compare the development of character, to that of the child going through the stages from birth to death, the initiate progressing from one position in the social structure to another or the individual abandoning one mode of life to be born again into another.

In This Earth My Brother, for example, Kofi Awoonor deals at one level with the entire period of the hero's life from the first awakening of his consciousness to his final exit from the material world to return to the spirit world. At another level, Awoonor relates this journey to that of the Western-educated African who journeys away from his African

past to inhabit a transitional cultural zone between Africa and the West. The African is shown yearning to return to the past. In The River Between, Ngugi describes a specific stage in the hero's existence--that between childhood and manhood. The period is marked for the hero, Waiyaki, by initiation rites which influence both his physical and psychological development. Like Awoonor, Ngugi is concerned with the separation of the African from his past. Although Waiyaki goes through the various processes of induction into his own society, he is at the same time going through processes of induction into Western culture as well, and is finally destroyed by the resulting conflict of interests. Finally, in Wole Soyinka's Season of Anomy, Ofeyi, the hero, journeys to Aiyero, the remote Utopia, and renews contact with his traditional African past. This journey marks his separation from and repudiation of the new way of life that has been overtaking his society. His subsequent adventures take him through a transitional state in which his moral and spiritual resources are tested. Ofeyi successfully survives this transitional period and is ready to take on a new mode of being in order to carry out a full commitment to his society.

The examples mentioned above show features in common which may be related to the recurrent pattern noted in the rites of passage.<sup>20</sup> In the first stage, the initiate is separated from a fixed point in the social structure. Correspondingly, in the novel, there is an interruption of the central character's customary role or way of life. He becomes isolated from a group with which he was closely identified or from a set of cultural

conditions. In the second stage, the initiate "passes through a realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past of coming state."<sup>21</sup> In this period he gets a new understanding of his obligations to society. Very often in the novel, the society as a whole may be shown going through a transitional stage and, as in the examples mentioned above, the experiences of the individual become more traumatic. In the third and final stage, the initiated person re-enters the society at another point in the social structure and is aware of new obligations to it. Alternatively, in the novels, the central character is often shown unable to reintegrate himself with the society after the unsettling transitional stage. This pattern may be applied to a variety of situations.

In Chinua Achebe's Arrow of God, for example, the central character Ezeulu begins to be separated from his community at the point where he gives evidence against it in a land dispute with a neighbouring clan. Achebe places emphasis on this action which took place five years before the start of the events described in the novel.<sup>22</sup> The main action of Arrow of God shows Ezeulu moving further and further away from his original position in the community. The novel ends at the point where Ezeulu's position relative to the rest of the community has been so altered that he cannot retain his customary role. The novel, in effect, depicts Ezeulu's movement away from a fixed point in the social structure, his attempt to understand certain new conditions and his recognition that he cannot return to his original position which was one of

authority within the social structure. Ezeulu's attempt to delay the yam harvest is a futile attempt to exert his authority over the village.

Separation from a fixed point in the social structure is also depicted by the movement of the individual from his traditional village environment to the city. Here the individual encounters a new set of cultural conditions. The development of the novel shows the character's attempt to find a place within this changed cultural milieu. The character may in the end return to the village and attempt to resume the old way of life. This is true, for example, of Jagua in Cyprian Ekwensi's Jagua Nana. In many later novels, however, this kind of ending seems no longer possible. Ekwensi's Iska, for example, ends with the heroine's death; she cannot extricate herself from the life of the city and there is no possibility of a return to the old corporate existence. In David Rubadiri's No Bride Price, the hero, Lombe, after a brief visit to his village returns to the city. Rubadiri suggests that in Lombe's case, there is a possibility of synthesizing the old and the new way of life.<sup>23</sup> While Lombe does not return to remain physically in the village, his changed attitude to Miria, whom he had earlier rejected, signifies an acceptance of the values which she represents and which are related to his traditional background. Lombe's decision to remain in the city may therefore be seen as a result of his maturation and a sign of his readiness to participate in a broader society which includes both village and city.

In those novels which are structured around the move-

ment of the central character from the village to the city, it has become increasingly difficult for the novelists to project the village and the city as two separate and distinct environments. Many of the novels written in the nineteen seventies show the extent to which city life and its values are beginning to encroach upon the village. In any case, for the Anglophone African novelist, it was never a matter of a simplistic identification of the village with a state of innocence and the city with experience. Village and city, hinterland and metropolis, provided a spatial image for conveying the situation of cultures and individuals in transition. This is clear, for example, in such novels as Robert Serumaga's Return to the Shadows, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's Petals of Blood, Wole Soyinka's Season of Anomy and Nkem Nwankwo's My Mercedes Is Bigger than Yours.

The separation of the individual from his customary position in the society may also be depicted in terms of a physical separation from the African continent. The individual's natural pattern of development is thus shown to be interrupted by his departure for a strange land. His stay abroad alters his position relative to the rest of the society and on his return finds it difficult to reincorporate himself into the community. This is the structure underlying such novels as Chinua Achebe's No Longer at Ease, Ayi Kwei Armah's Fragments and Kofi Awoonor's This Earth My Brother.

In Fragments, for example, the experiences of the hero, Baako, fall into three clear stages--departure for America which marks his separation from his customary environment, his stay in

America during which he suffers from an illness diagnosed as "expanded consciousness" and his re-entry into his own society. Armah fits the experiences of the "been-to" in contemporary African society very specifically into the age-old and recurrent pattern of the rites of passage--separation, initiation and reincorporation. Baako's departure for a foreign land is also associated with the journey of the deceased into the realm of death. Baako's grandmother, Naana, not only refers to him as "the departed one," but also imagines him:

. . . roaming in unknown forbidden places,  
just born there again after a departure and  
a death somewhere. He had arrived from  
beneath the horizon and standing in a large  
place that was open and filled with many winds,  
he was lonely.<sup>24</sup>

This passage effectively brings together the picture of the initiate in the rites of passage "entombed at a place where the sky meets the earth"<sup>25</sup> and "the departed one" entering the spirit world, which, in traditional African belief, is contiguous with and identical to the human world.<sup>26</sup> The passage also effectively conveys the loneliness and vulnerability of the young person entering a strange and seemingly hostile environment for the first time. Throughout the first chapter of the novel Armah makes frequent references to the rites accompanying Baako's departure and insistently connects them with the funeral rites for the departed person. Similarly, the re-entry of "the departed one" is accompanied by certain rites. On his return to Ghana, Baako is made to look on at the rites performed in honour of another been-to, Brempong. Armah's purposes here are both to bring out the symbolic significance of the hero's return by

relating it to the central theme of departure, transition and return and to note the debasement of the traditional ritual as it is distorted to suit the modern context.<sup>27</sup> By relating the structure of the novel to patterns of experience within his society, Armah emphasizes its social reference and identifies it with its African background.

In This Earth My Brother, Kofi Awoonor, like Armah, is concerned with the separation of the Western-educated African from his past and his struggle to regain contact with it. Awoonor has structured the novel around the belief in the interaction of the human and spirit world and local myths relating to the intervention of supernatural beings in human affairs. The opening section of the novel describes Amamu's encounters with a mysterious woman who appears to him out of the sea and who is the source of an extraordinary vision. Awoonor's description of this extraordinary presence combines references to the sea goddess, Mama Wata, of Ewe mythology<sup>28</sup> and Nyame the Akan moon goddess who was said to shoot moonrays into the bloodstream of men who remained alive as long as these rays vivified them.<sup>29</sup> Amamu's second encounter with the goddess is described as follows:

The moon had arisen that night again, like the night she came. She shone in a violent fire of long line like the glinting knife. Carving the sea in two where that night she came. . . . She stood near me, her eyes reflecting the blaze of the fiery water in the savagery of the carving knife. Then it [the vision] began to happen.<sup>30</sup>

This brief contact with a supernatural being has the effect of making Amamu disenchanted with his everyday surroundings. His

subsequent experiences as described in the novel, convey his longing to renew contact with this source of inspiration from which he is aware of being separated. At one level, Awoonor interprets this as the longing of the spirit to return to its home and at the other he interprets it as the longing of the African to recover his past.

In the poetic interlude which follows the first chapter of the novel, Awoonor gives the reader an imaginatively conceived description of the passage of Amamu's emergent consciousness through a dark tunnel into a world of extraordinary sensations. As the process of growth bears Amamu further away from these first vivid sensations of life, he is seen constantly attempting to penetrate the perceptual blocks which interpose themselves between himself and that experience. The recognition of these perceptual blocks at the psychological level is paralleled by recollections of selected stages in his induction into Western culture. In a series of flashbacks, Awoonor dramatizes the process by which Amamu's Western education and other experiences of growing up in a colonial society have interposed themselves between him and his traditional background.

Like Baako in Fragments, Amamu in This Earth My Brother experiences a conflict between the claims of his traditional past and his modern, Westernized existence. Awoonor, however, links this perception of the alienation of the educated African from his traditional background to the general one of the gradual death of the child in the man.<sup>31</sup> More in keeping with his particular social preoccupations, Awoonor also suggests a

parallel between Amamu's first awakening of consciousness and the awakening of Ghanaian society itself as a nation. References to the earlier period of independence in Ghana are clear, for example:

In the hush hour of birth came the songs,  
the sirens of joy and the land took on new  
colour as voices raised a new chorus to  
the sky.<sup>32</sup>

This brief period of rejoicing for the nation, like Amamu's youthful encounter with the sea and moon goddess, is seen as "a brief crack of light" between "two eternities of darkness"<sup>33</sup> --the period of colonialism and the post-independence period which comes in for Awoonor's probing satire in the realistically depicted sections of the novel. By alternation of realistic prose narrative and the poetic "stream of consciousness" reflections of the hero, Awoonor projects two landscapes, an exterior or physical landscape which allows him to pursue social satire and an interior or spiritual landscape which allows him to absorb African folk belief into the structure of the novel. Awoonor thus depicts two contiguous and interacting worlds corresponding with the human and spirit worlds in traditional African belief.<sup>34</sup>

The foregoing discussion has demonstrated how the African novelists have modified the journey motif while using it as a central narrative device in their novels. The main theme which emerges from the novels discussed relates to the passage of the individual and the society through the transitional zone which has been created by the impact of Western societies upon African societies. Anglophone African novelists

have found in their local religious traditions, folk beliefs and patterns of social organizations, structures which supply the metaphors for describing transition.

The development of the novel form in the West has shown progressive attempts to deal with the more and more complex notions of reality which require a reorientation towards our concepts of space and time. The novel in the twentieth century exists in direct competition with electronic media, such as film which can project multiple time schemes in an economic way. Hence the treatment of time in the novel has become an important aspect of plot organization. Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg have observed, for example:

With the coming of the twentieth century, plotting in narrative became dominated by time as it never had been before. First the old chronological formulas of the various kinds of historical narrative were given their most thorough employment in non-historical narrative; then plots began to be based on rearranging time so that the resolution became not so much a stasis of illumination, when the missing pieces of the temporal jigsaw puzzle were all finally in place and the picture therefore complete.<sup>35</sup>

A novelist may, for example, attempt to present a more complex notion of time by elaborating the contrast between "exterior" time or time by the clock and "interior" time as it passes through the consciousness of the character. In the latter instance, time may seem protracted. The contrast between "exterior" and "interior" time may, however, reveal the discordance between the tempo of the individual's existence and that of the outside world. Thus the individual character may experience a sense of lapsed time and an awareness of a lag

between the pace at which he can absorb experience and the pace at which events around him move.

In the Anglophone African novel, as in the Western novel, fitting events into a temporal perspective serves the purpose of advancing the narrative and creating insights into character. In Anglophone African novels with rural settings, writers draw on local ways of measuring time. In recalling the time at which a particular event took place they relate it to a significant event in the life of the community, such as a festival or a market day. In marking the passage of the day they refer to activities associated with the stages from sunrise to sunset. This is, of course, true of other novels written about people living in rural societies. However, these references to daily routines and to significant local social activities are a means of introducing local colour and of identifying the novel with its cultural context. Many novelists depend largely on this technique to indigenize the novel. E.N. Obiechina has effectively demonstrated the extent to which several West African novelists rely on such "temporal and historical yardsticks" for measuring related events in describing the life of the community.<sup>36</sup> Where writers emphasize the time factor in the urban context they are often able to show the ways in which the individual's movement is controlled in the urban setting by routines to which he was grudgingly adjusted. This is brought out very distinctly in novels such as Kofi Awoonor's This Earth My Brother and Ayi Kwei Armah's The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born.

In The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born, for example, Ayi Kwei Armah utilizes a simple overall time scheme. The action takes place over a period of about two weeks, but it is not clear whether they follow each other consecutively. Chapters One to Seven cover events taking place in one day, from pre-dawn to late night. In the first chapter, in the pre-dawn period, people file into the buses on their way to work. Then, in the next chapter the day begins in the office and proceeds with constant references to the routines carried out by the central character. Chapter Three covers the lunch break and Chapter Four the end of the working day with people leaving the offices to return home. In the next chapter the hero has returned to his home for his evening meal, after which he wanders out into the street to visit the Teacher, his friend. Chapter Six is a flashback into the hero's past for which the reader has been prepared at the end of Chapter Five, and Chapter Seven completes the day with a picture of the hero retiring for the night.

Subsequent chapters give a less minutely detailed description of the urban daily routine. Chapter Eight repeats the description of the type of day covered in the preceding chapters. Chapters Nine to Eleven describe weekend activities which are less scheduled than those of the working day. Chapter Twelve describes the end of another day at the office and, together with Chapter Thirteen which describes another early morning at work, gives the impression of time having lapsed since the start of the action of the novel. Chapter Fourteen

covers activities late at night on the same day and introduced in the chapter before, when the hero helped Koomson to escape the consequences of a political coup which had just taken place. The final chapter depicts another pre-dawn scene with the hero returning home with the "never-ending knowledge" that "aching emptiness would be all that the remainder of his own life could offer him."<sup>37</sup>

The stages of day as marked by the significant activities of the urban office worker with alternating images of light and shade<sup>38</sup> are Armah's register of the passing of time. Time for the hero of the novel, Armah conveys by this close check on routines, is no mere abstraction. It is a concrete prison in which the hero remains condemned to more weary and futile days. Armah thus depicts the urban routine not merely as a frame into which a sequence of events may be fitted, but primarily as a device for emphasizing the dislocation of the hero's existence by routines which are imposed upon him.

The clash of the traditional African and modern Western values can, as other novelists have also shown, be symbolized by the difference in the pace of life. In Petals of Blood, for example, one difference between the old village of Ilmorog and the new city of Ilmorog is the difference in the rhythm of life. In the corporate village existence, people move together with each other and activities are linked to the natural order of seasonal change. In the city movement is arbitrary. In Season of Anomy, Wole Soyinka similarly contrasts the rhythm of life in Aiyéró "a communal labouring, sharing entity"<sup>39</sup> with the

commercialized environment of Aiyétómò. This difference in, the tempo of life may also be symbolized in the dance. In David Rubadiri's No Bride Price, for example, participation in the traditional African dance symbolizes the liberation of the physical, emotional and spiritual energies which the dancing in the Astronaut, the Western-style night club, does not convey. Rubadiri has observed that the dance is "an expression of the individual as well as the communal meaning of life within the African community."<sup>40</sup> Differences in the ways one uses time and in the rhythm of movement to time are, for some Anglophone African novelists, outward and visible differences which they can use as metaphors to represent other types of differences which may be only inwardly felt.

In the process of using the novel form, Anglophone African novelists have modified aspects of its structure. These modifications result from an attempt to adapt the novel to the African environment. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's use of the narrator in Petals of Blood, for example, is related to a concept of society which he regards as peculiarly African. In the treatment of the journey motif in many novels, Anglophone African novelists utilize a structure which is basic to ritual, myth, folklore and recent social experience in Africa. Our examination of this particular aspect of structure shows links between the works of major Anglophone African novelists. This indicates that Anglophone African novels have developed common structural features. This observation is supported also by the novelists' treatment of time. In their treatment of time, major Anglophone

novelists have been able to bring out the characteristic rhythm of Africa seen in contrast with the West.

FOOTNOTES TO CHAPTER 5

<sup>1</sup>See, for example, Wole Soyinka, Myth Literature and the African World (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 127; Chinua Achebe, Morning Yet on Creation Day (London: Heinemann, 1977), p. 94.

<sup>2</sup>Myth Literature and the African World, p. 130.

<sup>3</sup>See, for example, Chinua Achebe, Morning Yet on Creation Day, p. 50; Wole Soyinka Myth Literature and the African World, p. 64; Kofi Awoonor, The Breast of the Earth (New York: Doubleday, 1975), p. 297.

<sup>4</sup>See, for example, Ezekiel Mphahlele, Palaver, ed. Lindfors et al. (Austin: University of Texas, 1972), p. 40; Lewis Nkosi, "Fiction by Black South Africans," Introduction to African Literature, ed. Ulli Beier (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), p. 213.

<sup>5</sup>Richard Rive, African Writers Talking, ed. Duerden and Pieterse (London: Heinemann, 1972), p. 161; Alex La Guma, ibid., p. 92.

<sup>6</sup>See Ngubane's comments in the introduction to Ushaba.

<sup>7</sup>This form exists elsewhere in Africa. See Lalage Brown, "The Development of African Prose-Writing in English: A Perspective," Perspectives on African Literature, ed. Christopher Heywood (London: Heinemann, 1971), p. 74.

<sup>8</sup>See Chapter 2, Note 20.

<sup>9</sup>Petals of Blood (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1978), p. 6.

<sup>10</sup>Petals of Blood, pp. 7-8.

<sup>11</sup>Petals of Blood, p. 31.

<sup>12</sup>Petals of Blood, p. 266.

<sup>13</sup>The vitality of the oral tradition and the role of the clan elders in keeping this tradition alive is one of the important features which Ngugi uses to distinguish the African cultural environment.

<sup>14</sup>"The Journey Motif: Vehicle of Form, Structure and Meaning in Mongo Beti's Mission to Kala," Journal of Black Studies VII, 2 (1976), 183.

<sup>15</sup> Marxism and Form (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 172.

<sup>16</sup> The Breast of the Earth (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1975), p. 227.

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, Ayi Kwei Armah, Fragments (New York: Collier Books, 1971), p. 151.

<sup>18</sup> The quoted phrase is from Victor Turner, The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1967).

<sup>19</sup> African Religions and Philosophy (London: Heinemann, 1975), p. 108.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Victor Turner, The Forest of Symbols, pp. 93-94; John Mbiti, African Religions and Philosophy, pp. 121-132.

<sup>21</sup> Victor Turner, The Forest of Symbols, p. 93.

<sup>22</sup> See Arrow of God, Chapter 4. See Also Chapter 7 of this dissertation.

<sup>23</sup> See Chapter 4.

<sup>24</sup> Fragments, p. 24.

<sup>25</sup> Benjamin C. Ray, African Religions: Symbols, Ritual and Community (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1976), pp. 92-93

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, Chinua Achebe, Morning Yet on Creation Day, pp. 94-95; John Mbiti, African Religions and Philosophy, p. 80.

<sup>27</sup> At another level Armah structures the story on the myth of Prometheus. Baako and the other been-to Brempong are Olympian figures. Brempong undergoes mock apotheosis at the airport. Baako, on the other hand, attempts to make the Promethean crossover to the side of the impotent ones. Through the novel Armah opposes two groups--the Olympians or sky people and the impotent ones or the plain dwellers. Baako stands in between.

<sup>28</sup> See, for example, Palaver, ed. Lindfors et al., pp. 60-62.

<sup>29</sup> See, for example, Eva. L. Meyerowitz, The Akan of Ghana: The Ancient Beliefs (London, Faber and Faber, 1958), pp. 23-24; Chinua Achebe, Morning Yet on Creation Day, p. 99. Achebe uses the name Ngame.

<sup>30</sup> This Earth My Brother (New York, Doubleday, 1972), p. 5.

<sup>31</sup>We may compare Awoonor's treatment of this theme with that by Vladimir Nabokov in Speak Memory. Nabokov writes: "The cradle rocks above an abyss, and commonsense tells us that our existence is but a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness." Speak Memory (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1967), p. 19. Awoonor envisages a parallel between the child's first awakening of consciousness, the adolescent's first initiation into the "mysteries" of male-female relationships, the stirring of the creative instinct in the artist, the stirring of cultural awareness in the African and the awakening of national consciousness in Ghana.

<sup>32</sup>This Earth My Brother, p. 30.

<sup>33</sup>The quoted phrases are from Vladimir Nabokov's Speak Memory. See note 30 above.

<sup>34</sup>As has been pointed out before, this is an important aspect of the African world-view.

<sup>35</sup>The Nature of Narrative (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 234.

<sup>36</sup>Culture, Tradition and Society in the West African Novel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. 135.

<sup>37</sup>The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born (New York: Collier, 1969), p. 108.

<sup>38</sup>These are in keeping with the underlying theme of illusion and reality in Ghanaian social and political life.

<sup>39</sup>Season of Anomy (London: Rex Collings, 1973), p. 19.

<sup>40</sup>"The Development of Writing in East Africa," Perspectives on African Literature, ed. Christopher Heywood (London: Heinemann, 1971), p. 152.

## CHAPTER 6

### CHARACTERIZATION IN THE AFRICAN NOVEL

Characterization in the Western novel in English has acquired a different focus as novelists' views of the relationship between the individual and his society have changed over time.<sup>1</sup> Modifications in approach to characterization in the novel are also noticeable when we compare novels produced in one society with novels from another.<sup>2</sup> The social values and institutions of African societies have traditionally been different from those of Western societies. Western society characterized as "individualist in social structure, rational in its approach to causation and industrialized in its system of production"<sup>3</sup> has often been contrasted with African societies which, before their contact with Europe were communally oriented pre-industrial societies which emphasized the unity of material and spiritual existence.<sup>4</sup> We expect then that African novels in English will reveal a different focus and a different approach to characterization than that which is found in Western novels in English.

In discussing characterization in the Anglophone African novel, we will look for common features in the characters depicted in the novels and examine approaches and methods which are shared by the novelists. As we shall show in this chapter, the impact of Western ideas on traditional African societies has provided the main sources of conflict around which charac-

terization is developed in the African novel. Thus Anglophone African novelists have shown special interest in characters whose personal dilemmas reflect the social and political conflicts arising from the contact between Western and traditional African ways of life.

Chinua Achebe's Arrow of God provides a starting-point for tracing the emergence of a distinctive focus of characterization in the Anglophone African novel.<sup>5</sup> In this novel, Achebe shows how the traditional role of the individual in the society has been altered by the European presence. Achebe focuses on the separation of the individual from his community and the impossibility of his retaining his customary role. At the same time, Achebe shows that the disruption of the individual existence is symptomatic of the state of the society as a whole. Thus in Arrow of God, the result of the European presence and the social changes which it has introduced is that the function of the hero, Ezeulu, as chief priest of the Igbo community, is disrupted. Dislocated from his customary position by the British administration, Ezeulu attempts to delay the harvest and disrupts the rhythm of life in the community. His symbolic role as the intermediary between the community and the hostile forces which confront it is negated by this action.

In Arrow of God, Achebe has established a pattern for further development in his later novels and in the novels of other major Anglophone African novelists. In later novels, the process of modernization in African societies, which has resulted from the contact with Europe, is similarly interpreted as the external correlative of changes taking place within the

individual. Central characters in these novels usually have the role of mediating between the different value systems of Western and traditional African life. These values are reflected, for example, in religious practices, attitudes to family life, and political institutions.

West African novels depicting African characters in the contemporary context usually highlight situations of internal political conflict involving party politics and ethnic rivalries. Political confrontations provide a background against which the individual is shown experiencing his personal struggle. This struggle may be presented in terms of a conflict between the individual's desire for autonomy in his personal life (the result of the impact of Western ideas) and his obligation to his family and his community (as understood in the traditional African environment). Chinua Achebe's No Longer at Ease and Ayi Kwei Armah's Fragments, for example, depict the conflict between the individual's personal goals and his obligation to his family and community.<sup>6</sup> Both novels deal with a typical social problem in African societies in the modern period--the responsibility of the educated African to his family or to the community which has sponsored his studies. In Fragments, for example, the relatives of the hero, Baako, expect him to use his privileges as a "been-to" to enhance their material welfare and social status. Baako experiences a conflict between what his family expects of him and his need for personal independence. He finds himself "going against a general current."<sup>7</sup> At the political level, Armah has depicted a corresponding conflict

between Baako's view of the developments in his society and those of the corrupt and manipulative political power-structure to which he finds himself opposed.<sup>8</sup>

Alternatively, as in Chinua Achebe's A Man of the People, the hero may be shown at the outset of the action of the novel following a path toward personal independence, with no awareness of a commitment to his society. As the action of the novel develops, the hero is shown discovering his capacity to undertake a significant political role in the society. The assumption of this role at the social level is the result of a decision at the personal level to subordinate the claims of self to those of society. This is true also of heroes like Modin in Ayi Kwei Armah's Why Are We So Blest and Ofeyi in Wole Soyinka's Season of Anomy.

In the West African novels mentioned above, characterization centres around the conflict between the hero's emotional involvement with his past and the demands of his status as a Western-educated African who has had to adjust to modern living. As these novels show, the Western-educated African who has been partially assimilated into Western culture usually becomes, in his own society, a member of a privileged élite which is situated above the rest of the society. However, his knowledge that his participation in Western culture is necessarily limited makes him reach back towards a past which he cannot fully recover. In This Earth My Brother, for example, Kofi Awoonor treats, exclusively, this aspect of the Western-educated African's predicament. Awoonor, like Armah, shows how the individual's

awareness of the increasing separation of various levels of his society and of his own isolation tends to immobilize his will, because he is emerging from a situation in which the individual has been accustomed to being part of a well-defined social unit. Wole Soyinka, on the other hand, has in Season of Anomy depicted a situation in which the hero discovers a means of serving his society. The novel points, at the end, to the possibility of the hero's reintegration in the society. In the novels of Achebe, Armah and Soyinka, it becomes clear that the individual character's ability to reconcile divergent elements in his personal life is projected by the authors as symptomatic of the society's capacity to withstand the problems arising from the conflict of opposed value systems.

In the East African novel also, characterization is used to bring out certain social "facts." As in West Africa, novelists concentrated, in the earlier stages, on characters whose situations revealed the disintegration of traditional African institutions and the problems of the individual attempting to accommodate traditional African and Western values in his personal life. This is the main emphasis in such novels as Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's The River Between and David Rubadiri's No Bride Price. Like the West African novelists, East African novelists have demonstrated the extent to which the life of the individual is bound up with that of the community. The view that individualism is wrong, even when the community as a whole is shown to be corrupt, informs characterization<sup>9</sup> in the novels mentioned above and in later novels such as Robert Serumaga's

Return to the Shadows, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's A Grain of Wheat and Petals of Blood.

In the South African context, too, where contact with Western values has undermined the concepts which linked members of traditional African communities together, and the processes of industrialization and urbanization have split up formerly homogeneous communities, novelists depict characters whose predicament can be traced to common experiences arising out of their political situation. In South African novels, the central character is often shown moving between the social "underworld" in which blacks and coloured South Africans are confined and the world of opportunity which white South Africans inhabit. As in the novels from East and West Africa, the central character is depicted attempting to mediate between two worlds.<sup>10</sup> In such novels as Alex La Guma's The Stone Country and Jordan K. Ngubane's Ushaba, the hero, as intermediary, is shown making voluntary sacrifices to counter the forces of poverty and injustice on behalf of the community with which he identifies.

Like their East and West African counterparts, South African novelists emphasize the bond which exists between the individual and his society and the collective significance of the individual experience.<sup>11</sup> Thus, there are similarities, for example, between the roles depicted for characters such as Ofeyi the hero of Wole Soyinka's Season of Anomy, Karega one of the central characters in Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's Petals of Blood and George Adams the hero of Alex La Guma's The Stone Country although the specifics of their social situations are not identical. In all three novels, the central characters are

depicted as agents of social regeneration who voluntarily subordinate their personal lives to the demands of their community. This emphasis in the Anglophone African novel on the social significance of the individual experience is in marked contrast to the trend in the modern novel in the West which has been noted, for example, by Georg Lukács, who observed:

First the hero is strictly confined within the limits of his own experience. There is not for him . . . any pre-existent reality beyond his own self, acting upon him or being acted upon by him. Secondly the hero himself is without personal history. He is thrown into the world meaninglessly, unfathomably. He does not develop through contact with the world, he neither forms nor is formed by it.<sup>12</sup>

The common emphasis on the individual character as part of a social unit indicates a distinctive trend in the Anglophone African novel.<sup>13</sup>

In depicting character, Anglophone African novelists utilize concepts which are important in the African environment. The concept of the intermediary,<sup>14</sup> for example, is central to the presentation of characters in the works of major novelists. Originating in a religious context, the concept of the intermediary is extended to include racial, socio-cultural and political contexts. The continuance<sup>15</sup> of a world-view which projects the contiguity of human and spirit worlds, the separation which exists between black and white races in South Africa, the situation of contemporary African societies operating between traditional African and Western scientific cultures and the emergence of distinct class interests in the post-independence period have combined to draw the novelists' attention to characters performing an intermediary role or placed in an intermediate

position between opposing forces. Central characters in the novels usually belong within one or more of the following areas of transition--between human and spirit existences, between black and white racial groups, between traditional African and modern cultures and between the elite and the masses.

In Chinua Achebe's novels, for example, individual characters are differently portrayed as Ezeulu, the priest of the traditional religion in Arrow of God,<sup>15</sup> Obi Okonkwo, the "been-to" in No Longer at Ease, and Odili the school-teacher-turned political activist in A Man of the People all have intermediary roles. As the priest Ezeulu interposes himself between the community and outside forces, Obi Okonkwo has to mediate between traditional and modern influences and Odili must choose between allying with a corrupt power structure and assuming an independent and socially-committed role.<sup>16</sup> The existence of a common conceptual framework for these characters emphasizes their representational function. Through the depiction of the individual character, Odili, for example, Achebe reveals the plight of a particular individual, the plight of a whole class of younger Western-educated Africans and the problems of the society in transition.

In utilizing the concept of the intermediary, Ayi Kwei Armah has fitted the experiences of the "been-to" Baako, the hero of the novel Fragments, into the pattern of the rites of passage.<sup>17</sup> As a result, Armah depicts Baako, returning to Ghana after a journey to the West, both as a stranger to his society and one who is familiar with it. Like the initiate in the rites of passage, Baako is in an "in-between stage."<sup>18</sup> He is neither

a part of his own society nor a part of Western society. Armah also compares Baako leaving his society to go to America as the departed one, going to the land of the ancestors, who is expected to assist the fortunes of the bereaved whom he leaves behind.<sup>19</sup> In this respect Baako is not regarded as a stranger in his Ghanaian community. His return, however, is related to the coming of the child who is born again into the family and who must learn the ways of the society into which he has entered. Armah perceives Baako, then, both in the role of the intermediary who moves between two levels of the social structure and between two states of being. In the latter role, he is also someone on whom the hopes of the community depend. Unlike the initiate in the rites of passage, Baako is unable to complete the cycle associated with the rites and to reintegrate himself into his community; he is trapped in the liminal phase.<sup>20</sup> Unlike the departed ancestor, he cannot achieve anything on behalf of the community. An important aspect of Armah's approach to characterization here is his ability to convey the duality which Anglophone West African novelists, in particular, see as a significant aspect of characterization in the African novel.

In the East African novel, the application of the concept of the intermediary in characterization is best seen in the novels of Ngugi Wa Thiong'o. In Weep Not Child, for example, the situation of the hero, Njoroge, is similar to that of most of the heroes of the West African novels. Njoroge is shown attempting to bridge the cultural gap between African and Western society. In The River Between, the situation of the

hero, Waiyaki brings out more fully the consequences, for the individual, of the clash between African cultural traditions and the demands of modern European-influenced living. In A Grain of Wheat the picture of the opposition between the cultures of Africa and Europe gives way to one of an opposition between two types of responses to European dominance in African societies. The forest fighter like Kihika and the collaborator with the Europeans like Karanja represent two extremes of conduct between which the central characters, Mugo and Gikonyo, are caught. Mugo is destroyed by his individualism; he is afraid to give public support to either side and secretly betrays Kihika. Gikonyo, the hero of the novel, learns to subordinate the demands of his individualism to his sense of social responsibility. Gikonyo experiences both the weakness from which the collaborator acts and the conviction which makes purposeful action on behalf of the community possible. Gikonyo's need at a personal level to reconcile the conflict between the opposing forces in his own life is related to the overall need for the factions represented by Kihika and Karanja to coordinate their efforts for the survival of the society.<sup>21</sup> Like Mugo and Gikonyo in A Grain of Wheat, Munira and Karega in Petals of Blood demonstrate two different attitudes towards social responsibility. Both characters stand in the gap which has developed between two social classes in Kenya in the post-independence period. In Petals of Blood, the opposition between Europe and Africa is replaced by an opposition between an African comprador class allied with Western capitalist interests and the mass of the population.

The role of the intermediary falls to the political activist Karega.

The tendency to depict central characters as intermediaries is also evident in the South African novel. George Adams, the hero of Alex La Guma's novel The Stone Country, for example, may be viewed within this framework. George Adams is presented as an intermediary who moves between two areas of existence--the debased and hopeless world of the Casbah Kid and another in which individuals attempt to resist the forms of oppression which weigh them down. These worlds are represented by the prison, a concrete image of "the stone country" and the world outside it. Adams is representative of the displaced individual who is trapped between two worlds. In the South African context these worlds are also those of the black and the white people. Adams' role as a committed political activist also takes him outside the normal course of society; like the initiate in the transitional phase of the rites of passage, he inhabits a kind of social limbo. Like Achebe and Ngugi, La Guma has given his central character a representative role and uses characterization to point up the types of division which exist within his society.

The role of the intermediary is not limited to the central characters in the Anglophone African novel. In general, such characters as teachers, members of the professional classes and reinvigorated political élites like chiefs who became agents of the colonial administration are used to expose the ironies and ambiguities of the African's cultural and political situation. This is often their primary function as minor characters.

The school teacher is the "paid servant" of European culture, who often has direct contact with village life. At that level he is usually respected; the prestige attached to Western culture is attached to him.<sup>22</sup> At the same time, as many novelists show, considerable ambivalence attaches to his role. The school teacher's situation reflects the predicament of a whole class in his society. Like the members of the professional classes, he is shown, in the novels, as inhabiting a transitional area between traditional village life from which his education and professional status separates him and Western culture into which he has been only partially initiated.

The chief was part of the élite in the traditional African society in which he was recognized as a repository of traditional values and a symbol of traditional institutions. At the same time, as the novels show, he often owed his continued political influence to his ability to use Western ways to his own advantage.<sup>23</sup> The depiction of him in his intermediate situation between two political systems reinforces the main tendency in characterization in the Anglophone African novel which is to emphasize the role of the intermediary. In many novels the chief appears as an older corrupt type of intermediary who is contrasted with the younger committed individual who is genuinely seeking to overcome the polarities in the society.

Certain physical types are also used to emphasize the idea of the individual as a bridge between opposed or divided areas of existence. In his novel, The Interpreters, for example, Wole Soyinka portrays the albino as a strangely aware combina-

tion of human and spirit existence. Soyinka has observed elsewhere that the albino is "a kind of twilight creature" who inhabits "a numinous area of transition."<sup>24</sup> For Soyinka, the albino also expresses the idea of the duality of existence which Chinua Achebe has presented through the concept of chi in such novels as Things Fall Apart and Arrow of God. Like the albino, physically handicapped persons and old persons whose physical powers are diminished are often presented as individuals with an increased awareness of the spiritual world. Such characters as Nana in Fragments and Nyakinyua in Petals of Blood bridge not only past and present which symbolize two distinct modes of existence but also seem to bridge two areas of consciousness. The introduction of such characters into the novels reinforces the tendency for the individual character's state of being to reflect a perception about the society itself. Cumulatively, characterization in Anglophone African novels has tended more to reveal the ways in which the individual's situation illuminates the problems of his specific social context than to explore individual psychological problems which have no bearing on the life of the community as a whole.

Characterization in the Anglophone African novel is further related to the social context when characters are related to figures in local mythology. In this instance, too, the characters may be perceived by the novelist as belonging simultaneously to the human and spirit worlds.<sup>25</sup> This may be observed, for example, in Chinua Achebe's presentation of Ezeulu the hero of Arrow of God. Achebe depicts Ezeulu as head of his

household in a convincing and realistic manner. As the chief priest of Ulu, however, Ezeulu's personality seems to merge with that of the god whom he represents. In his re-enactment of the coming of Ulu at the Festival of the Pumpkin Leaves, for example, Ezeulu becomes Ulu; the purpose of the ritual re-enactment which he performs is to break down the barrier between the human and the spirit world. Symbolically, in playing the role of Ulu, Ezeulu himself crosses the boundary between man and divinity and gives the people access to the other world. As depicted by Achebe, Ezeulu's character conveys the notion of duality.<sup>26</sup> Achebe thus attempts to project more than one man's individuality; he gives the reader an idea of some of the forces which shape personality in the traditional African environment, and brings out existing ideas in that environment about man's relationship to the cosmos. In depicting the motivation behind Ezeulu's actions, Achebe also uses ideas relating to the interaction of spiritual and material forces. Ezeulu's decision to delay the yam harvest, for example, is presented as the result of the intervention of the god. The narrator attributes Ezeulu's decision to forces that the individual within the traditional African environment finds real. Achebe's depiction of character in Arrow of God is thus based upon values and beliefs accepted within the society about which he writes; action is judged according to the norms of the culture in which the character is created.

In his depiction of Ofeyi, the hero of Season of Anomy, Wole Soyinka utilizes Yoruba mythology.<sup>27</sup> Ofeyi's character is related to that of the Yoruba god Ogun. Soyinka has stated

elsewhere that Ogun is "the master craftsman and artist, farmer and warrior, essence of destruction and creativity, a recluse and a gregarious imbibor, a reluctant leader of men and deities."<sup>28</sup> Like Achebe, Soyinka has sought a model for characterization which conveys the notion of duality which West African novelists find essential to the depiction of character in the African novel. The development of Ofeyi's character, like the development of the novel as a whole, is concerned with the attempt of the hero to harmonize opposing tendencies within himself and in his environment. The period of transition through which Ofeyi passes is made parallel to that through which the society passes. Both the experiences of the hero and of the society have a parallel in the story of Ogun's passage through "the transitional gulf."<sup>29</sup>

Just as the cultural beliefs of traditional African societies have helped to create special approaches to characterization, so, too, the social conventions and institutions contribute to the novelists' method of presenting character. In the Anglophone African novel, the depiction of romantic love is often made to subserve the purpose of bringing out social conflict. The depiction of romantic involvements between male and female characters is a means of highlighting the problems of central characters who are confronted by different cultural options. The depiction of the central character in love is often a means of externalizing the conflict in his mind between traditional African and modern values. This is the main focus of interest in a novel such as Onuora Nzekwu's Wand of Noble Wood.<sup>30</sup> In Chinua Achebe's No Longer at Ease, the love affair

between the hero, Obi, and Clara represents one aspect of his social dilemma. Obi's rejection of Clara is one in a series of incidents which show his inability to act independently and the difficulty of ignoring the past even in the modern urban environment. In Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's The River Between, the love of the hero Waiyaki for the Christian convert Nyambura highlights the conflict between the demands of his personal life and the demands of his commitment to his community. The tendency toward individualism, a consequence of the process of Westernization in the society, conflicts with traditional African ideas about the relationship of the individual to his society. The conflict is deepened by the opposition depicted between the traditional institution of the Kiama and the Christian church.

The tendency among Anglophone African novelists to link the experiences of the individual responding to the processes of social change with that of the society is seen in the treatment of romantic love when the novelist implies that correspondences exist between the relationship of the central character to the woman whom he loves and his relationship with his society as a whole. This tendency is clear, for example, in David Rubadiri's No Bride Price. Rubadiri depicts a romantic involvement between the hero of the novel, Lombe, who has left his village to take up a junior civil service appointment in the city and Miria who has left the village and has become a hostess in a Western-style city nightclub. Later events in the novel reveal that Miria is Lombe's sister; Rubadiri implies that Lombe's rejection of her is a rejection of his own background. At the same time,

the occurrence of incest reflects the disintegration of the traditional mores. Lombe, however, has deserted Miria before he discovers that she is his sister. Miria gives birth to a child which is dismembered in the process of being removed from her body. Rubadiri suggests correspondences between Miria's situation in childbirth and that of the new African nation. Miria survives the experience of childbirth and Lombe learns to accept his past. The novel ends on a note of hope for the reconciliation of the traditional and the modern elements in the society.<sup>31</sup>

Where novelists depict a situation showing an African man in love with a white woman, the central conflict is between the pull of the Western world and Africa. This is obvious in such novels as William Conton's The African and Peter Abrahams' A Wreath for Udomo. In these novels the convention is introduced, but it is not fully incorporated into the overall structure of the novel. Abrahams, for example, introduces the English girl Lois more to identify those qualities in the European culture which attract the African than to externalize any deeply-felt conflict taking place in Udomo's mind. The convention is employed very effectively, however, by Ayi Kwei Armah in the novel, Why Are We So Blest. Through his depiction of the relationship between Modin, the African, and the white American girl Aimée, Armah is able to express in concrete images notions about the nature of the interaction between Western and African societies. Modin, the hero, is an example of "the African absorbed into Europe."<sup>32</sup> Although he is convinced of his commitment to his

own people, he is duped into accepting the role of a humanizing influence on Aimée. Because of his inability to detach himself emotionally from her, his commitment becomes suspect and his fellow Africans regard him as a fool and a romantic.

In Wole Soyinka's Season of Anomy, the love interest is used in a somewhat different way. Conflicting impulses in the mind of the hero, Ofeyi, arise out of his exploration of alternative methods of effecting revolutionary change in his society. The two women with whom he becomes romantically involved seem to him to embody the conflicting notions in his mind. Ofeyi is in love with the African woman Iriyise, a dancer through whom he expresses certain aesthetic ideas.<sup>33</sup> He is also drawn to an East Indian woman, Tailla, whose qualities complement but are at the same time opposite to Iriyise's. The women represent not only two distinct ideals of femininity but also two approaches to existence. Iriyise's impulses are life-affirming and dynamic; Tailla is contemplative and ascetically inclined. Soyinka makes the two women appeal to opposite poles of Ofeyi's nature. Drawn though he is to what Tailla represents, Ofeyi chooses Iriyise and symbolically affirms the principles of his own world-view.<sup>34</sup>

The tendency to depict women as social forces may be seen also in the treatment of such figures as mothers and wives. Women may, especially in the traditional setting, represent the more stable and conservative aspects of African social life. The violation of the woman is often depicted as symptomatic of the decay in the society as a whole.<sup>35</sup> In Robert Serumaga's Return to the Shadows, for example, the hero, Joe, attempts to avoid political violence in the city by returning to the village.

In fact, it has become his habit to retire to the village to wait out political coups. On this occasion, Joe flees to the village only to find his kinswomen raped and his mother unable to offer him refuge. He returns to the city to confront the danger there. The rape of his kinswomen provides a concrete image of the violation of traditionally accepted values.

In Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's A Grain of Wheat, the character Mumbi is a somewhat idealized picture of African womanhood. That is, she represents values which the people of all groups in the society admire. The three major male characters, Karanja, Mugo and Gikonyo relate to her in different ways which reflect their relationships with the society as a whole. Karanja who is made a chief by the government side during the Mau Mau rebellion, uses his position to force Mumbi to submit to him sexually while her husband Gikonyo is in detention. To Mugo who has denied the claims of the nationalist cause, Mumbi represents a desired object which he cannot possess. Gikonyo who becomes estranged from Mumbi, because of her submission to Karanja, is reconciled with her only when he learns to accept the realities of a society in which reconciliation and forgiveness are required.<sup>36</sup>

In Petals of Blood, Ngugi makes another type of connection between the woman and the society. Wanja, a character depicted in more detail than Mumbi, is shown undergoing stage-by-stage changes in her personal life which correspond with changes which are taking place in her social environment. Wanja, to begin with, has been violated sexually. She becomes a prostitute and her life up to the point at which she goes to the agricultural village of Ilmorog, where the action of the novel

is set, is a series of aimless wanderings. In Ilmorog Wanja's life takes a direction as she becomes committed to a communal effort for survival. As Ilmorog is transformed into a modern industrial town, Wanja returns to the life of a prostitute and pursues an increasingly individualistic way of life. Wanja's experiences clearly reflect those of indigenous African societies "violated" by Western influences, temporarily losing direction, finding a common unifying cause in the effort to achieve independence and finally becoming demoralized as political party rivalries and the effects of modernization take their toll upon these societies.<sup>37</sup>

As we have shown so far, the particular experiences which the society is undergoing creates a focus for characterization in the Anglophone African novel. The conception of reality held by the society also exerts a controlling influence on the novelist's approach to characterization. Similarly, the novelist's perception of his audience will affect his method of delineating character. Anglophone African novelists, because of their nearness to their own oral tradition, have revitalized techniques which are taken for granted in the Western novel. Such techniques are especially important when they help to relate the novel to its cultural context. The individuation of character through naming was one of the techniques which originally distinguished the novel from earlier types of extended prose narrative.<sup>38</sup> In Anglophone African novels, naming is often intended both to identify the novel with its cultural environment and to link characters with other contexts and so develop further significance for them.

In their social uses, names have descriptive, symbolic and quasi-allegorical functions which may be transferred to the literary context. Proper names, as Ruth Finnegan has observed, also play an indispensable part in oral literature in Africa.<sup>39</sup> In Zulu poetry, for example, proper names sometimes used as a literary device are "part of a system of ideas or personifications."<sup>40</sup> In many African novels, names have the figurative and allusive quality which they have in oral literature. They are an economical means for the novelist of enhancing literary effect while, at the same time, emphasizing the particular cultural environment in which the action of the novel takes place. As in oral narrative, Anglophone African novelists use proper names to identify their characters with a local African context, to link them with legendary or mythical figures and to provide clues in understanding their relationship to other characters.

In Ayi Kwei Armah's Fragments, for example, our understanding of the role of the character Naana is clearly enhanced if we grasp the significance of the term "nana" in Akan culture. The term "nana," as J.B. Danquah has pointed out, is "a concrete representation of the supreme moral maxim for the practical life."<sup>41</sup> A title which is given to the heads of families, grandmothers and ancestors in general, the name Naana helps to emphasize the representative function of the character called by that name in Fragments. Similarly, the name Baako Onipa (meaning "lonely man") which is given to the hero is related to his role. Baako also has a representative function; he is typical of the isolated individual.<sup>42</sup> The situation of Naana, the representative

of the ancestors who has a unified sense of being, may be contrasted with that of Baako who is aware of a gap between himself and his environment. These two characters are used to offset each other and this is achieved partly through naming.

Naming, as Wole Soyinka has demonstrated in Season of Anomy, may be used to link the novel to a body of mythology and, as a result, to a particular system of ideas. There is clearly an association between the name Ofeyi given to the hero of this novel and Orpheus in Greek myth.<sup>43</sup> Ofeyi's experiences, as we pointed out earlier in this chapter, are related to those of the Yoruba god Ogun, and Orpheus, as Soyinka has pointed out elsewhere, is his Hellenic equation "to depict" the Dionysian-Apollonian-Promethean essence of Ogun.<sup>44</sup> In Season of Anomy, Soyinka attempts to explore very specifically some of the ideas related to Orphism,<sup>45</sup> as seen, for example, in Ofeyi's speculations about the nature of religious ritual and the type of social renewal which he envisages.<sup>46</sup> At the same time the name Ofeyi may be related to the Yoruba word ofe meaning "clever." This also indicates a characteristic of the hero of the novel. The name, as an allusion, calls attention to the themes of the novel, links two bodies of mythology and points out a quality which the hero personifies.

A particular concept of the hero has arisen out of the social circumstances in which Anglophone African novelists write. The highest virtue for the hero depicted in their novels is self-sacrifice on behalf of the community. Personal suffering in most novels is linked to the character's awareness of his

exclusion from his community. This is particularly true of those novels which depict the Western-educated African who is separated from his former mode of existence by Western cultural influences. The inability of the Westernized African to reintegrate with his community is often shown in relation to the uninterrupted cycle of separation, transition and reintegration which underlies the rites of passage in traditional African societies.

The situation of the individual in the society is usually shown, in the Anglophone African novel, to be symptomatic of that of the society as a whole. Many of the earlier novels showed characters unable to cope with the divergent cultural tendencies in their societies. More recent novels such as Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's Petals of Blood and Wole Soyinka's Season of Anomy have, however, shown central characters who are entering upon a new phase of social regeneration. In this phase, the rigours of the individual's and the society's transitional passage are accepted as a necessary trial which will eventually lead to a more harmonious state of being for both.

Where the Western novelists writing in English have been increasingly preoccupied with demonstrating the validity of the individual perception of reality,<sup>47</sup> Anglophone African novelists emphasize the need for the individual to recognize and respond to the demands of his community. Anglophone African novelists are, in fact, more concerned about the harm which the individual does by withdrawing from positive action on behalf of his community than about the individual's loss of freedom through

restraints imposed by the society. In addition, Anglophone African novelists have attached to the portrayal of African character a purpose which has not been relevant to the concerns of Western novelists. The Anglophone African novelists' portrayal of African character has a political intention.<sup>48</sup>

The focus and purpose of characterization in the Anglophone African novel have, as we have shown, certain implications for the writer's method. Although they oblige him to adopt a largely realistic approach to characterization, they also make for the use of specifically African materials in the novels. The presence of these African materials gives a distinct stamp to the African novel. These materials include references to social institutions, values attaching to personality traits, concepts governing behaviour and the individual's understanding of his role in his community.

FOOTNOTES TO CHAPTER 6

<sup>1</sup>See, for example, W.J. Harvey, "Character and the Context of Things," Essays in Criticism XIII (1963), repr. in The Novel: Modern Essays in Criticism, ed. Robert Murray Davis (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1969), pp. 126-140. See especially p. 133.

<sup>2</sup>See, for example, Daniel Hoffman, Form and Fable in American Fiction (New York: W.W. Norton & Co. Inc., 1973), pp. 33-41.

<sup>3</sup>Philip Mason, Patterns of Dominance (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 194.

<sup>4</sup>See, for example, Benjamin C. Ray, African Religions: Symbol, Ritual and Community (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 132; Wole Soyinka, Myth Literature and the African World (London: Cambridge University Press, 1976), pp. 2-5, 39-43.

<sup>5</sup>Discussion is limited to novels which we regard as important in starting a distinctive trend in characterization. Most Anglophone African novels, however, raise questions about traditional African and modern ways of life and examine responses of characters to them.

<sup>6</sup>These are, of course, not the only such novels. Similar situations are depicted, for example, in Lenrie Peters, The Second Round and T.M. Aluko's Chief the Honourable Minister.

<sup>7</sup>Fragments (New York: Collier Books, 1971), p. 152.

<sup>8</sup>In Gabriel Okara's The Voice and Ayi Kwei Armah's The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born, the hero is like the conscience of the community agonizing over the question of a proper direction for it.

<sup>9</sup>See, for example, Chinua Achebe's Interview with Ernest and Pat Emenyonu in Africa Report, XVII, 5 (1972), 27.

<sup>10</sup>This is often in economic and racial contexts depicting the world of opportunity in which whites live and the deprived world which blacks inhabit. In the racial context, the coloured man who inhabits a kind of racial "no man's land" is an intermediate figure.

<sup>11</sup>See Chapter 2.

<sup>12</sup>"The Ideology of Modernism," Twentieth Century Literary Criticism: A Reader, ed. David Lodge (London: Longman, 1972), p. 477.

<sup>13</sup>For further discussion of this see Ch. 8.

<sup>14</sup>The character is not simply poised between two worlds, but is actively trying to harmonize self with world, and one world with another.

<sup>15</sup>The role of the priest embodies a conception of the role of the leader. Chinua Achebe has observed, for example, "The moment you declare yourself the leader of your people, you've taken on their vessel. You are "carrying" their god, and you have become their priest." Africa Report, XVII, 5 (1972), 27.

<sup>16</sup>See discussion of Ezeulu later in this chapter and in Chapter 7.

<sup>17</sup>See Chapter 2.

<sup>18</sup>On rites of passage, see Victor Turner, "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage," The Forest of Symbols (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1967), pp. 93-111.

<sup>19</sup>On the relationship of the departed with the living, see, for example, J.H. Nketia, Funeral Dirges of the Akan People (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969), p. 44; Kofi Awoonor, Palaver, ed. Lindfors et al. (Austin: University of Texas, 1972), p. 62.

<sup>20</sup>"[The] coincidence of opposite processes and notions in a single representation," observes Victor Turner, "characterizes the peculiar unity of the liminal: that which is neither this nor that and yet is both." The Forest of Symbols, p. 99.

<sup>21</sup>For an elaboration of this point, see Ch. 8.

<sup>22</sup>See, for example, Ali Mazrui, "Africa and the Crisis of Relevance in Modern Culture," Présence Africaine No. 72 (1969), p. 19. Within this framework, there are many and varied portraits of the school teacher, for example, Nani the hero of Francis Selormey's The Narrow Path, Waiyaki in Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's The River Between, Mr. Lomo in Amu Djoletto's The Strange Man.

<sup>23</sup>For example, Chief Nanga in Chinua Achebe's A Man of the People, Chief Taiwo in Cyprian Ekwensi's Jagua Nana, Chief Izongo in Gabriel Okara's The Voice and Chief Odole in T.M. Aluko's Chief the Honourable Minister.

<sup>24</sup>Wole Soyinka, In Person, ed. Karen Morell (Seattle: University of Washington, 1975), p. 118.

<sup>25</sup>See E.N. Obiechina, Culture Tradition and Society in the West African Novel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), pp. 98-99.

<sup>26</sup>See, for example, Chinua Achebe, "Chi in Igbo Cosmology," Morning Yet on Creation Day (London: Heinemann, 1977), pp. 93-103.

<sup>27</sup>There are also parallels with Greek mythology; Soyinka has elsewhere compared Ogun with Orpheus. See Myth, Literature and the African World, p. 157, where Soyinka refers to Orpheus as an "Hellenic equation" to depict "the Dionysian-Apollonian-Promethan essence of Ogun."

<sup>28</sup>See Myth, Literature and the African World, p. 27.

<sup>29</sup>Myth, Literature and the African World, p. 145.

<sup>30</sup>The novel centres around the situation of Peter Obiesie who wants to marry a woman of his own choice, and the conflict between customary and modern practices relating to marriage.

<sup>31</sup>The novel ends: "Walking out of the Astronaut, one heard the drums at night." No Bride Price (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1967), p. 180. The Astronaut has throughout the novel been a symbol of the Western life-style; the mention of the drums recalls Lombe's visit to his village.

<sup>32</sup>Why Are We So Blest (New York: Doubleday, 1973), p. 232.

<sup>33</sup>It is interesting to note that during the political disturbances described in the novel, Iriyise is in a state of coma. Neither dead nor alive she is in a "liminal" phase.

<sup>34</sup>See Edward Geoffrey Parrinder, Religion in Africa (New York: Praeger Press, 1969), p. 233. "The African world view," Parrinder has observed, "is life affirming; a philosophy of vitalism and dynamism lies behind many attitudes and actions. This view clearly differs from the Indian, Hindu or Buddhist, tradition of world-denial. . . ."

<sup>35</sup>The woman may be symbolically raped or seduced; her subsequent experiences show a steady process of deterioration which reflects what is happening in the society. Other examples are Laura and Clara in Lenre Peters, The Second Round, Iska in Cyprian Ekwensi's Iska.

<sup>36</sup>For further discussion of this point, see Ch. 8.

<sup>37</sup>What I have outlined suggests a certain allegorical element in the novels. However, as Northrop Frye has pointed out, "Allegory is not the name of a form or genre but of a structural principle in fiction." See Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics, ed. A. Preminger (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1965), p. 12.

<sup>38</sup>In naming their characters "in such a way as to suggest that they were to be regarded as particular individuals in the

contemporary social environment," early novelists, Ian Watt points out, made a significant break with tradition. See The Rise of the Novel (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1960), p. 19.

<sup>39</sup>Oral Literature in Africa (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 470.

<sup>40</sup>Mazizi Kunene, Introduction to Zulu Poems (New York: Africana Publishing Corp., 1970), p. 21.

<sup>41</sup>The Akan Doctrine of God (London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd., 1968), p. 120.

<sup>42</sup>See D.L. Izevbye's discussion in "Ayi Kwei Armah and the 'I' of the Beholder," A Celebration of Black and African Writing, ed. Bruce King and Kolawole Ogunbesan (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), pp. 232-244.

<sup>43</sup>Note also similarities between such names as Iriyise in the novel and Eurydice in the Greek Myth. Iriyise is significantly characterized as wild-eyed and wild-voiced. See, for example, the scenes just before she dances Pandora's Box and before she leaves with Zaccheus for Cross-River.

<sup>44</sup>See Myth, Literature and the African World, p. 157.

<sup>45</sup>Ivan M. Lindforth has observed that the term Orphism may include "all the activities of men who occupied themselves with the religion of mysteries--their practices, their myths, and their potencies. . . ." The Arts of Orpheus (New York: Arno Press, 1973), pp. 305-306.

<sup>46</sup>Orphism, as Lindforth has observed, exhibits "a unity of spirit and purpose, but no unity of deity, creed or rites," The Arts of Orpheus, p. 306.

<sup>47</sup>In fact, Robert Scholes and Robert Kellog, commenting on major trends in characterization in the twentieth-century novel, mention a further movement away from psychological investigation and toward the apprehension of "impressions which claim no absolute validity as facts." The Nature of Narrative (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 203.

<sup>48</sup>See Chapter 3. See also, for example, Chinua Achebe, The Writer as Teacher, New Statesman 29 January 1965, p. 29; Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Homecoming (London: Heinemann, 1972), p. 43; Ezekiel Mphahlele, The African Image, 2nd ed. (New York: Praeger, 1974), p. 189; Wole Soyinka, Myth, Literature and the African World, p. 107.

## INTRODUCTION TO SECTION 2

In the first section, we have shown that the writing techniques developed by Anglophone African novelists, in their attempt to relate the novel more closely to their own cultural context, have helped to create an identifiably African novel. In this section, we shall present sustained textual analyses of selected novels in order to demonstrate more fully aspects of the practice of individual novelists. We have selected, for this purpose, three novels by three major novelists, one from each of the regions (West, East and South Africa) included in this study. The novels selected for analysis are Chinua Achebe's Arrow of God, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's A Grain of Wheat and Es'kia [Ezekiel] Mphahlele's Chirundu.

In selecting the novels above, we have taken into consideration the contributions of their authors to the ongoing discussion of the novel in Africa and the recognition which has been awarded them as novelists. Chinua Achebe, a major West African novelist, is recognized by other African novelists as an outstanding practitioner of the art of the novel in Africa. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, for example, has referred to Achebe's "mastery of technique and his succinct use of language."<sup>1</sup> We have selected Achebe's third novel, Arrow of God, which was published in 1964, as a mature work from which his skill in relating the novel to his African cultural background can effectively be demonstrated.<sup>2</sup> In chapter 7, we shall examine Achebe's narrative

and verbal style paying special attention to his use of indigenous concepts, African oral tradition and local English idiom in Nigerian society.

Like Chinua Achebe, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, the foremost novelist in East Africa, has been recognized as a major contributor to the practice of the novel in Africa. Among the important questions which Ngugi has raised about the novel in Africa is that of relating African characters to the norms of their own culture.<sup>3</sup> In Chapter 8, we shall examine Ngugi's treatment of character and show how considerations relating to social behaviour and values in Kenyan society and the particular historical situation of the Kenyan people have affected the structure of A Grain of Wheat. In this novel, which was published in 1967, Ngugi has very consciously attempted to make his characters reflect certain forces in the society and as a result has related them very specifically to their social environment.<sup>4</sup>

Unlike Chinua Achebe and Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, the South African novelist, Ezekiel Mphahlele has not so far been recognized among the first rank of African novelists. Until recently, his claim to special study rested on his achievement as a critic who has contributed much to the "nurturing of the emergent tradition of written literature in English in West and East Africa."<sup>5</sup> Mphahlele's novel Chirundu which was published in 1979,<sup>6</sup> shows how much he has benefited from his careful monitoring of the African literary scene. His concern in Chirundu is to match his African content with his "way of putting it across." As he observed in an interview with Lewis Nkosi: "The great

novelist always reconciles his social realism with the aesthetic element . . . . you feel that the content is as big as the way in which he puts it across."<sup>7</sup> In chapter 9, we shall show how Mphahlele has used motifs and symbols from Bantu culture and African oral tradition both to evoke an African social environment and to create structural unity in Chirundu.

FOOTNOTES TO INTRODUCTION TO SECTION 2

<sup>1</sup>Homecoming (London: Heinemann, 1972), p. 53. See also Cyprian Ekwensi, Dem Say, ed. Lindfors et al. (Austin: University of Texas, 1974), p. 33; John Munyonye, Dem Say ed. Lindfors et al., p. 38.

<sup>2</sup>Ezekiel Mphahlele, for example has referred to Arrow of God as Achebe's "masterpiece." See "The New Mood in African Literature," Transition, XIX, 4 (1972), 59.

<sup>3</sup>See, for example, "The Writer and His Past," Homecoming, pp. 39-46.

<sup>4</sup>See "Tolstoy in Africa: an interview with Ngugi Wa Thiong'o prepared by R. Sander & I. Munro." Ba Shiru, v, 1 (Fall, 1973), 21-30.

<sup>5</sup>See Samuel Asein, "The Humanism of Ezekiel Mphahlele," The Journal of Commonwealth Literature, XV, 1 (August 1980), 38.

<sup>6</sup>Mphahlele was working on this novel as early as 1971. See Palaver ed. Bernth Lindfors (Austin: University of Texas, 1972), p. 44.

<sup>7</sup>"Some Conversations with African Writers," Africa Report, IX, 7 (1964), 9.

CHAPTER 7

LOCAL INFLUENCES IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S

ARROW OF GOD

In Arrow of God, Chinua Achebe has effectively drawn on African subject-matter, concepts belonging to Igbo society and local sources of imagery and has created a mode of expression in English which also draws largely on local speech forms. Achebe shows an overall reliance on the African oral tradition in creating narrative continuity and in handling verbal expression in the novel. Arrow of God may be used to illustrate what is peculiarly African in Achebe's approach to the novel.

Arrow of God describes a stage in the lives of the Igbo people when traditional tribal institutions were becoming moribund, but were being reactivated by the British imperial administration for purposes of indirect rule. The breakdown of Igbo communal life is seen in microcosm in the story of the six villages of Umuaro which constitute a clan of the Igbo people. A destructive rivalry develops between two of the villages, Umuachala and Umunneora. This rivalry reflects a more intense conflict at the individual level between Ezeulu, the chief priest of Umuaro who belongs to the village of Umuachala, on the one hand, and Nwaka and Ezidemili, the priest of the python god, Idemili, of the village of Umunneora, on the other. In time, Ezeulu also finds himself in conflict with the people of his

own village.

It is significant that the source of the conflict between Ezeulu and his people is traced back to a land dispute in which he gave evidence against his own clan, for the Igbo code of ethics "was rooted in the land."<sup>1</sup> The major crisis in the novel is related to Ezeulu's attempt as Chief Priest to delay the celebration of the Feast of the New Yam. Yam was the vital food commodity in traditional Igbo society,<sup>2</sup> and the ability to produce and harvest yams thus becomes a symbol of the community's capacity to survive. In Arrow of God, Achebe relates Igbo survival to the planting and harvesting of yams.

The concept of the hero which Achebe projects in Arrow of God is one which, as we have shown in Chapter 6, is peculiarly African. Achebe has attached special importance to Ezeulu's function as an intermediary between the human and spirit world and between the community and its god. The concept of intermediaries, as has been pointed out,<sup>3</sup> is especially important in African belief. The main question which is answered by the events described in the novel is which of Ezeulu's sons will succeed him as the intermediary between the community and the new forces which confront it. Achebe links the situations of individuals in traditional and contemporary Igbo societies by relating Ezeulu's traditionally understood role of intermediary to that of his son Oduche whom he sends to the Christian mission. Oduche must mediate between his African background and his Western education as Ezeulu mediates between the traditional society and the god Ulu.

The relationship between Arrow of God and its social background is further demonstrated by its references to local custom and belief which are an integral part of its narrative structure. A full appreciation of the opening of the novel, for example, depends on an understanding of the significance of the moon in West African belief.<sup>4</sup> The novel opens with a description of the appearance of the fourth new moon of the year. Achebe shows Ezeulu watching for it anxiously. It is with considerable effort that Ezeulu discerns the moon which is "as thin as an orphan fed grudgingly by a cruel stepmother."<sup>5</sup> The appearance of the moon is greeted with both joy and fear, for the moon is both the source of life and the destroyer of life. Ezeulu dismisses his feeling of uncertainty. Was there indeed "a feather of cloud"<sup>6</sup> as he had at first feared,<sup>7</sup> or was Ezeulu too ready to dismiss a danger which threatened both himself and the community? Only the subsequent events disclosed in the novel will confirm whether it was indeed "an evil moon,"<sup>8</sup> as Ugoye, Ezeulu's wife feared. Achebe uses the traditional lore relating to the moon as a means of creating suspense. He has also given the reader a hint of certain tendencies in Ezeulu's nature which will appear again and again--his vanity about his physical powers and his confidence in his own judgment.

References to local custom and belief are also contained in the necessary descriptions of the ceremonial aspects of Igbo life. These aspects of life, in the traditional African environment, are not considered as separate from the people's everyday existence. Achebe describes in detail, assemblies of the

village elders and rituals such as the Festival of the Pumpkin Leaves which marks the annual ritual cleansing of the community, the Sacrifice of Coverture for Obika, Ezeulu's son, and his bride Okuata and the presentation of a new mask by Obika's age-group. Many local practices and beliefs are referred to in passing. For example, the narrator mentions Ezeulu waking up to hear Obika's mother and sister weeping and his fear that someone had died. The narrator continues: "But then he heard Edogo's wife talking, which would not happen if anyone had died."<sup>9</sup> When Obika returns from Okperi without his father, his brother Edogo asks where his father is: "Where is the person with whom you went?" he asked, "skirting the dreaded finality of a name."<sup>10</sup> Clearly the style of the narrator's remarks is related to the content with which Achebe is dealing.

References to the local background also occur when Achebe distinguishes the attributes of persons or of objects by comparing them with others chosen from the same cultural context. For example, Ezeulu refers to his brother Okeke and his son Edogo whom he disapproves of as "a derelict mortar and rotten palm nuts."<sup>11</sup> Obika arriving late to work on the road with the members of his age group felt "lost like "a grain of maize in an empty goatskin bag."<sup>12</sup> Adeze, Ezeulu's daughter, teases her sister Akueke about her reconciliation with her husband, Ibe, "I did not know that you and he had suddenly become palm oil and salt."<sup>13</sup>

The last example shows Achebe creating an idiomatic form of English which is related to the social context about which he

writes. Achebe thus creates a local equivalent of slang expressions which occur in English usage elsewhere. For example, when Ezeulu's friend, Akuebue says to him, "I will not dispute with you. . . . You have the yam and you have the knife,"<sup>14</sup> the expression, "you have the yam and you have the knife," is equivalent to "you're the boss." Ezeulu's remark to Akuebue, "We have shown the white man the way to our house and have given him a stool to sit on,"<sup>15</sup> makes a more complex reference to the West African cultural context. On the surface, offering a stool to someone may be seen as a purely social gesture of welcome.<sup>16</sup> In some West African communities, however, the stool is a symbol of sovereignty or authority.<sup>17</sup> Ezeulu's remark implies something about the extent to which the Igbos have submitted to the white man's domination. Taken in this way, the remark is ironical since the Igbos, in particular, prided themselves on the fact that they had no king or central authority--a point which Achebe reminds the reader of in the novel.<sup>18</sup>

As Achebe has shown in the examples cited above, the images which the writer chooses for conveying his ideas are, at a very basic level, drawn from the environment in which he lives. As a result, the forms of expression in one social environment vary from those in another, even within the same language system. The African novelist who is consciously relating his work to its local background is able therefore to create a distinctive verbal style. Achebe has also shown how those images through which he relates the verbal style of the novel to its social context may also be integrated into the structure of the novel. That is, the images may become a means of relating events or

characters to each other and of emphasizing parallel circumstances.

A point which is consistently made in Arrow of God is that Ezeulu has a deep affection for his son Obika, in spite of their frequent disagreements. When Obika is beaten by the English overseer Mr. Wright, the narrator observes:

He did not struggle at all; he only shivered like the sacrificial ram which must take in silence the blows of the funeral dancers before its throat is cut.<sup>19</sup>

The same image reflecting a local ceremonial practice is later used to describe Ezeulu's reaction when he is told of Obika's death:

Ezeulu sank to the ground in utter amazement. It was not simply the blow of Obika's death, great though it was. Men had taken greater blows; that was what made a man a man. They say a man is like a funeral ram which must take whatever beating comes to it without opening its mouth; only the silent tremor of pain down its body tells of its suffering.<sup>20</sup>

The description of Ezeulu's grief is clearly meant to recall the earlier occasion. Mr. Wright's attack on Obika who, in many ways, typifies the "power and aggressiveness"<sup>21</sup> of Igbo youth marks a stage in the decline of Igbo masculinity. Obika's courage and aggressiveness prove futile in the changed environment and significantly he dies just before the New Yam Festival at which Igbo masculinity was ritually renewed each year.<sup>22</sup> Further examples of the repetition of images to establish continuities in the novel will be mentioned in the discussion of Achebe's use of proverbs which will be introduced later in this chapter.

In relating the novel to its social context, Achebe has also demonstrated how certain features of traditional African oral narrative may be used to create narrative continuity in the African novel and to distinguish its verbal style. Repetition, for example, as many analysts have pointed out,<sup>23</sup> is one of the main characteristics of oral poetry. While it is not exclusive to oral literature, it is a technique which oral narrative accommodates to an extraordinary degree. It is the degree to which Achebe relies on repetition in Arrow of God which is remarkable.

In Arrow of God, Achebe uses repetition to emphasize important details of the story, to achieve a tightly controlled sequence of events and to reiterate his themes. One of the most important details in Arrow of God is the number of yams which remain at the opening of the story. One of Ezeulu's functions as Chief Priest is to name the day for the New Yam Festival. He can do this, however, only after he has eaten the twelve sacred yams, one at each new moon. Ezeulu is detained for two moons in Okperi by the British District Commissioner. On his return to Umuaro, he refuses to eat the remaining sacred yams outside of the specified ritual occasions so that the New Yam Festival can take place at the usual time. This means that the new crop of yams cannot be harvested and will dry up in the ground. At the beginning of the novel, Achebe emphasizes the details about the number of the sacred yams which remain, as if he were establishing memory cues for listeners:

Ezeulu went into his barn and took down one yam from the bamboo platform built specially for the twelve sacred yams. There were eight

left. He knew there would be eight; nevertheless he counted them carefully. He had already eaten three and had the fourth in his hand. He checked the remaining ones again and went back to his obi, shutting the door carefully after him.<sup>24</sup>

Achebe varies his way of saying that there were eight yams left. His use of repetition conveys the deliberation with which Ezeulu handles the yams and the importance of the simple ritual of selecting them.

Repetition is also used in Arrow of God to remind the reader of the lapse of time and to fix events in a clear temporal perspective. This is especially necessary in the earlier section of the novel with its rapid shifting of scenes. The opening events of the novel, which are described in Chapter 1, take place five years after those described in Chapter 2. The narrator indicates this when he observes at the beginning of Chapter 2: "On the day, five years ago when the leaders of Umuaro decided to send an embassy to Okperi . . ."<sup>25</sup> This is followed by a description of the meeting at which it is decided to send an embassy to Okperi, the calamitous events connected with the arrival of Umuaro's envoy in Okperi, the war between Umuaro and Okperi and the restoration of order by the British District Commissioner, Winterbottom. The reader is again reminded at the beginning of Chapter 4 of the lapse of time: "In the five years since the white man broke the guns of Umuaro . . ."<sup>26</sup> and again at the beginning of the second section: "In the five years since these things happened . . ."<sup>27</sup> and still later in the same chapter, "It was five years since Ezeulu promised the white man . . ."<sup>28</sup> The same linking formula appears again in the

text.<sup>29</sup> While one might argue that repetition of words or phrases is natural enough in any form of writing or speech, the use of repetition in Arrow of God does create the impression of a narrator speaking directly to an audience. It also serves for emphasis. The narrative is made to seem very manageable--the narrator is in clear control of the temporal perspective and his presence is constantly felt. The example which we have cited above is also an oblique way of stating a cause/effect relationship by implying a connection between Ezeulu's attitude to the war against Okperi, his giving of evidence against Umuaro in the land dispute, his sending of his son to the Christian mission and his isolation in the community.

The influence of oral narrative is also perceptible in the endings of sections within chapters which anticipate events described later in the novel. For example, the ending of the fourth section of Chapter 1, which refers to Ezeulu's daughter Akueke: "It looked as if she would live in her father's compound for a long time,"<sup>30</sup> introduces one of the many sub-plots of the novel. At the same time it postpones the telling of the rest of that part of the story to introduce another aspect of the story which relates to Oduche. In addition to having a double-linking effect, the abrupt statements at the end of certain sections are used to create suspense. For example, at the end of the second section of Chapter 4, the narrator observes: "It was only the incident of the sacred python that opened Ezeulu's eyes. But that was later."<sup>31</sup> The statement both anticipates and postpones the recounting of "the incident of the sacred python." By

anticipating it in this way, Achebe attaches special significance to this incident and arouses the expectations of the reader who now looks towards the moment when Ezeulu will become aware of a danger which threatens him. These double-linking statements are also useful for introducing digressions which may simply be folklore for local colour or background information necessary to the understanding of later events. Achebe has devised a method similar to that of the oral narrator which helps him to move from one aspect of the story to another without snapping the thread of the main narrative.<sup>32</sup>

The influence of African oral tradition is particularly noticeable in the verbal style of Arrow of God. This influence may be observed first of all in the tone of the narrator. In Arrow of God, the narrator often seems to be directly involved in the events which he is describing. This is true, for example, of the description of the fight between Akukalia, Umuaro's envoy to Okperi, and Ebo. The narrator clearly sympathizes with Ebo. It is as if he shares Ebo's distress at the outrage which Akukalia has committed and expects his audience to do the same. He observes:

Ebo rushed towards Akukalia and, seeing what he had done, stopped dead. He did not know, for one brief moment, whether he was awake or dreaming. . . . The two pieces of his ikenga lay where their violator had kicked them in the dust.

"Move another step if you call yourself a man. Yes I did it. What can you do?"

So it was true. Still Ebo turned round and went into his obi. At his shrine he knelt down to have a close look. Yes, the gap where his ikenga, the strength of his right arm had stood stared back at him--an empty patch, without dust, on the wooden board.

"Nna doh! Nna doh!" he wept, calling on his dead father to come to his aid.<sup>33</sup>

The main characteristic of that description is that each phrase, each observation of the narrator, can be translated into gesture. The description can be effectively mimed or spoken or both. Again the narrator's role is emphasized.

The narrator assumes that his audience is familiar with a common body of folklore to which he frequently alludes. For example, referring to the fight between Akukalia and Ebo, he observes: "What happened next was the work of Ekwensu, the bringer of evil."<sup>34</sup> In describing the reception of the news of Akukalia's death in Umuaro, he continues: "Umuaro might have left the matter there, and perhaps the whole land dispute with it as Ekwensu seemed to have taken a hand in it."<sup>35</sup> Finally, in referring to the end of the "war" between Umuaro and Okperi, the narrator comments, "The death of Akukalia and his brother in one and the same dispute showed that Ekwensu's hand was in it."<sup>36</sup> The use of the Igbo word "Ekwensu" instead of its English equivalent "devil" also serves to localize the idiom. Similarly, one of the stories frequently referred to is that of "the lizard that ruined his own mother's funeral."<sup>37</sup> It is referred to both by the narrator and by characters in the story. The effect of such references is to associate the narrator with the set of values and folk beliefs shared by the characters and to identify him as a voice speaking from within the cultural context of the characters in the novel.

So far, Achebe's techniques in handling narration are ones which emphasize the role of the narrator in the novel. In addition, the narrator copies the opening formulas of the folk tale, as for example: "In the very distant days when lizards

were still few and far between . . . "28 He often imitates sounds rather than describes them:

Tufia spat the old priest.<sup>39</sup>

Nweke Ukpaka raised his voice and shouted:  
"Kwo kwo kwo kwo kwo!" All the men  
replied: "Kwooooh oh!"<sup>40</sup>

"... he-he-he-he-he!" laughed the diety  
the way spirits do.<sup>41</sup>

Sounds such as those of the church bells and Ezeulu's ogene are always represented. Achebe's use of the third person narrator in Arrow of God clearly involves different considerations from those governing its use in the nineteenth century realistic novel,<sup>42</sup> for he makes a conscious attempt to relate the function of the narrator in the novel to that of the narrator of the oral literature with which his local readership is familiar.<sup>43</sup>

The most important influence of the African oral tradition on Achebe's style in Arrow of God is connected with his use of proverbs. In Igbo society, the ability to use proverbs well is recognized as a verbal skill.<sup>44</sup> Because they are designed to express a general truth through a particular case taken from the everyday context, proverbs provide images which are readily understood and which are typical of the culture in which they are used. In Arrow of God, the use of proverbs is therefore an effective means of relating the novel to its social context and to a wide body of folklore.<sup>45</sup>

Some of the proverbs which occur in Arrow of God are set forms which are used on certain types of occasions. For example, Uduezue, an elder of Okperi, responding to Akukalia's declaration that his mission is urgent, uses the same proverb as the Court

Messenger who is sent by Winterbottom to summon Ezeulu to Okperi:

"A toad does not run in the day unless something is after it."<sup>46</sup>

The proverb, in the first instance, is a polite way of pointing out Akukalia's obstinacy. In the second instance it is the Court Messenger's way of insisting politely that he will not be diverted from his purpose. The same proverb is also used by Ezeulu's assistant, Nwosisi, to excuse his presumption in reminding Ezeulu about the date of the Feast of the New Yam.

When the same proverb is repeated over and over and is used by different characters, it becomes a common point of reference for the users and is a way of relating them to a common social environment. For example, the proverb, "When an adult is in the house the she-goat is not left to suffer the pains of parturition on its tether," occurs four times in Arrow of God.<sup>47</sup> This proverb is used twice by Ezeulu when he attempts to dissuade the elders of Umuaro from stirring up war against Okperi. It is also used by Akuebue when he attempts to placate the policemen who go to Umuaro to arrest Ezeulu and by the elder, Ezekwesili, when the elders of Umuaro plead with Ezeulu to declare the Feast of the New Yam. There is a certain irony in Ezekwesili's using the same proverb which Ezeulu earlier used to the elders to persuade them against their unfortunate battle with Okperi in an attempt to stop Ezeulu from taking a step of delaying the harvest, which will be even more disastrous for the community. There are also instances in Arrow of God when the proverb used by one character to support his own position is later used by another to challenge that position. This is especially true in the case of the enemies, Ezeulu and Nwaka.

On more than one occasion, for example, Ezeulu observes that "A man who brings home ant-infested faggots should not complain if he is visited by lizards."<sup>48</sup> This proverb suggests that one should not complain about a problem which one is responsible for creating. Nwaka later uses this proverb to remind Ezeulu that his problems with the British District Commissioner are of his own making. As a result, Ezeulu is given no support by the elders of Umuaro when his presence is demanded by the Commissioner in Okperi. On one occasion Ezeulu compares the Christian religion to a leper: "Allow him a handshake and he wants an embrace."<sup>49</sup> Nwaka also uses this proverb to taunt Ezeulu reminding him that, by giving evidence against Umuaro in the land-dispute, he had started a form of collaboration with the enemies of Umuaro which the District Commissioner was naturally only too ready to take advantage of. By making Ezeulu and Nwaka use identical proverbs to support opposite viewpoints, Achebe emphasizes the obstinate nature of their enmity.

Proverbs are also used in Arrow of God to reiterate themes. Different proverbs with similar meanings may be used to restate the same theme. For example, the proverb, "When two brothers fight a stranger reaps their harvest,"<sup>50</sup> which occurs twice in Arrow of God, reiterates the theme of disunity in the family and community leading to its ruin. The same idea is restated in the proverb, "When the roof and walls of a house fall in the ceiling is not left standing,"<sup>51</sup> which occurs several times, and again in the proverb, "The very thing which kills mother rat prevents its little ones from opening their eyes."<sup>52</sup>

These proverbs are important to the narrative structure both because of the ideas and the images which they convey.

Many of the images related to the dance, for example, restate one of the important themes of the novel--the necessity to adapt to change and to show flexibility in dealing with each other. The image of the dance is incorporated into many proverbs. "The world is like a mask dancing. If you want to see it well you do not stand in one place,"<sup>53</sup> Ezeulu tells Oduche. When Ugoye expresses her fears about Oduche going to the Christian mission, Ezeulu says to her:

Do you not know that in a great man's household there must be people who follow all kinds of strange ways? . . . In such a place, whatever music you beat on your drum there is somebody to dance to it.<sup>54</sup>

Ezeulu's friend Akuebue later uses the same proverb to illustrate that it is not necessarily wrong for Ezeulu's sons to disagree with him:

. . . in all great compounds there must be people of all minds. . . . That is why we say that in the compound of a great man whatever tune you play there is always someone to dance to it.<sup>55</sup>

When pleading with Ezeulu to declare the Feast of the New Yam, Ogbuefi Ofoko, one of the elders, reminds him of his own saying that "a man must dance the dance prevailing in his time."<sup>56</sup> This is the same proverb which Ezeulu quoted when he encouraged Oduche to acquire the white man's knowledge.

The proverb has a far-reaching effect on Achebe's verbal style in Arrow of God. The mode of the proverb--the use of a particular situation to convey a general truth and the tendency

to reduce abstractions to concrete examples--is carried over into other areas of dialogue and narrative. Statements modeled on the proverb often reflect the conscious attempt of a character to relate a new experience to a familiar situation in order to understand it. For example, when Ezeulu questions Ulu's will after Obika's death he asks himself:

When was it ever heard that a child was scalded by the piece of yam that its own mother put into its palm? What man would send his son with a potsherd to bring fire from a neighbour's hut and then unleash rain on him? Who ever sent his son up to the palm to gather nuts and then took an axe and felled the tree?<sup>57</sup>

By modeling Ezeulu's remarks on the proverb, Achebe is able both to introduce local imagery and to reconstruct a convincing style of expression for his character who belongs in the traditional setting.

The proverb also has an effect on the verbal style of Arrow of God, for, in addition to citing the proverb, Achebe incorporates the image which the proverb introduces into a further statement, as, for example, when Akuehue observes to Ezeulu:

Our sages have said that a man who does not know where the rain started to beat him cannot know where he dried his body. We are not like that. . . .<sup>58</sup>  
We know where the rain began to fall on us. . . .

Akuehue uses the proverb both as a precedent to support his viewpoint and as a stylistic model. Thus the proverb is treated as a metaphor which is further developed as the dialogue continues. Similarly, when the narrator observes of the friendship between Nwaka and Ezidemili:

. . . when we see a little bird dancing in the middle of the pathway we must know that its

drummer is in the nearby bush.

Nwaka's drummer and praise-singer was none other than the priest of Idemili. . . .<sup>59</sup>

the image in the proverb is repeated in the statement which follows.<sup>60</sup> The features which are carried over from the proverb to the observation which follows it are the oblique method of statement and the expression of an abstraction in concrete terms. There is irony intended in the use of the playful image since the reader is aware of the enmity of Nwaka and Ezidemili against Ezeulu. The image of the drum beat to convey the idea of a force that moves or motivates occurs over and over in the novel.<sup>61</sup>

The tendency to integrate the proverbs into the text by including images which occur in the proverbs is an observable feature in Arrow of God. The image from the proverb when integrated into the dialogue or narrative also helps to create a highly idiomatic form of expression in Arrow of God and one which is marked by its social context. For example, Ezeulu says to Akuebue:

If I was sure of my son do you think I would sit here now talking to you while a man who pokes his fingers into my eyes goes home to his bed?<sup>62</sup>

The expression "to poke the fingers into one's eyes" means to "irritate" or "annoy" and may be traced back to the Igbo proverb: "Ona aru nyeri aka n'me anya" which is translated "He put his finger into my eyes."<sup>63</sup> When this technique of incorporating the image from the proverb into the sentence is repeated over and over, the result is a style of English in which the phrasing and word choice are influenced by patterns existing in Igbo oral tradition. Thus the proverbs used in Arrow of God have an effect

not only on the statements which are directly related to them but also on the language of the novel as a whole.

An important feature of the proverb, as we have pointed out, is the substitution of image for abstraction. As many of the examples of the language of Arrow of God which we have cited earlier in this chapter show, this is a marked feature of the language of the novel as a whole. It is carried over into the descriptive passages. The narrator, for example, observes of Nwaka, after his challenge to Ulu, "His head did not ache nor his belly; and he did not groan in the middle of the night"<sup>64</sup> The spread of enmity between the people of Umuaro and Okperi is described as a refusal "to touch palm wine or kola nut."<sup>65</sup> Even where the abstract idea is voiced, it may be preceded or followed by a variety of images all illustrating the same idea. Nweke Ukpaka, a member of Obika's age-group observes, for example:

We did not ask him [the white man] to visit us; he is neither our kinsman nor our in-law. We did not steal his goat or his fowl; we did not take his land or his wife. In no way have we done him wrong.<sup>66</sup>

There is more than verbal elaboration involved here. The illustrations which Ukpaka uses are important also because they refer to the values in Igbo society. He refers specifically to the relationships and possessions which are uppermost in the traditional Igbo scale of values.

One of the factors which contribute to this preference for concrete examples is, of course the need to avoid the built-in judgments and associations which certain descriptive words convey. For example, when the narrator describes Obika's wife,

Okuata, "polishing off" her soup, he does so by detailing several actions: "She crooked her first finger once more, wiped the bowl with it, stretched it again and ran it down her tongue."<sup>67</sup> Here Achebe consciously avoids the term "to lick" which carries its fully perjorative associations when it is used to describe the actions of those Africans who become domestic servants in European households. Such persons are accused of "licking the plates in the white man's kitchen."<sup>68</sup>

The techniques which Achebe has incorporated in Arrow of God evoke a distinctive social context. Achebe has shown how some of the narrative devices created in a non-scribal context continue to have significant functions in written narrative. He employs certain techniques for their usefulness both in conveying his imaginative perception of traditional African life and in linking the materials of the novel itself to the body of African folklore and the broader oral tradition.

The effectiveness of the ending of Arrow of God depends on the manner in which Achebe has combined its several thematic preoccupations with important social references. At the end of the novel the Christian harvest service has drawn the attention of the community from the traditional Igbo Feast of the New Yam which marks the beginning of the Igbo new year and the renewal of life in the community.<sup>69</sup> In the passage,

The Christian harvest which took place a few days after Obika's death saw more people than ever Goodcountry could have dreamed. In his extremity many an Umuaro man had sent his son with a yam or two to offer to the new religion and to bring back the promised immunity. Thereafter any yam that was harvested in the man's fields was harvested in the name of the son.<sup>70</sup>

the triumph of Christianity is conveyed through a reference to the harvesting of yams. The final words, "harvested in the name of the son" recall the response in many Christian services "in the name of the father and of the son and of the Holy Ghost." The reference to "the promised immunity" recalls the Christian context in which Christ as an intermediary is sent to ransom the human community. The focus is again on the role of the intermediary, one of the major preoccupations of the novel. Another theme which is restated is that of the conflict between generations and the passing on of the father's role to the son. Achebe conveys the fate which overtakes the community in terms of their central domestic preoccupation. Characteristically, he substitutes a concrete image to register an abstract process. The final sentence of the novel, "Thereafter any yam that was harvested in the man's field was harvested in the name of the son," is somewhat aetiological. It has the effect of making the novel as a whole an explanation for the decline of the worship of Ulu. In this respect the ending of Arrow of God resembles that of a folk-tale.

FOOTNOTES TO CHAPTER 7

<sup>1</sup>John Njoku, A Dictionary of Igbo Names, Culture and Proverbs (Washington: University Press of America, 1978), p. 5.

<sup>2</sup>John Njoku, A Dictionary of Igbo Names, Culture and Proverbs, p. 12.

<sup>3</sup>See Chapter 6 of this dissertation. In Arrow of God, the concept of the priest as "half man half god" invested with powers by the community is specifically referred to. See for example, pp. 212 and 249.

<sup>4</sup>See, for example, Eva L. R. Meyerowitz, The Akan of Ghana: Their Ancient Beliefs (London: Faber, 1958), pp. 23-24.

<sup>5</sup>Arrow of God (New York: Doubleday, 1969), pp. 1-2. All quotations in this chapter are from edition.

<sup>6</sup>Arrow of God, p. 2.

<sup>7</sup>Eva L. R. Meyerowitz has observed, "People in remoter villages still fear to look at the moon when it is disappearing behind a cloud, for the moon-mother might take their own kra [ray of life] with her and thus kill them." The Akan of Ghana, p. 24.

<sup>8</sup>Arrow of God, p. 2.

<sup>9</sup>Arrow of God, p. 99.

<sup>10</sup>Arrow of God, p. 184.

<sup>11</sup>Arrow of God, p. 167.

<sup>12</sup>Arrow of God, p. 92.

<sup>13</sup>Arrow of God, p. 86.

<sup>14</sup>Arrow of God, p. 109.

<sup>15</sup>Arrow of God, p. 149.

<sup>16</sup>In the novel, visitors are seated on mats or mud benches and often bring their own goat skin mats with them.

<sup>17</sup>An Ashanti chief, for example, "fills a sacred role as the one who sits upon the stool of his ancestors." See K.A. Busia, "The Ashanti," African Worlds: Studies in the Cosmological Ideas and Social Values of African Peoples, ed. Daryll Ford (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), p. 202.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Arrow of God, pp. 30 and 65. Among the Igbo the ofe staff is the symbol of political power. See, for example, Austin Shelton, The Igbo-Igala Borderland: Religion and Social Control in Indigenous African Colonialism (Albany: SUNY Press, 1967), p. 190.

<sup>19</sup> Arrow of God, p. 94.

<sup>20</sup> Arrow of God, p. 260.

<sup>21</sup> The phrase is taken from Arrow of God, p. 207.

<sup>22</sup> Austin Shelton has observed: "The harvesting of the new yam crop is the renewal of the major food store for the coming year, and is the expression of masculinity, the reassertion of Nsukkan manhood, for the harvest festival celebrates the male ancestors and the renewal of life. See The Igbo-Igala Borderland, p. 30.

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, Ruth Finnegan, Oral Poetry: Its Nature, Significance and Social Content (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1977), pp. 130-131; B. Gray, "Repetition in Oral Literature," Journal of American Folklore, LXXXIV (1971), 289-303.

<sup>24</sup> Arrow of God, p. 3.

<sup>25</sup> Arrow of God, p. 17.

<sup>26</sup> Arrow of God, p. 43.

<sup>27</sup> Arrow of God, p. 44.

<sup>28</sup> Arrow of God, p. 50.

<sup>29</sup> See, for example, Arrow of God, p. 147.

<sup>30</sup> Arrow of God, p. 13.

<sup>31</sup> Arrow of God, p. 45. The python as a symbol is also a structural link in the novel as a whole. The death of the traditional past is symbolized by the images of desolation which haunt Ezeulu's dream at the end of the novel; the fallen state of the python is reflected in the overwhelming sadness of its song which Ezeulu hears in his dream. See pp. 252-253.

<sup>32</sup> As a result, he emphasizes the story-telling aspect of narrative and the role of the narrator.

<sup>33</sup> Arrow of God, p. 27.

<sup>34</sup> Arrow of God, pp. 26-27.

<sup>35</sup> Arrow of God, p. 28.

<sup>36</sup> Arrow of God, p. 31.

<sup>37</sup> See, for example, Arrow of God, pp. 55, 142, 251 and 261. The wording varies slightly in each case.

<sup>38</sup> Arrow of God, p. 16. Again the wording may vary, but the formula is basically the same.

<sup>39</sup> Arrow of God, p. 55.

<sup>40</sup> Arrow of God, p. 132.

<sup>41</sup> Arrow of God, p. 219. There are several examples of this. See also, for example, pp. 67 and 215.

<sup>42</sup> S.A. Gakwandi has observed, for example, that leading African novelists have been "satisfied with employing the techniques developed by European realism." See The Novel and Contemporary Experience in Africa (New York: Africana Publishing Co., 1977), p. 127.

<sup>43</sup> We may compare this with the attempt of the dramatist to involve the audience as participants in the action of the play.

<sup>44</sup> In Igbo society, Chinua Achebe has observed, proverbs are "the palm oil with which words are eaten." See Bernth Lindfors, "The Palm Oil with Which Achebe's Words are Eaten," African Literature Today 1 (1968), 3-18. See also John Njoka, A Dictionary of Igbo Names, Culture and Proverbs, pp. 55-58.

<sup>45</sup> Proverbial wisdom is also conveyed through allusions to stories which also establish precedent and relate particular cases to the general, for example, "A thing greater than nte had been caught in nte's trap." (p. 250); "The lizard who threw confusion into his mother's funeral rite" (p. 142).

<sup>46</sup> Arrow of God, pp. 23, 155 and 232.

<sup>47</sup> Arrow of God, pp. 20, 29, 172 and 236. The wording varies slightly on each occasion.

<sup>48</sup> Arrow of God, pp. 67 and 148. Nwaka's use of the proverb occurs on p. 162.

<sup>49</sup> Arrow of God, p. 47. Nwaka's use of the proverb occurs on p. 162.

<sup>50</sup> Arrow of God, pp. 148 and 250. There is repeated mention of brothers fighting as in Moses Unuachukwu's story on pp. 53-54, Maduka's description of his palm wine on p. 90.

<sup>51</sup> See Arrow of God, pp. 20 and 97. There is also the repeated image of the house on fire. See pp. 98 and 243.

<sup>52</sup> Arrow of God, p. 69.

<sup>53</sup>Arrow of God, p. 51.

<sup>54</sup>Arrow of God, p. 51.

<sup>55</sup>Arrow of God, p. 113.

<sup>56</sup>Arrow of God, p. 242. Ezeulu also uses this saying to Oduche. See p. 213. "Prevalent" is substituted for "prevailing" there.

<sup>57</sup>Arrow of God, p. 260.

<sup>58</sup>Arrow of God, p. 149.

<sup>59</sup>Arrow of God, p. 44.

<sup>60</sup>Achebe has used a variation of the Igbo proverb "Nwa nunu n-agba egwu n'ezi nwere ihe na akuru ya nkwa" which indicates simply that something has gone wrong. See Njoku, A Dictionary of Igbo Names, Culture and Proverbs, p. 63.

<sup>61</sup>For example, Ezeulu says to Akuebue: "You are my friend and you know whether I am a thief or a murderer or an honest man. But you cannot know the Thing which beats the drum to which Ezeulu dances." Arrow of God, p. 149.

<sup>62</sup>Arrow of God, p. 112.

<sup>63</sup>See Njoku, A Dictionary of Igbo Names, Culture and Proverbs, p. 59.

<sup>64</sup>Arrow of God, p. 43.

<sup>65</sup>Arrow of God, p. 43.

<sup>66</sup>Arrow of God, p. 97.

<sup>67</sup>Arrow of God, p. 255.

<sup>68</sup>Like John Nwodika and Moses Unachukwu. See pp. 183 and 96.

<sup>69</sup>See Note 22. above.

<sup>70</sup>Arrow of God, pp. 261-262.

CHAPTER 8

THE PRESENTATION OF CHARACTER

IN NGUGI WA THIONG'O'S

A GRAIN OF WHEAT

This chapter will demonstrate how the concept of the individual's relationship to his society which is held in African society has shaped characterization in Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's A Grain of Wheat. The special considerations which influence characterization in this novel may be observed in the types of characters which are depicted, the aspects of behaviour on which attention is focused and in the resolution of the action.

Major characters in A Grain of Wheat may, in the first instance, be seen as dramatically portraying the various forces in society which have been activated by a particular social crisis. The types of characters depicted thus have special relevance to a situation which existed in Kenyan society in the period, 1952-1963. The characters are important both for the interest which they arouse as individual types and for their capacity to convey the interaction of social forces.

Characterization in A Grain of Wheat is also shaped by Ngugi's intention to examine certain concepts of character which existed in traditional African society and to relate them to the changing African environment in the contemporary period. This attempt must be seen both in relation to "the search for a usable past" and in relation to the need to view African charac-

ters against the norms of their own culture.<sup>1</sup> For example, Ngugi relates the concept of individualism to a society which has traditionally been communally oriented.

Finally, through characterization, Ngugi demonstrates in A Grain of Wheat some of the values which are relevant to modern Kenya. The first fourteen chapters of the novel describe the interaction of characters with significantly differentiated attitudes to social and personal relationships: Towards the end of the novel, instead of numbering chapters, Ngugi gives them titles using the names of important characters who survived the crisis depicted in the novel. In these final chapters, Ngugi indicates the subsequent fate of each character, and suggests by his method that a character's capacity to survive the crisis symbolizes his ability to cope with the present.

There are five main characters in A Grain of Wheat - Mugo, Karanja, Kihika, Gikonyo and Mumbi. Two other important characters are Warui and Wambui who represent the traditional viewpoint. Each character is tested by events as they relate to the three main sources of allegiance in Kikuyu society - the family, the community and the land.<sup>2</sup> The events described in the novel relate to the period following the State of Emergency in Kenya which was declared because of the Mau Mau Rebellion.<sup>3</sup> The characters are introduced to the reader after the Emergency has ended and as they are attempting to "pick up the threads" of their former existence. By a series of flashbacks, Ngugi shows how each character behaved during the Emergency and the consequences of his behaviour upon his life subsequently.

In the post-Emergency period, Mugo, an ordinary and retiring individual has become the focus of attention in his community, the village of Thabai. The knowledge that people are observing him makes Mugo uneasy. During the Emergency, he had gained a reputation for courage because of his impulsive attempt to rescue a woman who was being beaten by homeguards. For this act, Mugo had been sent to a detention camp where he was later credited with organizing a hunger strike. The community of Thabai expects Mugo to play a leading role in the Independence celebrations because he is regarded as one of the heroes of the Emergency. Mugo, however, carries a burden of guilt because he had secretly betrayed Kihika, the forest fighter whose memory is revered by the villagers, to the colonial authorities and was responsible for Kihika's capture and execution. Ironically one of the purposes of the celebration in Thabai is to honour Kihika.

In the early stages of the Emergency, before he was placed in detention, Mugo's response to the crisis facing his society was to turn to the traditional source of solace and stability - the land:

He turned to the soil. He would labour, sweat, and through success and wealth force society to recognize him. There was, for him, then, solace in the very act of breaking the soil: to bury the seeds and watch the green leaves heave and thrust themselves out of the ground, to tend the plants to ripeness and then harvest, these were all part of the world he had created for himself and his dreams soared to the sky. But then Kihika had come into his life.<sup>4</sup>

Kihika's attempt to involve Mugo in political activity disrupts Mugo's vision of a stable existence. Mugo's vision is important

to him, for unlike Kihika, he is poor, has no close relatives and feels excluded from the community. Mugo's resentment of, Kihika may be related to the fact that the latter can so readily sacrifice the things which he covets. Mugo betrays Kihika because he resents his intrusion upon his vision and because he wants to survive the Emergency in order to seek the satisfactions which come from owning land, having a family and gaining social recognition. In addition, Mugo who had seen how the authorities punished the villages in retaliation for the attacks of the forest fighters questions whether Kihika's exploits were beneficial to the society.

Mugo who is clearly traditionalist in outlook may be contrasted with Karanja. While Mugo looks to the land and small-scale farming for his livelihood and places a high value on family ties and recognition by the community, Karanja is typical of those caught up in the movement from village to city. Thus Karanja becomes a clerk in the library of the Githima Forestry and Agricultural Research Station. He retains contact with his village but his vision of the future is one in which he becomes powerful among his own people because of his association with the Europeans. The narrator observes, for example:

At Githima people believed that a complaint from him was enough to make a man lose his job. Karanja knew their fears. Often when men came into his office, he would suddenly cast them a cold eye, drop hints, or simply growl at them; in this way, he increased their fears and insecurity.<sup>5</sup>

After Kihika's execution by the government forces, Karanja, concerned about survival, joins the homeguards. Ngugi

thus makes him guilty of a more extreme form of selfishness than Mugo, for where Mugo attempts to retreat into a world which is empty of conflict, Karanja joins forces with the colonial authorities and attempts to exploit his own community. As a homeguard he is also in a position to force his attentions on Mumbi, whose husband, Gikonyo, has been placed in detention. Unlike Mugo, Karanja turns away from the land and becomes increasingly alienated from the community. His treatment of Mumbi shows a disregard for family ties and personal relationships. Karanja belongs to a class which is constantly depicted in the African novel - a class which collaborates with outside forces against the community.<sup>6</sup>

The tendency to seek refuge in traditional values like Mugo or to join with outside forces against the community like Karanja is, in A Grain of Wheat, balanced against other forces which are represented by Kihika and Gikonyo. Kihika projects the revolutionary forces in the society which have both creative and destructive potentialities. Unlike Mugo, he is not concerned with the personal contact which the individual cultivating the land has with it, but rather with possession of land as a symbol of independence. Kihika's vision is not a personal one, but is one which includes the whole society. He observes, for example:

My father's ten acres? That is not the important thing. Kenya belongs to black people . . . I am my brother's keeper. In any case, whether the land was stolen from Gikuyu, Ukabi or Nandi, it does not belong to the white man. And even if it did, shouldn't everybody have a share in the common shamba, our Kenya?

Kihika's commitment is to an idea rather than to human

relationships or to a set of social values. His relationship with Wambuku who loves him brings this out clearly. To Wambuku, Kihika's vision of himself as a kind of Moses, Christ or Mahatma Ghandi is "a demon" with which she grapples unsuccessfully. Kihika leaves her to go to the forest to fight for freedom. Ironically Wambuku is the woman whom Mugo, the politically uncommitted man, attempts to save from the homeguard. She dies in the trenches under the homeguard's whip.

Unlike the three characters who have been described so far, Gikonyo successfully combines love of the family, the community and the land. In describing Gikonyo's life before the Emergency, Ngugi brings out his creativity, and his joy in his relationships with his mother and his wife Mumbi. Gikonyo's trade as a carver and carpenter combines both creative and functional characteristics and gives him a special role in the community. He is the man to whom the villagers bring broken wares and implements to be repaired and his role takes on special significance in the context of the novel which deals with the problem of re-establishing social relationships after a period of severe disruption. Like Mugo, Gikonyo is attached to the land but he learns to adjust his attitudes to it in the changing environment. Before the Emergency his ambition was "to own a piece of land where he could settle his mother."<sup>8</sup> After the Emergency, his aim is to acquire a farm to be worked on a cooperative basis.

During the Emergency Gikonyo is rounded up with many other men of Thabai and put in detention. While in detention, he

weakens and confesses the oath because he wants to return home to Mumbi. He returns to Thabai to find his relationship with Mumbi broken, because he returns only to find her with Karanja's child. Though political goals and economic survival ~~have~~ to point the direction of his life subsequently, his main longing is for a close relationship like the one he shared with Mumbi before the Emergency. Where Mugo, for example, asks himself on his return to Thabai, "where was the fascination he used to find in the soil before the Emergency,"<sup>9</sup> Gikonyo asks, "God, where is the Mumbi I left behind."<sup>10</sup>

Gikonyo's relationship with Mumbi has special significance in the context of the novel. Gikonyo learns to accept the changed Mumbi, just as the society as a whole must learn to accept the changes which the Mau Mau rebellion had brought about in relation to family life, social relationships and the land. Gikonyo's willingness, at the end of the novel, to talk about Mumbi's child by Karanja symbolizes his recognition of the need to face up to the events of the recent past. Only by facing up to them, as Mumbi emphasizes, can their relationship survive. She tells Gikonyo:

People try to rub out things, but they cannot. Things are not so easy. What has passed between us is too much to be passed over in a sentence. We need to talk, to open our hearts to one another, examine them and then together plan the future we want.<sup>11</sup>

With the promise of reconciliation between Gikonyo and Mumbi, his impulse toward artistic creativity, which had become dormant, is revived.

All four male characters are related to Mumbi in some

way. She is Kihika's sister, Gikonyo's wife, the mother of Karanja's child and the only person who breaks through the barrier of Mugo's isolation. She is thus a link between forces which tend to move in different directions. In this respect, she personifies the community itself. As an individual character, Mumbi is generous, forgiving and enduring, helping others "to put [their] particular grief into perspective."<sup>12</sup>

In depicting the five characters described above, Ngugi shows how war dislocates and smashes the relationships within the family and the community. In his handling of the relationship between Gikonyo and Mumbi, in particular, Ngugi links the personal and the communal levels of existence to show how they support each other in Gikuyu thinking. Stages in the relationship between Gikonyo and Mumbi parallel stages which Ngugi also wishes to distinguish in the life of the community. We recognize, both in the situation of Gikonyo and Mumbi and in that of the society, the familiar pattern of separation, transition and reintegration. In the case of Gikonyo and Mumbi, there is the period of harmony and creativity in Gikonyo's work, then a period of disruption caused by the Emergency and finally the hope of reconciliation following the Independence day celebrations.

So far, we have shown how Ngugi uses the situations of individual characters to convey the opposition of forces in Kenyan society during the Mau Mau Rebellion. In the following analysis we will examine the ways in which the interaction of characters in A Grain of Wheat also reflects the conflict between the communal ethic of traditional African society and

the individualism which is the result of the prolonged contact between African and Western societies. It is in this connection that the characters Warui and Wambui assume importance.

Warui and Wambui represent continuity in the society; they are older characters who form a link between the past and the present and are repositories of popular tradition. Warui's life, the narrator observes, "was in a way the story of the Party."<sup>13</sup> In the modern period, the Party, a political organization which has developed in protest against colonial rule, has replaced the old communal social institutions as a force for cohesion in the society. Ngugi gives the Party cultural as well as political significance. Warui and Wambui are largely responsible for certain legends which spring up about Mugo. After Mugo's refusal to lead the Independence day celebrations, Warui went to Wambui's place to tell her of Mugo's refusal. Then the narrator observes:

Wambui and Warui went to a few other huts and told the same story. And so the word passed from one hut to the next. The man who had suffered so much further revealed his greatness in modesty. By refusing to lead, Mugo had become a legendary hero.<sup>14</sup>

This is only one of many occasions on which Warui and Wambui are shown to be responsible for "weaving legends" around Mugo's name and crediting him with "imagined deeds." These older characters are, in effect, representative portraits from the section of the community which is steeped in the values of the traditional past and which is concerned primarily about continuity in the tradition. It is Wambui, for example, who pronounces the judgment that Kihika's exploits will become part of the communal

record.

Warui and Wambui look forward eagerly to the Independence day celebrations as the culmination of the Party's effort. The failure of events on that day is symbolic. It leaves them puzzled and disappointed. Warui observes to Wambui:

"Something went wrong . . . We slaughtered the rams - and prayed for our village. But it was like warm water in the mouth of a thirsty man. It was not what I had waited for, these many years."<sup>15</sup>

Warui's observation implies that because certain rituals have been carried out in the customary way, events must respond in the manner expected by those who have performed the ritual. Warui's and Wambui's disappointment with the Independence day celebrations suggest that their traditional approach to social problems are inadequate in the new political context. Their interpretation of situations often proves to be faulty. They discover, for example, that Mugo, whom they have made into a hero, is the man who betrayed Kihika. Later, after Mugo has been tried and condemned, Wambui doubts the judgement passed against him. "Perhaps we should not have tried him,"<sup>16</sup> she mutters, as she wearily attempts to resume her domestic routines.

In subjecting Warui's and Wambui's values to such examination, Ngugi asks his readers to look critically at the popular tradition. He suggests that although a degree of continuity in tradition is necessary for the survival of the community, survival also requires coming to terms with the new environment. Adaptation to a changed context, Ngugi suggests, makes necessary certain modifications in standards of judging behaviour.

At the opposite pole from Warui and Wambui are Mugo and Karanja who are examples of persons motivated by self-interest. In Mugo and Karanja, Ngugi distinguishes two different forms of individualism. Both men are concerned about personal survival in a situation of crisis. However, while Mugo attempts to remain uncommitted to the struggle against the colonial authorities, Karanja's ambitions motivate him to work with these authorities against his own community. Mugo's ambitions, as we have shown earlier, do not in fact run counter to the values of his society until the situation of crisis forces him to choose between joining Kihika or betraying him. In A Grain of Wheat, Ngugi examines the behaviour of the individualist in relation to the norms of the culture and the situation of social change.

In traditional African society, individualism was distrusted. In Kikuyu society, in particular, as Jomo Kenyatta has noted:

The selfish or self-regarding man has no name or reputation . . . An individualist is looked upon with suspicion and is given a nickname, mwebongia, one who works only for himself and is likely to end up as a wizard.<sup>17</sup>

The punishment for the individualist in traditional society, as South African writer Mazizi Kunene has observed, "lies ultimately in the sanction and isolation which society imposes on those who apparently refuse . . . to participate in society."<sup>18</sup> In Mugo's case, Ngugi shows that such traditional attitudes must, in context of social change, be tempered by an understanding of the pressures exerted on the individual as well as by a recognition of inadequacies in the traditional social institutions.

To begin with, Ngugi shows that Mugo's isolation from the rest of the community is not something for which he has been totally responsible. His childhood experiences with his drunken aunt Waitherero, who brought him up, had deprived him of social contacts and made him distrustful of people. In this respect he may be contrasted with Karanja who has many friends among his own age group, who is admired by younger boys like Mumbi's brother, Kariuki, and is popular with the women. In the second place, Ngugi shows that there is nothing sinister about Mugo's desire for privacy. Mugo's hut becomes his world because he is landless; the strip which he farms belongs to Warui. His hut provides the satisfactions that others get from a rounded existence, as the following description shows:

He often fussed over pushing the key into the lock, delaying the final act, the operation gave him pleasure; the hut was an extension of himself, his hopes and dreams. He entered, sat on the bed and admired the walls . . . and the cone-shaped roof, from which bits of grass and fern stuck out. Soon darkness crept into the hut. He lit the oil lamp whistling to himself as he did so . . . After eating, he walked to the door to make sure it was securely bolted. Again he lingered over the bolt admiringly.<sup>17</sup>

This picture of Mugo clearly places him in a sympathetic light. Finally Ngugi depicts Mugo as a compassionate person in direct contrast with characters like Karanja and Kihika.

The fact that Mugo is duly punished for betraying Kihika is in keeping with the traditional African view of the relationship between the individual and the community. In the traditional viewpoint, as Chinua Achebe, for example, has observed, "The obvious curtailment of a man's power to walk alone and do

as he will is provided by another potent force - the will of the community."<sup>20</sup> In many respects, Ngugi shows Mugo to be a victim of this ethic. First of all, Kihika forces a choice upon him. Secondly, he is the victim of the failure of other characters like Wambui and Wambui to understand the changes in the society. Wambui, for example, fails to understand the difficulty of choice for the individual in a more complex society. She thus denies that there is any good in Mugo, since she considers his betrayal of Kihika a crime against the community. "Nobody could have saved him," she tells Mumbi, ". . . because there was nothing to save."<sup>21</sup> Thirdly, the characters like Karanja and Gikonyo who have, like Mugo, been involved in making choices recognize him as a man of courage when he confesses to betraying Kihika. Finally Kihika's sister is able to forgive Mugo.

The kind of forgiveness which Mumbi shows in Mugo's case is withheld from Karanja. Although he survives the Emergency, it is clear that he has no place in the new Kenya. Ngugi indicates this by mentioning specific areas of social existence from which Karanja is excluded. Karanja's abandonment of his mother indicates a break with family. Mumbi's refusal to let him see their child symbolizes his exclusion from the benefits of the period of struggle. His exclusion from community is indicated by his isolation in the eating house where all the talk is of Jomo and Uhuru. The reader's last glimpse of Karanja is of a man without family ties and without land, and with a growing sense of loneliness.

Ngugi has so handled his treatment of the individualist

as to bring into question certain norms of the traditional culture. In Mugo's case, he makes clear the necessity for modifications of traditional modes of thinking. However, Ngugi also suggests that the individual's own interest dictates his involvement in the society. Thus he also makes a case for the individual's responsibility to the wider society. While the concept of the individual's responsibility remains valid in the contemporary period, the nature of the individual's social commitment, Ngugi shows, may change over time.

In traditional African society, the degree of the individual's social commitment was measured largely in terms of physical courage displayed in protection of the society. In Zulu society, for example, as Mazizi Kunene has observed, "The highest virtue was not justice . . . but heroism, that is, self-sacrifice on behalf of the community."<sup>22</sup> In A Grain of Wheat Kihika's physical courage and readiness for self-sacrifice make him a hero in the traditional sense. Kihika, however, reveals the egoism of the self-appointed leader. The narrator observes, for example, that Kihika "had visions" of himself, a saint, leading the Gikuyu people to freedom and power."<sup>23</sup> Kihika's political vision is accompanied by an obsession with proving his personal commitment. As a result, he exalts the cause rather than the people whom the cause is intended to rescue. Kihika's code of bravery thus tends to ignore other types of contributions which differently disposed individuals make to the society. He observes to Mugo, for example:

I despise the weak. Let them be trampled to death. I spit on the weakness of our fathers.

Their memory gives me no pride. And even today, tomorrow, the weak and those with feeble hearts shall be wiped from the earth. The strong shall rule.<sup>24</sup>

Kihika, in effect, would forget those aspects of the past which he considers inglorious. His show of courage is intended to redeem the past as much as to safeguard the present. Ngugi shows, however, in the novel as a whole, that the community, in order to survive, must be able to reconcile weakness in some areas with strength in others.

Although Kihika is traditionalist in his thinking in that he has a rigid idea of the type of contribution which each individual should make to his society, he is much infected by Western ideas. Kihika preaches, for example, the redemption of the society through a sacrifice of blood and uses Christ's crucifixion as his example. He observes:

All oppressed people have a cross to bear . . . Had Christ's death a meaning for the children of Israel? In Kenya we want a death which will change things, that is to say, we want a true sacrifice. I die for you, you die for me, we become a sacrifice for one another.<sup>25</sup>

Kihika's use of biblical parallels to convey his political message points up the irony of his situation as a revolutionary in the colonial context. He is attempting to free his society from foreign domination but relies on symbolism derived from a foreign culture to convey his purpose.

It is clear that through Kihika, Ngugi is attempting to resolve some of the contradictions in the situation of the revolutionary in the ex-colonial context. As a character in the novel, Kihika expresses some of Ngugi's ideas which are

mentioned elsewhere as, for example, the idea of the purifying effects of violence exercised in the right cause. Influenced by Frantz Fanon's The Wretched of the Earth, Ngugi has observed, for example,

Violence in order to change an intolerable unjust social order is not savagery; it purifies man. Violence to protect and preserve an unjust oppressive social order is criminal and diminishes man.<sup>26</sup>

Another idea which Ngugi brings out in the novel, through Kihika, is the relationship between local, national and Pan African goals. Correspondingly Ngugi has observed elsewhere about Kenya:

We want to create a revolutionary culture which is not narrowly confined by the limitations of tribal traditions or national boundaries but looks outward to Pan-Africa and the Third World. . . .<sup>27</sup>

The resolution of the action of the novel suggests that, although Ngugi has made Kihika into a mouthpiece for some of his ideas on revolutionary struggle, he has come to realize that such ideas can operate only within a limited stage of a society's evolution. Thus like, Warui and Wambui, Kihika is depicted as a part of Kenya's past rather than as a part of its future. He is an agent of change; he helps to create the ferment in which the "grain of wheat" germinates.

Kihika does not then survive the Emergency. His relationship to the new Kenya is defined by Wambui when she observes:

"We cannot let Kihika's name die. He will live in our memory and history will carry his name to our children in years to come."<sup>28</sup>

While Kihika's exploits serve to balance the record of weakness of which he accused his society, the inadequacy of self-sacrifice

as the idea for sustaining the further growth of the society is made clearer when he is compared with Gikonyo.

Gikonyo reveals the capacity to adjust to new systems of social organization and to redefine his social relationships effectively. In the period following his return from detention, there are marked changes in Gikonyo's behaviour. Detention camps, as the people of Thabai remark, "have taught him to rule himself."<sup>29</sup> He returns to take up his old tools of trade - his saw and hammer - but is more businesslike in his dealings with the villagers. He insists on being paid for his services and on being paid on time. Gikonyo pursues his trade as a carpenter largely to finance his trading activities in which he involves both Mumbi and his mother. These trading activities are intended to help him to realize his ambition of setting up a farm on a cooperative basis. This ambition is significant. Although Gikonyo plans to abandon the traditional practice of subsistence farming, he still intends to seek his living primarily from the land. He also affirms the traditional ideals of sharing and of communal effort. The new type of co-operative venture which Gikonyo envisages is different, however, from the old communal system, in that it is something which those in the present participate in creating. It is not simply imposed by tradition.

Gikonyo, then, is shown adapting to the money economy, a process which also requires modifications of traditional roles for men and women. Changes in roles had, in fact, been initiated by the Emergency during which women did men's work. Mumbi, in particular, is shown to have developed an independence

of spirit which Gikonyo gradually learns to respect. The adjustments which Gikonyo makes in his personal life and in his means of livelihood are accompanied by changes in his political awareness.

One of the lessons which Gikonyo learns is the connection between the individual and the corporate destiny. He recognizes the need of the individual to subordinate personal interests to those of his community. Ngugi brings this out effectively in the scene in which Gikonyo accompanied Warui and Wambui to ask Mugo to lead the Independence day celebrations:

"We are only voices sent to you from the Party,"  
Gikonyo said after Mugo had shaken hand all round.  
"The Party?"  
"Yes. . . mere voices from the Party," Gikonyo  
repeated slowly, his eyes lit up, fascinated by  
his own cryptic utterances.<sup>30</sup>

Gikonyo's own example shows, however, that while he accepts the principle of collective effort and is comforted by the idea of collective responsibility, he also has responsibility as an individual where personal relationships and the attempt to earn a satisfactory livelihood are concerned.

To sum up then, we can clearly see that, in A Grain of Wheat, characterization has been developed with special reference to a historical situation in Kenya. It is also influenced by the intention to illuminate socio-political issues common to ex-colonial African societies. The conflict between individual characters dramatizes the conflict of forces within a specifically African context and characterization centres around values which are held by African societies. As a result, the types of characters appearing in A Grain of Wheat are types which are

continually ranged opposite each other in major African novels -  
traditionalists, collaborators, revolutionaries and pragmatists.

FOOTNOTES TO CHAPTER 8

<sup>1</sup>On the need to relate character in the African novel to the African context, see, for example, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, "The Writer and His Past," Homecoming (London: Heinemann, 1972), pp. 39-46; Ezekiel Mphahlele, The African Image (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1974), p. 141; Chinua Achebe, "The Novelist as Teacher," The New Statesman, 29 January 1963, pp. 161-62; and Wole Soyinka, Myth, Literature and the African World (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 108.

<sup>2</sup>See, for example, Jomo Kenyatta, My People of Kikuyu (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1966), pp. 6-12; Godfrey Muriuki, A History of the Kikuyu 1500-1900 (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), pp. 110-135.

<sup>3</sup>The State of Emergency was declared in September, 1952. Events dealt with in the novel relate to the period up to 1963 and immediately following.

<sup>4</sup>A Grain of Wheat (London: Heinemann, 1967), p. 11.

<sup>5</sup>A Grain of Wheat, p. 43.

<sup>6</sup>See Chapter 6.

<sup>7</sup>A Grain of Wheat, p. 113.

<sup>8</sup>A Grain of Wheat, p. 87.

<sup>9</sup>A Grain of Wheat, p. 9.

<sup>10</sup>A Grain of Wheat, p. 81

<sup>11</sup>A Grain of Wheat, p. 280.

<sup>12</sup>A Grain of Wheat, p. 117.

<sup>13</sup>A Grain of Wheat, p. 22.

<sup>14</sup>A Grain of Wheat, p. 200. See also pp. 204, 232 and 246.

<sup>15</sup>A Grain of Wheat, p. 273. See also p. 25. The forest fighter, Lt. Koinandu uses almost the same words to describe the rituals performed by the forest fighters before they carried out raids.

<sup>16</sup>A Grain of Wheat, pp. 275-276.

<sup>17</sup> Facing Mount Kenya (London: Secker and Warburg, 1974),  
p. 119.

<sup>18</sup> "South African Oral Traditions," Aspects of South African Literature, ed. Christopher Heywood (London: Heinemann, 1976),  
p. 29.

<sup>19</sup> A Grain of Wheat, p. 213.

<sup>20</sup> Morning Yet on Creation Day (London: Heinemann, 1977),  
p. 99.

<sup>21</sup> A Grain of Wheat, p. 274.

<sup>22</sup> Introduction to Zulu Poems (New York: Africana Publishing Corp., 1970), p. 11.

<sup>23</sup> A Grain of Wheat, p. 97. In the traditional context, the man who holds too strongly to "one or the other doctrine," is not participating usefully in the society. See Kunene cited in note 17 above.

<sup>24</sup> A Grain of Wheat, p. 217.

<sup>25</sup> A Grain of Wheat, p. 110.

<sup>26</sup> Homecoming, p. 28.

<sup>27</sup> Homecoming, p. 19.

<sup>28</sup> A Grain of Wheat, p. 28.

<sup>29</sup> A Grain of Wheat, p. 67.

<sup>30</sup> A Grain of Wheat, p. 12.

CHAPTER 9

CULTURALLY DERIVED MOTIFS AND  
SYMBOLS AS STRUCTURAL FEATURES  
IN ES'KIA MPHAHLELE'S CHIRUNDU

The story of Chirundu is set in an independent Central African territory. Various geographical and historical references in the novel identify this territory as Zambia.<sup>1</sup> The themes which are treated in Chirundu are typical of those identified for the African novel in chapters 2 and 3 of this dissertation. Mphahlele is concerned with the "question of power"<sup>2</sup> - the nature of political power in ex-colonial Africa and the problem of adapting traditional cultures to modern social structures. As in the novels which have been discussed earlier, the personal relationships of the main characters represent situations and relationships which exist between various groups in the society. Mphahlele examines the choices for the individual and the society as a whole, operating as they do between African and Western institutions. Social relationships, in this context, Mphahlele shows, become "largely incoherent, pulling against and ~~contradicting~~ contradicting each other."<sup>3</sup> The situation which Mphahlele describes for a particular Central African territory may be regarded as a paradigm for all ex-colonial African societies which show social structures which are inconsistent in themselves because of social and political pressures which operate in contrary directions.<sup>4</sup>

In the following discussion, we are especially concerned with Mphahlele's method of relating Chirundu to the cultural environment in which his characters live. We shall do this by observing his use of motif and symbol. In the first place, we shall examine Mphahlele's use of the motif of marriage to advance the story line and, in the second place, we shall examine his treatment of the python as a symbol which develops his theme and aids characterization. Both motif and symbol are given special meaning because of the ways in which Mphahlele has related them to thought-patterns existing in Bantu society and to its folklore.<sup>5</sup>

The main characters in the novel, Chimba Chirundu, his wife, Tirenje, and his nephew, Moyo, belong to the Bemba ethnic group. Traditionally the Bemba had a matrilineal system of marriage and matrilineal kinship affiliations.<sup>6</sup> This is important as it makes Chimba's behaviour as a husband more aberrant. Significantly, the two important relationships depicted in the novel are Chimba's relationship with Tirenje, whom he marries both under Bemba customary law and British ordinance, and his relationship with Moyo, his sister's son. In Chirundu, the circumstances of the breakdown of the marriage between Chimba and Tirenje symbolize the breakdown of relationships between previously allied groups in the society. It also indicates the loss of certain guidelines of conduct in the society, for in the context of which Mphahlele writes, the marriage relationship or kinship affiliation, as represented in that of Chimba and Moyo provides stable guidelines of conduct for the individual. The

metaphor of marriage or kinship to describe other types of alliances is thus, in this instance, culturally derived.<sup>7</sup>

The conflict in the novel arises from the circumstances under which Chimba takes a second wife. By marrying his second wife, Monde, under British ordinance, Chimba becomes guilty of bigamy which does not exist under Bemba customary law. The conflict of interests arising from Chimba's bigamous contract supplies the background for dealing with the theme of power and the conflict between the politicians and their grass-roots supporters, who, like Tirenje, are abandoned by the politician who is busy consolidating his power.

Chimba's action in committing bigamy is deliberate. He is defying Tirenje who has made it a condition of their marriage that she must be his only wife. He therefore denies that there is any necessity to choose, observing, for example:

I love Tirenje as much as I love Monde. I resent the idea that I should have to make a choice: If you love both women, make up your mind which you're going to live with! Inanity - why should I have to put up with it?<sup>8</sup>

While it is clear that Tirenje is unwilling to divorce Chimba to allow him to marry again, it is also clear that Chimba does not contemplate divorce either. "Divorce," he later admits "would have been the easiest thing, but [he] did not want to lose Tirenje and the children. Not Monde either."<sup>9</sup>

Chimba also intends his marriage to Monde as a protest against colonial institutions. He tells his English lawyer Mr. Clare:

. . . your people colonized this country and imposed their own laws on us. Now the Ordinance supplants native customary law. And yet the British kept the tribal system alive so as to be able to govern through chiefs and kings. Isn't that contradictory? I'm out to fight a system.<sup>10</sup>

Chimba sees himself then in the role of a committed nationalist attempting to fight the British Ordinance by disregarding it. Mphahlele makes it clear, however, that Chimba is testing his own power by placing himself above the law.

Chimba's act of defiance is also aimed at people like his English headmaster, Noah Hackett. He observes for example, after the start of his affair with Monde:

. . . I felt rich, increased to be loved by two women . . . I remembered how the Hackett incident had rankled in me. So that I felt happier still that I could virtually say to the angels that were spying on me on his behalf. "Tell him, go tell him that I'm free of his institutions."<sup>11</sup>

Similarly, Chimba is reacting against his father who had become an overzealous convert of Christianity, and had consequently divorced one wife and had driven the other, Chimba's mother, away by his obstinate fanaticism. Chimba's "fervent" nationalism is at one level self-serving, but he also means it to contrast with his father's total acceptance of colonial domination as symbolized by his conversion to Christianity.<sup>12</sup>

Finally Chimba's decision to have two wives is directly related to his position as a government Cabinet Minister operating between traditional African and Western institutions. In this intermediate role which he performs in a period of social change, Chimba finds that Tirenje and Monde satisfy different

needs in his political life. He tells Monde, for example:

. . . I want to keep two wives - one who meets my demands in political life and in the city, the other in the country for whenever I tour the rural areas."<sup>13</sup>

Chimba associates each wife with two different social environments and with two different stages in his political career.

He observes:

Monde has become a habit I could not shake off; a convenient habit. Tirenje was a kind of home, the shelter a man comes back to after wandering from the cattle post; part of the reason for being alive, as basic as food and clothing."<sup>14</sup>

This association of Tirenje and Monde with different aspects of Chimba's life and with different stages in his political career is maintained throughout the novel. To the extent that Chimba's situation is symptomatic of that of his society as a whole, Tirenje and Monde come to represent different areas of society to which Chimba as a politician has pledged equal loyalty.

Throughout the novel, Monde is associated with city life and with Western European values. She has lived in England for four years and has acquired Western social graces. Tirenje is constantly associated with rural life. Mphahlele depicts her in intimate contact with her natural environment. She lives in a style which is not far removed from that of the ordinary people. Chimba is aware of her first as "A girl of country breeding with an earthy voice." "Although her face was youthful" he notices "her eyes seemed to hold unutterable wisdom."<sup>15</sup> The South African, Studs Letanka, later gives a similar though more elaborate description of Tirenje. He tells Chieza, the

Zimbabwean and Pitso, another South African:

Two women could not be more different than Chirundu's. This one - Tirenje - is firmly built, compact - you know - not flabby. . . . The face was once round, but I am sure it has been weathered by some loneliness or grief. And yet the eyes are still steady, they look you straight in the face, as if they were telling you of something vital in the woman that can never be destroyed. . . Braids her hair and puts on a headcloth when she goes out. You look at her and are contented to know Africa still makes them - her kind.<sup>16</sup>

Like Chimba, Studs Letanka associates Tirenje with what is enduring and, by implication with the endurance of Africa herself.

In contrast with Tirenje, Monde's proper environment, as Studs Letanka suggests, is the cocktail party. He tells Chieza and Pitso: "She moves in as if this social element was made for her, as if she ordered it."<sup>17</sup> Chimba himself is very much aware of Monde's social usefulness. As he puts it, "She made protocol feel like a thing rolling on ball bearings, conducted at the same time with grace, self-confidence."<sup>18</sup> Mphahlele does not, however, suggest that Tirenje is incapable of functioning in an environment which is different from that to which she has been accustomed. It is Chimba who insists on excluding her from the new context into which he has entered as an important politician.

Chimba's desire to have two wives under the colonial ordinance which forbids this, also symbolizes an attempt to hold on to old privileges while using the transitional period through which his society is passing to gain new ones. Chimba clearly belongs to the class of the new élite which is repeatedly examined in the Anglophone African novel in relation to the

masses from whom they develop separate interests in the post-independence period. Looked at unsympathetically, Chimba is typical of those who choose not to reconstruct guidelines for the society but to take advantage of the state of confusion in the society to make themselves more powerful. Looked at sympathetically, Chimba is himself a victim of forces which he attempts to resist. Studs Letanka who has no reason to sympathize with Chimba, admits, for example, that he might be "a radical of some sort who is trying to shake a social code people have always taken for granted."<sup>19</sup> Clearly too, Tirenje makes things difficult for Chimba by demanding his loyalty ". . . I selected you among many men," she tells him, "I have pegged my piece of land. No woman but me is going to graze on that land."<sup>20</sup>

Monde, secure in the knowledge of her practical usefulness to Chimba, is able to tolerate the existence of the other wife. At first she merely expresses curiosity about the woman whom she has replaced in Chimba's affection. Later, confronted by Tirenje, she reacts savagely. Tirenje who finds herself increasingly pushed to the background of Chimba's life and is finally denied even financial support is driven to despair. She brings the charge of bigamy against Chimba. Chimba is found guilty, and it is clear that reconciliation between himself and Tirenje has become impossible.

The show of strength by someone whom he had considered a docile ally angers Chimba. He regards Tirenje's challenge to his power as a betrayal. He feels similarly betrayed by his nephew Moyo who has become secretary of the trade union movement

which challenges his policies as Minister of Transport and Public Works. For Chimba, Tirenje and Moyo come to symbolize the forces which threaten his political power. His resentment against the workers and "grass roots" who supported the national front for self-rule, and are now demanding a part in policy, making merges with that against Tirenje who gave him emotional support during the formative period of his political career and who is later demanding the recognition which, she feels, is owing to her. The analogy between the breakdown of Chimba's kinship relations and the relations between the politicians and their formerly submissive supporters is clear, for example, when Chimba, reflecting on the changed attitudes of Tirenje and Moyo observes:

Yesterday they were weak and helpless and simpler to understand. Today they are complicated, they are in a position to wield power. And largely because they have each enlisted the support of others, they virtually broke into the arsenal and grabbed the weapons with which to threaten me - the labour union and the white man's law.<sup>21</sup>

It is important to note that Chimba began his political career as a school teacher. Speaking various local languages, but with a lifestyle not much different from that of the ordinary people, he made himself into a link between the masses and the élite and between the regional and central party organization.<sup>22</sup> The years of Chimba's harmonious relationship with Tirenje, 1959-1964, coincide with the period during which he organized popular support in the Copperbelt for the party. Immediately following Independence, when he is rewarded with a Cabinet post, he goes to live permanently in the city, leaving Tirenje and the children behind in the Copperbelt. As Chimba

becomes more and more involved with central government, he grows further and further away from Tirenje and comes to depend on Monde. His decision to build a new house and to marry Monde, which is intended at the personal level to test his relationship with Tirenje and to force her into a subordinate role, also symbolizes the transfer of his interests as a politician from a regional to a metropolitan level. His decision also indicates an identification with the élite rather than with the masses from that point on.

Tirenje's unwillingness to accept a subordinate role in Chimba's future is the major source of conflict in the novel. One of her intentions in bringing a court case against him is to force him back into contact with those whom he has abandoned. She identifies herself with the people "down below", the masses conscious of being separated from the élite. She observes to Chimba's cousin:

Msuweni, I also hoped that the court case would bring Chimba down from that high building in government and he would then see us down below more closely, know us again.<sup>23</sup>

Like Chimba, Tirenje sees a parallel between her broken marriage and the broken contract between the political élite and the masses. For Tirenje, the breakdown of her marriage which she frequently refers to as "the burning down of the house," symbolizes the process by which, Chimba who had begun by fighting the "colonialist" elements in the society is drawn away from his former purpose. These elements, as we have indicated, are represented by Chimba's father, whose family life has been

destroyed by his conversion to Christianity, and Chimba's old headmaster Hackett who exhibits the worst attitudes of the colonialist. Chimba had used the occasion of his marriage to Tirenje to confront and challenge their values.<sup>24</sup> The symbolic significance which their marriage has for Tirenje is revealed, for example, when she laments:

. . . Oh Chimba, why did you have to burn down the house we had begun to build - why did you go and fight Hackett and your father only to burn down our house and go build a new one with someone else - is she so much better than me?<sup>25</sup>

The symbolic significance of "burning the house down" is important in the Central African context of which Mphahlele writes. As Eleanor Preston-Whyte has observed, "It is a basic precept of all Southern Bantu societies that, once established, a house should not be allowed to die out."<sup>26</sup> Throughout Chirundu, the house is used as the material symbol of alliances formed. Its symbolic meaning in the context of the novel is culturally derived. For in Bantu society, "each new marriage is seen as establishing the house of the woman concerned."<sup>27</sup> Thus Tirenje describes the process of her coming together with Chimba and his defiance of the code of conduct insisted on by his father and Hackett as the "building of the house." Similarly, the house which Chimba builds in the city and occupies with Monde becomes, for Tirenje, the material symbol of a new alliance and a new loyalty. For Chimba, this house becomes a symbol of his independence within the political group to which he belongs.<sup>28</sup> Tirenje's final revenge is to burn down Chimba's house while he is in prison.

The failure of Chimba's plan to establish two houses becomes symptomatic of his failure to operate between two levels of the society. In the final analysis, as Tirenje points out to him, he has been no more successful in dealing with problems of social adjustment than his father for whom he shows such contempt. She tells Chimba at their final meeting:

It has come to the same thing - you have burned down a house - I saw flames and could not stop the fire - perhaps tomorrow another house will go down in flames and yet another be put up.<sup>29</sup>

Tirenje's words show little hope for the society adjusting effectively to change. Christianity had led Chimba's father to one extreme; nationalism has led Chimba to the other extreme. In their changed social environments neither had found a means of ensuring the survival of "the house" --the society.

A feature of the imagery in Chirundu is the frequent reference to animals. Many of the animals which Mphahlele mentions in Chirundu are directly related to Bantu folklore and heroic poetry and derive referential value from this.<sup>30</sup> They also have significance because of their association with social and religious ritual. The frequent animal references both have an effect on the quality of the language and create an awareness of a distinctive cultural environment. In Chirundu, Mphahlele uses comparisons with and allusions to animals to convey certain concepts and to contribute to characterization. The most important and consistently developed reference is to the python.

In Chirundu, the python is a symbol of power. The python is, in the first instance, a symbol which is explained by tradition and is meaningful to characters in the novel because

they belong to Central African society. As Moyo's grandfather, Old Mutiso, tells him:

Everyone needs to know him [the python] - he is king, ancestor - you need to look at him a long time although you are frightened . . . to know the size of sato is to know the size of your fear. . . .<sup>32</sup>

Each of the three main characters, Chimba, Tirenje and Moyo, has a childhood encounter with the python. As a result of this encounter, the python has a personal significance for each of these characters. For all of them, however, the sight of the python coiled around its victim becomes a compelling concrete image for exercise of naked power.

Chimba's encounter with the python had given him "a glimpse into the externals of power." He is impressed by the fear which the python inspires and its remoteness from other creatures, even its young. He observes:

I had learned a lot about the ways of the python when I was a boy. Almost every adventurous boy in our area - anywhere in Central Africa - sooner or later meets with nsato. Or more exactly, finds him. For he is king of his territory. Fangs, none, but sharp teeth, yes; fights only when wounded or attacked; seldom wants human flesh, only if he has gone mad, surrounds his eggs to incubate them. . . . The day I saw the King, he scared me almost out of my mind. You never want to see him again. All you need to know is that he lives in the neighbourhood.<sup>33</sup>

The python excites Chimba's admiration and provides a model for the exercise of political power. In his political life he sees such power in the President whom he describes:

Deceptively soft eyes oozing compassion. But you know it was compassion bestowed from a position of power. You could not mistake this when he declared policy. Ah, there is nsato

for you: the python that will only come at you if you bother him or threaten him in his own lair.<sup>34</sup>

The fact that Chimba is of the Bemba ethnic group seems especially significant here.<sup>35</sup> Chimba's concept of power is authoritarian. It is power which resides largely in the personality of the man who wields it and depends on the extent to which he can inspire respect or instil fear. Thus Chimba feels a kind of kinship with the python. At crucial points in his political career, the thought of the python retiring to its den to emerge again with new strength becomes a symbol of his own capacity to survive.

Tirenje's encounter with the python makes her fearful. She admires its strength but she sees it also as a potential molester. As a child, Tirenje had gone with her mother to gather wood and they had both seen a python constrict a goat. Tirenje associates the death of her mother, who had fallen ill immediately after and wasted away, with their encounter with the python. She remembers:

Nsato, the python coiled around a goat. Woman and child fall back and watch, dumbstruck - frightened, stunned by the swift movement of a giant, king of reptiles . . . Ma, Ma, I am afraid! Do not be afraid my child, it is nothing - this is how the ancestors will have it.<sup>36</sup>

Although Tirenje, like her mother, accepts the power of the python and the helplessness of the goat as part of the natural order, she struggles against the law of the jungle and the strong swallowing the weak. She wants to see the python again to understand the nature of her fear and to see whether, as she tells Chimba, she can trust the python.

Tirenje's childhood encounter with the python provides her with a concrete image for the duality which she becomes aware of in her later experiences in life. This duality is reflected, for example, in her relationship with Chimba, which she finds overpowering but, to begin with, protective. She perceives it in Chimba himself whom she comes to identify with the python. Tirenje recognizes duality also in the relationship between the politicians and the people. The politicians are admired by the people but also have the power to hurt them. Finally, she identifies the python's power with the contradictory force of traditional authority, which is beneficently and tyrannically exercised in society.

The process by which Tirenje learns to accept and handle her independence and to relate to various bases of power gives rise to the metaphor of bringing the python under control. At the end of the novel, when she is conscious of having brought the various forces in her life under control, she tells Moyo:

. . . I am going to begin again, I will build another house . . . I am not afraid anymore. Once I was struck dumb with terror looking at a python kill a goat. The next time I saw nsato I was a woman. . . this time I was not afraid. Nsato could not hurt anyone. But when nsato leaves his lair to molest and murder human beings the world is upside down, it is a wicked thing it must be destroyed - it must be put in a cage and its den burned down.<sup>37</sup>

The reference to Chimba who has been imprisoned and whose house she has burnt down is clear. Tirenje also refers to the recent protest marches by strikers attempting to exert some control on the politicians. Finally she is referring to the reconciliation which she has effected between her past and present and between

the contradictory aspects of traditional authority.

Moyo's encounter with the python takes place in a different psychic atmosphere from that of Chimba and Tirenje. His report of his encounter plays down the mystical power and fear surrounding the python:

I had seen sato - the python - when I was about ten. It was near the white man's farm. I was with a few other children whose parents were farm labourers. We ran to tell the white farmer, but not before we had stood for a few moments, staring at the creature, I with my heart in my throat. The white man came and shot it.<sup>38</sup>

Moyo's matter-of-fact attitude to the python is contrasted with that of his grandfather Mutiso for whom the python remains an object of reverence and fear. Old Mutiso tells Moyo, "When a god [the python] has you in its coils, . . . it is folly to look at him."<sup>39</sup> Moyo, however, can stare at the python, which, he feels, has no power to hurt him, for the python, as it symbolizes the restrictions and less benign aspects of traditional authority, has become a victim of the white man.

The python, as we have observed above, is a traditional motif of metaphorical comparison. The character who is most consistently compared with the python is Chimba.<sup>40</sup> The association of the hero with the python for purposes of characterization is a feature of traditional Bantu Praise Poems, in which, as Ruth Finnegan has observed, "It is largely through figurative and allusive forms of description that actions and qualities of people are conveyed."<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, in South African Heroic Poetry, as Daniel P. Kunene has pointed out, "The hero is often described as fighting against monsters, or as being himself a

monster or other terrible creature."<sup>42</sup> In Chirundu, Mphahlele is clearly adapting one of the methods and motifs of Bantu oral narrative to the purpose of characterization. The metaphor of the python overpowering his victim is associated in successive images with Chimba to convey an impression of his character and his way of relating to other characters.

The python, the monster with which Chimba is compared is one of the many fixed symbols in South African oral narrative.<sup>43</sup> It falls into the traditionally distinguished group of mythological swallowing monsters.<sup>44</sup> The image of the python overpowering its victim is first used by Tirenje to describe the power which Chimba exerts over her as a lover. Chimba recalls:

Tirenje often teased me whenever we made love  
... "You overpower me like nsato," she  
would say. "You hold me as if you were never  
going to let me go, like a python, as if you  
were going to eat me up alive."<sup>45</sup>

This comparison of their relationship to that of the python with a victim in its coils not only points to certain qualities in Chimba himself but also brings out the particular nature of his attraction for Tirenje. Tirenje is aware of Chimba as someone with great power over her. She feels her own helplessness even as she admires Chimba's strength.

For Tirenje, the image of the victim helpless in the python's coils breeds a sense of security as well as fear. This is brought out, for example, when, reflecting on her early relationship with Chimba, she observes "... you held me like nsato and nights after that I felt safe in your coils."<sup>46</sup> As in traditional oral narrative, Mphahlele uses the same symbol to

represent destructive and protective qualities. Daniel P. Kunene has observed with regard to the group of mythological swallowing monsters in South African Heroic poetry, for example:

To cover in order to imprison with the intention of destroying, is an idea that overlaps to quite an appreciable extent with that of covering to protect. And from this to the notion of the "covering" of the female by the male as a demonstration of superior strength, and a demand for female submission is but a short step.<sup>47</sup>

All these meanings are contained in Tirenje's use of the metaphor describing herself as a victim in the python's coils.

So far, the python as a symbol serves to indicate Tirenje's awareness of a balance in Chimba's nature between a desire to have power over someone in order to dominate or to protect. This balance is further suggested by certain associations which the python has in African religion and folklore. In certain African societies, as John Mbiti has pointed out, the python is considered to be an intermediary between human and spirit world.<sup>48</sup> In Southern Bantu society, in particular, the python is characterized as "the snake that holds together."<sup>49</sup> It is admired for its calm and even temperament as well as for its strength. When Chimba begins to abuse his power, he is associated with other animals also. Thus Chimba recalls one of his visits to Tirenje after he has set up house in the city with Monde:

"You do not hold me like a python any longer,"  
she [Tirenje] said teasingly one morning. . .  
I took her with a ferocity that surprised even  
me. As we lay panting side by side she said,  
"That was not a python, it was a leopard."<sup>50</sup>

Tirenje now compares Chimba with the leopard which ravages and

kills more than it can eat. The python image is, however, sustained. She later associates Chimba with the python gone mad: "Has the python gone mad because of a long time of hunger? Gone mad because he is full of himself,"<sup>51</sup> she asks as she understands the full extent of his abuse of power.

Our final view of Chimba is that of a wild animal trapped in a cage. His nephew, Moyo, tells the Zimbabwean, Chieza, that he is reluctant to visit Chimba in prison. It is clear that, like Tirenje, Moyo associates Chimba with the python - in this case "the mean python" which the older people had told him about in his childhood, one which the white hunters had been combing the bush for "so that they could take the skin or take him alive in a cage."<sup>52</sup> Moyo observes to Chieza:

. . . I think I am afraid somewhat. It's the kind of fear - I think - you know when you've got a killer of an animal in a cage - you know it can't break out - but you go and touch the wall of the cage - and something - something seems to tug at your nerves - you tremble ever so little - the slightest movement in the cage makes you jump or jerk or anything.<sup>53</sup>

For Moyo, as for Tirenje, the killer python serves as a concrete image of what he fears most - the tyrannical abuse of political power.

The attitudes of the major characters to the python give us an insight into the psychic worlds which they inhabit.<sup>54</sup> The python becomes an effective symbol of power in Chirundu not only because of the fear or wonder which it excites in the individual who encounters it but also because of the significance attached to it in the traditions of Bantu society as a whole. Like Achebe, Mphahlele draws on the special symbolic value which the

python has in the religion and folklore of many African societies. As a result, Mphahlele makes the python both a symbol of power and a symbol of traditional Africa.<sup>55</sup> This, however, becomes one of the main problems in the development of the novel, for in the python, we have a symbol which, on the one hand, is insistently associated with Chimba and, on the other, represents the values which he exploits.

FOOTNOTES TO CHAPTER 9

<sup>1</sup>For example, the references to the Copperbelt, and to the Bemba people, the largest ethnic group in Zambia.

<sup>2</sup>The use of this phrase is deliberate. Despite differences in treatment, there is a similarity of subject-matter between Chirundu and Bessie Head's A Question of Power.

<sup>3</sup>The quoted phrase is taken from Godfrey and Monica Wilson, The Analysis of Social Change (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), p. 23.

<sup>4</sup>In Mphahlele's own country South Africa, for example, economic necessity forces whites to work alongside blacks while official policy tries to maintain the separation of the races.

<sup>5</sup>Despite differences in history, Bantu societies show common features in religion, folklore and social institutions.

<sup>6</sup>In this respect they differ from the Southern Bantu. See, for example, Audrey I. Richards, Land, Labour and Diet in Northern Rhodesia (London: Oxford University Press, 1961). However, in both matrilineal and patrilineal societies the uncle-nephew relationship is important.

<sup>7</sup>Anthropologist, Max Gluckman, writing with reference to British Central Africa has noted the tendency to speak of political allegiance in kinship terms. See Order and Rebellion (London: Cohen and West, 1963), p. 151.

<sup>8</sup>Chirundu (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1979), p. 27.

<sup>9</sup>Chirundu, p. 64.

<sup>10</sup>Chirundu, p. 9.

<sup>11</sup>Chirundu, p. 44. Chimba is referring to the occasion on which he had been reprimanded by Hackett for making Tirenje pregnant. Hackett had attempted to force him to marry Tirenje.

<sup>12</sup>In three generations of Chirundus, Mphahlele distinguishes different stages through which the society has been passing. Chimba's grandfather was a traditionalist, but was discriminating in his acceptance of traditional institutions. Chimba's father is typical of those who have been dominated by colonial rule through conversion to Christianity. Chimba oscillates between the two set of values supported by his grandfather and his father.

<sup>13</sup>Chirundu, p. 12.

- <sup>14</sup>Chirundu, p. 64.
- <sup>15</sup>Chirundu, p. 14.
- <sup>16</sup>Chirundu, p. 99.
- <sup>17</sup>Chirundu, p. 99.
- <sup>18</sup>Chirundu, p. 47.
- <sup>19</sup>Chirundu, p. 101.
- <sup>20</sup>Chirundu, p. 45. Notice how close utterances like these are in style to Bemba marriage ceremonial songs. See, for example, Audrey I. Richards, Chisungu (London: Faber, 1956), pp. 196-198.
- <sup>21</sup>Chirundu, p. 25.
- <sup>22</sup>On teachers as marginal élites, see, for example, Linda A. Dove, "Teachers in Politics in Ex-Colonial Countries," Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Politics, XVII (July 1979), No. 2, 176-191.
- <sup>23</sup>Chirundu, p. 78.
- <sup>24</sup>Chimba had resisted efforts to force him into marriage and had married Tirenje only when it was clear that he was exercising his own will.
- <sup>25</sup>Chirundu, p. 81.
- <sup>26</sup>See, The Bantu-Speaking Tribes of South Africa, 2nd. ed., W.D. Hammond-Tooke (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), p. 188.
- <sup>27</sup>The Bantu-Speaking Tribes of South Africa, p. 179.
- <sup>28</sup>See Chirundu, pp. 12 and 54, for example.
- <sup>29</sup>Chirundu, p. 93.
- <sup>30</sup>See, for example, Brian M. DuToit, Content and Context of Zulu Folk-Narrative (Gainesville: University Presses of Florida, 1976) p. 27.
- <sup>31</sup>See, for example, Victor Turner, The Drums of Affliction (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), p. 226.
- <sup>32</sup>Chirundu, p. 116.
- <sup>33</sup>Chirundu, pp. 16-17.
- <sup>34</sup>Chirundu, p. 38.

<sup>35</sup>On the particularly autocratic character of chieftainship in Bemba society see Audrey I. Richards, Land, Labour, Diet in Northern Rhodesia.

<sup>36</sup>Chirundu, p. 81.

<sup>37</sup>Chirundu, pp. 155-156.

<sup>38</sup>Chirundu, p. 116.

<sup>39</sup>Chirundu, p. 116.

<sup>40</sup>The python is, however, associated with anyone who wields power in an absolute fashion. See, for example, the reference to the President above and to Noah Hackett and Chimba's father on pp. 17 and 34 of the novel respectively.

<sup>41</sup>Oral Literature in Africa (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), p. 135.

<sup>42</sup>"Metaphor and Symbolism in the Heroic Poetry of South Africa," African Folklore, ed. Richard M. Dorson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972), p. 296. See also M. Damane and P.B. Sanders, Lithoko: Sotho Praise Poems (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), pp. 40-41.

<sup>43</sup>See Harold Scheub, "Fixed and Nonfixed Symbols in Xhosa and Zulu Oral Narrative Tradition," Journal of American Folklore, 85 (1972), 267-273. Although Mphahlele does not develop his use of symbol in a manner identical with that which Scheub describes, there are some similarities. In Xhosa and Zulu narrative, Scheub notes, the symbol is made more complex through "a metaphORIZING process" which creates "a network of unstable symbols that complement and develop from the fixed symbols." (p. 267)

<sup>44</sup>The significance of this group has been explained by Kunene. See "Metaphor and Symbolism in the Heroic Poetry of South Africa," African Folklore, ed. Richard M. Dorson, p. 296. See also Daniel P. Kunene, Heroic Poetry of the Basotho (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), pp. 102-107.

<sup>45</sup>Chirundu, p. 16. This is also a reference to Chimba's virility. Among the animal symbols used in the Bemba wedding festivities is that of a huge coiled snake. See Audrey I. Richards, Chisungu, pp. 82 and 87.

<sup>46</sup>Chirundu, p. 81.

<sup>47</sup>Chirundu, p. 305.

<sup>48</sup>See African Religions and Philosophy (London: Heinemann, 1975), p. 71. As Mbiti points out, the living dead are thought to visit human beings in this form. Hence the ban on killing the python may symbolize a ban on destroying the laws of the ancestors.

<sup>49</sup>See Axel - Ivar Berglund, Zulu Thought-Patterns and Symbolism (London: C. Hurst & Co., 1976), p. 32.

<sup>50</sup>Chirundu, p. 43.

<sup>51</sup>Chirundu, p. 81.

<sup>52</sup>Chirundu, p. 116. Moyo is clearly thinking of the colonial authorities "whittling down the power of the local chiefs." See p. 34.

<sup>53</sup>Chirundu, p. 157.

<sup>54</sup>Thus across the generations which are represented by Old Mutiso, Chimba and Tirenje, and Moyo the attitudes to the past may be roughly identified as accepting, questioning, and indifferent.

<sup>55</sup>See note 49 above. In societies where the python is killed, it is often for ceremonial purposes. See, for example, Malcolm Ruel, Leopards and Leaders (London: Tavistock Publications, 1969), pp. 53 and 57-58.

### CONCLUSION

In the foregoing chapters, we have identified some specific elements in Anglophone African novels, which are the result of the novelists' attempt to adapt the form of the novel to their peculiar cultural conditions. In combining indigenous elements with techniques which they have inherited from the Western tradition, Anglophone African novelists have produced a distinctive type of novel. Their strong social commitment has obliged them to give a faithful representation of their environment and the effects of this may be observed both in their subject-matter and in their narrative method.

The tendency toward social realism has resulted in novels which are significantly distinguished by their thematic concerns. In that light, an important focus in the novels which we have examined, is the notion of transition. Individual and society are shown attempting to bridge different areas of existence and to reconcile equally different sets of values. Certain basic patterns of experience are then revealed. Typical situations described in Anglophone African novels depict individuals who are caught up in the conflict between generations - between kinship obligation in the traditional African society and preferment based on merit in the modern urban context and between rural and urban types of existence. The novelists relate the individual's problems in overcoming the polarities in his existence to those of their societies in general which are

involved in the processes of social and political change as a result of their contact with technologically developed Western societies. The connection between the pattern of events in the life of the individual and the overall experience of a particular African society is clearly brought out.

Anglophone African novelists relate the theme of transition not only to the historical experience of contemporary African societies but also to the religious beliefs and folklore of traditional African societies. The theme of transition, consequently, reflects the pattern in African myths in which there is a division or opposition of forces which the hero of myth or folklore struggles to overcome. This is true, for example, of the concept of the priest as half-man and half-god which Chinua Achebe uses in Arrow of God, the concept of the departed ancestor as the link between the living and the dead which Ayi Kwei Armah uses in Fragments and the depiction of Ogun as the challenger of "the transitional abyss" which underlies the characterization of Ofeyi in Wole Soyinka's Season of Anomy.

Within their cultural background, Anglophone African novelists have also found symbols and images which are peculiarly appropriate to the exposition of the theme of transition. Symbols which convey the notion of duality and of simultaneous participation in two existences are of particular significance. These include, for example, the mask which in Chinua Achebe's Arrow of God becomes a visual symbol of the contact between the human and the spirit world, the tunnel which in Kofi Awoonor's This Earth My Brother links different areas of existence, the

cocoa seed which in Wole Soyinka's Season of Anomy brings together opposing tendencies of death and life and the python which in Ezekiel Mphahlele's Chirundu symbolizes both the protective and destructive aspects of power.

Characterization in Anglophone African novels also reflects a concern with the theme of transition. The focus is on characters who are placed in intermediate positions. Certain African concepts are incorporated into character development. Examples of such concepts include Chinua Achebe's use of the concept of chi, Ayi Kwei Armah's use of the concept of the initiate in the rites of passage and Kofi Awoonor's use of the concept of the bearer or expiatory victim within an African mythic framework.

In some instances, as we have shown, Anglophone African novelists have developed a local idiom for conveying experience. This development is an important one which can help to distinguish African novels from other novels written in English in ex-colonial societies, for verbal style, as our discussion of Chinua Achebe's Arrow of God shows, has a definite effect on overall narrative structure.

In adapting the novel to suit their needs, Anglophone African novelists have thus given the techniques which we associate with a traditional Western form specific relevance to their social context. Although all the characteristics which we have identified as attributable to the African background will not appear in every novel produced by Anglophone African writers, it is clear that the works of major authors possess common

characteristics. The modifications of style and technique which they have effected in their attempt to adapt the novel form to their peculiar cultural conditions demonstrate the extent to which the form of the novel, which must be conceived of as organic, is affected by the social context in which it is produced.

Our examination of certain Anglophone African novels has shown, in effect, that the social context in which the novel is produced partially determines its form. The reasons for this may be briefly set out. In the first place, the selection of materials included in the novel is controlled by the motivations of the writers and relate to the central dilemmas of their socio-cultural context. In the second place, the development of plot structures depends on the types of people and situations which the novelists describe; the chain of cause and effect which is important in linking together the incidents described in the novels is derived from the values of the society and the goals and behaviour of the protagonists in relation to these values. Finally, narrative style is also controlled by the forms of expression which exist in the culture. The resulting differences in the quality of awareness communicated and in the mode of communication within the given literary context must ultimately be seen as an alteration of form, once we abandon the simplistic, though often convenient, distinction between form and content.

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