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"AN ANALYSIS OF THE STRUCTURAL USE OF MUSIC, SONG AND DANCE  
IN CERTAIN NOVELS BY WEST AFRICAN WRITERS  
IN RELATION TO CONCEPTS OF TIME"

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## ABSTRACT

The topic of this thesis is time in the West African novel in English and French, and the key approach is that West African time is readily grasped through a study of West African music. Though Western time is not exclusively or only linear, mechanical and exploitative, and African time not exclusively cyclic, synchronic and experiential, yet there is a characteristically African view of time and preferred modes of its employment in West African fiction. The novelists considered here wrote in European languages, yet each was a member of a specific cultural group and concerned to portray the aesthetics of his inheritance, an important aspect of which is the predominance of repetitive formulae, both in music and in oral literature.

The Introduction offers an historical survey of some of the main notions of time that have been manifest in the West, and compares them with notions of African time. Chapter One examines the structural use of rhythm and repetition in the novels of Camara Laye. Chapter Two discusses the griot and other traditions of oral literature in the novels of Ayi Kwei Armah and Yambo Ouologuem, novels which are concerned with the griot's continuing role in the creation and dissemination of historical perspective. Chapter Three analyses Chinua Achebe's portrayal of the values of pre-colonial life in Igbo society where the role of music is to limit behaviour through the structures of ritual which thus create static/cyclic time. Chapter Four describes the syncretic art-form,

'highlife', as used by novelists such as Wole Soyinka, which, because it is transitory and always changing, underscores the ironies of modern city life.

The thesis concludes that the authors discussed above are aware that music, because it is predominantly social in Africa, is a powerful medium for achieving a healing synthesis between the traditional past when communalistic values were binding, and the urban-orientated present with its insistence on individuation and material enrichment.

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For Raymond Brown

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## INTRODUCTION

In examining the parallels between the structures of African music, especially in regard to the use of patterning and repetition, and stylistic techniques used by West African novelists to reflect their concern with different aspects of time, (both in the traditional African sense, and as affected by the Western notions of time), this dissertation suggests that though there is much that is borrowed from Western literature, there are also special qualities which firmly tie the West African novel to a specific culture. The fact that the novelists examined here wrote in English or French but belonged to and spoke the language of an indigenous culture, raises a special problem. In so far as all writers of fiction have to employ some kind of time, since a novel like any other human art-form can only exist in time<sup>1</sup>, the question arises: is their use of it influenced by specifically West African notions of time either deliberately or unconsciously, or is it governed by changing attitudes to the time-and-space question reflected in the Western literary models (in particular those provided by Wordsworth, Flaubert, Conrad, Kafka, Sartre and Joyce) admired by these African writers? This thesis wishes to argue that though Western influences cannot be denied and are, to a large degree, admitted by the writers themselves, there are nonetheless specifically and characteristically African concepts of time at work in the novels, and that an understanding of these concepts can best be approached through

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<sup>1</sup> To quote Levi-Strauss (1969) on this point: Myth and music transcend articulate expression, "requiring a temporal dimension in which to unfold. But this relation to time is of a rather special nature: it is as if music and mythology needed time only in order to deny it. Both, indeed, are instruments for the obliteration of time." (15-16); S. Spencer (1971), ".... fiction is perhaps the most closely bound of all the arts to the concept of sequential time.... (xix); and Frank Kermode (1967), "So we may call books fictive models of the temporal world" (54).

notions of time demonstrable in West African music and oral literature. Indeed without such an understanding it is impossible to approach the writings of a novelist like Amos Tutuola, for instance, unless they are read as folk stories pure and simple. In fact they offer a critical insight into Yoruba aesthetics. Camara Laye, the Guinean novelist, admits his debt to European literature, in particular to the French literary tradition and to the writing of Franz Kafka.<sup>2</sup> Meno Spann has discussed in turn, Kafka's own debt to Goethe and Flaubert, especially the latter's Education sentimentale (1978, 48-50). So the debt is a far-reaching one. The characteristics of Kafka's writing which Spann notes as being prominent in The Castle, such as the problematic existence of the hero, the representation of a dream-like inner life, and the Jewish fantasy of leaving the place of oppression to find 'Canaan' in a foreign southern country, reappear in Laye's portrayal of Clarence's escape from his own society and subsequent journey south on a mystical quest in search of a King. There is even similarity in the ontological statements made by certain key characters e.g. "I am a white man" (Clarence, in The Radiance of the King) and "I am the Land Surveyor" (in The Castle). One may isolate above all, a parallel concern in both Kafka and Laye with the unapproachability of the civil authorities, and a hatred of all forms of bureaucracy. Perhaps what attracted Laye to Kafka was the tension in much of Kafka's work between reason and ancient modes of being, seen for example, in the allegorical story The Country-Doctor.

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<sup>2</sup> See Ben Obumselu's discussion, "The French and Moslem backgrounds of The Radiance of the King" in RAL Vol.11 No.1 1980, 1-26. He refers to Patricia Deduck's unpublished thesis "Franz Kafka's influence on Camara Laye's Le Regard du Roi", Indiana U, 1970, as the seminal work on the influence of Kafka. Laye himself said that this novel would be a Kafkan novel, in an interview with Gabriel d'Aubarede in March 1984. In addition, Obumselu finds that Laye owes some of his ideas to the Catholic existentialist philosophy of Julian Greene's Le voyageur sur la terre.

And yet many of the alleged borrowings from Kafka can be seen in an entirely different light when one looks for similarities, not in a purely literary source, but in the traditional culture and ritual behaviour of the society into which Camara Laye was born. The problematic role of the twins, Noaga and Nagoa in The Radiance of the King are a case in point. In The Castle there are similar seemingly interchangeable characters, Arthur and Jeremiah, the Land Surveyor's self-appointed assistants. Kafka has his protagonist say, "How am I to know one of you from the other?" (24) whilst Clarence asks, "Are they not interchangeable?" (116) This alone would seem to indicate that Laye's twins are conceived along the same lines as Kafka's assistants. But Laye's twins are in fact prime movers for every positive step Clarence makes towards spiritual growth, although he himself perceives them as 'rascals'. In fact in Guinea, twins had a very particular role to play in community life. Pascal James Imperato has discussed Bamana and Maninka (Malinke: of Mali) twin figures and there is no doubt that many of his findings apply equally to parts of Guinea and Nigeria. Imperato writes that the birth of twins was a happy event, "for twins are regarded as extraordinary beings with special powers, who are bestowed upon their parents (called kunandi - "privileged ones") as a gift from the supreme being, Gla" (1975, 52). The twins are the basis of a cult called sinzin which believes in the duality of the human soul, each person having a ni, a soul, and a dya, a spiritual double of the ni. Twin births were extremely common among these people and certain names were reserved for them e.g. Seni and Sine for male twins. A similar attitude to twins is held by the Yoruba.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See Ibegi images of the Yoruba by Marilyn Houlberg in African Arts Vol.VII No.1, (UCLA, 1973) 20-28.

An article by Labelle Prussin in African Arts offers the reader a new perspective on Laye's concern with the illusionary properties of architectural structures, which is also of course an interest of Kafka's. Describing Sudanese architecture and the Manding in West Africa, Prussin suggests that Sudanese style is exemplified by its towering, rhythmic, buttress-like pillars, rectangular forms and terraces, but in places where Islam has made no inroads "one finds the circle and the square interspersed not only in the same village but in the same compound" ( 1970, 13). Further, that round-house construction was the architectural mode in the West African savannah and that this depended on a wet-mud technique, "a technique which is closely related to the pottery-coiling technique."<sup>4</sup> Thus, Laye is concerned throughout The Radiance of the King with the tension between square and circle: the King's palace at Adramé and the pot-like red huts of Aziana (described on pp 119 and 147).

Another two significant examples of the Guinean content of The Radiance of the King are the Mammy Wata (fishwomen) episode (219-227)<sup>5</sup> and the antelope fertility mask performed by the twins for the king

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<sup>4</sup> These findings are confirmed by Susan Denyer in African Traditional Architecture (London, Heinemann, 1978). See pages 133 and 169-170.

<sup>5</sup> Jill Salmons describes the Mammy Wata cult, still very active throughout West Africa and central Africa, in African Arts Vol.X No.3, (UCLA, 1977) 8-14.



towards the end of the novel (272).<sup>6</sup> But where Laye is most influenced by his own cultural background is in his perception of the structure and use of traditional music, and in his making of repetition and patterns of imagery, the guiding principle of his narrative technique. The conscious use of repetition by West African novelists, the concentration on word clusters as stylistic device, and the resulting rhythmic patterns inherent in the texts, will be a main concern of this dissertation. In addition, music and dance as theme will be discussed, in relation to the novelist's attitude to ritual, to traditional forms of oral narrative such as the songs of the griots, and to modern syncretic forms of music such as Highlife. This will necessitate adopting an 'emic' approach to see how patterns of behaviour and perception arise from inside a particular cultural system.<sup>7</sup>

That patterns of behaviour and perception, of speech, hearing and even of body stance, arise from inside particular culture systems is a well researched topic in a variety of academic disciplines. For

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<sup>6</sup> Antelope masks are common throughout the Guinea forest area. See the article by James Imperato Pascal, "Sogoni Koun" in African Arts Vol. XIV No.2. (UCLA, 1981) 38-48. Sogoni Koun is the name applied to the whole field of reference centred on this mask: it is the actual horned head-dress, the dancer who wears it and the dance context in which it is used. (sogo=antelope, ni=small, koun=head) It was closely associated with age-sets, called ton, one of the masked performances of the wara deoun (animal-children). Although I can find no evidence that this mask was associated with fertility rites, there is every evidence that the contemporary use of the mask incorporates an element of satire directed against well-known European characteristics (Pascale, 45). Therefore, in performing a lewd mime, the twins are adapting a tradition to focus on Clarence's preoccupation with the physical desires of his body, which he sees as the main reason that he is unworthy of grace, in the spiritual sense.

<sup>7</sup> The terms 'emic' and 'etic' are Kenneth Pike's (1954: 37). As he explains them: "The etic viewpoint studies behaviour as from outside of a particular system and as an initial approach to an alien system. The emic viewpoint results from studying behaviour as from inside the system."

instance, according to Dodwell (1970) in his discussion of visual pattern recognition:

There are examples in the literature of differences in perception and perceptual categories that are clearly related to the general physical and/or social environment in which a person grows up, even at the rather low level of geometrical illusions and size constancy.... Gregory [1966] for instance, relates differences in susceptibility to the Muller-Lyer illusion in Western Europeans and Zulus to the fact that the latter live in a predominantly "circular" culture, where the opportunity to observe solid angles formed by mutually perpendicular planes, and their perspective transformations, is virtually absent. (233)

Of particular relevance here are the findings of Dr. A.A. Tomatis.<sup>8</sup> To quote from a paper presented by his wife, Mrs L. Tomatis at a symposium held in 1980 to establish an Audio-Psycho-Phonology unit at the University of Port Elizabeth:

He [Dr Tomatis] was able to show, in a research procedure which has become classic, by the analysis of the envelope curves of the acoustic spectra of each language, that the various ethnic ears have very different selectivity bands, within which the frequential relationships of each operate. (In this context "ethnic" means the ownership of a known collective linguistic unity.)

It was whilst helping children to overcome difficulty in learning foreign languages that Tomatis formulated the concept of "standard bands" in acoustics and linguistics which he explains as follows:

When you expose a child to a set ethnic auditory pattern, you immediately see his whole phonetic structure change, his whole bodily attitude alter. If the conditioning is continued

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<sup>8</sup> Dr. Tomatis is the developer of auditive physiology. His work with the Electronic Ear (a French-designed audiometer) has placed him at the forefront of the field of auditory perception, the psychology of audition, and the relationship of these to human sound production and communication. The basic theory on which his research is based is that the ear's precise capacity for input defines the voice's capacity for output, in other words, "The voice contains only what the ear hears." This was called "The Tomatis Effect" by Raoul Husson, a specialist in the psycho-physiology of the voice, in a paper in 1957, and has been known as such ever since. Sean Kierman (1981) outlines the career and theories of Dr. Tomatis and discusses the application of "The Tomatis Effect" to the connection between language and music, in his paper "Audiometric characteristics of the ethnic ear."



for several months, one can even speak of a psychomorphological modification. For example, if German hearing is imposed on a Frenchman, the subject is seen to straighten up, hold himself erect, and take on the rigid posture of a German. If, by contrast, an English ear is given to a German and you ask him to continue speaking German, he cannot do it; he even stops speaking; in order to continue his sentence, to think of it, he is obliged to take off the headset. I conducted the same experiment with Chinese; when the auditory pattern of the Chinese language, which is a tonal language, is suppressed, an inhibition is created which suppresses everything, even up to the faculty of thought. (1973, 6)

It is reasonable to maintain therefore, that patterns of behaviour and perception arise from inside a culture system and are inculcated from childhood.

#### The importance of the time-problem in the West African novel

The linguist, Sunday O. Anozie, applies the methods of structuralist criticism to African writing and suggests a re-evaluation of the time question in the West African novel. Refuting the Senghorian claim for negritude that "emotion is negro, reason Hellenistic" he says that the basic problem for negritude was to define an existential ontology, the African's mode of being and feeling, his situation in the world, but not of his thinking (1981, 49). He analyses the African concept and experience of time in order to apply de Saussure's terms, 'synchrony' and 'diachrony', to an understanding of narrative structure in African writing, particularly poetry. He suggests an examination of the use of time in African novels as a method of getting closer to an African way of thinking, but adds:

To be of any use at all, such an investigation must have, as its primary purpose, to make more explicit both the nature and the laws governing this internal regulatory dynamic, not to be confused with mere identification of 'seasonal rhythms', as a principle of novelistic plot and composition in Africa. (72)

He finds that the African novelist has much in common with his modern Western counterpart in his obsession with aspects of time, but in

considering West African literature the reader encounters a special problem in that these novelists "consciously or unconsciously, treat time as part of a general phenomenological experience and reality rather than as a simple chronology of events" (68). He is referring in particular to the Ambiguous Adventure of Cheik Hamidou Kane, and Camara Laye's The Radiance of the King, in which he says time is treated as mythical and, so, synchronic; and to Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart and Arrow of God where time is portrayed as a lived experience, "as part of the general ontology of the people" (71); to Ayi Kwei Armah's The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born in which time is 'devoured', not 'produced' by Africans (74) in post-Independence Africa (75); and to Yambo Oulougum's Bound to Violence. He continues:

....the recreation of time and space is as much an integral element and issue in the novelistic plot as is the theme treated. Often one gets the impression that time itself is an essential personage with whom the novelist has seriously to reckon, a character sometimes vying to dominate the scene of action and adventure, sometimes though rarely being dominated itself. (68)

#### African concepts of time

Do Black Africans have ideas about time - past, present and future - which are different from those held in the West? The answer would seem to be that they do, and further, that the African perception of time informs the structures of traditional dance and music and may more clearly be grasped through a study of these. One cannot make easy generalizations about African notions of time, nor is it possible to show that there is no West African culture that has anything like a Western time sense. Culture itself is a dynamic force which assimilates, borrows and adapts to the changing needs of the people who live it, whilst retaining basic ethnic structures so long as these are meaningful. Melville Herskovits (1962) summarises this process in the following way:

Even though change came to be a striking aspect of African life, the dynamic of Africa falls into place when we recognise that it is but a special case of a universal mechanism of cultural change; one that has probably been present ever since man has lived on earth. This mechanism is called cultural diffusion, or culture-contact, or acculturation. In essence, it means that whenever peoples having different customs come together, they modify their ways by taking over something from those with whom they newly meet. They may take over much or little, according to the nature and intensity of the contact, or the degree to which the two cultures have elements in common, or differ in basic orientations. But they never take over or ignore all; some change is inevitable. (6)

Herskovits maintains, moreover, that "music provides us with an example of how complex" the relationship of Africa with the outer world could be (4). John Storm Roberts (1972) confirms this premiss when he writes:

North Africa was an area of myriad musical influences. It had heard Phoenician, Greek, Roman, and Byzantine music before falling to invaders who brought an Arabic music containing elements of Coptic, Syrian, Egyptian, and Persian music - and even, some think, Indian. (4)

The roots of West African culture reach far back into European culture; besides which, there are symbols, particularly arcane and natural symbols, common to all mankind. (cf Carl Jung 1940, Levi-Strauss 1966, Mary Douglas 1970). Monica Wilson (1971), speaking for anthropologists in general, affirms that there are regularities in the social field, certain institutions such as the family, the wider community, law and custom which must exist, and furthermore:

From the point of view of the anthropologist all ultimate beliefs are comparable whether they assert or deny the existence of God. Humanists, Marxists, and Christians alike have ultimate beliefs and values to which everyday choices are related....such beliefs and values are also expressed in symbolic action which I call ceremonial, distinguishing it from ritual which refers to some supposed transcendental reality. (3)

That Africa has a long and troubled early history of repeated invasion and conquest by bearers of a foreign culture, from Phoenician

to Arabic, is obvious from a cursory spanning of the literature. Basil Davidson for instance, attributes the impact of foreign culture on Africa to the importance of the trade routes throughout a long period before the middle of the 1st millenium B.C. which lay between Middle Nile and the region of Lake Chad, passing across Africa by way of Kordofan, Darfur and Zaghawa. One West African culture, that of the central area of modern Nigeria - had passed from a Later Stone Age to an Early Iron Age civilization by about 500 B.C. (1964, 11) The penetration of Islam into north-western Africa began in the eleventh century. Its rapid spread across the Sahara was, to cite the African historian J.D. Fage:

....the work of Arab nomads, but was chiefly a consequence of the development of trans-Saharan trade, itself largely a consequence of the the adoption of the camel by the people of North Africa, a process which was complete by about the fourth century A.D. The expansion of Islam in the Sudan, other than in the Nilotic Sudan, where it was due to the Arab conquest of Christian kingdoms, was largely carried out by Islamised peoples native to the Sudan, e.g. Mande traders and state-builders and Hausa traders. (1978, Map 7).

Map 9 of Fage's An Atlas of African History, of the Arab's conquest of Africa, based on details accepted by Arab geographers in the twelfth century, shows a centre called Ghana, on the Nile of Ghana or Sudan, which demarcates the extreme limit of Arab knowledge at that time. The next great invasion was by the Portuguese between the XVth to the XVIth centuries, centred on Guinea. The first Portuguese landing was at Samma (Shama) in 1471 and in 1482 a castle was built at St. Jorge da Mina which served as the Portuguese headquarters on the Gold Coast. (Fage, Map 29). European expansion in West Africa in the XVIIth and XVIIIth centuries was largely confined to coastal trading bases from which slaves could be bought for export to America. The French concentrated on the Senegal and Upper Guinea whilst English and Dutch companies competed for the established trade on the Gold Coast (Fage, Map 34).



But in spite of the damage done to Africa by (to use Armah's language) the above 'predators' and 'destroyers', it is possible to isolate specific African culture-groups such as the Yoruba and Akan, and deduce from similarities in their music, in their religion and in their concern with lineage, certain basic concepts of time common to West Africa deriving especially from Ancestorism and rituals associated with the seasonal activities of agricultural communities. It is above all in traditional music and related arts, that these concepts endure. The musicologist, John Blacking, writing from his viewpoint that music is "an outward sign of human communication" (1969, 33) maintains that:

If a certain pattern of sound, of tone-stress combined with ideal motion, is associated in a culture with a social situation and hence with the various meanings that the situation has to individuals, it may be selected and musically developed in order to heighten the emotional effect of words or of a stated program, which need not be specifically related to the social situation that the sound represents.

The sounds of certain instrumental timbres, of patterns of melody or harmony, of groups of instruments do not have absolute meanings in themselves. Their meanings are assigned to them by society: an instrument of joy in one society may be an instrument of sorrow in another. (46)

Mantle Hood (1971) supports the idea that a study of 'tribal intonation' may be the key to unlocking the problem confronting ethnomusicologists, of distinguishing between different musical traditions. He cites an example of listener-response to a recording of a Hi-Life band in Accra:

At some point, I made the comment that even without the inclusion of African instruments, the Hi-Life band was unmistakably African. Was I referring to characteristic rhythm, melodies, and lyrics? I was asked. Yes, of course, but more especially to the intonation of the instruments and voices. I remarked that it was strange and at the same time musically very refreshing to hear saxophones and trumpets playing in one or another tribal intonation, pitches that fell somewhere between the cracks on the piano keyboard. (98)

To confirm his observations, he spliced together a recording of a Hi-Life band cut off in the middle of a musical phrase, and a dubbing of an American jazz band. When it was played back for his African friends, "the abrupt change from African to American intonation at the point of the splice produced a perceptible physical shock in the listeners." (This brings us back to the findings of A.A. Tomatis, discussed above.) So it is tenable to suggest that though West Africa has a long history of acculturation, nonetheless certain very definite differences of aesthetics survive the processes of change. This has been the focus of research by Robert Farris Thompson who writes, in an article on Yoruba artistic criticism:

....African aesthetics opens onto African sensibility. Aesthetic criticism suggests the relation of art to emotional ideals. These ideals, in turn, reveal the hidden unities which impose meaningful design upon the face of a culture. The mosaic may, of course, be apprehended only in fragments by members of the society. (1973, 19)

Ethnic attitudes to abstract notions such as 'time' or 'place' may also therefore endure, not only in the music and oral literature of any group but also in the day to day running of its affairs.

The theme of the African Studies Lecture Series in Bloomington, Indiana in 1982 was, in fact, "African dimensions of time".<sup>9</sup> The well-known ethnomusicologist and cultural scientist, Gerhard Kubik, was asked to deliver a paper on the subject of how African music provides insight into the temporal dimensions and may provide a key to

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<sup>9</sup> Current opinions about the subject of time in African music are summarised by James Koetting in a posthumous article edited by Roderick Knight (1986, 58) where he comments on Ruth Stone's paper "In search of time in African music" due to be published in *Music Theory Spectrum* VII (1985). An article in the same issue of *Ethnomusicology* by Kofi Agawu on West African rhythm, provides an extensive bibliography (1986, 81-83).

understanding the broader organization of experience in African life.<sup>10</sup> He had difficulty with this topic because firstly the problem was conceptualised in English and was therefore not directly translatable in an African language, and secondly, he did not entirely believe the ideas of anthropologists, such as Alan Lomax for example, that expressions or forms of behaviour detected by observers as determining the organization of one aspect of culture must be paralleled in another - a belief which leads Lomax to the assumption that "the relation between leader and led in song performance varies directly not only with societal complexity but, more specifically, with the level of political complexity" (1968, 155). Nonetheless Kubik does find parallels between elements in African music, such as the presence of form or cycle numbers and interlocking effects, and the techniques used in a visual tradition amongst the Nguni-speaking peoples, that is, the writing of geometrically structured ideographs in the sand. These tusona (sing. kasona) consist of a series of regularly laid-out dots which are circumscribed by lines. The tradition is largely obsolete now. Kubik writes that "they serve within the community both as entertainment and a store of abstract ideas about some of the people's most central institutions. They represent a written symbolic record of deep structures in the cultural heritage." He finds that in closely structured music such as amadinda xylophone music, and in the tusona, "each tiny component of a whole is designed to be an essential, irreplaceable element with multi-lateral relationships." These compositions, Kubik says, "are not merely 'art' or 'music' in the

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<sup>10</sup> This is taken from an unpublished article, "African space/time concepts and the Tusona ideographs in Luchazi culture with a discussion of possible cross-parallels in Music". It will be published in African Music Vol.6 No.4, International Library of African Music, Rhodes University, Grahamstown, in 1988.

western sense. They are little closed systems of functional and casual relationships, little universes without exit."

Western concepts of time are not directly translatable into African languages and similarly therefore, African concepts of time are not directly translatable into European languages. One may approach Western concepts through a study of the considerable body of literature on notions of time manifest in various literary, theological, or philosophical published works which provide a spectrum of possible thinking about time. Likewise, there is no standard work to which one can refer when discussing African concepts of time. A possible way of approaching this subject, (besides, as has already been suggested, by examining time in music), is through a study of verb tenses used in expressions relating to time, and through what the Kenyan scholar, John Mbiti, calls the 'phenomenon calendar' of individual societies (1969, 19). Mbiti has drawn up a chart comparing English verb tenses with those of two Kenyan groups, the Akamba and Gikuyu. From this he concludes: "In the east African languages in which I have carried out research and tested my findings, there are no concrete words or expressions to convey the idea of a distant future." At the most he finds an expression for the far or remote future relating to an approximate period of between two to six months (18/19). Most students of African languages, according to Anozie (1981, 54), recognise the limited range of expressions for the future tense, which invites the question whether the concept of a future is an integral part of the traditional philosophical system. Is there, in fact, a definable African conceptual system based on time? (72) Anozie cites Mbiti's statement that the future is virtually non-existent as actual time; and his belief that his understanding of the time problem in



Africa provides a key to the attitude of mind, logic and perception behind the manner in which African peoples think, act or speak in different stations in life. Mbiti repeatedly makes the point that "The linear concept of time in Western thought, with an indefinite past, present and infinite future, is particularly foreign to African thinking. The future is virtually absent because events which lie in it have not taken place, they have not been realized and cannot, therefore, constitute time" (17). Time has to be 'experienced' in order to make 'sense' or to become 'real', and this occurs partly through the society which goes back many generations. In traditional African society, he says, there is no concept of the future, except a very-short term future based on seasonal, synchronic, time. Mbiti takes two words from Swahili language, sasa (actual time) and zamani (potential time) to illustrate his point. He writes:

Sasa is defined as an experiential extension of the Now-moment stretched into the short future and into the unlimited past (or zamani); in other words, sasa is the time region in which people are conscious of their existence, and within which they project themselves both into the short future and mainly into the past (zamani).

Before events become part of zamani they have to be enacted in the sasa dimension of time. In this context history does not move forward into a future or towards the end of the world, but backwards into zamani time. Sasa would seem to be somewhat similar to the Greek notion of kairos which I discuss below.

Although Mbiti, "generalising specifically for Africa" as Alan Merriam says (1982, 456), stresses that the linear concept of time "is practically foreign to African thinking" and that Africans have no 'future' concept, he does allow that, partly because of Christian missionary teaching, partly because of Western-type education, "African peoples are discovering the future dimension of time" and that this

leads in the political and social context, to planning for economic growth (27). Moreover "emphasis is shifting from the 'we' of traditional corporate life to the 'I' of modern individualism" and this leads to a fragmentation of self-consciousness: "The individual simply discovers the existence of his individualism but does not know of what it consists. He has no language with which to perceive its nature and its destiny" (225). This is very much Armah's concern in his examination of the moral dilemma confronting Baako in Fragments; and also the reason for the psychic disintegration of Kofi Awoonor's tragic character, Amamu, in This Earth My Brother. However, Soyinka's interpreters, in the novel of that name, attempt to formulate a private code of allusive language to deal with this problem as it occurs in a highly acquisitive and corrupt contemporary society.

Alan Merriam provides several useful references in his discussion of rhythm and concepts of time-reckoning in Africa (1982, 455). Thus Bohannan (1953) says that when it is necessary to place an incident in time the Tiv do so by referring it to a natural or social activity or condition, using solar, lunar, seasonal, agricultural, meteorological or other events; Rigby (1968) talks about the "reversal" of time which occurs during Gogo ritual, and Evans-Pritchard says of Nuer time-reckoning:

....strictly speaking, the Nuer have no concept of time and consequently, no developed abstract system of time-reckoning... there is no equivalent expression in the Nuer language for our word "time", and ... they cannot, therefore, as we can, speak of time as though it were something actual, which passes, can be wasted, can be saved, and so forth. Presumably they have in consequence a different perception of time to ours. (1939, 208).

Beidelman says of time-reckoning among the Kaguru, that for them, time is a vague sliding scale focussed on the near present in which the past and future are of relatively little concern:

Time is expressed in terms of the occurrences of various natural and social phenomena, not in terms of any abstract units of measurement, such as are utilized in Western society. No single type of reference point for charting time is used by the Kaguru.... (1963, 18)

Another insight into African approaches to time is discussed by Kubik (1988, in press), where he quotes from Emil Pearson's book People of the Aurora - (an examination of Nyangela culture of southeastern Angola) - in support of his own findings that concepts of time are not expressed in African languages as such, and that it is inappropriate to project Western notions of time onto cultures so different from those of Western Europe. In a section called "The Time Concept" Pearson writes:

In the Nyangela language there is no word, as far as I know, for "time" as a continuous, flowing passage of events or the lack of same. Time is experienced as subjective, that is, that which is meaningful to the person or thing which experiences it. Time and space are cognate incidents of eternity. The same word is used for both "time" and "space" (the latter in the sense of "distance").....

"Time" is locative, something that is virtually concrete, not something abstract. The locative "Ha", "Ku" and "Mu" are used for expressing "time" as well as "place". Example: "Ha katete" - "In the beginning" (as to either time or place); "Ku lutue" can mean either "in front" or "in the future". "Mu nima" can mean "behind" as to place, or "after" as to time. (Pearson 1977:30).

Kubik makes the important point that in Nyangela culture time is a temporal relation between events which have already happened. So "the element of time is not separated from whatever element of space enters into the operations" (1988, in press).

The concept of the interdependence of time and space is not, of course, limited to African cultures. One may see an analogy, for instance, in the culture of the Hopi Indians of Arizona. According to Benjamin Lee Whorf (1956):

After a long and careful study and analysis, the Hopi language is seen to contain no words,

grammatical forms, constructions or expressions that refer directly to what we call "time", or to past, present, or future, or to enduring or lasting, or to motion as kinematic rather than dynamic (i.e. as a continuous translation in space and time rather than as an exhibition of dynamic effort in a certain process), or that even refer to space in such a way as to exclude that element of extension or existence that we call "time", and so by implication leave a residue that could be referred to as "time". Hence the Hopi language contains no reference to "time", either explicit or implicit. (57)

Whorf concludes that one can only approximate to a Hopi view of time through the language of metaphysics since they do not use terms that refer to time and space as such:

Such terms in our language are recast into expressions of extension, operation, and cyclic process provided they refer to the solid objective realm. They are recast into expressions of subjectivity if they refer to the subjective realm - the future, the psychic-mental, the mythic period, and the invisibly distant and conjectural generally. Thus the Hopi language gets along perfectly without tenses for its verbs. (64)

#### Continuity through lineage

Though traditional African societies may not have a concept of the future similar to that in the West, they certainly do have a sense of continuity and progression based, to refer to Meyer Fortes' research amongst the Tallensi of Ghana, on "principles of organization which have a general validity in a particular society", and in particular on kinship and lineage (1970, 30). Indeed, "the lineage is one of the most stable, widespread, and fundamental units of social structure in West Africa (34). Rattray (1932), and Bascom (1944), are the authorities for the contention that it is also the backbone of social structure amongst the Mandingo-speaking tribes, the Akan and the Yoruba. Discussing the time factor in social structure Meyer Fortes distinguishes the following functions of time: (a) as mere duration during conversations, ceremonies and social events which occur over a stretch of time but are



not intrinsically determined by this fact; (b) as continuity (or its opposite, discontinuity) where it is significant as "an index of forces and conditions" pertaining to some social events or organizations, which remains constant over a stretch of time, or else those that give way precipitately to new forces and conditions:

A lineage in a stable and homogeneous society exemplifies this. It is kept in being by, and is at a given time the expression of the forces that determine its structure in the past and will do so in the future. Discontinuity is exemplified in areas where military invasion, conquest, and alien settlement of a big scale have occurred....(2)

And (c) Time may also stand for genetic or growth processes, as opposed to mere historical sequences and as such is correlated with change within a frame of continuity. The concept of the future is thus, for societies exhibiting the West African patrilineal lineage pattern, closely tied to an idea of the consistent relationship between past and present. According to Meyer Fortes:

.... the notion of a rational and consistent relationship between the component parts of a social system in time as well as at a given time is implicit in the concept of [social] structure. It is, however, a difficult methodological task to incorporate the time dimension (which, be it noted, is not the same as chronology) into a synchronic analysis of the social structure of a community without written records ... A lineage must be visualized both as a configuration at a given time and as a dynamic equilibrium in time. Tale material shows this very clearly. A Tale lineage always functions as a whole. Even when only part of a lineage emerges in corporate activity, the total lineage field is subliminally present and influential. (35)

Monica Wilson supports this view of lineage as essential to a sense of permanence when she writes:

Permanence was thought of in Africa in terms of the lineage which continued through time, and which was symbolized by breeding stock, the succouring clump of bananas, or the cutting taken from a tree on a grave and planted in the new homestead when men moved. The trees surrounding a chief's grave formed a sacred grove which served as a cathedral - men worshipped there - and such groves survived through many generations ... The sense of permanence is not

confined to literate peoples, though the span of time pictured extends with scale. (10)<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore, she argues in Religion and the transformation of society that cultures embody symbolic references implying that this is all the time there has been; but time-scale alters as a society becomes more complex - there is then a deeper concept of time and a wider concept of space. Compression of time expands with history.

#### The concept of 'synchronic' time

Though there may not be agreement on the meaning of 'future time' in African cultures, there is at least a consensus of agreement about the application of synchronic time systems. Thus, looking for instance at the Komo culture in Zaire, Wauthier de Mahieu, in an article in Africa (1973, 4), shows that the day is divided up according to natural signs and the organization of the community work-load. The early hours of the morning are divided in relation to the divisions of the sun or other accepted time-designators e.g. Division K'ípha - (le second sommeil), (le jour gonfle), (le jour grandit), (les buffles vont boire), (le premier chant du coq) etc. (1973, 4) These divisions are of no definable duration. (This is a concept of time used to great effect by Achebe, especially in Arrow of God.) This pattern can be expanded to mark the passing of days as with the Igbo traditional 'week', izu, which is based on a cycle of four market days: eke, orie, afo, nkwo. Two cycles gives a full week of eight days. The Tallensi of Ghana have a lunar calendar tied to the rainfall pattern which in turn regulates their agricultural activities. The last month of the rains is called the 'Moon of Waters' and heralds a period of festivity. This is officially inaugurated by ritual during which the rains are abolished

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<sup>11</sup> Monica Wilson defines 'scale' as "the range of relations and intensity of interaction in wider relations" (1971, 12).

or 'thrown away' on the first day of the new month (Meyer Fortes, 152).

De Mahieu however, has this to say about the views relating to an African concept of the future discussed above:

The current view that primitive societies are orientated towards the past and have no outlook on the future is based as much on a confusion in the use of the term 'past' as on the ethnocentric choice of criteria - particularly economic criteria - which allow the future to be estimated. The study of Komo society shows that the ascendancy of the past is no more than the permanence of social institutions, operating as a means of preserving the social order. (17 - English summary)

This corroborates the findings of Meyer Fortes.

Synchronic time operates in societies whose institutions incorporate meaningful ritual behaviour. Claude Levi-Strauss (1966), uses the terms 'time regained' and 'reversible and irreversible time' to explain the synchro-diachronic system which he sees operating in primitive societies:

Thanks to ritual, the 'disjoined' past of myth is expressed, on the one hand, through biological and seasonal periodicity and, on the other, through the 'conjoined' past, which unites from generation to generation the living and the dead. (236)

Relating his findings to his interest in the meaning of myth, he writes that mythical history presents the paradox of being both disjoined from and conjoined with the present:

It can thus be seen that the function of the system of ritual is to overcome and integrate three oppositions: that of diachrony and synchrony; that of the periodic or non-periodic features which either may exhibit; and, finally within diachrony, that of reversible and irreversible time, for although present and past are theoretically distinct, the historical rites bring the past into the present and the rites of mourning the present into the past, and the two processes are not equivalent, mythical heroes can truly be said to return, for their only reality lies in their personification; but human beings die for good. (237)

The essence of Levi Strauss's argument about time in The Savage Mind is that time in the West is chronologically orientated, but time perceived in conservative and traditional societies, particularly those with some form of ancestor-worship, has a much more cyclical quality about it. Soyinka says of the symbolic roles of the Yoruba deities, Ogun, Obatala and Sango, that "as a prefiguration of conscious being which is nevertheless a product of the conscious creativity of man, they enhance man's existence within the cyclic consciousness of time" (1976, 1). He also maintains that the Yoruba world-view is based on a cyclic reality rather than a linear conception of time but hastens to add:

One does not suggest for a moment that this is peculiar to the Yoruba or to the African world-view. Kerenji<sup>12</sup> elicits parallel verities from Greek mythology in his essay 'The primordial child in primordial times'. But the degree of integrated acceptance of this temporal sense in the life-rhythm, mores and social organisation of Yoruba society is certainly worth emphasising, being a reflection of that same reality which denies periodicity to the existences of the dead, the living and the unborn. (10)

The Dogon of Mali have a religious mythology based on the simultaneousness of all time. According to Jack Flam, in his description of the symbolism on Dogon granaries, "events in time are conceived as having other than a merely causal relationship" (1976, 37). Once again kairos seems to dominate:

The idea that all time exists simultaneously and that the results of all past actions are always present seems to lie at the heart of the Dogon concept of history, and is also reflected in their system of representation. Each part of every ensemble is at once integral and a result of everything that has preceded it and everything that will follow. Time is paradoxically both in constant motion and perpetual arrest. History, within this context, is a series of prime formative acts which are endlessly repeating themselves - acting out, in Jan Vansina's terms, as expressed in The Historian in Tropical Africa, 1974 their "destinies". (37)

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<sup>12</sup> In C.J. Jung and C. Kerenji, Introduction to a Science of Mythology, trans. R.F.C. Hull (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970).



This is a concept of time which seems to pervade Yambo Ouloguem's Bound to Violence and results in his adopting the technique of montage to convey the simultaneousness of historical and personal events.

The African attitude to time would seem to reflect in some way an attitude to perfection in society, and to the nature of sin: that which disrupts or in any way threatens the essential connection between living and dead, between people and the natural cycles of their environment is bad. This holistic world-view is also reflected in their music. An ethnomusicologist, Andrew Tracey, writes:

.... the quality of relationships among individuals and groups as expressed in music is directly comparable with that found in society at large. African music demonstrates a dynamic balance between the individual and the group, between dependence and independence, that may not always be there in society, but which I believe African musical structure holds up as an ideal to society ... In my view the "state of music" represents an ideal state.... (1988, in press)

#### Western concepts of time

Concepts of time and space in the West as used by philosophers, writers and scientists are so many and varied that they defy easy classification. There is cyclical time, linear time, absolute time, relative time, external time, internal time, biological time, clock time to name but a few kinds. Whorf writes:

The metaphysics underlying our own language, thinking and modern culture ... imposes upon the universe two grand cosmic forms, space and time; static three-dimensional infinite space and kinetic one-dimensional uniformly and perpetually flowing time - two utterly separate and unconnected aspects of reality.... The flowing realm of time is, in turn, the subject of a three-fold division: past, present, and future. (1956, 59)

The Greeks had two words to designate time: Kairos and Chronos. Paul Tillich (1958) explains the difference between them thus:

While chronos designates the continuous flux of time, kairos points out a significant moment of time. Chronos points to the measurable side of the temporal process - clock time -

which is determined by the regular movement of the stars, especially the movement of the earth around the sun. Kairos points to unique moments in the temporal process, moments in which something unique can happen or be accomplished. In the English word "timing", something of the experience which underlies the term kairos is preserved. Timing means doing something at the right time. One can formulate the difference between chronos and kairos by saying that chronos brings out the quantitative, calculable, repetitive element of the temporal process, while kairos emphasises the qualitative, experiential, unique element. (197)

The Greek notion of kairos may thus be close to the African sense of time. In The Form of Time, Elliott Jaques's main argument is that western man's failure to alleviate the confusion bound up in such questions as whether time flows and whether there is an arrow of time flying in one direction, has been a major factor in the lack of development of a sound understanding of the nature of man and of society. He defines chronos as chronological, seriatim time of succession, and kairos as seasonal time, "the time of episodes with a beginning, a middle and an end, the human and living time of intention and goals" (1982, 14). He refers to Aristotle's distinction between chronos as 'dating time' and kairos as the time which gives value: "What happens at the right time [kairos-season] is good."<sup>13</sup>

Jaques is interested in the nature of our experience of time and uses the above distinction for his own ends i.e. to prove that only one concept of time is needed, which is definable "in terms of the conceptual organization of the experience of change, of process, of motion, of transformation, as well as of object constancy and permanence experienced as continuity of existence" (31). He refers the reader in search of a comprehensive survey of the difficulties of clarifying the nature of time, to a collection of essays edited by J.T. Fraser, The Voices of Time (1966).

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<sup>13</sup> De Categoriae Vol.1 pp 107a 8 and 119a 26-37.

Perhaps the view of time most widely held in the West is what Frank Kermode has called "apocalyptic", and which he describes as belonging to rectilinear rather than cyclical views of the world - though he warns against making such a sharp distinction since:

....even in Jewish thought there was no true apocalyptic until prophecy failed, for Jewish apocalyptic belongs to what scholars call the Intertestamentary Period. But basically one has to think of an ordered series of events which ends, not in a great New Year, but in a final Sabbath. The events derive their significance from a unitary system, not from their correspondence with events in other cycles. (5)

Kermode discusses the writings of theologians such as John Marsh in The Fullness of Time and Oscar Cullmann in Christ and Time who based their views on lexical analysis of the New Testament and held that two very different ideas of time are expressed by these two terms:

Cullmann and Marsh are seeking to use the words kairos and chronos in their historical, biblical senses: chronos is 'passing time' or 'waiting time' - that which, according to Revelation, 'shall be no more' - and kairos is the season, a point in time filled with significance, charged with a meaning derived from its relation to the end....The divine plot is the pattern of kairos in relation to the End. Not only the Greeks but the Hebrews lacked this antithesis: for Hebrew, according to Marsh, had no word for chronos, and so no contrast between time which is simply 'one damn thing after another' and time as concentrated in kairos. It is the New Testament which lays the foundation for the modern sense of epoch (it is very conscious of existing in an overlap of aiones) and the modern distinction between times: the coming of God's time (kairos), the fulfilling of the time (kairos-Mark i.15), the signs of the times (Matt. xvi.2,3) as against passing time, chronos. The notion of fulfilment is essential.... (47/48)

However one defines the distinctions between the two terms, they are useful when discussing 'psychological' time on which human experience is based, as opposed to logical notions of time researched by physicists. To refer to Jaques once more:

It is also of interest to note that whereas chronos has come down via Latin into all the Roman-based languages, kairos somehow became stuck and remained in classical Greek only. This linguistic hold-up reflects the greater ease which we feel with emotionally unencumbered chronology as compared with the more anxiety-filled experience of the time which brings human intentions and purposes into sharp focus, with

their consequent oscillations between success and failure, catastrophe and renewal, and between life and death. (16)

C.A. Patrides provides a very useful introduction to Western concepts of time in his chapter "Time past and time present" (1976, 1-18). He also provides an extensive bibliography (250-270) which covers studies on time in history, philosophy, art, music, the cinema and literature. He discusses the Greek notion of the circularity of time, of the eternal recurrence of events, and of history as endlessly repeated cycles. This, he says, negates the Hebraic emphasis on the linear nature of time, the irreversibility and uniqueness of all events, on history as progression from the six days of creation towards the Day of Judgement, or as Tennyson put it "And all things creeping to a day of doom."<sup>14</sup> In particular he discusses St Augustine's approach in The City of God where it is argued that the history of the universe is "single, irreversible, unrepeatable, rectilinear" (5). Whereas, Patrides says, the Greeks related time to external space, which is now of course the centrepiece of modern physics, St Augustine saw it as an experience internal within our minds, and thence to our perception of the totality of events, his main concern being to establish the connection between the permanent and the transitory.

In another essay in the same volume, R. J. Quinones discusses the Renaissance view of time which he claims was highly favourable to St Augustine, but closely connected with the emergence of historical values. From this comes the notion, prevalent in much English literature, of the awful bondage of mechanical time and the accompanying desire to somehow escape from it: "The energy expended to

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<sup>14</sup> "The Mystic" in Poems, Chiefly Lyrical 1830.



control time creates an anxiety about what will be and from which one seeks release in the insouciant manner of Montaigne..."<sup>15</sup> An obsession with time "and all the devices that measure time's flight" characterised the Victorian age.<sup>16</sup> The nineteenth century attitude to time was dominated by the notion of public time, or history, as the medium of organic growth and fundamental change, rather than simply additive succession, and the parallel notion of the fluidity of nature, as seen for instance, in the writings of Carlyle.

As for the twentieth century, Mendilow entitled his first chapter in Time and the Novel, "The time-obsession of the twentieth century" and opens by quoting from Spengler's Decline of the West, that our notions of time, in the historical sense, present a view of life "not as things-become, but as things-becoming" (1972, 3). According to Mendilow, Spengler maintains that Western culture sees "the world-as-history in contradistinction to the world-as-nature" and has thereby acquired "the sense of the logic of time, additional to the logic of space" (3). Mendilow attributes the modern concern with aspects of time so obviously reflected in literature, to the phenomenon of 'disintegration' which he says "is menacing every form of life":

Everywhere the old configurations have broken up. Out of the flux that has superseded the comparative fixity of the past, new forms rapidly crystallise, only to dissolve once more into the flow of things. Society no longer offers the appearance of an entity, but is instead conceived as an aggregate of conflicting forces. (6)

He writes that speed, which is the relation of distance to time, and which originally had the meaning of 'success', is the keynote of our

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<sup>15</sup> R.J. Quinones, "Time and historical values in the literature of the Renaissance" in Aspects of time ed. Patrises, 38-57.

<sup>16</sup> J. Buckley, "The four faces of Victorian time" in Aspects of time ed. Patrises, 57-69.

modern appetitive society and implies moving forward towards some definite goal. Perhaps this has something to do with our need to seek endlessly for perfection.

### The concept of time in the Western novel

All narrative represents and symbolises aspects of time, because action occurs in time and space (inner or outer) and therefore necessitates character and succession which may or may not be causal. Western literature embodies many different concepts of causality, and complex approaches to the question of time and space as experienced by man, which in turn reflect, or are a reaction to, prevailing political, philosophical and scientific beliefs in any one period. The basic thesis of The Sense of an Ending (Kermode, 1967) is that when the sense of time as epoch (Kairos) prevails in any period of history the literature tends to be more highly charged with religious and godly ends, with apocalypse, catastrophe, revelation, redemption and new beginnings:

It has been my argument that there must be a link between the forms of literature and other ways in which, to quote Erich Auerbach<sup>17</sup>, 'we try to give some kind of order and design to the past, the present and the future.' One of these ways is crisis. [p.93] ... Crisis is a way of thinking about one's moment, and not inherent in the moment itself. Transition, like the other apocalyptic phrases, is, to repeat Focillon's<sup>18</sup> phrase, an 'intemporal agony'; it is merely that aspect of successiveness to which our attention is given. The fiction of transition is our way of registering the conviction that the end is immanent rather than imminent; it reflects our lack of confidence in ends, our mistrust of the apportioning of history to epochs of this and that. (101)

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<sup>17</sup> Erich Auerbach, Mimesis, trans. Trask (Princeton, 1953).

<sup>18</sup> Henri Focillon, The Life of Forms in Art, trans. Hogan & Kubler (New York, 1958). According to Kermode (97) Focillon's thesis is that we project our existential anxieties on to history.

But according to Kermode, all general assumptions concerning crisis and transition have a paradigmatic aspect, and can be studied in historical depth. Further,

We can think of them as fictions, as useful. If we treat them as something other than they are we are yielding to irrationalism; we are committing an error against which the intellectual history of our century should certainly have warned us. Its ideological expression is fascism; its practical consequence the Final Solution. (103)

Margaret Church, in Time and Reality, studies in contemporary fiction, discusses one of the most influential relations between modern writers who employ revised concepts of time, that between Bergson and Proust. "Contemporary literature" she writes, "is saturated with a sense of Bergson's durée and of Proust's mémoire involontaire" (1949, 5). According to Church, Bergson, in Time and Free Will (1889) rejects a spatial or linear view of time as an inaccurate representation of conscious process:

....the sort of time in which states of consciousness can be counted would have to exist all at once....One state of consciousness does not necessarily preclude another. Furthermore, even when states of consciousness are successive they are interdependent and often pervade each other. (6)

Proust in the final volume of Remembrance of Things Past, "Time regained" (Le temps retrouvé), concludes and resolves just such a temporal arrangement in his novel. In doing so, he is presenting time in a way not uncommon among modernist writers; Virginia Woolf is a noteworthy example. For Proust, only literature dominated by involuntary memory is realistic, "for it is the only device that enables us to experience a sensation simultaneously in past and present" (Church, 10). Proust's concern with recapturing the past is particularly relevant to an understanding of how the past is made simultaneous with the present in a novel such as Camara Laye's The Dark Child. (And yet, as shown by Flam's research on Dogon symbolism,

discussed above, the notion of the simultaneousness of time is central to at least one West African culture.) Church writes that Proust's main preoccupation was rediscovering the past, and that "whilst accepting Bergson's theory of qualitative time, [he] was primarily interested in the opportunities that existed (since time was of this nature) of recalling the past" (10). The past is hidden beyond the reach of the intellect in some material object, or rather in the sensation which the material object will give us, and our senses wait for us to recognise by association past experiences with which they are connected (Church, 13).

In his chapter "Timelessness in fiction", Mendilow describes Proust's belief - in relation to the attempt to recapture the past - in the following way:

In his voluminous novel, he held that the past in its purity cannot generally be recaptured because it has been modified by the experience intervening between the event and the time of recollection, and has undergone a change in the act of passing through the crucible of the mind. However, there are incidents that were never noted by the mind at the moment of their occurrence, and these slipped into the unconscious, unaffected by the chemistry of thought. When on rare occasions a chance association recalls them from oblivion, they come up to the surface in their pristine form and become thereby free of time. (1972, 135)

This is different from the Romantic conception of the mind's linking of the past and present in a living chain of experience as explained by Coleridge in relation to Wordsworth's "My heart leaps up when I behold/A rainbow in the sky":

If men laugh at the falsehoods that were imposed on themselves in childhood, it is because they are not good and wise enough to contemplate the past in the present, and so produce by a virtuous and thoughtful sensibility that continuity in their self-consciousness, which Nature has made the law of their animal life....Men are ungrateful to others only when they have ceased to look back on their former selves with joy and tenderness. They exist in fragments. Annihilated as to the Past, they are dead to the Future, or seek for the proofs of it everywhere, only not (where alone



they can be found) in themselves. (The Friend No.5, 10 August 1809)

Mendilow sees operating in Kafka's novels, in both the fictional time and the psychological duration of the characters, a sense of durational rhythm that cannot be measured against any of the fixed standards of chronological time (139). A "nightmarish time-continuum" makes the quality of the emotion experienced at any particular point of central importance. On the other hand, Thomas Mann's novels on biblical themes are influenced by Jung's theories of archetypes, myths and the collective unconscious. A character performs certain acts because he sees himself as part of a living myth as perpetuated in oral tradition from generation to generation. The emphasis is on eternally valid culture patterns: "Through any single manifestation of the myth, therefore, there opens up the perspective of a serialistic pattern endlessly repeating itself, what Mann has called 'time-coulisses' (140). The fictional time of these novels operates on two levels - there is the actual time of any particular happening, and the 'time-coulisses' (grooves, slots) which open up behind it. Thus a character may be an individual in his own time but also one of an endless series, thus to see Eliezer is to see "an endless perspective of Eliezer-figures" (141). This seems not unlike Armah's concept of character in Two Thousand Seasons.

The complexities of the time-question in a modern novel can be seen at work in Conrad's Heart of Darkness, in Virginia Woolf's The Waves and Joyce's A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man in which, according to Church, time "includes a sense of the individual time of the hero, a sense of the persistence of the racial past, a sense of cyclic recurrence, a Jesuitical sense of eternity as opposed to time,

and a transcendence of time achieved by the artist." In addition, Joyce has an almost Jungian sense of time in which the racial past is also implicit in each individual existence, whereby memories of a personal past lead to memories of an historic past (1949, 30-33).

In her book, Space, Time and Structure in the Modern Novel, Sharon Spencer makes a distinction between closed and open structures in the novel. Relating experiments with space and time in modern writing to expressionism in the modern arts, to a) the greater scientific validity given to the meaning of dreams, and b) newly evolving concepts of time and space as they have been formulated since 1905 when the physics of relativity was announced by Einstein, she says that the serious novelist has an obligation, if he wishes to create works that reflect the reality of his age, to search for ways of attaining a fusion between time and space (1971, xix). Because pure duration is not susceptible to intellectual description and because the mind can only form concepts of that which is static, she suggests that following a narrative procedure of construction by means of juxtaposition or montage (that is, the setting beside one another without connectives of types of prose) one may annihilate the whole idea of beginning and ending (xxi). In novels with closed structures only one perspective is permitted as a point of view upon the subject, and perspective may be indistinguishable from narrative point of view (26), but in open-structured novels multiple perspectives are embodied, some of which are actually contradictory, whose purpose is to expose the subject from as many angles as possible - and, ideally, with an impression of simultaneity (52). Novels with open structure therefore seek to embody a dynamic view of time.

Because music has a special relationship to time and because through music one may most easily experience the phenomenon of time regained, it is often used either thematically or stylistically by novelists concerned with temporal/spatial relationships. Bergson himself compared pure duration with the rhythm in a piece of music to show that it is the opposite of succession, for just as in a piece of music each note becomes part of and changes the entire composition, so each moment of time changes the whole (Church, 7).

The musicologist, Victor Zuckerkandl, in Sound and Symbol: Music and the External World (1956), distinguished between the physical time concept and the musical time concept. In the former, time is order, form of experience, measures events and is divisible into equal parts: in the latter, time is content of experience, produces events and knows no equality of parts. To quote Elliott Jaques on Zuckerkandl:

He wrote with great sensitivity on both the sense of time and the sense of space as a dynamic field of force rather than as a static extension of points at a distance - in connection with our experience of melody, rhythm, and meter in music, and our experience of pattern, tension, and harmony in painting....He attempts to absorb all time, using his musical time as the model, into Bergsonian duree. (1982, 123)

His analysis of music in terms of fields of force extended in time leads to his conclusion that in music the whole is in some manner present in the part. He speaks too of "auditory space" by which he means the sense we have of a spatial wholeness that accompanies our experience of a musical episode (Jaques, 124).

Virginia Woolf is an example of a novelist whose work is a symbolic representation of the dynamic force of time. Thus Melvin Friedman shows that the "space-time dimension" of Virginia Woolf's Mrs Dalloway is used to counterpoint its theme, the musical style to be

found in the "circular movement" of sonata and fugue. It has been suggested that Bernard's weaving of various experiences and personalities into a final unity was influenced by Beethoven's quartet and more specifically, by J.W. Sullivan's analysis of it, which Virginia Woolf had read (1983, 165). This raises the question of the perception and use of pattern and rhythm in the novel.

In Aspects of the novel, E. M. Forster suggests that 'the special something' which springs out of the plot and to which the characters and other elements contribute, cannot be defined in literary terms: what he seems to be getting at is something very similar to Kubik's concept of inherent patterns.<sup>19</sup> Finding an analogy in painting he calls this fickle quality 'pattern' in the sense that Thaïs by Anatole France, is reputedly in the shape of an hour-glass (102). Finding an analogy in music, he calls it 'rhythm'. Pattern, he says, is an aesthetic aspect of the novel which springs mainly from the plot, "accompanies it like a light in the clouds, and remains visible after it has departed" (104). He offers The Ambassadors as an example of how pattern is created, and Marcel Proust's, A la Recherche du Temps Perdu as an example of a novel with rhythm in the easy sense (that is, as immediately perceived for instance in Beethoven's Fifth Symphony) (113). He specifically refers to the "little phrase" in the music of Vinteuil as one of the internal stitches in a somewhat chaotic plot:

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<sup>19</sup> For a discussion of the meaning of 'inherent pattern' see Gerhard Kubik's article "Pattern perception and recognition in African music" in The Performing Arts, Music and Dance eds. Blacking & Kealiinohomoken (Mouton, 1979). Kubik defines inherent patterns as auditory patterns which stand out from the overall complex of the melodic/rhythmic models of a musical passage. He emphasises the point that the composers and musicians of African music make skillful use of the characteristics of human auditory perception and aim to produce these patterns as part of the composition through the use of notes of different pitch layers which form sub-patterns with one another.

"The little phrase does more than anything else....to make us feel that we are in a homogeneous world." Easy rhythm he defines as "repetition plus variation" (115), but then he comes extremely close to Zuckerkandl's idea of fields of force extended in time, in his perception of an overall effect of a work like the Fifth Symphony so that when the orchestra stops "we hear something that has never actually been played." He goes on to explain:

This common entity, this new thing, is the symphony as a whole, and it has been achieved mainly (though not entirely) by the relation between the three big blocks of sound which the orchestra has been playing. I am calling this relation "rhythmic". (115)

Zuckerkandl says that metre and rhythm are the effects of the mere passing of time in the tones, of their temporality. Because tones have duration, because time elapses in them, we have rhythm in music. The creation of a rhythmic relation between the parts of a composition thus involves a structuring of time. In Africa, as in other parts of the world where there are primitive rural communities, this is demonstrable in the rhythms and patterns of oral literature.

#### Patterning and repetition in oral literature

Oral literature in Africa shows a degree of deliberate manipulation and control of listener/audience response through the use of repetition. The function of structure in ritual African music is to regulate and control the perceptions of the audience or dancers. Harold Scheub says of this aspect of oral literature:

The performer of oral narrative elicits emotions from the members of her audience, then patterns those emotions - shapes and gives them form. The first of these operations is achieved primarily through the images that the artist evokes. The result is a variegated flow of emotions which is then patterned by the rhythm of the performance, through repetition in its several forms. (1978, 71)



Control of audience response therefore, is achieved through repetition of the basic 'image' sequence in Scheub's terms. His definition of 'image' covers a wide field: "felt actions or sets of actions evoked in the imaginations of the members of an audience by verbal and nonverbal elements arranged and controlled by the performer, requiring a common experience by both artist and audience" (71). Very often the inclusion of a song with chorus in a story will have a deep structural purpose:

Images are organized by means of a song, chant or action that can be repeated any number of times to form an expansible image. Repetition of the basic image sequence moves the narrative towards its resolution. (73)

With regard to time, Scheub says that the use of patterning to control emotion works towards establishing a relationship between past and present. It is often used by African novelists to achieve the same effect and is a dominant feature of Achebe's narrative style. A regular rhythmic background of repeated image sequence provides links with the past and because of the degree of emotional involvement, "seemingly unlike images are experienced as identical" (77). Flam, in his discussion of Dogon mythology, says that repetitions of various symbols associated with ritual "are no less than repeated affirmations of the continuity of the world order; the repetition of certain numbers and signs provides a consistent ritual key by which the various elements of this continuity may be evoked and reconciled" (38).

Milman Parry's definition of the formula - "an expression regularly used, under the same metrical conditions, to express an essential idea"<sup>20</sup> which was later expanded, according to Russo (1976,

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<sup>20</sup> L'épithète traditionnelle dans Homère, Paris, 1928. Reprinted in Parry, Milman and Adam, The making of Homeric verse: The collected papers of Milman Parry (Oxford, 1971).

32)<sup>21</sup> to designate that which was not verbatim formular repetition but was clearly felt to belong to a partly visible formular system or pattern, offers a useful basis for the study of repetition by providing for the concept of an open variable combined with the fixed element to form a larger unit. There is an analogy to be seen in the use of improvisation within strictly regulated rhythmic patterns in African music. The balance between "tradition"<sup>22</sup> (the stock in trade on which the story-teller can draw, i.e. the inherited patterns of imagery and theme), and "originality" (the creative contribution of the individual narrator and the sense of being of the present time) is as essential to the process of meaningful story-telling as it is to the process of good music-making. It is important to understand that it is in the variability with which the traditional formula is repeated in different combinations and in different sequences that the uniqueness of each individual performance lies. In The Singer of Tales, (1960), A.B. Lord points to the absence of the single correct version of any one tale and the unique nature of each performance by the composer/performer. This is fully discussed by Ruth Finnegan (1976) in her research on Limba story-telling, and demonstrated by Donald Cosentino in his study of tradition and invention in Mende story performance (1982). In his review of the latter in African Studies 44.1.85, M.G. Whisson writes:

As with Shakespeare's plays, the main story lines are too well known to bear simple repetition by the creative producer and performer, but, unlike those plays, the Mende stories are not enshrined in a written text. The attention of the audience can thus be held by inversions and variations which make each recital a unique event. At the same time the audience is engaged by various theatrical and stylistic tricks as it laughs at the scatological references, joins in

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<sup>21</sup> As explained by Albert Lord in The Singer of Tales, Introduction, p.4: "By formulaic expression I denote a line or half line constructed on the pattern of the formulas."

<sup>22</sup> The terms "tradition" and "originality" are those used by Milman Parry and A.B. Lord.

simple or familiar choruses, is made to identify with participants in the stories, is drawn along the path of near repetition towards the crucial, if not unexpected, twist and denouement.

When moving into the realm of written literature, the repeated image can attach to itself a symbolic field of reference, or form part of an archetypal pattern. Then one has what Albert Lord calls a "narrative pattern which might be called "mythic" because in some instances at any rate, it seems to have originated in myth. Whatever we name it, it is a dynamic, operative, force in tradition" (1976, 1).

Norman Friedman in "Theory of Symbolism" explains how this happens:

If the same image recurs in different contexts, then it (theoretically) serves to link those contexts in significant ways, and if different images recur together several times, then the mention of any one will serve to call the other to mind.

The principle is clear then. To put it into the language being employed here, we can say that the single-image recurrence gathers associations cumulatively as it moves from context to context, with the same result that it can begin to symbolize those associations as it moves into each new context, bringing them along with it to join those of the new context. (1975, 296)

The principle of patterning through repetition is demonstrably not confined to oral literature in Africa or to the music of Africa. However, that there is a cultural difference in perception of pattern is very clear to musicologists who have compared, for instance, the way Europeans and Africans hear the beat in traditional African music and in modern Afro-music. For instance, Kubik quotes Eno-Belinga's observation that the French people dancing to modern Zairean and Camerounian music danced on the "temps faibles" that is, the weak parts

of the measure.<sup>23</sup> Within Africa there are cultural differences in the perception of metrical patterns but there is one thing common to all groups: the immediate awareness of the metronomic quality of the music and the identification with the strong beat. Discussing the metronome sense (which Kubik calls "the inner experience of numerical patterning") Richard Waterman says:

....From the point of view of the listener, it entails habits of conceiving any music as structured along a theoretical framework of beats regularly spaced in time and of co-operating in terms of overt or inhibited motor behaviour with the pulses of this metric pattern whether or not the beats are expressed in actual melodic or percussion tones...  
(1952, 207)

Kubik holds that "perception of metrical patterns depends largely on the listener's liaison with a specific musical culture."<sup>24</sup> Convincing proof of this can be seen in the music of other non-European cultures. For instance, an article by Jose Maceda, "A concept of time in a music of southeast Asia" confirms that the structure of the music, its instruments and symbolisms are "a product of perception more subtle than conscious thought in written documents." Using the concept of space as a division of time, Southeast Asian musicians developed the use of drone or ostinato in their gong ensemble music. They were fascinated by the possibilities of vibration, allowing it, stopping it at will. Maceda writes: "Drone may be understood to be not only a sustained sound, a continuation of the long vibration of gongs, but also a constantly repeating phrase of one or more pitches played by one or several instruments for the duration of the music " (1986, 12).

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<sup>23</sup> Page 8 of the unpublished MS "Perceptual and cognitive foundations of music making in Africa", Gerhard Kubik, 1983. This forms part of the holdings of the International Library of African Music, Rhodes University, Grahamstown.

<sup>24</sup> ibid. 20.

Lewis Rowell has conducted similar studies of Indian music and shown that it is an art-form deeply and specifically rooted in its intellectual tradition and controlled by profound cultural analogies:

India knows time as a causal power, a source of energy, a means of continuous creation and recreation, characterized by ceaseless circular motion....The idea of Indian music is directly analagous to this cluster of cultural assumptions, and thus I suggest that Indian music - viewed from this perspective - is a cultural model of the idea of time itself. (1986, 239)

We cannot escape the conclusion that different cultures nurture different patterns of perception. This can be demonstrated by comparing Western attitudes to music and musical time with those displayed by various culture groups throughout Africa.

#### Differences between Western and African attitudes to music

Adolfo Salazar (1946) classified music according to two basic concepts which provide grounds for thinking in terms of differences of perception and attitude towards music. Though he does not refer specifically to African music, he writes:

The principle of organization, of course, is subject to infinite variation. By and large, however, music may be classified according to two basic concepts: that of the music of oriental peoples, not subject to the regulating principle of tonality in the occidental sense, and that of Western music which, although deriving historically from the other, has established itself as an entirely different sonorous and artistic phenomenon. In Western or occidental music, in general, musical structure is based on the principle of tonality. (16)

Christopher Small, in Music.Society.Education lists what he takes to be the common characteristics of the Western approach to music: a) the tendency to see music as product; b) the idea of the producer as separate from the music, the orchestra, and the audience; c) the stringency of the notation system which sets certain limits and enables the process whereby musical compositions can become enduring classics



and have an abstract existence apart from the performer. Small maintains that "this classicizing tendency is unique to our musical culture and depends upon our notation system." In addition Small stresses the importance of harmony and pitch relationships whereby, in contrast to African music, rhythm is not the organizing factor. In relation to time in music he writes that in the West we have:

....the idea of music as the conscious articulation of time so that one always knows or expects to know where one is in relation to the beginning and the end - indeed, the idea of music as a linear progression in time from a clear-cut beginning to a fore-ordained end; and the idea that it is necessary to use conscious devices, such as the large harmonic forms, to make clear the articulation in time and prevent the listener from becoming lost in time. (1977, 31)

Small attributes many of the above characteristics to the underlying assumptions and attitudes of Western science: "And indeed the spectacular achievements of European musicians from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries run in striking parallel to those of men of science in the same period, men such as Newton, Lavoisier, Gauss, Pasteur and Darwin" (60). A passion for the commanding of nature and quantification of human experience is related to the 'clockwork' model of the universe which carried with it "the implication that time was a dimension of reality external to human consciousness, flowing along in the regular, homogeneous way characteristic of the movement of clock hands, independent of our perception of it....Time came to be thought of as a linear progression..." (67).

Ballantine (1984), adopting a sociological approach, constructs a Marxist aesthetics of music, maintaining for instance, that the interaction and fusion of the old 'closed' forms of opera seria, were apposite to a closed society, while the 'open' forms of sonata, were

apposite to an evolutionary world.<sup>25</sup> There is an obvious analogy to be seen in closed and open structures in the novel. Another example of the relationship between music and society which Ballantine gives is that:

....the music of Bach is the way it is because Bach's music is appropriate to the ancien regime; and when the static Baroque style of Bach is replaced by the dynamic sonata style of Beethoven and others, this is wholly because of the collapse of late Feudalism and its replacement by the bourgeois democratic order....So the assumption that music and society are wholly separate domains is demonstrably false. (5)

The fact that Ballantine can head a chapter "Music and society: the forgotten relationship" points to the great difference in attitude towards music between Western and African societies. In Africa, such a relationship could never be forgotten. I would like to suggest that while Western music imitates in its form prevailing social structures and even political trends, and is therefore constantly changing and evolving in style, traditional African music is far more constant in form, tied as it is to ritual, ceremonial and social uses which survive the most rigid acculturation processes.

In the episodic character of the modern experimental music of composers, such as Cage and Stockhausen, one notes a movement away from music as product, to music as process. A Marxist interpretation of this situation offered by Ballantine cites Morton Feldman's observation that "What music rhapsodizes in today's 'cool' language, is its own construction ...In fact, process itself might be called the Zeitgeist of our age. The duality of precise means creating indeterminate emotions is now associated only with the past" (130). What this infers is a desire on the part of the composer to actually inculcate new habits in audiences amounting to a change of perception, expectation

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<sup>25</sup> See the introduction by Wilfred Mellers to Music and its social meaning, p. xi.

and response (131). But the African musician does not have to struggle with his audience in the same way - he is already one with it and if his music does not fit the occasion and the time, then it simply is not good music.

Some Western composers have shown a desire to escape from the rigid strictures of European tonal-harmonic music by concentrating on sound qualities in themselves. Such a composer was Debussy. Small, quoting Boulez, says of his music:

Debussy cut through all the traditional techniques of harmony and organization of time to a world where the moment, the now, is all-important, looking neither forward nor backward, using none of the devices of anticipation or reference back that had previously characterized western music. His music has in fact a hypnotic quality that takes us out of time. (107)

One could say therefore that his music is governed more by kairos than chronos, displaying an interest in sound for its own sake, lacking in any urge to resolution so that "the forward impulse of harmony disappears" (105). His music remains firmly in the present: "What Debussy did, in fact, was to liberate European music from sequential logic" (106). According to Small "our age is starved of ritual", by which he means "that unemotional rehearsing of actions that are known to the whole community, which for all their impassivity and lack of external expressiveness carry a powerful emotional charge....enabling us to celebrate our common humanity, shared beliefs and communal feeling" (109). Music such as Stravinsky's Le Sacre du Printemps, with its violent powerful rhythms, he says, attempts to compensate for this lack. Salazar calls this primitive rhythm "ruralism", and quotes Andre Schaeffner on Stravinsky:

[This is] popular music, infantile or rural, vulgar, but vulgar in the sense in which all everyday objects are vulgar: a wooden table, the thick glass of a wine bottle; [this is]

music based on Russian folklore, not to exploit those motives artificially in works of previously stipulated form, but in order to place itself exactly at the level of that music. (283)

Salazar also says that the dynamism of Stravinsky's work derives from the rhythm and the repetition of short, clean-cut motives based on a principle of dissonance (285). In the chapter "A different drummer" Small shows that modern western composers such as John Cage and Steve Reich have returned to rhythm as the guiding principle of their works. Of Cage he says "going ahead as if western concepts of harmony and the associated ideas of linear time and climax had never existed, he has found in rhythm the organizing principle for which harmony served in traditional western music" (147). Very much influenced by the Indian tala method, Cage devised a rhythmic structure based on the duration, not of notes but of spaces in time. He seeks to evoke a single emotional state. Reich is interested in "fascinating and beautiful new melodic and rhythmic patterns"; he sees his music as a process happening gradually, much as a plant unfolds. Small sees the development of this form of music as closely associated with the conflict in American culture between those who want to regulate and those who do not want to be regulated, and to the expression of the ideal of individual liberty. It is therefore possible to maintain that European music is tied to society with all its aspirations and disintegrations, but not necessarily to social use. It can exist as a self-sustaining work of art, as an artefact of a particular society and a particular time.

#### Music in non-European cultures

In contrast, Small draws examples from various non-European cultures in which, as Wilfred Mellers says, the purpose is "not to express but to reveal. There is no audience to be communicated with,

since composer-performer and his listeners are both participants in a rite" (1968, 6). The Indian ragas or scalar orders for instance, belong to a certain time or season and are not used at any other. The gamelan orchestral music of Bali (an island to the east of Java) is a good example of music being tied to social use and therefore to the concepts of time held by the community in which it happens. This music is circular, a 'state' of music required for a certain time: "the whole concept of climax and resolution, so central to the western arts that exist in time, is completely lacking in Balinese music" (Small, 41). He quotes from the composer Colin McPhee's book Music in Bali that "each section of a composition returns to the opening note and repeats immediately, the final note generating a new beginning."

#### Characteristics of African music

Anyone interested in understanding the complexities of West African music and dance would do well to refer to A.M. Jones, Studies in African Music, to John Miller Chernoff, African Rhythm and African Sensibility, and to Kwabena Nketia, African Music in Ghana. These texts represent a sound overview of the subject.

It is permissible to speak of the homogeneity of African music.

A.M. Jones says, for instance:

The characteristic staggered beats of polyrhythmic music are an acid test - you either use them or you do not: the Europeans in Africa do not use them, the Africans do: and therein lies the essential cleavage in their musical traditions. But in the world of those who do use these polyrhythms, the music may express itself in many different ways. (1959, 203)

In exploring the musical unity of Africa, and his contention that African musical practice is not circumscribed by linguistic boundaries, Jones contrasts African music with Islamic music which has its roots in the East, in Persia and in India, but which influenced a large part



of West Africa: the music of the Mandinka, the Yoruba, and the Hausa for example. This, he says, has a formalized rhythmic framework (usually a single rhythm as a background to a song), uses a solo-stringed instrument attended by a drum instead of the multiple voice and drum patterns of Africa, and employs a characteristic nasal voice production. Moreover, in the Islamic world, music is altogether secular (207-208). But the important point is that wherever Jones has found music in the Islamic tradition, he has found, side by side with it, "the typical music of the Bantu style" (208). Moreover there are enormous areas covered by the Mende, the Akan group, the Ewe, and the Igbo, where the music is pure African style untouched by Islamic features:

Here we find vocal harmony everywhere and the typical centrality of the drum ensemble. The broad conclusion seems inescapable that the original style of the whole area was the sort of music we have been dealing with in this book [that of Ghana] and that any deviation from this traditional norm has resulted from the impact of Islam. (208-209)

Kubik, in his discussion of Àlò (Yoruba story songs), says that the Arabic influence is characteristically absent and that these songs handed down by grandparents from generation to generation "seem to suggest the existence of an older autochthonous form of Yoruba songs in the general West African context". (1968, 10).

Perhaps the most important difference between African and non-African musical performance is the importance of movement patterns.

Kubik explains patterns of motion thus:

Each pattern has a starting point, an entrance point in relation to other simultaneously performed patterns, a certain length, expressed in the number of elementary pulses that constitute the cycle and give the form number; it is further characterized by its inner structure, which may be composed of sub-patterns or sub-sections such as 5+7 pulses in the 12-pulse time-line patterns. Motional patterns as such are soundless. One of the results of my evaluation of the music/dance films which I have made in Africa over the years

was the realization that behind the sounding "rhythm patterns" there are autonomous motional structures. Motional patterns are in the background of both "rhythm patterns" and "movement patterns". They possess the capacity to appear in both sounding and non-sounding forms. They are the abstract temporal and structural content of movement ... To understand music in Africa therefore also means to move in the accepted way with it. (1985, 51/53)

Kubik states therefore, that it is often misleading to distinguish between music and dance as separate categories because very often they are linked through identical motion patterns. He acknowledges Hornbostel<sup>26</sup> as the first to recognise the importance of motion in African music:

His sentences written in 1928 have become famous:  
 "This implies an essential contrast between our rhythmic conception and the African's; we proceed from hearing, they from motion;.... (56)

This is born out by Chernoff's observations on the mutual relationship of drummers and dancers in West Africa:

Just as they listen to the supporting drums in a drum ensemble, African dancers listen to the rhythm section of a band - drums, bass, rhythm guitar, perhaps piano - and put some part of their bodies into a steady and relevant rhythmic pattern so that they can better hear and enjoy the melody or the improvisations ... Spectators watch dancing style with the same concerns they bring to music, hoping to see the drummer and the dancer demonstrate their reciprocal involvement in a dialogue on the relationship of time and presence.

Although music in the West may be cyclic in structure when the composer has some thematic reason for incorporating recurring patterns, the cyclic nature of African music is inherent, reflecting a concept of time as cyclic. The formal temporal organization of this music is determined by how many elementary pulses (the smallest action units in a piece) are contained in the cycle. These provide the real metre quite different from the 4/4, 3/3, 2/4 6/8 of Western music. Because this is

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<sup>26</sup> Erich Hornbostel, "African Negro Music", Africa 1 (1971).

so, ethnomusicologists have been searching for a new system of notating and transcribing the African music they hear. Kubik uses a form number (6, 8, 9, 12, 16, 18 or their multiples) indicating a cycle instead of western time-signatures: the elementary pulses build the cycle. A.M. Jones made his Zambian students write down their music using the time unit box system in square-ruled exercise books - "Each square represents the shortest unit of time used in a piece of music and one plots the notes accordingly." Chernoff believes that there is another complicating factor inhibiting accurate notation, which is:

The fact that African musicians play with reference to additional rhythms to the ones they actually beat is one of the most important reasons why notations, which of course do not represent unsounded or implied beats, offer an inaccurate representation of African music. (201)

Kubik insists that the proper understanding of African music actually begins with the recognition of these units as the primary element in a pulsation ad infinitum.<sup>27</sup> Andrew Tracey<sup>28</sup> is not sure which comes first, the pulse or the beat recognition, but holds that whichever it is the other follows almost immediately. The time-line is a specific category of struck motional patterns, the regulative element in many kinds of African music especially along the West Coast and Central Africa: single note patterns struck on a musical instrument such as drum, gong, bottle, concussion stick, gourd, which has a high penetrating quality. A 12-pulse time-line pattern is common. It is an auditory aid to the perception of how the pulses are being grouped in any particular piece of music.

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<sup>27</sup> Perceptual and Cognitive Foundations of Music Making in Africa, 22.

<sup>28</sup> Director of the International Library of African Music, Rhodes University, Grahamstown.

African music is characterised by the importance of rhythm. Small quotes from A.M. Jones: Studies in African Music<sup>29</sup> that "Whatever be the devices used to produce them, in African music there is practically always a clash of rhythms; this is a cardinal principle" (53). Further Jones believed that the African approach to rhythmic movement is inculcated from infancy and different from the Western perception of rhythm:

We have to grasp the fact that if from childhood you are brought up to regard beating 3 against 2 as being just as normal as beating in synchrony, then you develop a two-dimensional attitude to rhythm which we in the West do not share. (1959, 102)

Chernoff writes that most commentators had viewed rhythmic repetition as an indication of "primitiveness", and similarly, Western religious biases led many to interpret the aesthetic effect of rhythmic music as primarily emotional and "ecstatic" (208). In fact it is a highly developed vehicle for structuring time. Western music, according to Chernoff, is a way of ordering sound through time. In contrast, relationships are established between the rhythms of African music which create a tension in time (95). Chernoff refers to Richard Waterman's discussion of the dynamic tension in the off-beat accentuation patterns of African music and quotes him at length (96). He concludes:

What Waterman was getting at with his oddly chosen mechanical metaphor of the "subjective pulses" of a "metronome" was first the notion we have stressed, that to appreciate African music requires an active engagement, and second the fact that, compared to us, Africans acquire a rather exact sense of time as they learn to relate to the rhythmic potential of what goes on around them. (97)

Thus we have the paradox that though, in the day-to-day running of their lives, Africans incline more to kairos than chronos, they have a

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<sup>29</sup> A.M. Jones, "African Rhythm", Africa, Vol. XXIV, No.1, January 1954, 26-7.

highly developed sense of the metronome quality of music. According to Chernoff, African music puts a deliberate pressure on the continuity of time (98).

Other characteristics of African music are: melodic phrases are short, great use is made of the human voice and the vocal music bears a close relationship to speech. In this connection Francis Bebey says: "The bond between language and music is so intimate that it is actually possible to tune an instrument so that the music it produces is linguistically comprehensible " (1975, 119). He cites in particular, the 'language' of the slit-drum which can only be understood by members of the community where that particular language is spoken. Repetition is an integral part of the structure of this music, be it in a call-and-response sequence which may go on for hours, or drumming or handclapping patterns.

The explicit purpose of African music is socialization by which is meant that it is tied to a process of education. Individuals and age-groups learn how to relate to each other, and how to resolve conflict through patterned behaviour<sup>30</sup> which, in the midst of change, embodies

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<sup>30</sup> For an example of how potential conflict between individuals is resolved through the structures of traditional dance forms, see Johnny Clegg, "An examination of the Umzansi Dance Style", Papers presented at the Fourth Symposium on Ethnomusicology, Grahamstown: I.L.A.M. 1984, 64-70. Umzansi dance is Zulu team dancing, now very popular with Black mineworkers on the Transvaal. The dance is structurally divided into Isipani which is team dance, and 'One-One' which is individual competitive dancing. Clegg says that the dance is an expression of unity, but it is also an expression of the fact that each one of the participants is an individual and a warrior: "The dance here is similar to society in a way, because every society has to cope with incorporating the individual into the group and making that incorporation meaningful. What the dance does is to allow the individual to explore other parameters and even parameters which refer directly to hismanhood, his 'bull-ness', his constitution, his identity as a warrior, and to manipulate that" (69).



continuity from generation to generation. Nketia, discussing music in Akan society says of this aspect:

From the point of view of the creative performer, music structure must be seen in terms of procedures and usages and not just in terms of static elements, for music is primarily an event: it happens as the result of the activities of the creative performer and those with whom he collaborates. Such a performer must be guided by a knowledge of tradition.... (1973, 99)

Ladzekpo (1971) speaks of the social mechanics of good music in his discussion of dance clubs in Ghana. These highly organized recreational dance clubs, usually based on age-groups, imitate social structures operating on a wider scale in village or town-life. Francis Bebey maintains that music is clearly an integral part of the life of every African individual from the moment of his birth (8), but though it is most often collective and communal and plays a social, therapeutic or even magic role in society, there is also scope for individual performance: "A nightwatchman who plays his sanza and sings of his hopes or misfortunes does not concern himself with the social role of his music; he is playing in order to pass the time " (125). Moving much further south, the Xhosa uhadi bow player who composes self-delectative lyrics is another example of solo performance. In this connection though, it is interesting to note that in present day Igbo land (Nigeria) most string instruments, with the exception of une (music bow) which is enjoying a revival due to the popularity of a contemporary player, have fallen out of use because of the belief in the adverse or satanic power which these instruments were supposed to exert over the players. The une was actually banned in several villages.<sup>31</sup> Nketia explains that though a solo singer may use his

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<sup>31</sup> Mentioned by J.N. Lo-Bamijoko in her article "Classification of Igbo Musical Instruments" in *African Music* Vol.6 No.4, due to be published by the International Library of African Music, Rhodes University, Grahamstown, in 1988.

music in a very personal way as an avenue for the release of emotion, this is not considered a good thing in the broader context of the community: "Hence solo instruments like the seperewa harp lute, and now the guitar, are associated in popular mind with excesses, particularly with regard to the taking of alcohol...." (1973, 94).

#### 'Experiential' time in ritual music in Africa

Repetition is important in ritual music because, as Kubik says, the patterns which emerge, the powerful numerical configurations of African music facilitate individual or group psycho-cathartic effects under certain conditions. It is not the inner order and the logic of the patterns alone that produce heightened physical or psychical states in humans, "but it may play a catalytic role in the achievement of such states, if there are other psychological factors to produce a cumulative effect" (1985, 47). Small writes that the repetitions "have a function in time which is the reverse of our own music - to dissolve the past and the future into one eternal present, in which the passing of time is no longer noticed" (55). Mircea Eliade (1959), speaking for religious man in general, distinguishes between two kinds of time, "of which the more important, sacred time, appears under the paradoxical aspect of circular time, reversible and recoverable, a sort of eternal mystical present...." (201).

Because African music is closely tied to social and ritual use, it is often carefully structured according to several 'intellectual' rather than 'emotional' rules. During a period of 'experiential' or ritual time, for instance, the secular public observes certain rules of behaviour in order to maintain the correct level of tension which, in turn, is generated by the subtle complexities of the music and dance,

and the use of auditory and visual illusion often incorporating an element of surprise. An example of this is to be found in Yeve cult music (Ghana).<sup>32</sup> Its musical repertoire is actually a suite using up to nine dance forms which combine spiritual and humorous elements always with the aim of controlling the reactions of the audience as well as creating a period of 'deep-time' or 'experiential' time during which culture-specific rites of passage such as initiation, may take place. The beginning of experiential time is signalled by cockcrow and a special type of singing. Both Achebe and Soyinka make use of this type of signal, in Arrow of God in the scene where the news is first brought to Ezeulu that his son is dead (227), and in Season of Anomy where the funeral rites for the dead Custodian begin "In the hours before dawn...." (12). In Yeve cult music the listener/spectator is presented with a sound-time maze created by a complex of varying temporal and sonic events: the singing of free-rhythm songs with strict time accompaniment, the shaking of adodo (a multiple clapper bell) by individuals at different frequencies. The strict time-accompaniment, called gamamla, and performed on a master drum, is kept up throughout the ritual activities of the day to provide a driving force which keeps the participants going for long hours. The dancers wear many-layered skirts and employ various tricks to alter the perceptions of the audience as to the variety and number of costumes which each dancer owns. This type of deception is an integral part of the whole performance. The climax is the adavu, a special dance form based on running in a circle, during which members of the cult appear to perform miraculous acts, the whole centred on the death-rebirth ritual. The act

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<sup>32</sup> This summary of Yeve cult music is taken from an article by Daniel Avorgbedor, "The construction and manipulation of temporal structures in Yeve cult music: a multi-dimensional approach" in African Music Vol.6 No.4 which is due to be published by the International Library of African Music in 1986.

of running in a circle combined with the insistent repetition of the accompanying drum rhythms helps to convey the idea of an 'arrest in time'. But an intriguing paradox is that, as the participants in ritual music must not be allowed to remain in this induced limbo, it incorporates its own structures for protection from potential danger, both physical and psychic, through adherence to a strictly controlled time-line. Thus there is harmony between kairos and chronos, a balance which in Africa falls under the concept of 'coolness'. Robert Farris Thompson (1973), explains this as a West African/Afro-American metaphor of moral aesthetic accomplishment. It has to do with transcendental balance, and on a more mundane level, with the ability to be nonchalant at the right moment and to act as if one's mind were in another world, particularly in times of stress (41). But more importantly:

Manifest within this philosophy of the cool is the belief that the purer, the cooler a person becomes, the more ancestral he becomes. In other words, mastery of self enables a person to transcend time and elude preoccupation. He can concentrate or she can concentrate upon truly important matters of social balance and aesthetic substance, creative matters, full of motion and brilliance.

### Conclusion

Because they have such a keen sense of the rightness of time and because of the necessary close ties of agricultural communities with the earth and with the effect of the seasons on what the earth can bring forth, life in rural Africa has to be very tightly structured in order that the right thing is done at the right time. Music, especially when it is associated with routines of work or ritual and ceremonial events which in themselves often mark the passing of seasons, has the effect of reinforcing this structure and of resolving personal conflicts within a group by allowing for conflict of rhythms or parts, which, to use Chernoff's phrase again, "put pressure on time". Though in the day-to-day running of their lives Africans may appear to

regulate their activities according to syncretic or experiential time, which we may call kairos, they have a keenly developed sense of metronomic time in music, which in traditional society, is inculcated from infancy as, to quote Chernoff once more, "they learn to relate to the rhythmic potential of what goes on around them" (97). The experience of moving backward in time to restore balance and harmony to the present, that is engendered by ritual music, is also a major concern of the West African novelist whose presentation of social life, both in the traditional past and in the more urbanised present, substantiates Chernoff's contention that "like a ritual or musical event, a community too is basically an ordered way of being involved through time" (1979, 161). Blacking has defined music as "an outward sign of human communication" and claims that its function is "to enhance in some way the quality of individual experience and human relationships" (1969, 36). If, as Ezekiel Mphahlele suggests, "there is a collective memory which feeds into the musical idioms, into the literature to a lesser extent" (1984, 16), it should then be a matter of some interest to examine the use of music, both in structure and theme, in the West African novel.



## CHAPTER ONE

### RHYTHM AND TIME IN THE NOVELS OF CAMARA LAYE

Laye describes experiential and ritual events in his novels, not because he wants to present an ideal view of society in traditional Guinea but because, for a West African, these are the the most meaningful points in time: they are the points which give time its structure. For both Laye and the Ghanaian novelist, Ayi Kwei Armah, the past, (in so far as the repetition of sacred or ritual acts is an invocation of the past), clearly has important explanatory value. And this is not true of West African writers alone. James Ngugi, discussing the concerns of African writers in general, writes:

....what has been the evolution of human culture through the ages, society in motion through time and space, is of grave import to the poet and novelist. For what has been is intimately bound up with what might be. Our vision of the future, of diverse possibilities of life and human potential has roots in our experience of the past....The novelist is haunted by a sense of the past. (1982, 4)

For Laye as for Armah, the importance of these 'archaic' but enduring structures of time can best be apprehended through the language and music of traditional ceremonies, both sacred and profane.

Laye believed that as a child he acquired from his cultural background a special kind of knowledge. The question is therefore whether this special knowledge is common to all mankind at certain significant transitional points in life, or whether the West African, or indeed any African, may have a sense of a private, traditional arcane wisdom which is unique to his own culture and whether this is directly related to a special concept of time. The anthropologists would seem to differ on this point. Maurice Bloch (1977), in his

important essay, "The past and the present in the present", questions Durkheim's thesis that cognition is socially determined, a position which he admits has been upheld by the findings of Mary Douglas and Levi-Strauss, amongst others. Proceeding from the standpoint that "the fundamental logic employed in the syntax of all languages is, Whorf notwithstanding, the same", and that the logic of languages "implies a notion of temporality and sequence", he concludes that, "if all syntax is based on the same logic, all speakers must at a fundamental level apprehend time in the same way", and further that:

....in every society ... at some time, one notion of time is used, and at others another, and we can immediately notice that the evidence for static or cyclic time comes from that special type of communication, which we can label ritual in the broad sense of the term: greetings, and fixed politeness formula, formal behaviour and above all, rituals, whether social, religious or state. (283)

Bloch's application of ritual time to role-playing and social structures<sup>1</sup> leads him to suggest that there are "systems by which we know the world", and correspondingly, "systems by which we hide it" (290).

Bourdillon (1978) in his response to this essay, disagrees most strongly with Bloch's association of social inequality and political exploitation with those structures of ritual which, according to him, 'hide' the world:

The implication of Bloch's discussion is that in practical affairs people use a purely durational concept of time, and that this is a universal concept, one by which we know the world. A further implication is that non-durational concepts of time, which are culturally relative, are used only in ritual contexts, and are subsequently concepts which hide the world. Against this I shall point out that non-durational concepts of time do occur in practical situations; secondly,

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<sup>1</sup> See Maurice Bloch, "Symbols, song, dance and features of articulation: is religion an extreme form of traditional authority?" *Archiv. Europ. Sociol.* 15 (1974) 55-81.

that universality and occurrence in practical situations are not criteria for the validity of concepts; and thirdly that non-durational concepts of time can help to reveal the world. (592)

He argues that Bloch's standpoint does not account for "the cyclic and non-durational element in concepts of time used in agricultural situations" (592); but he finds even more disturbing Bloch's implication that "more structure or more ritual communication in a society results in more inequality" (594). Although Bourdillon agrees that ritual can be used to reinforce traditional hierarchy (as we see for instance in Achebe's Arrow of God), he maintains that it can also be used to control the abuse of authority: "I recall a Korekore chief whose autocratic inclinations were checked when he discovered that the co-operation he needed for traditional community rituals was not forthcoming " (596). Laye's standpoint here would certainly be that repetition of meaningful ritual was a traditional and well-tried means of controlling the potential abuse of power by individuals within a community, as well as a means by which we 'know' the world rather than 'hide' it. As Fatoman's father tells him, (having first given him the news that his friends, Konaté and Bilali, have been shot for alleged conspiracy against the government):

If all these men and all these women, instead of wasting their days pronouncing childish discourses, were to consecrate that time to the adoration of the All-High, our native land would not be in its present wretched state....Law and justice shall return also. And then ye shall be reconciled, reconciled with yourselves and with others.  
(A Dream of Africa, 156-7)

Ritual embodies the cyclic reality of time; it celebrates, to use Soyinka's words, "the constant regenerative process of the universe" (1976, 18). As Soyinka points out too, there are aspects of an African world view which are common to many other cultures:

But the degree of integrated acceptance of this temporal sense in the life-rhythm, mores and social organisation of Yoruba society is certainly worth emphasising, being a

reflection of that same reality which denies periodicity to the existences of the dead, the living and the unborn. (10)

It is true that in his presentation of childhood in West Africa, Laye has chosen to concentrate on 'rites de passage',<sup>2</sup> because these represent demarcations of time which mark the individual's social and spiritual development. This is also the view of the anthropologist E.R. Leach who proposes a pendulum view of time in which the sequence of things is discontinuous and time a succession of alternations (e.g. day and night, life and death) and full stops: "All I am saying is that in fact quite a lot of people think of it (time) as going back and forth " (1966, 133).<sup>3</sup> Further, he writes:

Despite the word pendulum, this kind of metaphor is not sophisticated; the essence of the matter is not the pendulum but the alternation. I would maintain that the notion that time is a 'discontinuity of repeated contrasts' is probably the most elementary and primitive of all ways of regarding time. (134)

For Leach, ritual occasions and festivals, with all their attendant symbolism, actually order social life because they create the periods of time ('week', 'day' and in a West African context, 'market-days') in between:

Without the festivals, such periods would not exist, and all order would go out of social life. We talk of measuring time, as if time were a concrete thing waiting to be measured; but in fact we create time<sup>4</sup> by creating intervals in social life. Until we have done this there is no time to be measured. (135)

In his writing, Laye has chosen to regard the periods of time in between traditional rituals (which are sometimes also rites de passage)

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<sup>2</sup> In E.R. Leach's terminology. See "Two essays concerning the symbolic representation of time" (1966) 133.

<sup>3</sup> Leach's view is, according to himself, orthodox Durkheimian sociology.

<sup>4</sup> Leach's emphasis.

as unimportant, or at the best, barren, almost death-like periods before the next major transitional event, and this accounts for the selective, condensed and to some commentators on his work, romantic<sup>5</sup> or over-idealised view of society portrayed in The Dark Child. Laye himself explains this aspect of his work in A Dream of Africa where he says (through his persona, Fatoman) that the years he spent in France were in fact years of exile, and that one's native land is more than just family, friends and a familiar horizon, it is "ways of life which the heart within one may well retain, but which it never willingly exposes to reality, never willingly surrenders over and over again to reality" (9). Here 'reality' is opposed to the 'dream' of Africa, for the symbolic language of dream is very close to the symbolic language of ritual. Laye is saying then that profane, linear time is what one may know in Europe as 'reality' (which is certainly Clarence's position at the beginning of his quest in The Radiance of the King), but that the only way to 'know the world' and one's spiritual and physical relationship with it, is to re-experience, the special structures of time of the ritual, 'festive' or symbolic world.

Leopold Sedar Senghor, the Senegalese poet and politician, had a great influence on Laye partly because his early career and education in France was similar to Laye's, and then because of their friendship and association in the negritude movement in Paris which enhanced common links. According to Sylvia Washington Bâ, in her discussion of

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<sup>5</sup> See for instance, "Camara Laye, idealist and mystic" by A.C. Brench, African Literature Today No.2 Ed. Eldred Jones, Heinemann, 1969, 11-31. Also African Literature in the Twentieth Century by O.R. Dathorne, Heinemann, 1974, p.285 where he says of *L'enfant noir* that "...the African past, recollected from Paris, is idealized...." and that in contrast, *Le regard du roi* "moves away from the plane of straight realism into the world of symbolism." These seem to be two incompatible statements. These are European views; Soyinka offers an African interpretation (1976, 122).



the concept of 'negritude' in Senghor's poetry, it was Senghor's deep questioning of his role as a cultural assimilé and his friendship with militant West Indian students, which led to his involvement in publications like Légitime Défense (1932) and the founding of 'Présence Africaine' in 1947 (1973, 10). Very important too was the influence of the philosopher, Jean Paul Sartre, especially his novel La Nausée in which the anti-hero, Roquentin, suffers from the same 'dégagé', uncommitted feelings, the same melancholia, nausea, vertigo, anxiety and guilt as many characters (in particular, the failed 'Been-to' types) in West African novels. Guilt or 'mauvaise-fois' is this stock-figure's main psychological burden, but it can be said of Roquentin as of Clarence in The Radiance of the King, that his is the history of "....a man passing from self-deception to at least the beginnings of self-knowledge" (Cranston 1962, 54).

It was perhaps Sartre's philosophy of 'the Other' (L'existence d'autrui) and being 'for others' (Le pour-autrui) that had the greatest appeal for both Senghor and Laye, undoubtedly because it is so close to African belief. In simple terms<sup>6</sup> this can be expressed as the idea that the proof of one's existence is the regard of the other, or the way that one exists for the other person: we must exist for others in order to exist for ourselves, since "the road of interiority passes through the Other." The look, or the gaze, is the medium of this existence for the other: my gaze gives the other tangible existence and his reaffirms my own being. Shame is the emotional medium through which we begin to realise that we have an existence for the other. In shame, I recognise that I am as the Other sees me, that is, I am ashamed of myself as I appear to the Other (Cranston 1962, 53). The quest motif which pervades

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<sup>6</sup> Cranston on Sartre. (1962, 63-57).

Senghor's poetry, based on the imagery of traditional initiation rites, is related, in Sartre's terms, to the need for mutual integration of "the One" to "the Other" ("con-naissance") a state best achieved, according to Senghor, through an emotional identification with the Other. An extract from one of his poems is extremely relevant to the mystical ending of Laye's The Radiance of the King: "Mais elle est morte cette angoisse de la gorge, lorsqu'on est nu l'un devant l'autre."<sup>7</sup> For an African educated in the traditional way of life, existing for others is inherent in social structures, but if these structures no longer hold or are only imperfectly perceived, (for instance, during a period of voluntary or involuntary exile from the motherland, during revolution and war, or during a period when traditional culture is superseded by a foreign culture), then the sense of existing for oneself is also dissipated, and a sense of despair, of alienation, loss and moral 'nausea' replace it. This indeed is the theme of Yambo Ouologuem's Bound to Violence (Mali), as of another novel, very different in style, This Earth, My Brother... by Kofi Awoonor.

Laye's novels and Senghor's poetry are thus informed by a need to reassert a time when there was psychic integration between existing for the other and existing for the self, maintained through the structures, festivities and rituals of traditional society, especially when these incorporate as they so often do, music, songs, stories and dances.

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<sup>7</sup> "....when you are naked before each other/And suddenly dazzled and suddenly struck down by the Lover's eyes/Ah! the soul bared down to its root down to bedrock." (Translation by Sylvia Washington Bâ, 1973, 78)

Senghor, with writers like Alioune Diop, was concerned above all to examine "les modalités de l'intégration de l'homme noir dans la civilisation occidentale"<sup>8</sup> (Présence Africaine 1, 1947, 7), and further, to do this artistically and spiritually by reasserting his African heritage in all its diverse and rich cultural forms by using music, song and dance in his poetry. From the beginning the writers of the West African negritude movement as originated in Paris, used the language and associations of traditional music to express their commitment. A quotation from Saint-Exupéry was printed in the first issue of Présence Africaine: "Et la belle danse naît de la ferveur à danser. Et la ferveur à danser exige que tous dansent, même ceux-la qui dansent mal."<sup>9</sup> In the forward to the same edition, André Gide says, in discussing African music, that for the Westerner, "la communion avec une élémentaire et sauvage énergie régénèrait nos forces déclinantes",<sup>10</sup> a statement which repeats a conventional stereotype and yet gets to the heart of what that stereotype is actually about. The key-word is 'énergie'. It is this raw energy, which is none the less tightly structured and controlled energy, which Clarence meets up with outside the King's palace in Adramé where his progress is blocked by a horde of dancers (9). It is worth looking at this passage in detail. To Clarence the young black men "seemed to be performing a very freely-improvised war-dance, each one dancing, as it were, for himself, without paying any attention to his companions." Yet all of a sudden there is a concerted movement which carried all the dancers forward ,

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<sup>8</sup> ....the ways in which the black man is integrated into western civilization (my translation).

<sup>9</sup> And the beautiful dance born of the ardour to dance. And the fervour of the dance demands that everyone dances, even those who dance badly. (my translation)

<sup>10</sup> ....communion with an elementary and uncivilized energy regenerates our waning strength (my translation).

then backwards; but this surge of communal energy "seemed" to Clarence to be quite independent of the dance itself. What the dancers are doing is giving physical expression to the multiple metre of the music (drumming), where, to refer to Robert Farris Thompson's discussion of the aesthetics of West African dance, multiple metre means "the simultaneous execution of several time signatures, not unlike the sounding of the 3/4 of the waltz and the 4/4 of jazz at the same time" (1966, 90). Thompson quotes Richard Alan Waterman's assertion that:

The dance of the West African is an essay on the appreciation of musical rhythms. For the performance of a good dancer the drums furnish the inspiration, in response to which the thread of each rhythmic element contributing to the thunderous whole of the percussion gestalt is followed in movement without separation from its polyrhythmic context.<sup>11</sup>

Thompson's research shows that "apart playing" and "apart dancing" are virtually defining characteristics of West African culture and provide an insight into African aesthetics:

The unity which the musicians and dancers share seems....to constitute a constellation of solo and chorus performances. The master drummer (or drummers) plays alone, intent upon improvisation; the master dancer (or dancers), intent upon following or challenging these improvisations, also dances alone. And the drum chorus and the dancing chorus interact by repetitive patterns, which means that a certain amount of performing together balances the apartness. But the critical fact seems to be this: West Africans perform music and dance apart the better to ensure a dialog between movement and sound. (94)

So what Clarence inadvertently becomes part of is a typical African display of the desired balance between existing for the self and existing for the 'other', where the 'other' represents the community as a whole.

Much has been written about the use of musical analogy and traditional Serer folk rhythms in Senghor's verse. It is fully dealt

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<sup>11</sup> Richard Waterman, "Hot Rhythm in Negro music", Journal of the American Musicological Society, Spring (1948) 4.

with by Washington Bâ in her chapter, "The fundamental traits of negritude: rhythm and imagery" (1973, 110-151). Bâ says that a physical sense of rhythm is tied to the constant flux of cosmic forces to which the Black African responds as felt stimuli. This may be called 'the rhythmic mode of being'. Her use of the word 'flux' brings us back to Leach's concept of alternation and the pendulum. Senghor links rhythm to life-force or telluric force, "rhythmic vibrations perceptible to the senses" (Bâ, 112). In his view the act of generating rhythmic vibrations as in drumming, is a deliberate act to engender and participate in a life force and commune directly with the rhythms of nature; so too is the act of writing a poem<sup>12</sup> or constructing a novel using traditional rhythmic patterns.

Adele King has discussed the similarities between the works of Laye and Senghor, especially in their use of dreams (1980, 55) and 'surrealism' (60), maintaining that in The Radiance of the King two narrative traditions are at work: on the one hand the novel presents an idealised African culture reminiscent of Senghor's mythic state of 'Africanness' in for instance, Song of darkness, and at the same time it offers specific details from the real world. However King implies that unlike Senghor, Laye is on the side of those who feel that 'negritude' is valueless as a concept on which to base art:

He knows he is not portraying a real Africa and seems to be mocking the concern of the Negritude movement to define an essential African culture as if it did still exist. There is

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<sup>12</sup> Senghor's poetry deliberately reproduces the tones and rhythms of the drums of Senegal and some of it is orchestrated. Sylvia Washington Bâ gives a summary of the instruments used in his work (113). She draws attention to the African preference for duple rhythms which she relates to a philosophy which conceives of primordial cosmic forces as binary (124). Her discussion of the analogical image and of Senghor's use of sous-réalité or underlying realism is also relevant to Laye, since the most outstanding quality of the analogical image is its ambivalence (146).



surely mockery of Negritude in the description of the one tangible product of Clarence's stay in Aziana: the numerous half-caste children in the harem. The result of the combination of Africa and Europe is mulatto babies, not the idealised 'cultural mulatto' (Laye's phrase) of Senghorian polemics. (43)

I would argue, however, that this mixture of the mythic and the real, gives Laye's novels their distinctive African mood and demonstrates a powerful syncretism of narrative form, derived from received Western literary influences on the one hand,<sup>13</sup> and the rhythms of traditional oral or sung narrative<sup>14</sup> on the other. Although the use of rhythmic prose does not necessarily prove that musical or cyclical realities inform the deep structures of meaning, it is possible that this is in fact the case, certainly as far as Laye's novels are concerned. Adele King writes that Laye wished to capture "the psychology of an African narrator sensitive to his own language, in which repetitions are used for emphasis" (114), but I would suggest that there is far more to the use of repetition in African culture than mere emphasis.

#### The Eyes of the Statue/Les Yeux de la Statue

This short story by Camara Laye was printed in Black Orpheus in 1959, as Una MacLean's translation. It is relevant here because it is in some ways a postscript to the enigmatic ending of The Radiance of the King and offers in cameo form, all that is best in Laye's narrative style. Most commentators see in it "a quest for a mystical experience which

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<sup>13</sup> Apart from Sartre, Franz Kafka had a great influence on Laye as has been shown by Adele King who says that this is detectable to a far greater extent in Part 1 of The Radiance of the King than in the second part (1980, 62), and who maintains that, "In using Kafka, Laye was in tune with the prevailing mode of French fiction after the Second World War" (59), especially with regards to the theme of alienation and the situation of man in an absurd universe (58). I have implied that in fact Kafka 'used' certain modes of African perception to carry his themes.

<sup>14</sup> Laye's debt to the griot tradition for instance, is discussed in Ch.2 of this dissertation.

offers access to complete self-knowledge",<sup>15</sup> or "a search for a lost African culture, now abandoned by the younger generation."<sup>16</sup> The action takes place in a ruined city set in a remote forest, difficult of access. There are only two characters: a young girl and an elderly caretaker. On the surface it is the story of a gripping and destructive obsession which has no comprehensible origin, which is not located in ordinary time and space, but which has as its symbol the stone statue of the last prince of an ancient and ruined civilisation. The influence of Kafka would again appear to be very strong, not only in the dream-like atmosphere, the unexplained presence of a caretaker in an abandoned ruin, but also in the elliptical, condensed and ironic style of conversation. However it can be shown that this style of conversation is based on African riddling techniques where, to refer to Kwesi Yankah's research on the Akan riddle: "the resources of language are exploited for effect - those that involve correspondence of meaning, sound, tone, rhythm, and structure" (1983,87).<sup>17</sup> As in The Radiance of the King Sartre's idea of the importance of the regard of the Other informs the entire action. There must be more than a fortuitous similarity between the titles Le Regard du Roi and Les Yeux de la Statue. So it is possible to suggest that these two works are heavily influenced by a European literary tradition. However, one only has to turn to Laye's own traditional culture to see that he has

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<sup>15</sup> A.C. Brench 1969, 23.

<sup>16</sup> Adele King 1980, 61.

<sup>17</sup> See also the article by Eren Giray-Saul, "A West African riddling tradition: the Solem Kueese of the Mossi of Upper Volta", in Cross Rhythms Vol.1 (1983) 68-87. Yankah refers to the findings of G. Fortune 1951 (Zezeru), William Bascom 1949 (Yoruba), P.D. Beauchat 1965 (Bantu), and Ruth Finnegan 1970, especially pp.426-443, though objecting to her classification of riddles under prose forms. An important article on tone-riddles which discusses the relationship between stimulus and response is "The riddle in Africa", by Lyndon Harries, in Journal of American Folklore 84 (1971), 377-393.

embodied in these stories an African concept of surrealism described by Senghor,<sup>18</sup> and used for instance in the tali, Malinké folk-tales<sup>19</sup> set in no particular time and place, in regions or zones known as the village or its opposite, the bush. These are not merely geographic zones however, but represent some aspect of psychic reality reflecting both accepted norms of behaviour, and the darker or illicit passions which could bring disaster on the community as a whole. Each time the direction of movement is reversed, a new phase of the story begins; the sum total of these movements constitutes the schema (in a philosophical sense) of the tale. Further, young boys were often mediators passing between the two zones (as do Noaga and Nagoa in The Radiance of the King). Again we have an example of Leach's pendulum effect: the action swings from one zone to another, from one moment of experiential time to another. According to Sory Camara, the rhythmic structures in the tali themselves, and particularly the repetitions of key images and ideas, set up a pattern of expectations in the minds of the listeners and were the medium of transition between one zone and another. The Eyes of the Statue is an excellent example of how, in the novel, the rhythm of the prose propels the action towards resolution and so fulfills the expectations of the reader.

There are parallel sets of images, motifs and symbols within the narrative structures of The Eyes of the Statue and The Radiance of the

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<sup>18</sup> A point of view supported by Adele King when she writes: "In what he means by 'surrealism' and its closeness to the African world view, Laye's ideas are similar to Senghor's." (1980, 60)

<sup>19</sup> See Sory Camara, "Tales in the Night: toward an anthropology of the imaginary", in Varia Folklorica Ed. Alan Dundes (Mouton, 1978) 91-121. Camara embarked on a project to determine the conceptions of the Mandingo (eastern Senegal) society, of the life of the individual within it, and of man's relations with his natural environment and his past. She collected and analysed tali to show the importance of movement between zones (village/bush).

King; furthermore, it is possible to show similar parallels between the short story and the novel. Both start, for instance, with a situation of 'lack'<sup>20</sup> with the protagonist already in the process of moving from one zone to another towards the hoped-for amelioration which should result in lack-liquidated. What is the nature of the lack? For Clarence it is both material (he has no money, no position in society and is being hounded for debt), and spiritual (he is alone, an alien and an exile from his own people). He hopes that this situation will be resolved if the king employs him: then he will have both money and a position of sorts. For the girl the lack is less obvious though becoming progressively spiritual in nature. The short story starts with the words: "She stopped walking for a moment; ever since she set out...", and the novel with: "When Clarence reached the Esplanade...." In both therefore, events are already set in motion, expectations are set up both in the minds of the protagonists and in the minds of the readers. For the girl the desired object is the town, a word which is constantly repeated to emphasize the compulsion which this hidden centre is exerting. She moves nearer to resolution with each repetition. As she gets closer to it, the town becomes "a deserted city, a ruined city in fact." The telluric force which the town/city exerts is directly in sympathy with a force within herself: "The urge is me, she cried" (20). The idea of being called by something, of following an irresistible urge, is common to both works. It seemed to Clarence that the eyes of the king were calling him, and for the girl it was "as though the distant town were calling." Though both narratives are set in a timeless zone (no particular time or place) they are dominated in tone by a frenzied need to push forward and waste no more time, and with the accompanying fear of being too late. The

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20 'Lack' is an aspect of Vladimir Propp's Function A, being an alternative to 'Villainy'. Propp believed that all fairy tales could be reduced to an invariant thematic scheme in which the functions of characters served as stable, constant elements in a tale (J. Pentikäinen & Satu Apo, 1978, 24).



caretaker in the short story tells the girl, in answer to her self-questioning, "What am I searching for here?", "But you have arrived too late. Surely you must have been delayed on the road." At the beginning of his quest Clarence says "I've no more time to waste" (25), and at the end of his quest he thinks, "It is too late" (275). The fallen statue amongst the nettles, with its living piercing gaze which is so dynamic it seems to create sound ("A cry came from it, an appealing cry" (21)), reflects on the beauty of the young boy king, more a statue than a living person. The frightening nightmarish atmosphere of the short story, with its strident tone of loss and desolation, sets up an expectation in the reader that here lack will not be liquidated. It is indeed too late. Repetition encourages this expectation which is then reinforced on an ordinary temporal level: "But it is getting late, the sun is sinking." In both narratives it is clear that the protagonist was expected, that something beyond the individual will had already been set in motion (e.g. of the fallen statue, "Had he not guessed she would come?" and in Radiance the king says to Clarence, "Did you not know that I was waiting for you?" (284)).

What is the meaning of this enigmatic story with its powerful emotional tone, its insistence on time past, on being too late in times present, and on the impossibility of escape from time past? The key is to be found in Senghor's poem Night of Sine which was published in the same number of Black Orpheus in 1959. Moreover this number carries an article by Ulli Beier, "The theme of the Ancestors in Senghor's poetry", which complements the themes of both poem and short story. Beier's article examines what he sees as the African's attitude to death, which far from being associated with horror, is devoted to establishing a harmonious contact between living and dead, and he



proposes an African organic view of the world.<sup>21</sup> If one applies this concept to Laye's use of imagery and metaphor one sees that the weeds in The Eyes of the Statue are an ocean, are by extension a great green sea, are a single engulfing wave composed of velvety leaves, are the darkness itself, are night - and coming full circle - are again just nettles. The impulse that has brought the girl to the town and thus to the fallen statue, is her awareness that the continuity of life and death has been disturbed, the rites of the ancestors have been neglected and there is no sense of harmony (that is, she is not 'connected' in Armah's terms). The anguished tone of the short story suggests that Laye saw, as did Senghor, that this link between past and present was in danger of being irrevocably severed. The entire body of his work is an attempt to answer the girl's question, "Is there ever anything we can do?" (23). Senghor's poetry is filled with mask and statue imagery and the emphasis is on the turning of the eyes of the ancestors upon the living. In his poem Prayer to Masks he is the supplicator begging for direct contact, for the regard of the Other: "Now turn your immobile eyes towards your children." The girl in the short story asks herself: "Could sculptured stone have cast upon her such a piercing glance?" One remembers that Laye's father was a skilled craftsman who worked in gold, yet also carved beautiful rhythmic images from wood. There is certainly the idea in the story that the artist is the vehicle through which the divine force communicates. Night of Sine says of the ancestors, "They did not want to die, lest their seminal flood be lost in the sand" (Black Orpheus 1959, 18), and it seems to be

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<sup>21</sup> The idea that an organic view of the world is important in Africa is discussed by Ezekiel Mphahlele (1984) who claims that it is tied to the African idea of the supreme being, and that "The African has a total sense of the universe, things are not separated. Things are tied together, man, animals, plant life, the bodies in the sky and so on..." (19)

no accident that this poem precedes The Eyes of the Statue in the same publication. But Laye is more aware of the vast practical gulf between the ritual and the real worlds than Senghor will allow himself to be: his story tells of the failure of the symbol in a very African way. This is an issue which was not only vitally important in 1959 but equally so now. Vera Bührmann's research amongst Xhosa amagqira (traditional healers) shows that the dilemma of black Africans developing a Western type of ego consciousness, with Western goals and measures of achievement in conflict with the demands of the ancestors, brings deep psychological problems resulting in anxiety, confusion and a pressing search for identity. She quotes Senghor's statement: "We must in the 20th century enrich our civilization through mutual gifts and not create a new civilization " (1984, 102). How can the black African adjust to the paradox wrought within him from a collision of cultures in this move towards the new civilization, away from the old? According to Laye, without a conscious awareness of this paradox there can be only loneliness and spiritual debilitation: awareness therefore is the starting point to resolution. This is clear from the discussion between the girl and the caretaker in The Eyes of the Statue:

- But these paradoxes as you call them, which come from the depth of our being, what if we cannot find them there?
- What do you find within yourself? he answered her.
- I have already told you: unbearable loneliness. (25)

As Bührmann expresses it, and as Laye believed it to be true:

The black man should, however, not sever his connections with the world of symbols and mythical thinking and archetypal images. Instead a shift of emphasis is required to his relationships to these symbols, myths and images. He should for example, be less under the sway of his ancestors and of dream images and, instead, enter into a dialectic relationship with them. (103)

This is exactly the problem being confronted, in all its many aspects, in novels by Laye, Armah, Soyinka and Achebe.

The use of repetition in "The Radiance of the King".

Repetition is an important and striking feature of oral narrative throughout Africa. Dan Ben Amos states that apart from exaggerations of tone for narrative effect, "the main features of narrative style [of sung and narrated folklore in many African societies] are repetition of words and phrases, parallel phrasing and listing" (1977, 1-37). The various forms this repetition takes have been extensively analysed. A.M. Jones and Hazel Carter say that repetition may take place on several levels: stem reduplication, repetition of whole word or word-complex, and of a whole phrase or sentence, the overall intention being to intensify the meaning by nominal and adverbial repetition; or if the desired effect is to show continuation of action, there will often be repetition of the entire verb form as in Tweenda, tuyu bweenda, tuyu bweenda..../We travelled, we kept on and on travelling (1967, 118).

Repetition can also have a very special function in relation to sacred or experiential time, as Avorgbedor's research on Yeve ritual shows (1987). This is not specifically an African phenomenon, but part of the ritual experience anywhere where it centres on rites of passage,<sup>22</sup> for instance as practised by the Mescalero Apache Indians during a girl's puberty ceremony:

....those elements which in music help mark the passage of time: pulse, repetitions, change and silence - are a carefully structured part of the ceremony ... However, the progressive or linear sense of time found in much Western art-music is conspicuously absent. In fact, the songs of this ceremony are structured and grouped in such a way as to unify

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<sup>22</sup> For a description of the special sense of time during rites of passage see van Gennep 1960 (Les rites du passage/The rites of passage, U of Chicago Press), Turner 1969 (The ritual process: structure and anti-structure, Chicago: Aldine Publishing Co), and Leach 1976 (Culture and communication, Cambridge UP).

the diverse portions of the ritual and to create the impression in the participants that no time has elapsed from beginning to end - and that, in fact, this ceremony joins others in its own re-creation of the realm of mythological time. (Shapiro and Talamantez, 1986, 78)

Referring specifically to the use of repetition, Shapiro and Talamantez say:

The repetition also functions to hold time still, to make an interval of "timelessness". Just as the ceremony as a whole is, in Leach's phrase, a period of "social timelessness" between two stages in life, the songs separate the tribe from a normal sense of time ... By repeating them [ritual songs] the power of the words and the images they evoke are literally present in the sacred space. The mind can travel between them; when similar tunes are used it is as if no time has elapsed between one set of images and the next, or between the first ceremony ever sung and the one presently being sung. (85/86)

Repetition of the image<sup>23</sup> is the dominant feature of many narrative art forms. Cosentino lists the basic principles which underlie the construction and use of 'image' throughout Mende (Sierra Leone) oral performance (1982, 38/39), and describes how it works in the actual telling of tales:

The initial image sets up the armature,<sup>24</sup> but additional images are needed to resolve the inherent conflict and to test the significance of the established categories. No matter how diverse the plot surface of an additional image is, elements of the categories already established must be repeated, either directly or as an inversion or in juxtaposition. Only in categorical repetition can theme be established, for it is in the fit of the second image that the meaning of the first is explicated. Depending on the form of repetition the artist chooses, the original oppositions will be maintained and thus intensified or they will be reversed in a work of irony or a synthesis will be attempted. (149)

Cosentino gives as an example the story known as "A defiant maid marries a stranger", which, in the version he has recorded begins with

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<sup>23</sup> Cosentino follows Harold Scheub in the choice of the word 'image' to describe the narrative block. See Scheub (1970) 119-147.

<sup>24</sup> This is Levi-Strauss's term. He defines 'armature' as "a combination of properties that remain invariant in two or several myths" (1969, 199).



the formulaic: "Behold this girl from long ago. She was a great fornicator " (145). Here the narrative is built on a series of opposites, for example, town versus bush, woman as fornicator versus woman as obedient Sande initiate. The town/bush opposition is particularly important in the tradition of Mende domei (oral stories), movement between the two zones intensifying the meaning of the repetition, "for it represents a journey with profound emotional connotations for a Mende audience. This movement from town to bush is, in effect, a movement between worlds: the first under human control, the second under the control of spirits" (149). This confirms the findings of Sory Camara above, and is especially significant in the context of West African literature although, as Cosentino points out, it is a well known narrative cliché common to oral narratives from Senegal to Nigeria, and one made famous of course by the version offered by Amos Tutuola in the 'Complete Gentleman' section of The Palm Wine Drinkard.<sup>25</sup> It is evidently not the 'narrative cliché' itself which is significant but the manner of rendering it, and the quality of individual performance.

Turning to Laye's The Radiance of the King one sees at once the same types of opposition at work e.g. individual versus crowd (7); black versus white ("A white man?" said the black man, 10); integrated social action (i.e. the dance) versus solitary uncoordinated action (i.e. Clarence's pushing crab-like movements, 8); town (Adramé) versus

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<sup>25</sup> pp 17-25. Cosentino records a version of this story told by Hannah Samba. A short extract shows how close the significant elements are to those in Tutuola's version: "As they were going, this Kpana ... all those things he had, those handsome features ... behold he was a Big Thing! His human features, all those features he had borrowed, they were finished. As they reached a place, he would go to visit that person and return his own handsome feature. So he changed back into a spirit. Then they reached deep into his own forest."



bush (Aziana) etc. Clearly Laye is concerned with writing within an immediately accessible narrative tradition which goes far deeper than mere rhythmic repetition and which attempts to capture (in his own words) the "furious rhythm of the tom-toms" in prose. He took his example from the accredited poets and musicians of his own people - the griots.<sup>26</sup> Speaking about the artistic use of repetition in his home language, Malinké, he wrote:

Speech in Agni, in Baoule, in Malinké contains many repetitions. This aims at making the listener understand; you repeat the same thing several times from different angles. So I plagiarise a little, if you want, Malinké speech and I succeed in creating a certain number of repetitions. (qtd. in King, 113)

This is more obvious in the original French versions than in the English where the repetitions have sometimes been reduced and simplified in the interests of neater verbal patterns. For Laye, the use of rhythmic prose was a way of keeping close to the structure of traditional narrative whilst working within the grammatical framework of a foreign language such as French. The key description which reinforces the symbolic connection, (as Clarence perceives it), between the too-delectable odour and the South, provides many examples of Laye's skillful use of repetition.<sup>27</sup> It is also an excellent example of the organic nature of Laye's imagery, whereby an image is introduced which then gathers a whole field of symbolic reference to it through the reinforcing quality of the repetitions. The key-words 'lumière' and 'mer' firmly link the absence of (spiritual) light with the more sinister aspects of unbridled fertility. The demonstratives "ce n'est pas" and "c'est" introduce each new link in the chain of image and

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<sup>26</sup> The influence of the griot tradition on the narrative techniques of Camara Laye is examined in Ch.2 of this dissertation.

<sup>27</sup> The passage beginning "Ce n'est pas tout à fait le mot...." and ending "l'appel du pollen des fleurs!" which is printed on pp 89/90 of Le regard du roi and pp 98/99 in The radiance of the king.

symbol, eg. "C'est l'opacité nocturne" ("Instead there is only a nocturnal opacity"), "ce n'est pas vraiment une nappe, ce n'est pas une mere étale. C'est cela d'abord, c'est cela aux abords; mais c'est une mer...." ("....it is not just a tranquil bay or a smooth sea. It is like that at first, it is like that at first sight. But then it becomes...."). The links in the chain are "parfum", "mer", "lumière", "nuit", "fleurs", "fermentation", "pollen des fleurs", but the word which carries the dominant emotional tone is "appel" (appeal). The word "mer" is introduced as an extension of "cette nappe de parfums", then its field of reference is expanded through repetition - "cette nappe de parfums, qui est comme la vraie mer: la mer, déjà présenté dans le vent....", "la vraie mer", "une mer étale", "une mer sourdement travaillée, soudement agitée; une mer avec ses courants et ses fleuves secrets; une mer qui puise ses secrets dans les fleurs at dans la fermentation du sol." The word "lumière" is repeated twice to suggest its opposite, darkness, but James Kirkup, in his densely worked translation, has replaced the second "lumière" with "radiance" thus deliberately reinforcing the symbolic content of the description though sacrificing something of the compelling force of repetition. The whole passage refers back to Clarence's impressions on the esplanade in Adramé, where "a herd-like odour which seemed to dull the senses into a kind of trance" overcomes him and impedes his progress forward. (Eng. 7/Fr.9: "une odeur de troupeau, qui plongeait l'être dans une espèce de sommeil."). So, when Clarence attempts to analyse the particularly insidious qualities of the odour of flowers and decay, he reflects that it is not "the crowd's herd-like odour" (Fr. "Ce n'est pas l'odeur de troupeau de la foule" (Eng.98/Fr.89)).

There are sustained verbal patterns in Laye's novels, which I shall define as groups of words with the same sphere of reference repeated in

the same or similar context, not perhaps as restricted as the so-called Homeric epithet. The basic function of each word cluster is often to dramatize the inadequacy of the logical mind to phrase answers for questions essentially mystical and non-rational in content, or to contrast the European mode of perception and attitude to time with an African surrealist (or Senghorian 'sous-réalité') mode of perception. In The Radiance of the King there is also the added dimension of the Sufist world-view. That Laye was heavily influenced by Sufist belief is beyond doubt.<sup>28</sup> The Sufi Way or Path leads to a direct perception into objective reality without need of the mediation of the logical mind. Much of the overt meaning of both the 'radiance' ('lumière', 'rayonnement du roi') and 'sleep' word clusters is derived from the Sufist idea of the rapture of illumination and the deep sleep of a drugged humanity. A Sufi will often use an illogical story or fable in order to penetrate the fixed ideas and associations of a mind which has been prejudicially preconditioned to understand only what is logical.<sup>29</sup> The beggar's riddles and ambiguous remarks are in keeping with the Sufist tone of the novel e.g. the discussion about why the King should or should not want to leave them (Eng.21/Fr.21). Because of the Sufist influence, and the African mode of perception favoured by Laye and set in contrast with a Western world-view, a keyword throughout The Radiance of the King is "perhaps", with its associative "seemed", especially in climactic passages of introspection. Clarence is unable to accept the evidence of his senses. Throughout The Radiance of the King the phrase "he wondered" ("il se demanda") is constantly repeated, often followed by the internalised question being asked out loud. This pattern occurs most frequently in questions relating to time, place or

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<sup>28</sup> Adele King discusses the Sufist content (p.44) and an important article in this respect is "Crescent and Consciousness: Islamic Orthodoxies and the West African novel" by L.A. Johnson, in Research in African Literature Vol. XI No.1 (1980). An article in the same number of RAL by Ben Obumsela, "The French and Moslem backgrounds of The Radiance of the King" 1-26, is also helpful. Johnson cites examples such as the taking of the kankan elixir in The Dark Child (138), and the character of Uncle Mamadou (150-51), but holds that "syncretism dominates the aesthetics at work in the religious world that Camara Laye gives us in his novels...." Obumselu finds Laye's puritanism to be a matter of orthodox Moslem form. Kenneth Harrow's, "A Sufi interpretation of Le Regard du Roi", RAL Vol.14 No.2 (1983) 135-165, offers a detailed analysis of Laye's debt to Sufism.

<sup>29</sup> The stories of Idries Shah in his book The Sufis are well-known in the Western world.

intention where a hypothesis beginning with "perhaps" is usually supplied as a tentative answer. A good example is Clarence's contemplation of the special quality of the King's smile:

[This was] the reflection of an inner life, no doubt, but - what sort of inner life? Perhaps of that very life which lies beyond death ... "Can that be the sort of life I have come here to find?" wondered Clarence. Yes, perhaps it was that life. (Eng.22/Fr.22)

The repetition of a pattern of self-interrogation, succeeded by a negative answer and/or a provisional hypothesis is a characteristic of style already present in The Dark Child. Robert Greene has discussed what he terms Laye's "achaeological enterprise" in that novel as the narrator "digs up shards of memory and attempts to explicate their meaning" (1984, 61). The English poet, T.S. Eliot, whose poem Four Quartets is a symbolic spiritual voyage moving towards resolution at "the still point of the turning world", and which explores different concepts of time as they relate to the nature of mystical experience, (for "only through time is time conquered",<sup>30</sup> offers an interpretation of the process of transformation from actual experience to artistic form: "We had the experience but missed the meaning,/And approach to the meaning restores the experience/in a different form...." <sup>31</sup> According to Green, Laye was "concurrently seeking to transport himself backwards, re-creating mentally and imaginatively that landscape of ritual and arcane animism which he had bartered for a metropolitan education" through the persona of the child (62). So also in The Radiance of the King Clarence surrenders the outward trappings of western Christian civilization to seek revitalising contact with this ritual and arcane animism which at the same time he wants to define and grasp logically. For him, ritual non-durational concepts of time will, to use Bloch's terms, reveal the world rather than hide it. In the forest before Aziana, when Clarence tries to find a logical explanation for events at the same time as fighting an overwhelming desire to lapse into the state of sleep in which transpositions of time and space are common, he wonders why they are walking in circles and comes to the tentative conclusion that: "Perhaps it is a game. But what sort of game would that be?" (Eng.97/Fr.88) Here he half guesses the

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<sup>30</sup> "Burnt Norton" II p.10.

<sup>31</sup> "The Dry Salvages" II p.28.



truth - in a sense he is part of a complex African riddle. Most of the action is seen through Clarence's limited capacity to perceive, and monitored through his persistent child-like questions. These multiply when his confusion deepens as in the conversation with Baloum about the nature of the manatees: "I did not want to tell you", Baloum had replied. "But you keep on and on asking questions like a child; you spend your whole life asking questions!" (Eng.231)

The word 'time' is repeated with all the insistence of a sounding drum throughout the novel and again the emphasis is on perceived differences between black and white concepts of time. I can give only a short summary of this theme here. In *Adramé* on the esplanade, Clarence expects the King to appear at a definite clock-time whereas the crowd expects him only at the 'appointed' time ("l'heure fixée" p.11) by which is meant a ritual time pervaded with energy (heightened emotional and physical involvement) rather than a set moment on the linear path of time. "What time will that be?" Clarence asks and receives the usual apparently ambiguous answer, "The king knows" (Eng.10/Fr.12). The idea that Clarence hasn't time to waste is repeated from his first panic-stricken "But I can't wait as long as that the suggested three years before the King's return ... I haven't time. I've no more time to waste" (Eng.25), to the King's "Did you not know that I was waiting for you?" ("Ne savais-tu pas que je t'attendais?") at the end of the novel. In this context the western concept of wasting time is meaningless since the King has been waiting for him before the moment at which the novel begins, and to borrow a phrase once again from T.S. Eliot, "In my beginning is my end."<sup>32</sup> When the dancers impede their progress at the beginning of the pilgrimage south, the beggar exclaims, "We shall never arrive in time" (Eng.68), although it is not clear just then what he means to be in time for. He parodies or echoes Clarence's fear that time is running out: "We've wasted far too much time as it is " (Eng.92). Once they enter the forest time is characterised by repetition and circular movement; it is an African time measured according to the oscillations between day and night, the different seasons, birth and death. After their arrival in Aziana it seems to Clarence that everyone keeps referring to the coming of the dawn as a special time, an 'experiential' time when something significant might

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<sup>32</sup> Four Quartets: "East Coker" I p.15.



be expected to happen, but as usual Clarence cannot get a direct answer to his question, "Then, tell me, when does dawn break?" (Eng.131) The ambiguous answer is: "Whenever it breaks, it will be too soon." The word 'time' is repeated insistently, often with ironic overtones, as the king's longed-for visit nears. Clarence himself plays with the concept of time when he mockingly says, "There's a time for everything ... A time to meditate and a time to wash oneself; yes, there was plenty of time but the problem for him was what to do with it" (Eng.169). This is an ironic echo of Ecclesiastes III, also used by T.S. Eliot to denote the rhythm of succession.<sup>33</sup> But Clarence is not the only person spending time waiting for the king. Diallo discusses the concept of a special waiting-time - in fact, he says, the king chooses "the very fraction of a second" in which to make his appearance when those waiting for him have forgotten to wait; he discusses too the religious idea of waiting in the right way i.e. by work, and by striving towards the goal (Eng.210). Again Eliot uses a similar concept of waiting without hope in a voluntary darkness.<sup>34</sup> Diallo gives it a more active and practical application in his attempt to forge the perfect axe.

No matter how 'Africanised' he becomes, Clarence cannot resist the urge to organise events into a comprehensive progression from past to future; but the more he tries to do this the less he can remember the details: "It had all taken place ... but when exactly had it taken place?" (Eng.203) Finally Noaga and Nagoa assure him that not only will the king come, but that he will come at some point in the future which is foreseeable, at least by Dioki. She allows him a vision of the future and a moment of "con-naissance" but he still needs to know the exact

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<sup>33</sup> "...there is a time for building/And a time for living and for generation", from "East Coker" I p.15.

<sup>34</sup> "I said to my soul, be still and wait without hope", from "East Coker" III p.19.

time of the king's arrival, to which the delphic answer is, "He will sit there in the afternoon" (Eng.244). In the vision that he has of the king setting out from the palace at Adramé, present and future are compressed into one moment, and Clarence returns to the point of his departure. Now at last he can be given an exact time: "He'll be here tomorrow, on the stroke of noon" (Eng.254/Fr.228). The word 'stroke' ('coup') implies clock-time but it could also refer to the master-drummer's signalling beat on the drum which begins a period of experiential time. Clarence's sense of total unworthiness at first makes him unable to grasp the moment for itself; he sees the time of his presentation to the king as being past already, and too late. And yet within the spiritual framework of the novel "Sin is Behovely, but/All shall be well...." <sup>35</sup> It is Diallo (acting in the role of spiritual mentor or priest) who persuades him, "What's yesterday got to do with today? It is only this day and hour that count "

(Eng.275/Fr.246). A quotation from quite a different novel, Ambiguous Adventure by Sambo Diallo, seems relevant to an understanding of the ambiguous ending of The Radiance of the King: "The purity of the moment is made from the absence of time" (trans. K. Woods 176). So Laye's novel ends with the words "for ever" ("toujours"). Thus repetition of the word 'time' moves the action towards resolution at a point where ritual or static time makes the transitory experience permanent.

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<sup>35</sup> "Little Gidding" III p.41. Eliot quotes a fourteenth century mystic, Dame Julian of Norwich.

### Parallel image sets in "The Radiance of the King"

Laye has deliberately used repetition as a stylistic device to propel the reader into a realm of experiential time, as a means of resolving both the paradoxes of the black man's situation in a Western-orientated style of civilization (i.e. in The Dark Child and A Dream of Africa), and the difficulties of a white consciousness confronting an African concept of reality (as in The Radiance of the King).

Furthermore, though it is not possible to show without doubt that this use of repetition in the novels is directly related to repetitive devices which inform the structure of much African music and oral literature, it is almost certainly the case. So insistent is the repetition in a work like The Radiance of the King that one can outline a well-defined parallelism of structure and motif in its three different parts: "Adramé", "Aziana" and "The King". They all begin with the idea of an action in progress, but it is an action which is somehow physically impeded. In "Adrame" Clarence's way is blocked by a vast crowd; "Aziana" begins, "Clarence walked painfully to the threshold of his hut" (Eng, 146). Here again the movement is slow, heavy, drugged. The inference that heaviness is an aspect of evil (i.e. motivating against spiritual regeneration) is developed in the many repetitions such as "inexplicable heaviness", "inexpressibly heavy", "sultry heaviness", "misted heaviness of his being". This is associated with another recurring motif, sleep, as is the case in the opening scene on the esplanade. Further, the tendency to sleep is associated with pungent physical odours. On the esplanade it is a herd-like odour and in "Aziana" it is the insidious fragrance of the flowers which Akissi brings to the bed each night (Eng, 147). In fact 'odour' is one of the

most often repeated words in the entire novel. Next, in association with i) impeded movement forward, ii) the sensation of sleeping, and iii) overwhelming odours, there is iv) the colour red. On the esplanade the dancers stir up a massive cloud of red dust (Eng,9) and in Aziana the quality of the sunrise seems to turn everything red: "...the red earth regained its supremacy; the huts and the gallery took on once again their blood-red tint; the earth was red again, a darker and more velvety red " (Eng, 147). Part 3, "The King", begins with movement fully arrested. Clarence was sitting in front of his hut with the two boys (Eng, 228) and "day was joined to day with the same boring repetitiveness", but it ends with free movement forward, for when Clarence leaves his hut to go out at last to meet the king (and the hut is presumably a real physical place) the wall was no longer solid but melted away, the hut behind him melted away too. The reader readily accepts this shift from the possible to the improbable since the inherent patterns come to their logical climax at this point. So Clarence "went forward and he had no garment upon his nakedness....he kept moving forward, forward all the time...." (Eng, 282/Fr.253: "Il s'avavançait et il n'avait aucun vêtement sur lui....Mais non, il avançait, il continuait de s'avancer...."). His odour, which he had come to associate with his own unbridled sexuality, does not offend the king, and the king himself is bathed in a radiant light. The red colour of the dust and mud becomes by extension the fire and source of pure disinterested love emanating from the king at the moment that Clarence finally ends his quest "....still ravaged by the tongue of fire " (Eng,283/Fr. "....et tout meurtri encore par le trait de feu....").

Dance plays an important part in all three sections of the novel. "Aziana" opens with a dance in progress (Eng,9-15). The chapter "The

stolen coat" which marks the beginning of the first stage of Clarence's journey south also begins with a dance in which the entire population is involved. It seems to Clarence to have the frenzied rhythms of a witches' sabbath. The abandoned mode of dancing is accompanied by incredible noise - rolling drums, the raucous cries of the men and above all, the piercing cries of the women (Eng,66/Fr.60). The great fires at every crossroad create a radiance in the darkness exactly like the cloud of red dust at the esplanade. Once again Clarence falls into a sleep-mode which is directly attributable to strong odour: "....it was that very odour, a mingled smell of wool and oil and sweat, which always sent Clarence to sleep: the same odour which on the esplanade...." (Eng,67/Fr.61). It is a dancer who 'rescues' Clarence from the judge's guards. His arrival at Aziana is greeted by the sound of drums and a crowd of dancers (Eng,118). As soon as they come out of the forest a great crowd begins to clap and utter loud cries, "....the same cries and the same hand-claps as Clarence had heard on the esplanade - and then they broke into a dance (Eng,118/Fr.107: "....les mêmes cris et les mêmes battements de mains que sur l'esplanade, et aussi à danser sur place...."). As soon as darkness falls, a great fire is lit in the village square and dancing begins anew to the inevitable sound of the tom-toms ('talking' drums, "les tambours parlants"). Clarence's anguished statement of resistance when being pressed to dance by an importunate woman, "But I don't want to join in the dance " (Eng,132), and "I don't know how to dance...." (i.e. in an African way) reveal that he is not yet ready to lose his 'white' consciousness in a purely African form of energy, an energy



which is also a medium of spiritual and mental healing.<sup>36</sup> The surrealistic scene in which the twins lift up the arms of a woman dancer is a parody of the scene at the esplanade in which two of the pages or dancers placed themselves at the king's right hand, and two at his left, and slowly lifted his arms. At the same time as they did this, the royal robe "was falling open to reveal the slender black torso of an adolescent boy " (Eng, 20), Nagoa and Noaga lift up the woman's arms and make her jump up and down "and at every jump a kind of squall breezed through her leafy pinafore, lifting it up into the air....and they were following scrupulously the rhythm of the drums " (Eng, 134). A dance which is also a fecundity mime performed by the twins, precedes the scene in which Clarence walks out to meet the king (Eng, 272).

There is parallelism too in the use of trial scenes, the use of buildings or architectural structures such as arcades and terraces (the Palace of Justice, the Naba's palace), the use of mazes and corridors, (the corridors of the Palace of Justice, the tunnels of the forest, the maze at the Naba's palace). Laye explores tricks of perspective which contribute to the overall surrealist effect, because the world he shows us here is one of always shifting, always altering dimensions of space and time. Thus in "Adramé" when the king ascends the stairway of the central tower, Clarence has the illusion that he is walking off into

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<sup>36</sup> Vera Bührmann, in her discussion of *xhentsa* (the healing dance of the Xhosa *amagqira*) says that according to the Xhosa, dance has the power of clarifying thinking. She quotes from Wosein's *Sacred dance (Encounter with the gods)* in support of the contention that rhythmic sound in cosmogenic myths is at the root of all creation. Some of the creation myths of the world are spoken of as God sending pulsating waves of awakening sound through matter, "thereby seducing it to life from lethargy". (1984, 97)

space. A lengthy descriptive passage analyzes the nature of this illusion (Eng,36).

In order that he may reduce a mass of partial evidence about space and time to some acceptable pattern, Clarence visits Dioki, the local seer. Under the influence of a trance-like state created by the rhythmic orgiastic writhings of the old woman and her snakes (themselves a symbol of "con-naissance"), he has a vision which takes the action of the novel right back to the starting point. The ditch becomes an expanding courtyard, the sky becomes a rocky vault suffused with red light, and Clarence sees again the towers of the royal palace of Adramé: "Soon, Clarence could see the platform at the top of the central tower as clearly as he had seen it on the day when he had gone up to the esplanade " (Eng,247/Fr.222). Moreover he sees the king starting the journey south and it is as if the entire scene which he has witnessed on the esplanade was now repeated, only in reverse. The king repeats the exact pattern of Clarence's journey south, if not the same route at least a parallel one (Fr,222: "C'était la campagne même que Clarence avait parcourue au sortir d'Adramé....ou, si ce n'était pas le même, un chemin parallèle....") .

Laye seems to be suggesting that it is possible to transcend time and space through psychic and spiritual energy generated by movement, not along a linear path, but in recurring, repeated cycles, as in dance. There are certainly comparisons to be made with T.S. Eliot's Four Quartets: but Eliot's idea of the importance of dance and patterned movement leading to spiritual integration at the still point of the turning world, is as much an African idea as an Eastern or

European idea, and one that is more frequently still made flesh in Africa.

Rhythms of a vanishing world: The Dark Child (L'enfant noir)

The dramatic tension in this novel lies between the organic communal whole and the individual way. Although Laye is writing what seems to be autobiography, such is the intensity of his experience and the skill with which he describes it, that the work has a far wider application than a merely personal one. On a universal level it deals with the psychological effects of those rites of passage which mark the passing of time from birth to maturity, and the child's painful realisation that the mother has a separate 'self'. As such it relates to a symbolic field of reference probably common to all mankind (one remembers that Kofi Awoonor called his autobiographical novel, This earth, my brother..., an allegory). It deals with the gradual disintegration of the ritual bonds which held rural communities together and gave direction to the life of the individual within those communities. In this context the controlling metaphor is initiation. To an African from such a traditional community, a western education in a foreign land is also a form of initiation: the sacred places are technical colleges and universities; circumcision is replaced by physical and mental suffering; the village elders are replaced by the custodians of western cultural values; and music, song and dance are to be found in the nightclubs. Certainly there is a kind of death involved: the initiate is severed from his traditional heritage, and sent forth with the blessings and libations of his people<sup>37</sup> on his heroic quest for a western education and, more importantly as far as the people he leaves behind are concerned, for greater wealth. But what

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<sup>37</sup> Ironically described by Awoonor, 15.

of the rebirth? In traditional initiation the purpose of the ceremonies "is to effect ritual transformation within a socially regulated framework."<sup>38</sup> The end result is "Reincorporation" to use van Gennep's term.<sup>39</sup> But for the West African writers such rebirth seems stillborn. Laye ends A Dream of Africa (Dramouss) with an allegorical prophecy of the death and destruction which awaited his political compatriots in liberated Guinea. Armah ends Fragments with his protagonist virtually insane, and Awoonor has Amamu, his fictional nom-de-plume, commit a kind of suicide: "He had arrived home at last " (179). As Armah has it in the title of his novel, West Africa is indeed going through a period of transition and "the Beautiful Ones" are not yet born.

In The Dark Child Laye shows that the continuity between an inherited communal past and present private needs is still there for those who elect to remain within the traditional framework of education and age-sets; on the other hand for those who deliberately choose to adopt a Western consciousness, the deep meaning of traditional rites is hidden or lost forever. The sense of psychological alienation is very much an aspect of Senghorian negritude. Washington Bâ says that the theme of exile pervades Senghor's poetry and that it is this "suffering and desire combined" (Senghor's words) that provides the emotional timbre of the negritude movement (28). His poetry plays out the drama of exile (27). Laye too was an exile. According to Green, the heavy use of negatives and the finality of the word "jamais" in the introspective passage about his father's totemistic black snake reveal the child's realization of foreclosure, his apprehension that he had already lost the opportunity and privilege of intimacy (1984, 64). This is more strongly presented in the original French than in the English translation: ".... je ne pensais pas qu'il eut maintenant rien a me confier, je craignais bien qu'il n'eut rien a me confier jamais...."/"I was afraid that he would never have anything to tell me...." (Fr, 21/Eng.24).

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38 Shapiro and Talamantez, 1986, 77.

39 Les Rites du Passage, 1908.

Repetition here, as in The Radiance of the King is a dominant aspect of Laye's narrative style. Olney (1973) has pointed out several significant recurring motifs. One set of word clusters is related to 'the ways' that were open to him, ("les chemins", "les voies"), that is, to the choices to be made in life.<sup>40</sup> Another recurring motif is that of the "warmth" of the family home, "la chaleur de la case natale" (140), contrasted with the intense cold of foreign landscapes such as Orly Airport.<sup>41</sup> A third most important motif centres on the actual process of separation - the physical tearing away of the child from his mother. (Fr. "déchirer", to lacerate, mangle, tear, rend, rip). Olney says that Laye describes himself as being torn apart within, at the same time as, and because, he is torn away from the integral family and the organic community (142). Aimée Césaire uses the word "rupture" for a similar experience.

It is indeed this sense of being torn away from the organic community which is so strongly present in The Dark Child and which accounts for its strong emotional appeal. It is conveyed in the reactions of the child to the control exercised by his elders through the deliberate manipulation of temporal/spatial spheres during the

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<sup>40</sup> The difference of opinion between Richard Wright and Aimée Césaire at the world Congress of Black Writers in 1956, concerning the importance of the past, highlights the dilemma of the choice between Europeanisation and "superstition". As Césaire said: "One often tries to sum up the problem under the form of a choice one has to make. The choice between indigenous tradition and European civilization ... In other words, we are called upon: choose, choose between loyalty and backwardness on the one hand, and progress and rupture on the other. What is our response? Our response is that things are not as simple as all that and that there is no alternative." This congress was reviewed by Janheinz Jahn in Black Orpheus, No.1 1957, 44.

<sup>41</sup> For a similar point of view see Senghor's Paris in the Snow: "Lord, you visited Paris on the day of your birth/Because it had become paltry and bad./You purified it with incorruptible cold,/The white death." (Black Orpheus, No.1 1957, 26)



rituals accompanied by the music and dance which form the basis of traditional education. The Dark Child is above all about education and the structures of ritual through which a West African adolescent learns self-control. These structures endure though they may be subject to change;<sup>42</sup> they are a means by which to "know" the world rather than to hide it in that they reveal a people's sense of order, though they unfold in ritual time, a time which Laye calls "tres mysterieuse" (Fr, 91). Laye gives a fine analysis of these traditional structures in the descriptions of the Kondén Diara and circumcision ceremonies, providing as much real information as he knew, or was permitted to reveal.

Chapter 7 describes Laye's experience when he joined the "society of the uninitiated" (Eng, 94). Several time indicators are given: he was growing up, a special time had arrived in his development, a time for him to join his age-set of those between 12 and 14, and, on a more communal level, it was the evening before Ramadan, a time pervaded with special atmosphere. The ritual events began "as soon as the sun went down" (94), and were heralded by the beginning of the drum-beat which would keep time throughout the night. The word "time" is repeated in expressions such as "...Oui, le temps pour moi était venu; le temps était là!" (91), reduced to "Yes the time had come for me..." in the English version (94). The emphasis is on age-sets and the incorporation of these groups into the society as a whole through ritual behaviour. What was happening to Laye was an inevitable part of his life as a member of that society: the inevitability of the event is reflected in

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<sup>42</sup> Gerald Moore talks of "the vanishing world, so rich in dignity and human values", and of a life "which was still intact, though beginning to disappear; a life which was not essentially changed from that of the empires of the Mansa Musa or Sundiata which had ruled these riverine cities six or seven hundred years earlier" (1971, 86).

the onomatopaeic name of the lead drummer, Kadoké. An article by the anthropologist, Peter Weil, explains the importance of age-sets and related group activities in the type of community Laye is writing about. Weil associates the use of masking and related ceremonies in the Mandinka societies of Gambia with rule-application in hierarchical communities. The role of the masked figure, he says, is to maintain control of the working force, especially in agrarian communities; he "provides a mechanism through which the probability of sustained, divisive conflict is decreased by converting secular actions of rule-application [a process through which public rules are made binding on the members of a political community] into sacred, supra-social actions." Weil believes that the disappearance of masked figures in these societies is directly attributable to political and economic changes in the socio-cultural milieu in which sacred masked figures have functioned (1971, 279). Karoussa, in 1948, when Laye was initiated into the age-set of neophytes, was at a point of transition between an agrarian and an urban-type economy; the age-sets were still there and the festivals remained, but many of the reasons for the more esoteric parts of them were becoming obsolete. In retrospect Laye believed even at that time, during the Kondén Diara festivities before Ramadan, that he was conscious of a loss of connection (again in Armah's terms) between old beliefs and new needs.<sup>43</sup>

Another useful article which explains the close connection between age-sets and traditional masks is that by Pascal Imperato whose work

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<sup>43</sup> Weil also points to the spread of Islam as a reason for the disappearance of masked figures but at the same time points out that while Islam made progress amongst the Mandinka, and in the Muslim state of Mali, most of the population was still 'pagan' in the sense that they still practised traditional esoteric rites (1971, 291). Islam and received traditional practice, seemed as Laye shows, to have gone hand in hand.

amongst the Malinké<sup>44</sup> (1980, 47-56) shows that age-set associations called ton emerged to meet the needs of an agrarian society that most often functioned at subsistence level. According to Imperato, the Bambara and Malinké are patrilineal and patrilocal societies whose basic social and economic unit is still the extended family. A family group that eats together would be known as a gwa but the extended group which farms together is the lu. The importance of the extended family and the position of the father-figure is highlighted by Laye in the intimate descriptions of his father (Eng, 22-32); the lu at work is illustrated in the rice-harvesting scene (Eng, 53-60). Thus when Laye writes about being torn away from his family, the metaphor has much wider implications when seen in the context of a patrilineal society. Wiel's research shows that Mandinka males are grouped into age-sets of about three-year spans, and the age sets themselves pass through three age grades. Laye has simplified this by describing his membership of only two of these age-sets i.e. that of the neophytes and that of the initiates. Wiel maintains that "the boys' age grade, composed of youngsters from ten to twenty, plays a vital enculturation role" (283). The process of growing up and becoming a responsible adult therefore involved a passage through these age-sets accompanied by the attendant ceremonies and teachings; only this way would one come to have administrative power in a village. The age-sets function as a form of control of the abuse of power: one can only acquire power as part of an on-going natural cyclic process. This answers Bloch's suggestion that the amount of ritual cognition and 'social structure' in any society

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<sup>44</sup> The Malinké live to the west of the Bambara, extending into Gambia, Guinea and Senegal; their traditional home is Mali. The Bambara and the Malinké belong to the larger Manding cluster and share many social, cultural and political traditions (Imperato, 1980, 47).

represents the degree of inequality in that society. Laye would rather support Bourdillon is his argument that:

....there are concepts of time which involve an element of creativity on the part of the people who use them, and that this creativity is not necessarily an escape from reality....Through reflective thought people can escape from being simply absorbed in a transient series of events. Through reflective thought we are able, as it were, to stand back from the present moment and see it in the context of a continuity from past to future. Self-awareness involves the permanence of something formed in the past, yet always present. (594)

Though there is much in The Dark Child that one could comment on in this context, there is room here for an analysis of only one scene, the *Kondén Diara* ritual. Laye maintains dramatic tension in his description of this complex of ceremonies through his emphasis on the child's expectations and fears, and by concentrating on the aural content of the scene e.g. by describing the approaching sound of the drum and the effect when *Kadoké* and the drummers suddenly burst in upon him. *Kadoké* beats his tom-tom (perhaps a double-headed hourglass tension drum), the noise is overwhelming, the crowd forms a circle around the child and he is alone at the centre, "...isolé, étrangeté isolé, libre encore et déjà captif...."/"...collected as I was to be, as I already was" (Fr, 94/Eng, 97). The 'collected' ones stand in the centre of a circle of young men. At this point young girls and women join the circle; then according to plan, the young men and adolescents join in and break it up by beginning to dance facing the women. In this way the uncircumcised boys of Laye's set are isolated. They begin to sing in unison and the rhythm of the song helps them to overcome their anxiety, to make them lose ordinary consciousness and surrender their sense of self to the larger self of accepted communal action. The tour of the concessions during which they collect other boys, takes the action to near the middle of the night, at which point the women go back to their huts, the grown men also leave and the initiates are delivered over to older boys i.e. circumcised boys in a higher age-set. The initiates are taken to a spot which according to tradition has numinous power, at the junction of two rivers, the *Komoni* and the *Niger*, and more particularly to an enormous *bombax* tree. The reason for this is to reinforce a feeling of connection with an historic past at a moment of 'deep' or 'ritual' time. The atmosphere of total silence surrounding them strengthens the supernatural element and will



contribute to the necessary degree of shock and surprise when Kondén Diara begins to roar.<sup>45</sup> The crimson radiance of the fire in front of the bombax tree will also aid illusion, but to make sure that the children do not suspect that it is all a 'hoax', they are made to kneel down with heads against the ground and eyes closed. It is while they are in this position of vulnerability that Kondén Diara begins to roar. The total effect of the illusion on the boys is dramatically described by Laye (Eng, 101). At the point where the noise is excruciatingly painful it suddenly stops; the boys are told to get up and instruction begins. The terrible roaring is therefore symbolic, on one level, of the punishment that befalls anyone who fails to obey or to fulfil his role in his age-set.

The use of the bullroarer, actually an acoustic mask,<sup>46</sup> is well described by Francis Bebey:

The music (perhaps noise would be a more appropriate term) of this elementary little instrument has a deep significance totally belied by the simplicity of its appearance.

The bull-roarer consists of a rectangular piece of bamboo or wood (occasionally metal) about a foot long with a piece of string attached to one end. The other end of the string is held in the hand and the instrument is swung in a circle, so that it revolves vertically on its own axis. The faster it spins, the louder is the noise that is produced. To a Westener it may sound rather like a car engine starting up, but to West African children, it represents the roaring of a panther. (1975, 8)

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<sup>45</sup> Gerhard Kubik, in a letter to me of May 10th 1986, confirms that this deliberate frightening of the children is common to Zambia and Angola and wherever there are masks. It is part of the discipline of young boys in seclusion: the uninitiated are told that a terrible being will come to kill them. Weil also makes the point that at circumcision schools little boys are told that they are to be devoured by a monster and spat out whole (1971, 288).

<sup>46</sup> Another example of an acoustic mask is that used by the Dan who are a farming people living in the West African forest region of the hinterland of Liberia and the Ivory Coast. They have two kinds of mask, the conventional costume facial mask and the sound mask. According to Hugo Zemp (*Masques Dan*, OCORA, OCR 52-12" recording, qtd. by Bebey, 158) : "Since the masks are considered by the Dan as supernatural beings they obviously neither speak with nor sing with a human voice. But since they are incarnated by men, the men must change their voices into the voices of supernatural beings. The Dan have three ways of doing this. They distort their own voices, speak into an instrument which changes the quality of their voice or replace the human voice by sound instruments hidden from the uninitiated."



Bebey makes the important point that the bull-roarer "invariably symbolizes power of one kind or another; the power of the males, jealously protected against the ancestor; the power of the ancestor whose death has been transmitted down from generation to generation; the power of speech whose revelation has given supremacy over all the other creatures on earth" (ibid). Gilbert Rouget, in his article on the music of Guinea,<sup>47</sup> describes similar initiation rituals of the coastal forest region people, in 'sacred groves'. He discusses the strange music performed by men the purpose of which is to impress not only the initiates but also to terrify non-initiates and to inspire them with respect for the sacred:

The sounds made are the voices of the ancestors or the gods. This type of music is not unique to this region of Guinea; it is found in different forms in other parts of Black Africa. Like the masks with which it is often associated, it represents one of the finest achievements in the 'realm of sacred art'. Among the peoples of the Guinea forest, this music is made by disguised male voices which blend with various instruments of a historically primitive type: bullroarers, friction drums, mirlitons<sup>48</sup> and sets of stone whistles; iron bells add a rhythmic element. (1980, 821)

The bullroarer is in fact "Perhaps the most ancient, widely-spread, and sacred religious symbol in the world" according to anthropologist, Alfred Haddon<sup>49</sup> (1898, 327). Alan Dundes (1976), discusses the phallic implications of this strange instrument drawing attention "to the possible anal components of male initiation arguing that the bullroarer is a flatulent phallus." Furthermore he maintains that the "anal component of the bullroarer complex is amply demonstrated by unequivocal ethnographic and linguistic data from myth" (220). Laye's description therefore is neither exaggerated nor romantic.

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<sup>47</sup> In The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians.

<sup>48</sup> A mirliton is a hollow bird bone, one end of which is stopped with a spider's web membrane. It is used as an instrument to mask the human voice.

<sup>49</sup> Alfred C. Haddon, "The Bull-Roarer" in The Study of Man, (London: John Murray) 277-327.

The Kondén Diara episode ends at dawn, and in order to maintain the link with the 'deep' time of the night and lend credibility to its happenings, long white threads have been attached to the top of the bombax tree. Thus there is a visual correlation to the aural phenomenon of the bull-roarer's music. To the accompaniment of communal singing, which reinforces their sense of belonging to a group, the boys march back to their concessions but at each new place they find the same mysterious bombax threads on the roofs of the principal huts. The ritual is rounded off by the ceremony of giving back the boys to their individual concessions. Later on in life, Laye understood the origin of the terrifying roaring sound but he was never able to explain the white threads on the bombax tree. Kubik, who has intensively researched masking and related traditions, emphasises the fact that knowledge of the masks and ownership of them is "always connected with institutions or associations of people who are somehow the owners of this cultural realm." This means that to know about the masks needs membership, but membership always requires some sort of effort (1987, in press). In a letter to me, Kubik writes: "If Camara Laye cannot explain it himself, it means that either he was not completely initiated, or he is not allowed to write about this secret."

Laye describes the actual physical initiation ceremony in great detail, taking particular care to recall the exact movements of the solì, the special dance of the initiates in their cocoon-like costumes (Eng, 118-122). The solì is a vehicle for inducing a trance-like state, removing the initiates from ordinary time, making acceptance of the pain they knew they were to bear more possible. The two rows of men between which the boys advance form a living hedge and reinforce the idea of a special bond between men. An old man of high esteem in the society begins the chant which opens this new phase of experiential time. The repeated phrase "Coba! Aye coba, lama!" which the boys sing to the accompaniment of the drums, structures the movements of their dance. The drums provide a strict time accompaniment which to quote Avorgbedor in his study of Yeve ritual, [acts] as an antidote against musical lethargy, a drive force whose constant presence and interesting musical characteristics facilitate a prolonged musical activity " (1987, in press). The whole ritual complex involving music, song and dance is pervaded with energy and this energy must take the participants through the long hours of the night to that moment at dawn

when the drums fall silent and the boys are taken off to be circumcised, very nearly at the point of total exhaustion. The circumciser himself is especially appointed for his ability to perform the operation as painlessly and quickly as possible, the sole concern of the guardians thereafter being to ensure that the healing process takes a true course. The man in charge of their subsequent education is known as a 'healer' since he not only helps the physical healing but also acts as the midwife for the rebirth of the boy into society as a man. This same concept of the healer is used by Armah to great effect in his 'historical' novel, The Healers. There the healer's role is to make the boy group-conscious, to sever the ties between him and his mother which bind him to the small family unit rather than the wider economic unit.

Because Laye was conscious even then that he also wanted a different type of education, he is forced to consider the fallacy that time will heal the great gulf which seemed to exist between what was before and what is now: here there is the irony of the conflict between two different concepts of time, Western and African. He also considers the paradox that union with the greater society of men ("ma seconde naissance") means a kind of painful separation (from his mother and girl-friend). One must assume then that in his case, the healer failed. (Eng, 134/Fr, 133).

Bar-art showing Mammy Wata, on the cover of a publication advertising the exhibition on "Popular Art of Freetown" at the Museum für Völkerrkunde, Berlin, 1987, published by Trickster Press.

ENJOY YOURSELF



## CHAPTER TWO

### THE 'GRIOT' AND RELATED TRADITIONS IN WEST AFRICAN WRITING

#### Griots, old and new

The word griot could be a translation of the Fulani "gaoulo" (wandering poet or praiser) or the Wolof "gewel" (poet and musician). It is used today as a generic term for the professional entertainer in West African societies.<sup>1</sup> Another term for the Mandinka<sup>2</sup> griot is jali, meaning a verbal artist who is born into the profession.<sup>3</sup> Such a verbal artist may be the custodian of the oral literature of his people.

Roderic Knight summarises the extensive capabilities of the jalis thus:

They too learn many verbal skills, such as interlocution, genealogical recitation, historical narrative, praise oratory, and of course singing, but in addition, they study one of three melodic instruments with which they then accompany their own singing, or preferably, that of their wife or another jali muso. (1984, 3)

Two Mandinka instruments, the balo, a low-slung xylophone, and the

<sup>1</sup> Roderick Knight, *Kora Manding, Mandinka music of the Gambia*. Notes to accompany Ethnodisc ER12102 (Tucson: Pachart Publishing House, 1972) 10.

<sup>2</sup> Mandinka: The Mandinko, speaking one of the Mande languages, represent the western branch of the great Mande culture of West Africa, also known as the Manding. The dominance of Mande culture began with the rise to power of Sunjata Keita in 1235. By 1350 the Mandinka Empire included parts of present day Mali, Niger, Guinea, Senegal and all of the Gambia. See Roderic Knight 1972: 5; 1984: 3.

<sup>3</sup> There is some controversy as to what exactly constitutes oral or verbal literature, particularly when it can be collected and written down, as for instance Gordon Innes has done in his comparison of three Mandinka versions of *Sunjata* (1974). Ruth Finnegan in *How oral is oral literature?* (1974: 52-65) discusses the fallacy that oral literary forms could survive unchanging over generations, even centuries or millenia, by virtue of transmission through immutable 'oral tradition'. (55) Gordon Innes (1973: 105ff) has examined aspects of stability and change in griot's narrations. It would seem that performance in the social context is a useful criterion for classifying types of verbal art or oral delivery.



kontingo, a slender plucked lute, are very old, but it is the kora<sup>4</sup> which is best known in the west. The music of the griots or jalis is highly stylised, providing a rhythmic accompanying pattern called kumbengo. The basic vocal line in jaliya (the verbal performance) is called donkilo which may be either a sung solo or a choral refrain. The more elaborate and difficult vocal style is called sataro or reciting.

The music of the griots has a long history connected with the royal courts of the Manding, going back, according to their own stories, as far as Sunjata, the legendary first emperor of thirteenth-century Mali. Ibn Battuta, the Arab geographer, describes the appearance of some Mande griots at the court of Suleiman Mansa in the 14th century (Hale 1984: 208). It is this connection with emergent patrimonialism and patron-client structures, which makes the 'history' they recount so suspect. In the historical context, the primary function of their music is to invoke the past. Texts which have been recorded from oral tradition such as the Mande epic of Sunjata, highlight aspects of their social role. They appear as "spokesmen and advisors to kings, preceptors for princes, genealogists for families and clans, composers, singers, and musicians who perform for all segments of society...." (Hale, 209). To summarise Knight's findings (1984), nearly all their performances are songs of commemoration and praise, which, though they may refer to specific people and times, very often have a more general purpose so that they are not so much about

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<sup>4</sup> kora: Knight (1972, 10) describes this instrument as a large, plucked, bridge-shaped harp-lute with 21 strings and a body made from half a spherical gourd or calabash about 2ft in diameter. The playing technique is basically the same as with a harp - the thumbs pluck the low notes and the first fingers play the higher notes. The first written reference to it in the western world was made by Mungo Park in 1799.



one person or traditional hero, as about the particular time, place or theme that he represents.<sup>5</sup> The main purpose of donkilo is "to invoke the images of times past, places remembered, and people made famous - yes, immortalised - in song" (10). There are certain basic texts containing recurring themes such as death, (i.e. of great leaders which reminds the audience of its heritage) which may be conveyed in traditional symbolism and their meanings thus hidden by proverbial and enigmatic sayings. Elusiveness is typical of donkilo texts to such an extent that a clever play on words may on the one hand hide the real meaning of a story for those who are not familiar with it, and on the other, clarify and encapsulate it, for those who do.<sup>6</sup>

#### The modern griot

In an article which examines what remains of the griot tradition today, Thomas Hale provides evidence that though the older generation of artists is dying off rapidly, "the decline of that form of African folklore maintained by the bards, or griots, is being slowed" and that in the context of the new social synthesis which the government of Niger is promoting, for instance, "the keepers of the oral tradition have been promised a role" (1984, 208). In some cases the oral records

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<sup>5</sup> Looking at a similar oral-art genre, that of the mvvet of Gabon and Cameroon, where the term mvvet includes the different varieties of that genre and the people who specialize in it, Pierre Alexandre has shown that the cycle of songs known as mvvet ekang which deal with the fate and the fortunes of the Ekang people and their chief Akoma Mba, have "about as much historical reality as Percival or Merlin, and Engong geographical position is similar to that of Gondor" (1974, 5). Nevertheless the 'historical' and genealogical details are so precise and detailed that scholars mistook the legends for historical tradition.

<sup>6</sup> Knight gives as an example the Mali story of a man's incestuous love which was so strong he drowned himself; instead of dying however, he turned into a hippo. The point is that in Mandinka the word for 'hippo' and the word for 'shame' are identical: mali or malo.

of the griots provide the main source of information scholars have about the empires of the savanna. The introduction of both literacy and Islam into West Africa after the tenth century diminished the importance of the griot as advisor to those responsible for governing the empires of Ghana, Mali and Songhay: nevertheless, as chronicler of tribal history for the ordinary people, his importance remained undiminished. Very importantly, "the bard, through his link to the past, legitimized complex sets of relationships between noble, freeman, and slave, between different castes, clans and ethnic groups" (Hale, 209).

Even today the griot is much in demand for private and public events (e.g. a naming ceremony or the installation of a canton chief). In fact the griot's voice reaches further than ever due to the service provided by programmers interested in representing the main ethnic groups on radio and television. Even when a griot has been invited to perform for a small private group, it is more than likely that his praises and chants will be recorded on a radio/cassette player. Hale found that, "Not only were the bards concerned with the operation of the tape recorder, but they also seemed to time their performances to the length of the tape." Griots expect to be paid well for their services. Hale followed El Hadji Garba Bagna through a village after a period of festival: "At each home, he chanted briefly a few words linking the head of the household to distinguished ancestors, and thanked them for his reward, which ranged from the equivalent of \$1 or \$2 to \$20. In nearly every case those visited appeared happy that the griot had taken the time to visit and chant about their past " (217). Gordon Innes, discussing the relationship between the griots and Sunjata, in his obligation to provide for them, says that they are

attracted to men of wealth and leave a patron who falls on hard times.<sup>7</sup> Therefore they cannot be completely trusted and are open to manipulation.

A similar oral tradition, that of Asante praise poems (Apaee) provides a source of historical (i.e. relating to the past) and political ideas. According to Kwame Arhin, "Praise poems have been reported from western and other parts of Africa as indigenous means for recording and transmitting historical information ... But it is generally accepted that the information contained in them is rather sparse ... and so selective that Vansina<sup>8</sup> has called them propagandistic" (1986, 163). Now both Rattray<sup>9</sup> and Busia<sup>10</sup> suggest democracy "as the essence of the indigenous Asante constitution". Decentralized authority, they say, "was derived from the constituent units: political decision-making was consensual; and the right to remove rulers was a derivative of the right to make their own rulers by the ruled" (Arhin, 169). This is close to the society which Armah envisages in Two Thousand Seasons. Yet the Asante praise poems and the commemorative songs of the griots, many of which enshrine and celebrate political rituals, do not suggest democracy, rather they perpetuate inequality. Arhin maintains further: "There was an appearance of democracy because the conditions for, and the instruments of the exercise of physical coercion were relatively undeveloped. The

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<sup>7</sup> 1974, note 130-41, 105.

<sup>8</sup> In Oral tradition: a study in historical methodology (1965) 148.

<sup>9</sup> R.S. Rattray, Ashanti Law and Constitution (Clarendon Press, 1929).

<sup>10</sup> K.A. Busia, The position of the Chief in the modern political system of Ashante (O.U.P., 1951).

instruments of political control were more psychological than physical, and the rites of the ancestral cult reinforced the fear of authority " (169). The praise poems were in fact specialised variations of the songs of the griots which were deliberately instituted at the beginning of the seventeenth century in celebration of the military triumphs of the fifth Denkyirahene (Arhin, 164). Clearly the griot's role was in a very real sense, a political one. According to the Russian folklorist, Kotljar, what happens when a griot performs what may be termed an epic, such as the Manding "Sunjata-Fassa", is that the mixture of historical data about the rise of Medieval Mali, folklore, and myth<sup>11</sup>, becomes transformed by "...a whole complex of historic, ethnographic and regional distinctions" (1984, 235). Moreover, as with the Asante praise poems, there was a system of rites and rituals connected with epic legends about Sundjata, known as "Manding's mysteries" which were regarded as the official history of the Mandings, to be repeated and reinforced on the consciousness of the listeners at important festival or ritual times in the life of a village. Kotljar says that the main function of the griot on these occasions is actually to reinforce the legitimacy of the power of the ruling dynasty and "the proclamation of the political unity of the whole country" (237). Charles Cutter, in The Politics of Music in Mali, discusses this topic in full. It is this specifically political role of the griot which concerns writers such as Armah and Yambo Ouluguem, whilst Laye sees the oral tradition preserved by the griots as essentially artistic: their role is the preservation of the values of traditional culture, and more importantly, the

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<sup>11</sup> Gordon Innes maintains that the ritual component of these epics is reinforced through the repetition of common traditional motifs or myths such as that of the 'message that failed' (two messengers, the second of whom delivers his message first) which appears in the Sunjata stories in relation to Sunjata's inheritance, but is also a common African myth about the origin of death (1974, note 81, 104).

recreation of the emotional content of happenings which uphold those values.

### Le Maitre de la Parole

Laye personally conducted research among the Manding griots and wrote a literary transcription of the history of Soundiata<sup>12</sup> as told by a Malinké griot, Babou Conde, whom he recorded in 1963 in Upper Guinea. Adele King has summarised the content and style of this work (1980, 88-92). According to D.T. Niane whose An Epic of old Mali is the best-known version of this story, the oral history of the Mandings always has a moralising aim: "...the corpus of the Soundiata legend was probably formed around the end of the seventeenth century during a period of political crisis, in an effort to give the ruling aristocracy an idealised image of itself and the World" (qtd. in King, 89). Because of this, King says, history as recounted by the griots is not factual but transformed through a kind of "expressionism" (Laye's term), to highlight facets of the social and moral life of the Mandinka. In Laye's version, social and religious values are emphasized through the heroic and often fantastical activities of the hero and enemy alike. An introductory chapter discusses a favourite theme of Laye's, that nothing can be accomplished without consulting the divine will, and that God's spirit is in direct communication with man when he remains close to the natural world. Though offering a somewhat idealistic view of traditional values in West Africa, Laye nevertheless gives his version a practical application by using it as a vehicle to attack Soumaoro's oppressive dictatorship of Guinea.

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<sup>12</sup> The name of this legendary hero is variously spelt, e.g. Soundiata (Laye, Niane), Sunjata (Innes, Knight), Sundjata (Kotljar).



Laye's concept of the griot's role in The Dark Child/L'Enfant Noir

Laye gives a dramatic description of the griot's art in The Dark Child (26ff). Here a woman has secured the services of a griot with whom she has come to a financial arrangement, to act as negotiator between herself and the gold-smith. The griot's role is to provide rhythm and inspiration and in so doing to actually help in the manufacturing or transformational process. He accompanies himself on the kora performing a basic ostinato or repeating pattern, variation being supplied by ornamentation on the basic ostinato pattern of the song and by melodic interludes which display his virtuosity. Repetition of genealogy is the mainstay of such praise singing: "...as the couplets were reeled off ... The harp<sup>13</sup> played an accompaniment to this vast utterance of names, expanding it and punctuating it with notes what were now soft, now shrill." As Laye comments, this flattery is an essential part of the creative process itself since it establishes a dynamic link between the heroic past and the present. The repetition of formulaic questions (an interchange between customer and gold-smith) reinforces the ritual aura of the act of smelting gold. The combination of very precise details of the actual physical processes of smelting with the mystical qualities inherent in the act of transforming the gold into the desired object, gives this description a powerful emotional tone which reflects on the griot and ennobles his art: "He was no longer a paid thurifer; he was no longer just the man whose services each and anyone could hire: he had become a man who creates his song under the influence of some very special interior necessity " (34). In other words, not the content of the song but the power of the repetitions of both oral and musical phrase, create the rhythms of experiential or ritual time. However, when the narrator leaves home to

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<sup>13</sup> i.e. Kora: "harp" is an inaccurate Anglicism.

attend school in Conakry, he finds the attendant praise-singers at the farewell, excessive and jarring in their praises, perhaps because at that moment he has more the feeling of something being destroyed than created, i.e. his understanding of, and links with, the traditional past. But the flattery does have a positive purpose in the end - its ironic excesses dispel the mood of sadness, they embarrass and even amuse. There is an ominous undertone though, in that the young Laye felt he would have to live up to such expectations as "Already thou are as wise as the White Man" (141).

#### The griot content of A Dream of Africa/Dramouss

The most successful chapters of this part-autobiography, part-prophecy, are undoubtedly the griot's story told to Fatoman and his wife in Karoussa, (which Adele King says is meant to be a glimpse of a dying culture<sup>14</sup>), and the politically significant dream of the emblematic Black Lion with which the novel ends. Laye said (at a conference in Freetown in 1963), that beyond the political allegory lay a deeper reality, the relation between man and God. This he felt was in keeping with the traditional folk tale: "...telle est la manière des conteurs d'Afrique, dont les fables s'éclaircissent seulement a la lumière des rapports entre Dieu et ses créatures " (qtd. in King 1979, 121). Because his intention here is to appeal to African rather than European readers, the symbolism is more complex and culture-specific. The reader is expected to have an inner knowledge which will enable him both to become audience for the griot's story and to fully understand the emblematic style of the description of the dream. This book is a conscious attempt to bridge the gap between European and African

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<sup>14</sup> Adele King, in A celebration of Black and African writing ed. Bruce King & Ogungbesan (Amadu Bello UP: 1975) 112-124.

literary genres by fusing them into a single narrative structure.

Lemuel Johnson has discussed the strong Islamic influence on the style and content of A Dream of Africa. According to him the tale which the griot, Kessery, tells in Karoussa, is made up of Islamic formulae which range from the nature of the benign anticlericalism of the narration itself to chahada and liturgical rhythms. These formulae also encapsulate two Islamic modes of perception. In one, the phenomenal world is bound and stabilized by a sharicah (Divine Law) perception of time and space (e.g. "Soon the muezzin was summoning the faithful to the mosque for the first prayers of the afternoon " (83). In the other, reality is, as the Sufi insists, unstable, coalescing into inconographic correspondences (1980, 33). Kessery's story about Imam Moussa, the jealous man, was a popular griot's story told to kora accompaniment. It is narrated and performed in such a way that it evokes participatory questions and interpolations by the audience: griot virtuoso aesthetics subvert linear development of plot in A Dream of Africa (Johnson, 31).

The theme is not so much a lament for the decline of traditional artistic culture as an assertion of the relevance of past values to the present. It is a striking feature of this novel that the more prosaic and mundane passages of writing occur where Laye describes aspects of modern Guinea. In translation there is an interesting contrast between the use of English idiom which seems curiously out of place at times, and the heightened emotional prose of the descriptions of traditional life or values. Thus when Fatoman's plane is coming in to land at Conakry, the prose is loaded with emotional tone, the accent being on the radiant quality of the light and the brilliance of colour (10).

Later when Fatoman and Marie are out on a reminiscent walk, the sea is transformed through the imagery of traditional music to a force of perpetual movement, linking past and present, whereby the distant noises of the sea would "...dissolve and melt into a pastoral symphony, with its balaphones and coras, its flutes and its tom-toms " (19). This type of writing contrasts very strongly with mundane statements such as "I dropped off and slept like a log..." (25), and the travelog description of the manufacture of Bauxite which begins, "What is bauxite, sir?" (27); or the stilted conversation between Fatoman and Marie which allows Laye to fill in geographical details about his country, e.g. of Kouria, "One feels one is in a more temperate climate that at Conakry " (32). In such descriptions Laye deliberately uses the conversational mannerisms of the West rather than the rhythms of African speech. He creates a feeling of alienation, of change, not by vitriolic denunciation (the weapons of writers like Armah and Oulougum), but by contrasting two different modes of perception as reflected in the use of language. The prose style relaxes once Laye returns to the rhythms of the griot in his description of the second night at Kouroussa. The singing of praises reinforces the bond between members of an age set (Fatoman, Konaté,<sup>15</sup> Bilali) but it is also a process, the end result of which is a product which can be sold:

As the genealogical trees went on growing and spreading their branches, the witch-doctor's chchia or bowl, placed on the ground between his feet, filled up with coins which we tossed in every time he chanted something that flattered our vanity. The cora added to the beauty of his voice, accompanying his

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<sup>15</sup> According to Gordon Innes (1974, notes 39-40, 317) there is a tradition that Sunjata's surname was Konnaté, and that this was later changed to Keita which means 'take inheritance'. Thus Laye's Konaté may have a deeper structural role in the overall meaning of the novel than is at first apparent. He is at Fatoman's side throughout his stay in Kouroussa (80), is much involved in the R.D.A. which Fatoman says will be a regime whose evil consequences will be felt for decades (119) and his execution on grounds of conspiracy greatly distresses Fatoman when he returns to Guinea after several years.

chronicles, decorating them with notes that were now mellow, now shrill. (81)

The story about Habibatou and the jealous husband, drawn from a common stock of tales, is interesting, not because of its originality, but on the contrary, because the audience is so familiar with it, knows when to interrupt or respond, and is merely seeking gratification and reinforcement in asking for it. It is a communal act and the griot himself becomes transformed by his art so that he is no longer simply singing for his supper. In other words, it is the experience of sound itself and particularly patterned or organized sound which Laye finds so important, and which so moves the audience. Laye ends this key chapter with a Malinké expression to show the passing of time: "On my way back to my hut, the field of cotton had flowered; no one had reaped it " (100). Perhaps there is a hint here that the phrase 'field of cotton' refers not only to the stars above but also to the rich cultural heritage of Guinea which should be 'reaped' rather than destroyed in the interests of modernity.

With the griot's art, Laye would seem to say, the distortions and flatteries, the exaggerations are all welded by rhythm into a work of art which transforms both the medium and the mediator. This is not a nostalgic idealising look at African art but an attempt to explain the West African concept of beauty: something not too real and not too abstract, something which Robert Farris Thompson has termed "mid-point mimesis: representational balance". In discussing the aesthetics of West African sculpture Thompson says, "...the canon is mid-way between excessive abstraction ... and undue resemblance" (1974, 26). This is something which Fatoman's father tries to explain to him in his discussion of the traditional crafts (carving a hind out of wood) where the emphasis is on the transforming power of rhythm: "...it is that



inborn gift that used to inform, and even now still sometimes informs the souls and hands of our craftsmen-artists " (106).

The African dream which ends the novel is foreclosed by an earlier passage (71) where Fatoman turns on the radio hoping to hear "the vibrant strings of the cora played by Keba Sissoko, or the voice of Kouyaté Kandia." Instead he hears a list of departure times for the banana boats. In the context of modern Guinea the traditional past was "...just a dream, and as not all dreams are transformed into reality..." he had to content himself with the present. The dream, entitled Dramouss, in which, as King says, "...supernatural and magical transpositions of time and place, and sudden metamorphoses of creatures, occur frequently..." (1980, 73), is based on well-known traditional elements from the legends of Soundiata, but these are transformed through the use of syncretic imagery which draws freely from the cultural heritage of two worlds - the world of modern Western technology, and the mythic world embodied in African oral tradition - to present the 'reality' of the political situation in Guinea as Laye saw it. Thus Dramouss has eyes which blaze like locomotive headlamps and the multitude of people forming two long lines on the esplanade are reminiscent of the underground tunnels in Paris, while on a completely different level, the dream combines the elements of earth, fire, air and water, the traditional emblems of hawk and snake, and ends with a compelling prophecy of a return to normality and to a traditional pre-revolutionary way of life based on experience and progress. Again there is a syncretism of vision and a harmonising of beliefs: "...and already the bells had sounded in the cathedrals, in the churches; the meuzzin had continued calling the faithful to prayer; for the mosques too had been re-opened " (147). The fire in the hut where Fatoman was

sleeping is the transformational medium which bridges the gap between dream and the real world, for the Lion (Soundiata) was associated with fire and therefore with the heat and radiance of the sun. In keeping with the tradition of prophetic dreams, a numinous quality remains long after the dream itself has faded, so that Fatoman's father is able to control the actions of the hawk and force it to restore the chick unharmed: here reality is a sense of control and vision, a Sufist reality of iconographic correspondences which enable the transformation of time and space. The novel ends with a powerful liturgical affirmation of the will of Allah, in keeping with the strongly spiritual and humane tone of Laye's writing in general.

The use of the griot tradition and related traditions of oral literature in the novels of Ayi Kwei Armah

Two Thousand Seasons is a novel which uses oral tradition (as exemplified by the corpus of inherited historical tales used by the griot) as a vehicle of both satire and social criticism. Although openly messianic in tone, its passages of bitter invective combined with vitriolic descriptions of sadism and revenge, invite comparisons with Bound to Violence by Yambo Ouologuem. Isidore Okpewho, in his discussion of the need to review the old mythic tradition in Africa, calls Two Thousand Seasons a racial epic (1983, 206) and "...a rolling survey of the history of Africa - here given the name of one of its mythical ancestors, Anoa - from a nebulous past to a visionary future" (205). The style, he says, is that of oral tradition:

Armah acknowledges the power and charm of the African oral tradition; but he will have none of that social stratification which the tales advertise. What we have in the book is a tale in the oral style all right, but one that is intensely critical rather than eulogistic or designed to please, one that rejects the present social history of Africa as unrepresentative of its true character and so projects us, in true prophetic fashion, to a vision of an Africa that is

free of its shackles and guided by an ideology or religion - 'the way' - on which the race was nurtured from time immemorial. (205)

Expressions such as "....on which the race was nurtured from time immemorial" show novelist and critic alike presenting a far more idealistic and unreal view of traditional African society than the views offered in the novels of Camara Laye.

Okpewho discusses several aspects of Armah's use of griot style, referring to the tone or dominant narrative voice as one of 'remembering' and recalling the historic past, but suggesting that the stylistic techniques Armah borrows from this tradition are not planned to please or entertain (as in a sense the griot passages in Laye's novels do) but are meant to criticise and reform opinion. He sees Armah as differing in intent from the traditional griot especially in his use of the communal 'we' since "One of the notable marks of the oral narrative is the prominence of the single artistic personality....But there is never, in Two Thousand Seasons, the self-consciousness of the singular creative personality" (207/208). The collective voice is meant to speak of a common historical experience.

For Armah, there can be only one crime worse than not to know the past and that is to know the past in a false way. In Fragments Juana muses, in an introspective passage which reassesses the meaning of life in a society governed by a communal psyche bound to defeat: "The real crime now was the ignorance of past crime, and that, it seemed, would be a permanent sort of ignorance in places like this and places like home" (30). The visible symbol of that crime is the old slave castle "which had now become the proud seat of the new rulers" (44). Armah would seem to blame the griots and the traditions they nurture

and disseminate, for the false view of the past history of Africa which Black Africans themselves still hold. According to this view the prophets and poets have spoken with false voices and deliberate intent to mislead. Why Armah so despises the griot and his art is undoubtedly because he sees this type of traditional performer as a collaborator in perpetuating what Peter Horn, in discussing a contemporary Western novel, Weiss's The Aesthetics of Resistance, has called the 'cruel' aesthetics of the oppressor. A number of Horn's comments on Weiss's work seem relevant to Armah's concept of the 'connected' (and its opposite - 'disconnected') consciousness. Horn discusses the difficulties of a writer attempting to replace the 'cruel' aesthetics of the oppressors (Armah's 'destroyers' and 'predators') with an aesthetics free from oppression (1985, 7). In the Marxist scheme of things which applies here, the worker must become an intellectual in that he must be his own interpreter. Armah uses the idea of 'voices' to embody the tutelage of the interpreters and insists that unless the people acquire an ability to construct their own images of desire and engage in a struggle to realise them, they are "mere mirrors to annihilation" (Seasons, xiii). Above all, the people must resist manipulation. As Damfo tells Densu, a 'healer' (i.e. spiritual leader and teacher of the 'way') also lives against manipulation which is "a disease, a popular one" which comes from spiritual blindness (The Healers, 81). Throughout Fragments and The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born Armah displays an obsession with signs. When, in Fragments Juana begins to learn Akan and asks what the cryptic signs, particularly those displayed by lorries and buses meant, she is told "Oh nothing, just life is war...." (35). As Horn explains it, the aesthetics of past oppressive regimes:

limits the discourse to elites and their elaborate sign systems: leaving to the masses a simplified

and distorted discourse which inactivates them as subjects and steers them as automata in an economics of profit and a game of power politics. They who are only allowed to formulate their desires along stereotyped precast patterns, are excluded not only from art; the meaning of their lives is spelled out to them in the deep structures of television series and photographic novels....(9)

Armah comments on this in the bitter fight between so-called friends over possession of a television set (Fragments, 217), and in the rejection by his peers of Baako's television plays in which "through repetitive use of image and sound" he meant to imprint the idea of violence, to portray his favourite theme of slavery. According to the Director, Asante-Smith, slavery and survival have nothing to do with the people's culture: "We're engaged in a gigantic task of nation building. We have inherited a glorious culture, and that's what we're here to deal with" (209). But Armah would say that the so-called 'glorious culture' they have inherited is a monstrous lie. The main concern of Fragments is, as Derek Wright expresses it: "The impetuous refusal to observe the correct order of events which causes them to lose and to change their proper places in the natural cycle..." (1987, 180). Armah shows that in a rapidly changing society, "the grotesque exaggeration of selected negative elements of a tradition is tantamount to a total denial of that tradition" (ibid) so that the fragments left will be perceived as worthless.

The importance of 'Mnemosyne', the collective memory of a nation or a class, is stressed in Two Thousand Seasons. Armah exhorts his people to remember the names of the oppressors so that a true version of history is imprinted on their communal consciousness, but inveighs against idle nostalgia. (See for example, "Who wants to hear the mention of the predators' names?" etc. Seasons, 21ff) In particular he decries the griot or jali who merely recalls the past to remind his



listeners of what has been lost. He would seem to agree with Weiss too that the workers (people) themselves must take the blame for the continuation of oppression - "...because we are so many more, our cowardice and our weakness is all the more serious" (Weiss, III, 129). Armah speaks of a people "hypnotized by death" (Seasons, xi); and in Fragments the therapist Juana acknowledges the futility of her work in a society where there is "none of the struggle, none of the fire of defiance; just the living defeat of whole peoples - the familiar fabric of her life " (45). Armah's bitter tone stems from the fact that he sees so much corruption and openness to bribery amongst his own people; this is very much a theme of The Healers in the murder of Prince Appia and the character of Ababio, and is central to The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born, in the imagery of filth and excrement. Those who stand against it are isolated and lonely. In The Healers "Densu has always felt unutterably lonely. Every moment spent near the men of power in the royal courtyard was to him time spent in alien country " (49). In a key passage in The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born a man listens to a song, the main refrain of which is: "I will travel slowly/And I too will arrive"; but all the cool sadness of this music is able to do is "raise thoughts of the lonely figure finding it more and more difficult to justify his own honesty " (51).

Peter Weiss was conscious of the difficulties of writing artistically about the violence done to a people. He himself used the symbol of the destroyed face of the Pergamon altar, the face of Heracles: thus the classical perfection of the Pergamon altar in the process of decay and fragmentation is used to symbolize the meaning of violence towards man and his art. In Two Thousand Seasons Armah uses the griot tradition in much the same way, whilst in Fragments he shows

the meaning of violence in relation to an individual's fragmented self-consciousness.<sup>16</sup> The main problem is that portraying defeat may become a self-defeating prophecy. To counter this possibility, Armah urges an active mode of behaviour. In this context the 'Beautiful Ones' are the interpreters of the true culture who secretly work against corruption in society. He adopts a stridently didactic tone at the end of Two Thousand Seasons to reassert his faith in the future and his belief in the 'way', yet the truth is that the "vision of creation yet unknown" which he offers (expanded at length in The Healers), is not as convincing as the "scene of carnage" which is according to him, the true history of his people. As Ato Sekyi-Otu puts it, the "recurrent catastrophes of meaning" in Two Thousand Seasons, "leave in their wake the inescapable obligation for creative action and, in so doing legislated ... the only tradition unencumbered by substantive properties: the tradition of revolutionary practice" (1987, 200).

The word with the greatest field of reference in Two Thousand Seasons is "voice". The novel is conceived as a tale told by a griot whose avowed aim is to set the racial record straight. However, within that basic framework, variation of tone is governed by the sounding of several different voices: Anoa's voice (that of ancestral memory), Armah's voice when he steps away from the griot model to comment on it, the voice of the persona of the young initiate whose reports supply the immediate action for a large part of the novel, the voice of the seer Isanusi and the voices of the Christian priests. In a key passage three types of voice are described at a crucial point when the people have to make a decision which will influence the future course of their

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<sup>16</sup> Armah's description of mental illness was possibly influenced by Doris Lessing's The Golden Notebook which Baako had been reading.

history: the voices of "tired bodies" who wanted to stay where they were and make the best of things (stagnation), the voices of nostalgia which urged a return to ancestral lands (a false view of the past), and the third voice which is "...the meaning of the way itself; the call to reciprocity in a world wiped clean of the destroyers" (148/9). Through this last voice Armah advocates an aggressive positive move forward - not acceptance but change, however violent. Ato Sekyi-Otu in his discussion of the grammar of 'revolutionary homecoming' in Two Thousand Seasons comments on this passage as follows: "At the heart of these three visions are three distinctive modes in which time is lived by human beings. And in these discordant forms of temporality may be read divergent ways of understanding and being " (1987, 201).

The words "voice" and "utterance" occur in close proximity with the other key words in the novel to create a style based on a type of reinforcing repetition, and answers the question posed by the blind seer Naana in Fragments: "If I see things unseen by those who have eyes, why should my wisest speech not be silence?" (3) Anoa is at once a geographical area of somewhat vague dimensions associated with water (75) and the archetypal female ancestor from whom the race takes its name. As such she is stylised as the voice of the collective consciousness of the people, reminding them of who they are and setting them against their Arab masters. As much as Anoa is idealised so the Arabs are caricatured (there is a body of obscene vocabulary attaching to them centred on sexual deviation). The picture Armah presents of African kings is contemptuous and the griots are directly associated with them in standing against a classless society directed by spiritual healers as for instance in the description of Mansa Musa I of Mali.

But though Armah sets himself against oral tradition he uses its stylistic features to give his work a powerful rhythm which establishes ritual time through the insistent repetition of key words, verbal and grammatical patterns, images and themes. He uses the technique of the griot since, in a sense, he is doing the work of one. He is so concerned with the oral qualities of Two Thousand Seasons that he deliberately overloads and poeticises descriptions. He will use the phrase "vatic utterance" instead of "prophecy", or talk of "an ashen time when loneliness..." or repeat similar adjectival phrases until they are mere formulas of expression e.g. "howling agony", "howling regret". Descriptions such as "paralysed, fascinated in death's palpable presence" (38) distance emotion and give it a ritual rather than a real context. Another characteristic of Armah's style which is derived from griot tradition is the use of aphorisms e.g. "a fantastic force is the greed of the whites", "there is no beauty but in relationships." In jaliya texts short metrical sentences, complete in themselves, are common e.g. "You have matched your parents in achievement", "Times were good under the slave-giver, horse-giver, Maki",<sup>17</sup> "Kingship is the communal cereal spoon", "Sweet words and truth are not the same thing."<sup>18</sup>

In sataro, a narrative style used by griots, Jumundiro (meaning "saying the surname") involves not only recounting surnames thought worthy of praise but also knowing a body of praise lyrics associated with them. The overall intent is commemoration and praise.<sup>19</sup> When Armah makes use of this tradition it is to hold commemorated names up to

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<sup>17</sup> Knight 1984, 9.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.* 31.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.* 30.

public condemnation. The griots are "laughing rememberers", the names they glorify "a cascade of infamy...The memory of these names is corrosive. Its poison seers our lips. Odunton, Bentum, Oko, Krobo, Jebi, Jonto...." (64). And yet there is rhythm in the mere repetition of these names and they provide an apparently authentic historical framework for the novel.

Mande languages are two-tone terrace level languages.<sup>20</sup> According to Knight:

A characteristic feature of such language is that in a typical utterance containing high and low tone words, the high tone words are spoken at a progressively lower pitch each time they follow a low tone word. The overall effect is a downward terracing of pitch. (1984, 10/11)

This is reflected in donkilo<sup>21</sup> melodies and although there is nothing approaching a rigid adherence to the tonal profile of speech, all but a few donkilo lines are sung to descending melodies. The Mandinko recognise a tonal centre: by repeating a short pattern on the instrument, the musician establishes a tonal, or even harmonic framework in the kumbengo instrumental part. The concentration on a tonal centre is a hallmark of Armah's narrative style. Moreover donkilo melodies use a distinct type of phrasing – an almost symmetrical phrase structure where, in Knight's terms, a 'phrase' consists of a complete verbal statement, "such as an exclamation, phrase or sentence, that is marked off musically either by a sustained note or silence, or both" (13). Within this basic framework there are many different ways of combining and linking these phrases. The effect of downward terracing of pitch is seen in almost any long passage of Two Thousand Seasons and in shorter units such as: "A hundred seasons we spent in

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<sup>20</sup> *ibid.* 10.

<sup>21</sup> donkilo is the term for the basic vocal line in jaliya, the music of the Mandinka jali. (Knight 1984, 6)



this slow flowing" (50); "Soon we shall end this remembrance, the sound of it" (206). "We are not a people of yesterday" (1). "The dance of love is a dance of choice also" (90). "There was no ease to that conclusion's coming" (40). "True it was the drought was fierce that season" (6). The effect of symmetrical phrase structure is seen in sentences such as: "Four seasons we looked, four seasons listened" (41). "Anoa was not the first, not the second, not the third to speak" (13). "Ah, happy misfortune, fortunate disaster" (130). "There is no beauty but in relationships. Nothing cut off by itself is beautiful" (206).

Soyinka maintains that Armah does not use the rhetoric of revolution, his vision being at once both secular and humane, yet suggests that a weakness of the book is a "prose style (which) appears unequal to the task of capturing action and rendering it totally convincing" (1976, 114). The problem is that Armah's entire body of work is informed by the concept of the 'connected consciousness' but in order to tune into this mode of being and perception, one has first to withdraw from active engagement with the world and enter an almost passive state of subjectivity. This conflicts strongly with his insistence on active involvement in history and his didactic tone towards a Black public unaware of its own 'disconnectedness' and which defends a false view of history disseminated by traditional artists such as the griots. In order to set up a standard against which this sense of being disconnected from a valid historical perspective can be measured, he uses the repetitions and rhythms of oral tradition, in themselves the link between past and present. Dramatic tension is thus created between his use of traditional style and rhythm and the tone of his political and racial commentary. Soyinka may be partly right

however, in that a heavy reliance on the formal structures of the ritual language of oral literature precludes the dynamics of revolution.

#### Armah's use of the Akan funeral dirge

The propulsive and undeniably musical rhythms of Two Thousand Seasons derive not only from Armah's debt to the griot tradition but also to the Akan funeral dirge. Whereas, according to Lazarus (1982) The Healers presupposes "an adequate community of listener readers" and demonstrates to a certain degree a "reciprocity that is entailed in the story teller's twin roles of teacher and entertainer" (491), Two Thousand Seasons sets out to establish this community. Armah makes use of the techniques of the griot because he is, in a sense, doing the work of one; he also uses aspects of style and theme derived from the funeral dirge of the Akan and related peoples, since a common concern of these traditions is group renewal through ritual reinforcement of the links between dead and living, which is of course the mainstay of Armah's belief in the communal 'way'.

In his monograph, Funeral Dirges of the Akan People, the Ghanaian musicologist, J.H. Nketia, draws attention to what he terms the 'prosody of repetition' which dominates the style and performance of the funeral dirge. The most common theme is obviously death, yet the purpose of the dirge is not so much to honour the dead, though that is an important aspect of its function, as to repeat and reinforce the links between living and dead by recording lineage and descent. For the Akan, who suffered frequent dispersals, there is a need to establish links with a common ancestress, patriarch or leader. As Nketia says: "In the dirge the members of the clan are reminded of their links with

one another in spite of dispersions which war and other factors have brought about " (21). The Yoruba have a similar tradition in the oriki and orile chants of the iwi traditional oral performers; so do the Dahomey in the chants of the kpanlingan where the interest lies, according to Gilbert Rouget (1971), in the wording of 'strong names' and great deeds attributed to the king's predecessors during the rituals known as the 'Annual Customs' which were intended "to celebrate the dead kings with the aim of securing their protection for their successor and thus for all of the kingdom" (53). Moreover Rouget emphasizes the fact that this recitation was so important that a performer could be executed if he made a mistake.

The 'presence' (i.e. continuing influence in the affairs of the present) of the ancestor is the most important of all dirge themes; various attributes of character attach to particular ancestors and will be repeated as a formula whenever that name is mentioned. A woman might be perpetually known in the context of her fecundity, a man for the abundance of gold at his court, yet another is associated with a fondness for human sacrifice. Nevertheless these ancestors are not idealised or merely symbolic of a stage in a people's history: they are remembered as real people "who had some contribution to make, however small, to the corporate life of the group" (Nketia, 25). A second important theme is that of the place of domicile and again there are stock expressions connected with significant places such as a burial cave or source of water or to some momentous event e.g. "Ahensan, where death has decimated the people." A third recurring theme occurs in stock phrases expressing loss, in admonitions and reminders and in descriptions of travel, since in a cyclic view of life, the dead man goes on a journey back to the underworld from which he set out at

birth.<sup>22</sup> Nketia concludes his summary of dirge themes thus:

The building up of associations between the present and the past by means of references to Ancestors and events, the singing of praises and the identification of individuals in terms of their group affiliations, are also a major concern of the Akan funeral dirge. (50)

As with his use of the griot tradition, Armah uses its stylistic techniques but rejects the intent if it serves to perpetuate the memory of anyone falling within his definition of predator. When he describes the long line of self-appointed caretakers of the African nation who tried to "run land into something cut apart and owned", he denounces the "stinking memory" of these names:

For a cascade of infamy this is: the names and doings of those who from struggling to usurp undeserved positions as caretakers ... imposed themselves on a people too weary of strife to think of halting them ... The memory of these names is corrosive. Its poison seers our lips. (64)

The traditional themes of the dirge are linked together in prosodic patterns, a main feature of which is the use of repetitions of key words. The longer the piece, the greater the scope for duplication:

Word-components of dirges occur in restricted collocations. Words having the greatest collocability are key words. Of these, personal names occurring in name clusters and in collocation with other key words have the highest range of collocability. (Nketia, 100)

Nketia finds that the dirges are composed of a series of linear units, each unit containing one or more strong beats corresponding to the beat in the musical phrase (since they are sung to music). The accepted

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<sup>22</sup> This is very much a theme of Fragments. Armah uses repetition and symbolic language to create an expectation of events already set in motion which are moving relentlessly towards a foreclosed ending: "The return of this one traveler [Baako] had held out so much of good hope. But there were those left behind who had their dreams and put them on the shoulders of the traveler returned, heavy dreams and hopes filled with the mass of things here and of this time." (282) The idea that all going-forth, all birth and all travel, is in itself a defeat, is constantly repeated through the actions of various characters. Thus Nanna (a traditional Akan term for grandmother) establishes the theme with "All that goes returns. He will return" and hers is the last voice heard in the novel, prophesying her own death (278ff).

range of repetitions includes repetitions of single phonological terms and repetition of complete word clusters or linear units. A comparison of examples of types of repetition used by both the dirge and Armah as novelist, suggest the debt the latter owes to this tradition. There is room here to offer but a few examples:

a) The dirge makes use of pause, sob or end particles: e.g. "Praa ee" (O Mother). Armah uses exclamations such as "Hau!", usually followed by a description of some Arab atrocity (e.g. p.30).

b) The dirge uses formation and pause: "If you ask him for anything, he would give it to you"; "Grandchild of Ofori Amamfo: You are a Tia person." Armah has: "Faisal sang that night. Laughing he sang " (22).

c) The dirge uses a break in sequence marked by a new pronoun subject or word referring back to a preceding nominal. Examples in Armah's writing are: "Faisal: He the only one this night...." (22); "Sekela, she stroked the expectant tongue with a thin sharp knife " (23). The dirge also uses a break in the sequence marked by repetition of a 'piece' in the preceding unit such as a name. Armah writes: "Faisal, predator Faisal, the predator and his askari"; "Mohammed, the shiek Mohammed, brother of Shaq'buht" (23). This type of repetition is deliberately used by Armah in passages describing the slavers and the Arabs, and with heavy irony in the description of the praise-singers' exaggerated laudations of traitors to the cause, such as Kamuzu.

(170-172)

d) The dirge uses repetition and emphasis of pronoun as in "they-Do they ask". Armah too employs this device with striking frequency as in his "We" throughout Ch.1 "The Way", and in phrases such as, "Ours then was the way of cration" (1); "telling us stunned into utter silence" (40).

e) Repetition of a word in end postion in the initial position of a



succeeding linear unit and the use of identical endings and identical beginnings are common features of the dirge.

f) The dirge makes use of signs and labels, i.e. stock descriptive phrases for collectives, which is also a striking aspect of Armah's narrative style e.g. 'ostentations cripples', 'white predators', 'pathfinders', 'the wary ones', 'white destroyers', 'movers in the mind' and so on. This is of course also a characteristic of the jaliya texts of the griots.

These repetitions are part of a cultural product and in no way reflect lack of imagination on the part of a people using them. The greatest skill lies in the degree to which the components of a repeated linear unit vary. As Nketia says:

....such repetitions ... are not due to barrenness or paucity of thought. On the contrary, they may have a musical mode of meaning or they may be a means of emphasizing points that mourners might wish to make. They are used not only in dirges but in songs of different types and in horn and drum language and may reasonably be regarded as one of the marks of Akan poetry. (104)

It is clear from a reading of both Two Thousand Seasons and Fragments that the use of keywords and their carefully defined fields of reference is a major aspect of Armah's style, which brings to mind Nketia's contention that word-components of Akan funeral dirges occur in restricted collocations and that words having the greatest collocability are keywords. In Two Thousand Seasons the key words are 'voice', 'connected', 'reciprocity', 'utterance', 'way', 'remembrance' and 'time'. The words 'connected' and 'unconnected' recur constantly in similar or identical phrases or fields of reference containing the words 'remembrance', 'flowing', 'spread', 'spreading', 'travel', 'travelling', 'way' and 'reciprocity'. There is an important passage devoted to an exposition of the meaning of 'connectedness' which draws

all the fields of reference together into a single symbolic unity (133/134). The word 'unconnected' is frequently associated with an idea of the destruction of group consciousness, and in particular with 'road', the opposite of 'way', e.g. "We wander now along steep roads declining into the whitest deaths" (2); "Slavery was shown us - held up to us - as the beautiful road, the right road of our lives " (88). Nketia makes the point that in many cases repetition could easily be avoided if the performer chose to use different words, but this is not done because "the prosodic forms and reinforced meaning by collocation would be destroyed by substitution " (87).

Armah thus uses every traditional technique available to him to metricate his prose as in oral poetry and this use is structural rather than cosmetic. For example, in his use of inversion of natural word order, and the downward terracing effect,<sup>23</sup> he may want to invoke a cyclic view of time. In the passage beginning "Down the river our rowing was easy" (75), there is downward terracing of pitch linked through the field of associations surrounding the word 'river', to an image of the natural flow of time from childhood to adulthood for the initiate, and by extension, to the obvious correlation in nature that the life-force itself is manifest in a river flowing from its source to the sea, just as the initiate passes in due succession from one stage of physical and psychic development to another. The 'flowing' motif is repeated in a series of descriptions: "The songs we had learned from our first initiation to the seventh, these songs flowed from us with added meaning....", but then the tone changes as transition from one stage to another is not without trauma: "We rowed towards the

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<sup>23</sup> The downward terracing effect occurs in other major forms of west African oral performance such as the Asante praise poems, e.g. "Osee Tutu is he whose challengers lose their heads." (Arhin, 182)

turbulence, to the end of our open initiation." At the end of the novel the word 'flow' is deliberately linked with two other major keywords, 'remembrance' and 'way': "The ending of our remembrance should give greater force to the continuation of the beginning flow in search of our way" (204), a sentence which strongly advocates a cyclic view of time.

#### The problem of time in Two Thousand Seasons

Armah uses the griot's role as 'Mnemosyne' or 'collective memory' to enable him to move freely by association within vast periods of time. If, as Okpewho suggests, Armah is creating a racial epic based on private vision (1983, 206), then his concept of the 'way' must be unlocated in specific time or place, which then become symbolic rather than actual, as in many griot songs dealing with the exploits of national heroes. The difficulty is that Armah himself does not have an exact idea of his people's history and, in the absence of sure knowledge, prefers fables to false truths. On the other hand he uses details from griot praise-songs and Akan funeral dirges which appear to give his novel a more precise orientation. The journey, or quest motif, central to the Sunjata legends, is used to mark important stages of time in the history of ancient Ghana whilst at the same time being imagined as an actual journey happening in a vaguely defined area of West Africa relating to both supposed migration routes and known slaver's routes (see map)\* Although there are deserts, mountains, rivers (some of them named), waterfalls and seas in Armah's African landscape, they have spiritual rather than physical dimensions, occurring as barriers and obstacles to the 'way', rather than as exact geographical route markers. At the same time they have a symbolic field of reference due to the deliberate linking of geographical features

\* p. 144a.

with other key motifs in formulaic patterns, to use Milman Parry's term, e.g. "journey into our killers' desire" (2), "white destroyers who came from the desert" (147). The description of the first major migration away from the 'predators' (42) purports to give a more-or-less exact location: it starts, according to Okpewho "somewhere on the fringes of the Sahara" (205), with the crossing of the river Kwarra, takes the people past the younger twin town of Ilalani, then to the treelands, then to the base of the mountain before the great forests - but it becomes increasingly difficult thereafter to chart the routes being followed, though a lot of the action takes place where rivers flow into the sea or along river courses, the river having at times a field of reference analogous to "road".

African time is seen as relating directly to significant periods of racial history (kairos) as in, "Over a hundred seasons of this slow, peaceful, passage", though these periods, like the word "seasons", are of indeterminate length (50); whereas experiential or ritual time in the Moslem world-view, e.g. Rhamadan, is denigrated as the predator's season of hypocritical denial (20). African time is fertile, waiting, counted in cycles of plenty and drought, and relates to the healing and regeneration of a people's psyche, or else to its destruction. Amah uses stock phrases (verbal patterns) to make actual time as vague as possible: e.g. of Anoa, "at the time she spoke", "At the time of her training", "in the three hundredth season after Anoa spoke:" of history, "from time to vatic time", "remembering the thousands upon thousands of seasons of our people's existence" (157), "the time following was creation's time" (11), "The three spoke of a time impending", "the time is not ripe; the time will soon be here" (137). Other favourite stock phrases are used for their mimetic or poetic

qualities: e.g. "thousand seasons' scattering", "hundred seasons spent journeying", "we are not a people of yesterday".

It would seem to be Armah's intention to create a racial myth of cyclic activity where patterns of active growth and movement forward are offset by recurring setbacks. Or, to use Leach's concept of pendulum time, (the 'discontinuity of repeated contrasts') it is possible for him to prophesy a time when Black unity and 'the way' will prevail over disunity and colonial domination, because the pendulum must swing. Within this framework time is marked off for the individual by 'rites de passage' which chart his social and spiritual development. This gives Armah the very broad time scale he needs to get away from the inward-looking view of small societies that have a short time depth, and for whom, to refer to Monica Wilson, all history is squeezed into ten or twelve generations (1971, 8). He must also avoid the trap of showing the Golden Age to be a thing of the past, of yesterday. This would encourage the very complacency he deplores - on the contrary, it can be achieved at any point in the past, present or future when and if the people choose to follow the 'way'. So the action spans thousands of 'seasons' going back far beyond even African historical perspective which sets the beginning of history at the founding of a tribe by the original tribal leaders. Thus Gordon Innes says of the Sunjata epic that is the common property of all Manding people who are scattered over a wide area of West Africa, Guinea, Upper Volta, Mali, Senegal and The Gambia, and that it is:

....an important factor in maintaining among these widely dispersed peoples a feeling of common origin. All regard themselves as coming from medieval Mali (or Manding, as it is called in Mandinka), and most of the leading families throughout the area trace descent from Sunjata himself or from one of his generals. (1974, 2)

The usual date given by historians for Sunjata's defeat of Sumanguru is



1235. Innes believes that this connection with Sunjata will become increasingly tenuous as the time scale of the Manding peoples expands, as old values change and more importantly, as political power lodges not in the hands of independent kings but with elected representatives, so that finally the legend of Sunjata will become merely an entertaining old story (33). Therefore, from Armah's point of view, it is crucial that he establish that African history goes back far beyond the versions recorded by the griots.

As I have already suggested, there is a dual time-scheme operating in Two Thousand Seasons. On the one hand the action spans thousands of seasons and the narrative voice is that of a composite griot figure putting right popular remembrance, and on the other, the immediate action is mediated through the consciousness of a supposed eye-witness of some of the events - a young initiate, for whom time is synchronic, charted by the seasons of his life as he passes from childhood to adulthood via the stages of tribal initiation. But this initiate, the first person narrator of much of the direct action in the novel, does not have an autonomous existence, representing as he does, a portentous stage in his people's history. In describing the career of Koranche, Armah talks about the first initiation, "the season of games and dances of protection". Koranche's companions were children in their tenth season (67). Here "season" obviously refers to a synchronic time-scale. Koranche's failures during the initiation tests, his burning of the masks and subsequent career as an African king determined to "strengthen the social conventions that would make it possible for him to veil his inferiority with given power" (72), are set in contrast with the activities of the true initiates. The narrator-initiate however belongs to a much younger age-set: "It was in Koranche's time

as King that the children of our age grew up. It was also in his time - disastrous time - that the white destroyers came from the sea" (74). The "We" of the chapter "The Destroyers" sees the narrator as the young initiate, but at the same time as he progresses through the rigours of initiation rituals he also, with the freedom of the omnipresent narrator, leaps back in time, identifying at random with different age-groups, seeming at times even to get younger, swinging on the pendulum, as it were. For instance, from p.75 on we cover the first initiation to the seventh and are given a description of a trial of courage and strength under the direction of a 'guide'. The young men are in a canoe on a raging river, but their trial of courage at Panoa has another purpose: it is here that the Whites are attempting to build forts and impose Christianity on the Africans. The resulting power struggle, which in Armah's terms turns the conflict into a war of 'ways' versus 'roads', is reported by the initiates; but then Armah reminds his listeners that though the men who marched to the palace to tell the king that the white men must go (and who were massacred), were past their last initiation, "we were not even close to our first then" (84); therefore it would seem that the narrator has now joined a younger age-group.

### The Healers

The same breadth of time-scale informs the meaning of this supposedly historical novel.<sup>22</sup> As the Healer, Damfo, tells Densu, the initiate: "There will always be work for healers, even when the highest work is done. That highest work, the bringing together again of the black people, will take centuries." The tribal groups known as the

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<sup>22</sup> Robert Fraser suggests that one takes the novel's classification of itself as an historical novel seriously (1980, 84).

Fantse, Asante, the Denchira, the Akim etc. are, according to Damfo's view of history, mere fragments of the utopian whole which in ancient times was known as "Ebibirman". Just as the breaking up of that community has taken centuries and centuries, thousands of years, so will its unification take an equally vast period of time, but it is the 'disease' of the people which prevents them from seeing that these are the inevitable processes of history.

The Healers is a sequel to Two Thousand Seasons, albeit four centuries later. (Ababio tells Appia that the first of the white people came to the coast four centuries ago (29)) The griot-narrator who introduces the novel says that the story presently being told is not so old - "just over a century old" (2). Armah has considerably narrowed his vision to give a detailed account of a specific period of Akan history, the fall of Ashanti, and used as his witness of these events the consciousness of the young would-be-healer, Densu, who, when the story begins is "In the twentieth year of his life...." (1). The same key words and stock phrases appear, the same motifs each with its associated field of reference. An example is the use of the river/road motif: in Two Thousand Seasons apropos the gold and elephant-tusk trade, "Whence rowing their ungainly boats like some sort of immense, bloated serpents along the towns of the spreading delta, it was the predators' intention...." (175); in The Healers, describing Glover's progress, "...his two huge boats came down the river like uncertain monsters, turning and twisting to find the deepest part of the shallow river " (254). Another example is the voice motif, immensely important in the trial scene with which the novel ends.

The role of the traditional oral artists is very much a concern of

Armah's in The Healers, and there seems to be an added dimension of self-criticism. The description of the myth-making proces - of how "in the absence of real knowledge suspicion becomes the guide to thought" creating a whirlpool of fragments of speculation, fantasy and half-truths - followed by an admonition to himself as story-teller and "descendant of masters in the arts of eloquence" whose "tongue flies too fast for the listener", is a critical comment on the deliberate vagueness of time and space in Two Thousand Seasons. The use of the word "listeners" rather than "readers" shows the novelist working very closely within the conventions of oral literature and it is tenable to suggest that he meant The Healers to be read aloud to illiterate audiences, but this of course raises the contentious problem of the African writer and his public. Other clues are the poetic qualities of the prose, the short chapters, the deliberate simplification of style particularly during conversation pieces with the healer Densu where the didactic content is strong (92-97), and the carefully chosen endings to certain chapters reminiscent of the serial-writer's technique, e.g. "The wait was long and hard. But, in spite of everything, Densu had survived it. He was ready for the eastern forest and the future he had already chosen " (87). When Armah writes, "Let the listener know when. Let the listener know where" (3), and supplies an exact geographical location - the Cape Coast and the River Pra - he is both declaring his own intention as historian rather than myth-maker and admonishing contemporary performers of oral literature. Hence his address to Fasseke Belen Tigui, "master of masters in the arts of eloquence" and to Mofolo, the "sowers for the future", before his description of Prince Appia's murder (51/52).

In his description of the defeat of the Asante army and siege of

Kumase, Armah adopts the tone of the funeral dirge: "Now comes the time for the singers of slow dirges " (244). Furthermore he parodies the way in which popular reports of a national disaster soon take on the trappings of myth thereby distancing the people from a proper historical perspective. The facts of the defeat are real enough: the survivors returning to homes "silent with sorrows" all have their stories to tell. But there remains the "terrifying emptiness left in people's minds, an emptiness that left the nation wide open to every strange new conjecture " (244). Omens and strange stories fill the gap: "All these reported happenings were incredible, but all were swiftly, eagerly believed " (245). In particular the omens, reported after the disaster has happened, exonerate the people and make the disaster more bearable by portraying it as foretold and thus unavoidable. So there is the incident of the unexpected storm, the appearance of the symbolic porcupine, the miraculous pregnancy and the wonderful child, the goat that cried, the kid with six legs, the pregnant husband, the tree with genitals, the inexplicable death of the kum tree, "symbol of the mighty Asante family", and the sacrificial victims who did not die. The legends of Sunjata abound with such miraculous and prophetic happenings.

Armah unkindly parodies the political role of the praise-singers in his heavily ironic description of Glover:

Here he was, Glover the glorious, boastful one, Glover for-every-five-black-men-any-other-white-man-can-raise-I-alone-will-raise-hundreds. Here he was, the great white man. No need for the searcher to tire himself searching. Glover was visible as the sun this Saturday morning. (255)

Moreover, when Densu attaches himself to the white man's camp in order to spy on him, he uses the flattering techniques of the praise-singer to gain admittance, and sings "a kind of praise song"      addressing



Glover as "the redeemer of the enslaved, the hope of the oppressed, true friend of the unfortunate." These exaggerated and unfitting praise-names are translated to Glover who accepts them as his due and is thereafter kindly disposed towards "Den Soo", as he calls him. When Glover is losing in the contest of strength with Wolseley, these songs of praise reappear in his dreams as mocking epithets; he is then the exulting hero crashing down from the heights of imagined glory - "Glover the magnificent, Glover the omniscient, Glover the father of the Hausas...." is merely the "gross white buffoon " (261).

The novel ends with music and dance. The imported West Indian band plays in solemn style to see Wolseley off, but as soon as his ship is on the open sea, its playing changes: "The stiff, straight, graceless beats of white music vanished. Instead, there was a new, skilful, strangely happy interweaving of rhythms, and instead of marching back through the streets the soldiers danced." This new grotesque dance links all the different tribal groups in one harmonious act, and therein, according to the novel's didactic burden, lies hope for the future in Africa. Clearly Armah was intensely aware of the importance of the traditional West African arts, of their uses and misuses and of their enormous potential for capturing ethnic self-image.

#### The griot tradition in Yambo Ouologuem's Bound to Violence

This novel, the French title of which is Le Devoir de Violence, (literally, the duty of violence), claims to be a work of fiction. However it combines obvious autobiographical details (a student's life in Paris) with a far wider field of symbolic reference. It is perhaps, to use Olney's phrase, "symbolic autobiography".<sup>25</sup> Ouologuem speaks not

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<sup>25</sup> 1973, 209.

for any specific group of Africans such as the Igbo of Nigeria or the Dogon of Mali, but for that whole race of people called African. The duty he has to perform, not only in the thematic material of the novel but also in the style and language (and he himself checked the English translation adding details, as in the strangely different descriptions of Vandame's death<sup>26</sup>) is to do violence to the misconceptions of Africans so that they can realise what the real problems are. Very important to an analysis of the role of the griot in West African literature is his condemnation without charity, of "l'image d'une Afrique par trop déformée par ses chantres et ses litterateurs."<sup>27</sup> The novel opens with the author assuming the role of the griot, who in an ironic footnote he defines as "a troubadour, member of a hereditary caste whose function it is to celebrate the great events of history and to uphold the God-given traditions." However, nowhere in the novel is there any of that religious mysticism so common to Laye and Armah, or any idea that the traditions upheld by the griots are anything else than man-given and a form of mental slavery. The opening sentence of the novel is an invocation with liturgical rhythm, using traditional symbolism which links the brightness of the sun with the numinous power of Africa in a manner which recalls the ending of Dramouss. The sentence which follows is a violent contrast - this sudden juxtaposition of tones being a dominant feature of Ouologuem's style: "To recount the bloody adventure of the niggertrash [négraille] - shame to the worthless paupers! - there would be no need to go back beyond the present century; but the true history of the Blacks begins much earlier, with the Saifs, in the year 1201 of our era...." The

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<sup>26</sup> Olney discusses the intriguing discrepancies between the English and French versions, 234ff.

<sup>27</sup> Lettre à la France Nègre, 1968.

obsession with the true history of Africa as opposed to the histories of the griots "peering wide-eyed into the bitter deserts", was common not only to West African writers but also to their historians; but these very historians perpetuated the histories of the griots, which to Ouologuem are mere artefacts of slavery, seeking to establish a link between past and present which would glorify present revolutionary leaders.<sup>28</sup>

In his important article, "The search for national identity in West Africa", Immanuel Wallerstein summarises the African historian's approach to his own history. It was assumed by Africanists that there was no history of Africa before the advent of European contact with West Africa dating from the 15th century, and the advent also of the justifying ideology of cultural supremacy and the creation of a new élite (much vilified by Armah). Along with this came the attempt to deAfricanise Africa and attribute its observable artefacts to 'superior' races e.g. attempts were made to prove the Benin bronzes the work of the Portuguese, and the Ife heads the work of Egyptians (1960, 19). Herskovits has drawn attention to the complex of ideas about African art which held that its finer forms were of the past and which deliberately masked the continuity both past and present in African art (1962, 433). The work of early anthropologists did nothing to dispel the general backlog of preconceived ideas about Africa. Wallerstein quotes Ablemagnon, a West African sociologist: "One often has the impression that these first and great ethnographic works (of Westermann, Frobenius, Delafosse, Griaule) were nothing but a sort of vast phenomenology, vast compilations without a precise orientation as to the sociological objectives which interests us here " (19). So

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<sup>28</sup> See the findings of Arhin (1986) and Kotljar (1984) above.

Ouologuem uses, to quote Soyinka, "the stylistic 'griot' propulsive energy" to attack Frobenius and rewrite the saga of Arab-Islamic colonisation of Black Africa, though his vision is ultimately a negative and masochistic one.<sup>29</sup> What he most denigrates is what Laye was most eager to uphold: the magico-religious, cosmological and mythical symbolism of African ancestorism. Ouologuem's Frobenius ('Shrobenius') is nothing but a salesman and manufacturer of ideology who "exploited the sentimentality of the coons, only too pleased to hear from the mouth of a white man that Africa was 'the womb of the world and the cradle of civilization'" (95). Frobenius was perhaps an easy target but Ouologuem's satire is directed not only against such popularising Africanists, but also against Africans themselves who uphold a false image of the past in order to consolidate their position in the future. Soyinka believes for instance, that much of this novel owes its conception to a desire to counter the Islamic apologia of Cheikh Hamidou Kane's Ambiguous Adventure in the contest for the soul of Samba Diallo (1976, 104). It would seem to be Ouologuem's view that the worst form of slavery is a belief in the divine will of an Arabic God which forced the Africans to endure scenes of utmost savagery and yet do nothing about their lot. "God's implacable 'blessing' of its population" was nothing but a baptism in torture, the only conclusion to be drawn from the histories of ancient Nakem told by the "griot Kutuli of cherished memory" is that life was in vain.

Wallerstein sees as a dominating characteristic of the 'new history' the tendency to glorify and revalorize heroes and empires:

Samory, whom the French saw as a rapacious and cruel warrior finally subdued, was presented by West African nationalists as the noble and heroic chieftain finally repressed by the

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<sup>29</sup> Soyinka 1976, 99.

invader. A revolutionary movement needs to create legitimate sources of deviant norms. The reinforcement of symbols already latent in the mass of the people is obviously the easiest and most effective way to do this. (22)

With the advent of independence came the need to establish the legality of the governments and reinforce the loyalty of the citizens by recourse to tradition:

In West Africa, Ghana and Mali have deliberately assumed the names of old empires of the Sudan. The position of the charismatic leaders, key elements in maintaining the integrity of their countries, is reinforced by linking them to historical heroes. President Sékou Touré of Guinea claims to be the great-grandson of the warrior-hero Samory Touré. And it is said that Modibo Keita, Prime Minister of the present-day Republic of Mali, is descended from Soundiata Keita, 13th-century founder of the ancient Mali empire. (23)

This trend is well demonstrated by the writings of historians like Cheikh Anta Diop who traced West African history back to Egyptian origins, in Nations Nègres.

Thus the concept of slavery as used by Armah and Ouologuem obviously has a very wide application. In Bound to Violence, it is the informing motif in the novel: the négraille are the enslaved; the Saifs (Ouologuem's collective name for the rulers of a rather vague geographical area, the ancient Nakem Empire or the great medieval empire of Mali), are the slavemasters. In the first two chapters the novelist covers a vast timespan from 1202-1901, assuming a griot's voice in recounting the Saif's legend. Olney has discussed Ouologuem's debt to the style of the traditional griot, particularly the archivist aspect, but points out that in adopting the griot mask, his attitude is ironic both towards the manner of the griot and towards his subject (239). Soyinka calls this a "devaluation technique" (101), but does not agree that it can at the same time be called an "alienation technique" because "such a level of inventive degradation suggests that Oulougum is practising some form of literary magic for the purpose of self-



inoculation."

It certainly seems to have been Ouologuem's intention to create a tapestry of conflicting and confusing impressions of time and place and to highlight the inherent contradictions of a history based on oral tradition. He does not offer any final authentic account of history but rather a selection of different accounts depending on whether it is the 'elders' who are remembering, the Arab historians, or the griots. Thus the legend of Saif Isaac al-Heit which "still haunts Black romanticism and the political thinking of the notables in a good many republics" (8), is told from the point of view of the Arab historians. The slave trade under the Saifs is described from the point of view of troubadours (griots) of Nakem, moaning "when the evening vomits forth its starry diamonds". This contrasts starkly with Laye's evocative tone at the end of the chapter "Kouroussa" (in A Dream of Africa) after the telling of the griot's story about Imam Moussa and the Queen: "On my way back to my hut, the field of cotton had flowered; no one had reaped it", meaning that the night was a field of stars (100).

In "Dawn" the Christian bishop and the Saif play out a diabolical game of chess which re-enacts the violent history of Nakem. Ouologuem invites the reader to attempt to see the future of Africa but comes to the sad conclusion that the history of Africa is synonymous with the history of the Saifs as forever retold by the griots. The griot Mamoudou Kouyaté says in Soundiata, "We griots are depositaries of the knowledge of the past. But whoever knows the history of a country can read its future" (Niane, 1965, 41). And so although "the soul desires to dream the echo of happiness, an echo that has no past", Ouologuem ends his novel with the admonition that "Saif, mourned three million

times, is forever reborn to history beneath the hot ashes of more than thirty African republics."<sup>30</sup> Yet nature itself remains fertile and compassionate, although the history of man is no more than a game – an almost Senghorian perception.

A note on the griot tradition in Sembène Ousmane's God's Bits of Wood.<sup>31</sup>

Ousmane's novel is interesting in the context of the past and the griot tradition, because it offers a practical example of how history (and forms of slavery) can be changed by the people. It concerns itself with the 1947-8 strike of railway workers on the Dakar-Niger line. Surprisingly feminist in tone, the novel's main theme is "forces they (the strikers) had set in motion" (53), and the development of a new breed of men and women who can understand the nature of their slavery and act in a concerted way against it. As Soyinka puts it, in his commentary on this work, "We are made conscious of a new society in the process of coming to birth" (1976, 118). He even goes so far as to say that God's Bits of Wood attains epic levels (117).

A central figure in the novel is the blind beggar-woman Maimouna, who performs the role of griot within her society. In one crucial scene which marks the beginning of armed confrontation between strikers and authority, the actual words of her song harmonise with the action described, providing a commentary which strengthens, through example drawn from local history, the part played by the women. Throughout the day, before the actual outbreak of violence, Maimouna sits in the market singing the legend of Goumba N'Diaye, "the woman who had measured her strength against that of men, before she lost her sight.

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<sup>30</sup> The original French version is: "...Saif, pleuré trois millions de fois renaît sans cesse à l'Histoire, sous les centres chaudes de plus de trente Républiques africaines " (207).

<sup>31</sup> J.A. Peters has suggested a similar approach in "Sembène Ousmane as griot: The Money-Order with White Genesis", African Literature Today, ed. Eldred Jones, No.12.

The moving rhythms of the old chant could be heard above the noise of the crowd" (31). This is contrasted with the "rhythmic thudding of boots" when the soldiers arrive. Their bayonets, reflecting the rays of the sun, are described as being like "some great, upended harrowing machine". The bayonets have their counterpart in the "abandoned scythes" of the new verse in the legend of Goumba N'Diaye which Maimouna continues to sing and which bring to mind the abandoned work stations of the strikers. The theme of the new verse is a contest of strength:

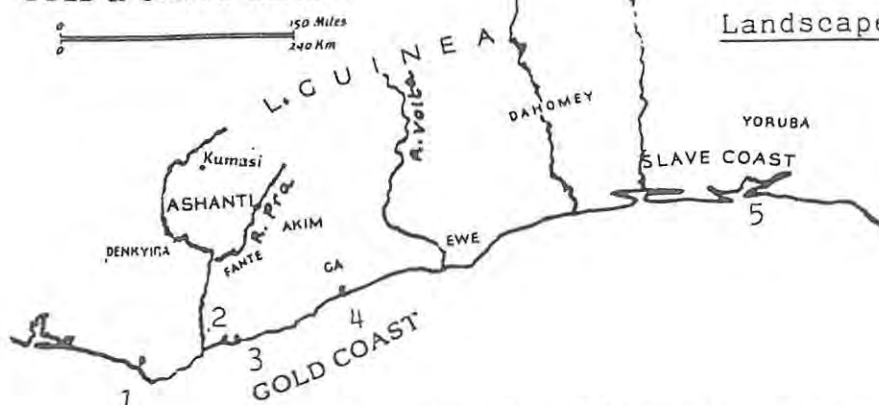
"I have come to take a wife," the stranger said.  
 "My bridegroom must be stonger than I.  
 There are my father's fields,  
 And there are the abandoned scythes",  
     replied Goumba N'Diaye.  
 And the stranger took up a scythe.  
 Two days each week, and still they came not to the  
 end,  
 But the man could not vanquish the girl."

The language used to describe Maimouna distances her from the reality of events as they happen, thus reinforcing her role as the voice of a higher ethnic consciousness: "She held her splendid, smooth-skinned body like some goddess of the night, her head high, her vacant glance seeming to contemplate an area above the people, beyond the world " (31). She is described as being "queen of her shadowy realm" (37) and "the mother of children without a father". The tone of these descriptions, unusual in the context of the rest of the novel, conveys on her the status of a legend in her own right. The first blast of the siren, symbol of the workers' slavery, and suddenly shockingly obviously so, is also the signal for the riot to begin. When the men waver and fall back, it is the women who renew the charge: "Dieynaba had rallied the women of the market place, and like a band of Amazons they came to the rescue, armed with clubs, with iron bars and bottles "

(39).<sup>31</sup> Meanwhile one of Maimouna's twins has crawled towards the bicycles and is senselessly killed by a fleeing man, so that legend is sharply focussed against reality. Ousmane thus makes use of the griot tradition in a way that is neither idealising nor critical, but which adds a positive artistic dimension to his work within its somewhat Marxist framework.

All the writers whose novels are discussed above, were fully conscious of the part played by oral tradition as practised by the griots in the development of racial consciousness and historical perspective. Then too, the rhythms and stylistic techniques of the griots provide a literary model easily understood in Africa. And in a very real sense, they themselves are followers in that tradition, regardless of their attitudes towards it.

## GOLD &amp; SLAVE COASTS



Landscape for "The Healers"

## The Forts

## Europeans in West Africa, XVIIth and XVIIIth Centuries

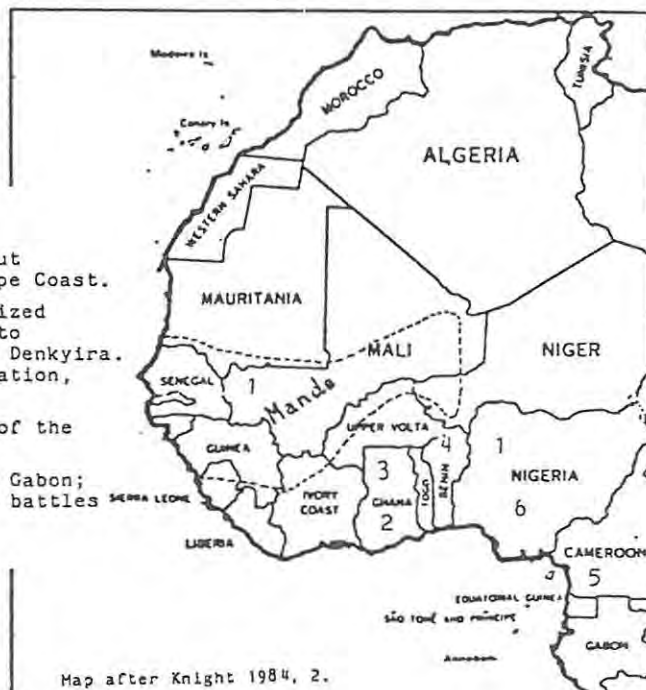
- 1 AXIM Ft. St Anthony - P 1503, D 1642, E 1872
- 2 ELMINA St. George - P 1482; D headquarters 1637, E 1872  
St. Jago - D c 1670, E 1872
- 3 CAPE COAST S. 1652; Da. 1659, D. 1663; E headquarters 1664
- 4 ACCRA Ft. James - E 1673  
Ft. Crèvecoeur - D 1650, E 1867
- 5 LAGOS

D. Dutch  
Da. Danish  
E. English  
P. Portuguese  
S. Swedish  
Sp. Spanish

Map after Fage and Verity, 1978, Map 34.

## The tradition of historical songs in West Africa

- 1 griot and Mandinka jali music
- 2 Akan funeral dirge, specialized music of the Ashante and Fante found throughout Ghana and collected by Nketia around Cape Coast.
- 3 Asante praise poems (Apae) - a specialized form of griot songs originating c. 1699 to record the wars between the Ashante and Denkyira. Osee Tutu, the founder of the Ashante nation, is often addressed in these poems.
- 4 Kpanlɔngan songs recording the history of the Kings of Dahomey.
- 5 mvɛt epics of the Fang of Cameroons and Gabon; less 'historical', often concerned with battles between the Gods and man.
- 6 oriki praise songs of the Yoruba.



Map after Knight 1984, 2.



Time and the processes of change in Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart and Arrow of God.

Achebe's major novels, Things Fall Apart and Arrow of God, present a view of a specific West African culture faced with the inevitability of change brought about by conflict with an invading culture, which must affect not only its political and social structure but also its concept of time. The historical background to both novels is fully discussed by Wren (1980). Briefly, Things Fall Apart is set near the beginning of the present century (1900-1920), "the time when British colonial authority, missions and trade penetrated the Igbo hinterland beyond Onitsha and beyond Achebe's home Ogidi" (Wren, 10), and deals with the 'pacification' or 'civilization' of Umuofia, a process beginning with the expedition against the unsuspecting Aros. It is possible that in presenting so strong and uncompromising a picture of traditional Ibo (Igbo) society, as he does in these two novels, Achebe was reacting to a passage (if not the whole theme and intent) of Conrad's Heart of Darkness, in which the response of the passengers on the steamer to the local inhabitants of the Congo is described as follows:

We could have fancied ourselves the first men taking possession of an accursed inheritance, to be subdued at the cost of profound anguish and excessive toil.<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, in hastening to condemn "the dehumanization of Africa and Africans which this age-long attitude has fostered and continues to foster in the world" (1978, 9), and in his admitted anxiety to portray "a total world and a total life as it is lived in that world ... the

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<sup>1</sup> Qtd. in Achebe 1978, 1-16.

life of the people",<sup>2</sup> Achebe does not fall into the trap of establishing the values of pre-colonial life by offering his readers an idealised or romantic account - on the contrary, many of his descriptions are more or less factual without being pedantic. In various talks and interviews he has been adamant about what he sees as the writer's duty towards his own culture, frequently mentioning the necessity of having to restore the dignity and self-respect of African people in general,<sup>3</sup> the significant word here being 'restore'. Through his authorial role as oral chronicler of the past, his novels attempt to explore how this 'dignity' was lost. Though, according to Kolawole Ogungbesan (1974), Achebe is consistent in his belief that the writer has a function in his society, he later came to acknowledge that in his role as social critic the writer can only comment on, or reveal, what has already happened; it is the people themselves who are the real revolutionaries, who bring about change. As he says in an article with the heavily-loaded title, "The duty and involvement of the African writer":

This has been the problem of the African artist; he has been left far behind by the people who make culture, and he must now hurry and catch up with them - to borrow the beautiful expression of Fanon - in that zone of occult instability where the people dwell. It is there that customs die and cultures are born. It is there that the regenerative powers of the people are most potent.<sup>4</sup>

Armah agrees with Achebe in his emphasis on regeneration. In 1984 he wrote: "As far back as our written and unwritten records go, it has been the prime destiny of the serious African artist to combine the

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<sup>2</sup> See Kalu Ogbaa, 1981, 1.

<sup>3</sup> See "The role of the writer in a New Nation" in Nigeria Magazine No.81 (1964) 157; "The burden of the Black writer" in Presence Africaine Vol. XXXI, No.59 (1966) 135.

<sup>4</sup> In Lindfors, Bernth "Achebe on commitment and African writers" Africa Report Vol. XV, No.3 (March 1970), 16-17.

craft of creativity with the search for regenerative values." <sup>5</sup> A little later in the same article he notes that "Fanon says the process of re-Africanization is something the majority of African people want. It is also positive and has an inherently revolutionary dynamic because it winnows out merely tribalistic values, leaving positive, inclusive values as a basis for future development."<sup>6</sup> Olney's reading of Things Fall Apart suggests that these so-called 'tribalistic values' are actually the real values of the Igbos and that Achebe is describing an ideal situation where you have a "community with one soul rather than a multitude of souls, held together by the will of the ancestors who speak group wisdom and timeless desires through the mouths of present ruling elders" (1973, 175). This over-simplified view, Kronenfeld maintains, is based on a misunderstanding of the clans and lineages system (1975, 216). What Achebe wants to do, according to Kronenfeld, is "justify precolonial African institutions in a rather anthropological way, by showing that they worked to keep society functioning, although not always perfectly. Such a view counters the view of primitive societies as irrational, common enough until recently" (216). If one agrees that Things Fall Apart should be read as a tragedy then, Kronenfeld suggests, the proper model is the Hippolytus legend, "which concerns the inevitable tragedy of choosing or aligning oneself with one or two necessary and opposed forces, which are extremely difficult to balance, but must be balanced" (219). This accords with David Carroll's analysis which, Kronenfeld says, makes it clear that Achebe analyses Igbo society in terms of the polarity of the masculine and feminine virtues. This is certainly true of his

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<sup>5</sup> In "Masks and Marx: The Marxist Ethos vis-a-vis African Revolutionary Theory and Praxis", Presence Africaine No.131 (1984) 35.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*, 60.

descriptions of musical and ritual activities, beginning with the implication that Unoka was a failure because he played pretty tunes on the flute whereas Okoye, who was also a musician, was not a failure because he played on the ogene, a masculine instrument never played by women (4/5).

Did Achebe intend to portray Umuofia as "static, in an unchanging pattern of life that had begun in some primordial forgotten past and survived in all its beauty and fragility until the coarse hand of the white man fell upon it, and in a twinkling, crushed it" as Wren, amongst others, suggests? This implies that Achebe believed at the time of writing Things Fall Apart that forms of religion, language and customs can be pure and unadulterated, or as Wren puts it: what remains pure today, like a virgin, was pure before (75). It seems more likely that he had a far deeper understanding of the processes of change as is shown by the hidden references throughout his work to the whole field of European literature. His main interest undoubtedly is, as Lloyd W. Brown expresses it, "the relationship between cultural norms and perceptual values" (1978, 24). According to Brown therefore, Achebe "consistently borrows European historiography in order to explode the notorious Western myth that Africans have no history. The title of the first novel, Things Fall Apart, announces Achebe's fairly obvious debt to Yeats's poem 'The Second Coming' (1921)" (25). Brown goes on to suggest:

in evoking Yeats's themes, Achebe implies that the sense of history and tradition, the burdens of cultural continuity, decay, and rebirth, have all been the African's lot as well as the Westerner's. And in the process the novelist has exploited the European's cultural criteria - his literature and historiography - in order to reverse the white man's exclusive definitions of history and culture. (25/26)

Another comment on these wider literary references is offered by John Jordan who believes that the Yeatsian title calls to mind "an unnecessarily apocalyptic interpretation of African history whereby the 'ceremony of innocence' (a static, tribal society) is figuratively drowned and 'mere anarchy' (British colonialism) is loosed upon the forest" (1971, 68).

Achebe would seem to have clear ideas about the relationship of concepts of time to a sense of history. Discussing recent Zimbabwean fiction, T. McLoughlin remarks that the time question is an all-important one for the African writer:

Implicit in much of what has been said above is an argument that the contemporary African writer, whichever phase of history he turns to, has to decide what significance to give to time. If he turns to the early phase, time tends to be cyclical or recurrent, emphasizing the homogeneity and perpetuity of established cultural mores. Thus the fiction is marked by romance, legend and myth. In the colonial phase, the present and the past are at odds, a discordance which is not presented as dialectical but, as Mungoshi shows, as self-destructive friction. Time is measured, rather, by degrees of alienation than by events. (1984, 106)

"Degrees of alienation" is a helpful phrase for discussing Okonkwo's increasing sense of estrangement from his clan, whilst Fanon's phrase "occult instability" suggests the source of such a feeling.

What is Achebe's attitude to time, then, and how does his use of music, song and dance within the structure of his novels convey this attitude to his readers? Brown invokes T.S. Eliot to provide a partial answer:

The structure and functions of African society define the individual's identity within a cosmic context which approximates Eliot's synthesis of the "timeless" and the "temporal", the past and the present. Hence the simultaneous existence which Eliot imparts to different eras through the historical sense is comparable with that "logic of love" which Leopold Senghor attributes to the old traditions of African society: "The feeling of communion in the family and the community is projected backwards into time, and also into



the transcendental world, to the ancestors, to the spirits and, unconsciously, to God." The supernatural and the temporal, the past and the present, all unite in the African's self-awareness. He is 'held in a tight network of vertical and horizontal communities, which bind and at the same time support him'. (28)

Yet Achebe does not describe such an ideal world-view in Things Fall Apart, rather he describes a social and political structure which has become too rigid. This rigidity is reinforced by recurring ritual events involving masking, music, song and dance, which are firmly linked to the needs of an agricultural community. Taking refuge in the structures of myth, in the convenient anomalies of proverbial sayings and in ritualised, formalised behaviour, the people of Umuofia have no language which can accommodate change. In an interview with Kalu Ogbaa, Achebe says, with reference to the European destruction of African culture, "a culture can be mutilated, can be destroyed by its own people, under certain situations ... The Igbo culture was not destroyed by Europe. It was disturbed ... But as I said initially, a culture which is healthy will often survive" (1981, 1).

This dissertation has frequently cited the writings of Maurice Bloch, and once again he suggests answers to the important question of how change can take place within a closed society with a heavy dependence on ritualised patterns of speech and behaviour:

One can put the problem generally by saying that, if we believe in the social determination of concepts....this leaves the actors with no language to talk about their society and so change it, since they can only talk within it. (1977, 281)

If the dissolution of time and the depersonalisation of individuals is linked with the mechanics of the semantic system of formalised, ritual communication, then a society which engages extensively in ritual communication will tend to be static rather than dynamic and little real change is possible within those structures. However if, as Bloch does, one grants the possibility of an independent infrastructure

(which he calls "other moments" in the long conversation i.e. the cognitive system of everyday communication) then one admits the possibility for change:

The infrastructure has then its own cognitive system for the actors and its realisation can be, and is, used occasionally to challenge that other consciousness, of an invisible system created by ritual: social structure. The timeless static past in the present is then challenged by the present ... people may be extensively mystified by the static and organic imaginary models of their society which gain a shadowy phenomenological reality in ritual communication; but they also have available to them another source of concepts, the use of which can lead to the realisation of exploitation and its challenge. (287)

This seems to be close to Achebe's understanding of the problem. The building of the road for instance, in Arrow of God gives rise to a new type of political consciousness amongst the young men of Umuaro with the feeling that they are being exploited and discriminated against. After the razing of Okonkwo's compound, in Things Fall Apart, the issue is stated very clearly by Obierika: Why should a man suffer so grievously for an offence he had committed inadvertently? And what crime did the twins commit who were "thrown away"? But though he is a thinking man, he "was merely led into greater complexities" (87). Neither man fully understands why the oracle should have decreed Ikemefuna's death: they argue instead about the extent of one's moral obligation to obey such an oracle, but failing to come to any conclusion, soon resort to proverbs (46-47), because the inherited body of proverbial lore which they have in common constitutes a constant reassuring factor in their society. Bloch associates political inequality with the use of ritual in highly structured societies and maintains that it is the very semantic mechanics used by ritual which create a static or cyclic view of time.<sup>7</sup> Achebe's presentation of the

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<sup>7</sup> See "Symbols, Song, Dance and features of Articulation: is religion an extreme form of traditional authority?" European Journal of Sociology XV (1974) 55-81.

essential nature of the conflict in both Things Fall Apart and Arrow of God would seem to concur with this view.

Bourdillon, in his response to Bloch's division between practical and ritual knowledge, i.e. "systems by which we know the world" and "systems by which we hide it", holds that Bloch does not take account of the positive aspect of ritual in controlling inequality (591); moreover, that far from being a mechanism to hide the world, cyclic concepts of time as lived in agricultural communities are usually based on a very real knowledge of necessary agricultural cycles. Nevertheless, Bloch's distinction between ritual and practical knowledge is helpful in considering Achebe's attitude to time and the processes of change in both his major novels. Here is a highly structured society maintained through the unbending application of ritual behaviour linked to the practical needs of an economy based on the growing and marketing of yams. This seemingly stable traditional arrangement is suddenly threatened by an invading culture opposed in every way to its own cultural ethos. What happens? In Achebe's example, political and social structure almost immediately falls apart. Through both *Okonkwo* and *Ezeulu*'s terrible bewilderment his novels ask the questions - Why does the structure fall apart? What can the loser retain of his traditional culture after such a confrontation?

Levi-Strauss's application of the parallels between structure in myth and structure in music (although he was thinking very particularly of Western music) offers a partial answer. According to Strauss, music, because it is at base structural, parallels myth, and the structures of myth transcend language. Both music and myth are instruments for the obliteration of time. Arden Ross King, in his essay on "Les

Mythologiques", says that the function of myth is to help men solve basic intellectual problems by offering a variety of alternative choices while circulating about a central structural core. Meaning cannot be derived from a single tale but from a corpus of myths (1974, 103). Discussing Levi-Strauss's L'Homme Nu, King writes:

Ritual is an attempt to recapture structure and its functions to organize and limit the content of experience and behaviour. In this manner the content of experience progresses through linear time with continuous alteration while structure, being timeless, can only be replaced. As long as structure is efficacious it is transcendent but when it no longer functions (pattern exhaustion) it enters linear time. It does not display the same continuity as content; by its very nature it must be replaced by another structure. (104)

It would seem that the problems inherent in the concept of 'pattern exhaustion' are dealt with by Achebe in Things Fall Apart. The act of replacing an obsolete structure with a new meaningful structure is a creative one, involving the whole cultural ethos of a community. It can also be a violent one. As King says, "If a society is to persist, a creative act must take place: the creation of a new structure - a new myth structure, or music structure, or language structure ... or probably all" (105). In all his writings Levi-Strauss pointed to the pattern-forming nature of the human mind and his belief that the communicatory codes in which these patterns manifest themselves are culturally determined. Yet he did not mean that these patterns were "pre-ordained and inflexible structures", but rather "moulds from which are produced forms that turn up as entities without being obliged to remain identical, either during the course of human existence from birth or death or, in the case of human societies, for all times and all places."<sup>8</sup> Music is an effective medium for change. As Pandora

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<sup>8</sup> "L'homme nu." Mythologiques IV. Trans. Hopkins (Paris: 1971) 561.

Hopkins writes in her examination of Levi-Strauss's views on musical structure:

In the case of music, those who share a particular sound system can produce (or induce) specific emotional (affective) responses in one another. According to Levi-Strauss, "The musical work is a system of sounds capable, according to the mind of the auditor, of affecting the emotions".<sup>9</sup> Each culture has constructed sound systems from which particular structures are drawn. Thus there are two levels of cognitive, culturally-determined grids. The affective response of the auditor is determined by his/her ability to intellectually interpret the cultural codes involved. (1977, 252)

Okonkwo's interpretation of the cultural codes of his own people is far too rigid, whereas Nwoye's interpretation of western codes is far too shallow: for instance, he is immediately emotionally affected by the Christian hymns. As Innes suggests:

Although for Nwoye the Christian hymns recognize and nourish the world of inner feelings, the language of the preachers and of the gospels only "seems" to provide answers to Nwoye's "callow mind"; it is shown to be as much a closed system as the Ibo language. (1977, 252)

Achebe (1975) stressed the ritual qualities of language in traditional societies, quoting Camara Laye's observation that in the rural villages the pace of life seemed much slower and more dignified because the people "always spoke only after due reflection, and because speech itself was a most serious matter"<sup>10</sup>. It is these ritual qualities of language which inhibit its ability to change and adapt "fast enough to deal with every new factor in the environment, to describe every new perception, every new detail in the ever-increasing complexity of the life of the community, to say nothing of the private perceptions and idiosyncracies of particular speakers."<sup>11</sup> Achebe cites

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<sup>9</sup> *ibid.* 582.

<sup>10</sup> "Language and the destiny of man." Morning Yet on Creation Day (1975) 32. The quotation from Laye is given as The African Child (Fontana: 1959) 53.

<sup>11</sup> 1975, 33.



T.S. Eliot's "Trying to learn to use words" from Four Quartets as an example of the struggle, frustration and anguish which this situation imposes on a writer. Achebe is particularly concerned with the misuse of language and writes that the symbols and structures of myth are there as a safeguard against this eventuality. Referring to Levi-Strauss's explanation of the repetitive factor in myth and citing the Igbo version of the ubiquitous "Message that failed", he makes a very strong claim that the long conversation between the ancestors (the senders of the message) and the living members of a particular society (the receivers of the message) should continue, and concludes:

It is as though the ancestors who made language and knew from what bestiality its use rescued them are saying to us: Beware of interfering with its purpose! For when language is seriously interfered with, when it is disjoined from truth, be it from mere incompetence or worse, from malice, horrors can descend again on mankind. (1975, 37)

C.L. Innes discusses Achebe's attitude to language in "Language, Poetry and Doctrine", an article which is highly relevant to this discussion, taking as it does the view that "The language which gives a world substance, which crystallizes it, can also be a conservative force which protects that world from change. This interplay between the two possibilities of language - constraining thought or extending it - seems to me to lie at the core of Things Fall Apart" (1978, 111). Innes maintains further that the narrative voice in this novel is the collective voice, a recreation of the persona which is heard in tales, history, proverbs and poetry, and that the artist speaks for his society as the chorus rather than the hero. This underscores one of the major critical problems for readers of Achebe's novels, however: how 'collective' is the 'collective voice'? Lindfors maintains, in his study of Achebe's use of proverbs and idiomatic language, that "proverbs are used to sound and reiterate major themes, to sharpen characterizations, to clarify conflict, and to focus on the values of

society Achebe is portraying." Moreover, "Because they provide a grammar of values by which the actions of characters can be measured and evaluated, proverbs help us to understand and interpret Achebe's novels" (1978, 64). This is true to a certain extent,<sup>12</sup> but proverbs have another important social use: they can function as structures for control. Ruth Finnegan shows for instance, that "the veiled and metaphoric language of proverbs" is especially important in situations where there is both conflict and, at the same time, some obligation that this conflict should not take on too personal a form or become extreme and explicit (1970, 411-412).

If the narrator is the spokesman for the Ibo community, as Innes believes, then his use of proverbs and idiomatic language must point to that narrator's awareness of the mechanisms of control operating within society, of which music and language are the audible signs. The 'voice' is in fact only 'collective' in situations involving ritual and synchronic time when music, song and dance are used to reinforce what is perceived as the collective will of the people, and to perpetuate a well-trying and sophisticated system of rule-application which both protects society and inhibits necessary change. It is interesting to note that this is the central issue for another Nigerian writer, Gabriel Okara, of whose novel, The Voice, Ravenscroft says in his introduction:

In the character of Okolo there is concentrated therefore, not only integrity of action but also integrity of language. Rather, the two kinds of integrity are shown to be the same

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<sup>12</sup> Peter Seitel (1976) shows that Ibo proverbs "may be used to resolve the contradictions between what a person feels an interaction situation should be and what he perceives it to be at present" (133). The social use of the oft-used "the toad does not run in the daytime unless something is after its life" is an accepted formula for bridging a gap or "to mediate between a simple social visit and a situation in which an important matter may be discussed." Furthermore this specific proverb is generally used "in first person correlation to state one's intention of and justification for bringing up a matter for discussion" (134).

thing ... To use T.S. Eliot's phrases again, Okolo is trying to 'purify the dialect of the tribe', and so the story grows into a parable of the moral role of the verbal artist (and by extension, any artist) in the society that he lives in. (1964, 13/14)

Maurice Bloch (1974), maintains that:

in a highly formalised or ritualised political situation there seems no way whereby authority can be challenged except by a total refusal to use the accepted form which is compulsory for this type of occasion, i.e. a total refusal of all political conventions. The ceremonial trappings of a highly formalised situation seem to catch the actors so that they are unable to resist the demands made on them. (59/60)

On these occasions formalisation can become the tool of power or coercion. Bloch further believes that the language of traditional authority is impoverished language, "a language where many of the options at all levels of language are abandoned so that choice of form, of style, of words and of syntax is less than in ordinary language" (60). This seems to be the theme of the conversation between the three messengers in The Voice when the third messenger who has been partially educated tells the other two, who are speaking in parables and symbolic language, "Your spoken words I call nothing. What I say is, things have changed, so change." To which the first messenger replies scornfully:

"Hear his creating words - things changeth. Ha, ha, ha...change, change. He always of change speaks. Ha, ha, ha. What is the whiteman's word, the parable you always say... "The old order changeth"? I forget the rest,...." (25)

So Okara, writing for the Ijaws, was as much aware of the connection between language and the processes of change as was Achebe. Both acknowledge that those who take refuge in the language of traditional authority are restricting the choice of what can be said. According to Bloch, the power of cross-references in the language of traditional authority "becomes more and more restricted to a body of suitable illustrations, often proverbs and scriptures" (1974, 62). In this type

of communication, Bloch says, rebellion is impossible: there can only be revolution. This is because an inferior, or someone trying to effect change, in a political situation with a high degree of formality has to contend with a communication code "where he can only accept what is said if he is to stay within the rules of appropriate behaviour."

Yet the strange paradox is that the Igbos have a long history of adaptability to change. Zaslavsky writes that by the sixteenth century they had a complex economy in which a division of labour was able to support markets every four or eight days. Moreover they "have always enjoyed a reputation for commercial enterprise, for their profound distrust of authority, and for their eagerness to try anything new" (1979, 27). Since government was by the village council of elders and control was exercised through ritual institutions (such as masking) run by young men who enforced the decisions of the elders, it is obvious that the former were in a position to block actions they found objectionable. Therefore, in the hierarchy of things, the impetus for change would have to come from below, not above. That is why Enoch's action in unmasking an egwugwu in public is so horrendous to the Umuofia community as a whole. He destroys the illusion of the 'collective' voice or will and shows the instruments of power and decision-making to be recognisable individuals. But his act has even deeper implications: it denies the accepted fact that it is the Gods who underwrite the moral bases of the human community and that taboos, customs, moral codes and social ethics are not enforced according to the desires of individual rulers, but are sanctioned and handed down by the Gods. Since this is a society where all significant groupings are organized on the basis of patrilineal descent, the community's gods are moulded in the ancestral image. As Robin Horton says, "The ancestors

come to stand for the ideal pattern of society, and acceptance of one's relationship with them comes to stand for acceptance of this ideal pattern" (1961, 110). Obligations are therefore, according to Modum, religious demands (1979, 95).<sup>13</sup> To deny this is revolution in Igbo terms and when it happens in Umuofia, the most archaic symbol of male domination, the bull-roarer, is used to send fear into every heart: "For the first time in living memory the sacred bull-roarer was heard in broad daylight" (132).

It cannot be true that Okonkwo's inability to change is symptomatic of an inflexible society since traditional power structures in the society Achebe is describing include structural mechanisms for effecting change. But these are frustrated, impeded and controlled by the language of ritual situations, whether verbal or musical, which create static time. This remains the intriguing paradox of the artistic spirit in Africa. The dynamics of change and inter-action are everywhere to be seen in African art. Dennis Deurden, who does not like the term 'traditional' because it gives an impression of static symbols, (symbols which have remained the same since the beginning of time), believes that in African society the conscious and determined preservation of stored memories is a sacrilege (1975, 7). According to his view a man in a group has to accept the need for patterns or constraints as expressed in social codes and in the arts such as dance, but "it is important that these patterns should not become a rigid

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<sup>13</sup> Modum follows Mircea Eliade's myth of "eternal return" (disputed by Deurden, 1975) in his discussion of the religious background to traditional festivals, which he asserts, fulfill the function of social and moral control (87), and are times of periodic contact with the deities during which society not only renews its faith in the Gods but also reiterates the essential factors of life and death (88).



Gestalt" and this, he believes, is the reason for the use of cults, masking traditions and divination so widespread in West Africa:

In order that the cults and diviners are able to carry out their functions the art must never become a frozen symbolism, must never make the structure of the present into a lasting and visible structure which takes too long to destroy. The present must become invisible. (Deurden's emphasis, 24)

Whilst it is the elders' associations which are the upholders of rigid conformity "to the patterns established in the past by their immediate ancestors" there are also cults which cater specifically for "individuals who are so nonconforming that they have become alienated" (27). Deurden sees a dualism operating in West African societies which is "a dualism of an opposition between conformity to a social group and a desire for individual self-expression" (78). Horton agrees when he says, "The personality concepts we have discussed from two West African societies show a remarkably clear awareness of the crises suffered by the individual in his passage through the social structure, and especially of the ways in which enculturation divides him" (115). The real purpose of diviners may well be, as Deurden suggests, to help an individual who finds his social role or 'destiny' too constricting find a new one, and there are other avenues of release as well. This dualism or opposition between individual and group is most definitely the driving force behind the complex rhythms of African dance. The "dynamic clash and inter-play of cross-rhythms" is something which Chernoff remarks on time and time again in his discussion of West African drumming and dancing (1979, 95). For instance master musicians will often introduce new styles in mid-performance: "the new style will cut the music differently and maintain the tension from a different rhythmic perspective, often introducing new tensions to support or go against the perspective which a spectator, or a dancer, had been trying to maintain" (101). Chernoff asserts that in African music "excellence

arises when the combination of rhythms is translated into meaningful action; people participate best when they can "hear" the rhythms, whether through understanding or dance. The most important issues of improvisation, in most African musical idioms, are matters of repetition and change" (111). In other words, once the people hear the rhythms correctly they know how to dance to them: understanding means movement.

African art is not rigid therefore, rather it is as Robert Farris Thompson says, always "in motion" (1974). Likewise African cultural groups are not static, neither are their politics, but in the midst of all this flux, this need for change and movement forward and away, there is a constant element, something special to each and every group which survives. This is what David Lan has described, for example, in his study of the role played by spirit-mediums during the guerrilla war in Zimbabwe, as "the cluster of abstract ideas, symbolic associations and ritual performances that make up the political ideology" of individual groups" (1985, 225). In his preface to this important book Maurice Bloch writes:

The Shona have always seen the relation between their past and their present as mediated by their ancestors. The young fighters therefore had to enter into a dialogue with these ancestors, to justify and explain their actions and seek ancestral help.

The inevitability of a dialogue between past and present is universal.

David Lan believes that if the guerillas had tried to revive old techniques of resistance, which had failed time and time again, they would not have won the cooperation of the peasants, since clearly they were not the warriors of the past: "It would seem that, in a changing world, ideology and ritual must constantly seek out new raw material to feed upon, to ingest and absorb in order to grow to meet the challenges change brings, and in order to remain essentially unchanged" (225). This is the paradox which sheds light on Okonkwo's tragedy when he is unable to free himself from the old warrior or hunter image with his

reliance on brute physical strength, when what was needed was a new mental outlook, a new language capable of incorporating new concepts and ideas which yet abandoned none of the living symbolic depth of the old traditions.

To summarise thus far, Achebe acknowledges that cultural and political change is inevitable, even essential, in any society. He does not therefore, present a picture of traditional Igbo life as either ideal or static, - rather, his novels reflect the ongoing dynamic tension between old and new. Concepts of time are an important concern to all the major Black writers particularly in relation to the presentation of a people's history. Achebe chooses to focus attention on a period of time when the structures of ritual behaviour had become too rigid and therefore, self-destructive. The role of music (i.e. festive and ritual occasions involving music and dance, such as during the appearance of masks) is to limit and organise human behaviour; this is also true of the language of traditional authority. Culturally determined social patterns or forms however, can and should survive change, however drastic. Myth and music carry these patterns from the past into the present.

#### Music, masking and the temporal dimension in Things Fall Apart

Time, in both Things Fall Apart and Arrow of God, is synchronic time based on a lunar calendar, linked to the agricultural cycle and specifically to the yam harvest; it comes into conflict with the linear time of the white colonisers. On a day-to-day basis the subsistence needs of a village govern its attitude to time. The Feast of the New Yam is the most significant Igbo festival, marking the harvest, thus the end of one cycle and the beginning of another. But it also serves a

more basic function. According to Zaslavsky, it is the occasion of the annual census when every adult male brings one yam for each member of his house to the sacred shrine. When the yams are counted it can be determined if the population has increased. Yams, rather than people are counted, since throughout African there is a widespread taboo on counting human beings, domestic animals or valuable possessions (52).

So conscious is Achebe of a specifically 'African' sense of time that he deliberately draws attention to it. For instance, in his description of the appearance of the egwugwu masks he remarks: "Most communal ceremonies took place at that time of the day (i.e. when it began to cool down), so that even when it was said that a ceremony would begin 'after the midday meal' everyone understood that it would begin a long time later, when the sun's heat had softened" (62). Later, when Ezeudu's death is first announced by the talking drums he says, "The first cock had not crowed" (84). Again after the killing of Ezeudu's son during the funeral, Okonkwo has to flee Umuofia "before the cock crowed" (87).

There are of course extremely practical man-made divisions of time in West Africa, which are, according to Zaslavsky, the calendrical week of market days and the system of age-grades, by far the most distinctive feature of social organization. Calendrical time is often divided into periods of two four-day weeks called the 'big week'. There is room within this scheme for a rest day on which festivals, ceremonies and markets are held, frequently all in the same location, thus reinforcing both communal and ritual behaviour. The age grade system, a unique method of recording time, is primarily a rigid method for enforcing control of the available work force (Zaslavsky, 65).

Achebe makes constant reference to the system of age-grades. Okonkwo aspired to one of the highest positions in his society and would have achieved it if the usual course of events had been followed: "Okonkwo had clearly washed his hands [proved his valour] and so he ate with kings and elders" (6). In this way he would have atoned for the failures of his father i.e. debt, and having taken no title. Igbo elders and wealthy men who have been admitted to the Ozo titles or grades were sometimes buried sitting beneath a stool, itself a symbol of the king's attempt to impose rigidity, just as the sun imposes rigidity from the sky. When an elder dies he is encouraged through the ceremony of 'planting' to join the ancestors and come back again since it was believed that, "To encourage an ancestor to be reborn is to preserve the unique character of the family and clan" (Deurden, 56). By the same token, to remove one stone from this carefully-structured edifice of social control is therefore to throw the whole system into chaos. And this male dominated system was perceived as necessary to offset the terrible tyranny of the earth, the feminine principle, for without the blessing of the great goddess Ani, their crops would not grow. Ani was "the ultimate judge of morality and conduct" (26), since a man was judged according to what he produced, and it was said that a harvest would be good or bad "according to the strength of a man's arm" (13). Just how terrible a tyranny this can be is demonstrated in the story of Okonkwo's planting of the eight-hundred seed yams from Nwakibie (16). Though the yam stood for manliness, Okonkwo's greatest efforts could not influence or control nature: "Nothing happened at its proper time; it was either too early or too late." This indeed could be taken as Okonkwo's epitaph. He is exiled for seven years and when he returns it is too late to withstand the colonisers' new religion and laws: "The clan had undergone such profound change during his exile



that it was barely recognisable" (129). And it was the wrong year for him to return too because he could not immediately reassert his influence or make a spectacle which would draw attention to himself, by initiating his sons into the ozo society: he was too late by one year for this and too early by two.

In other words, no change in the natural cycle can be seen as a good one; neither is any sudden or unexpected change in the natural rhythm of one's life. The villagers rely on absolute repetition, and cyclic recurrence. The Week of Peace expresses this dependence through ritual avoidance, but Okonkwo's arrogance and excessive manliness prompt him to strike out against the earth - that is - against women, and he strikes his wife, Ojiugo. Okonkwo himself expresses a dependence on a cyclic view of time when he returns from exile and takes on the role of hunter/warrior once more: "For the first time in many years Okonkwo had a feeling that was akin to happiness. The times which had altered so unaccountably during his exile seemed to be coming round again" (136).

I have already observed that in Things Fall Apart there is a strong distinction between the music of the men and male societies, and music associated with the feminine principle and thus with subversion. We can associate subversion with a move towards change, away from the rigidity inculcated by the social and ethical mores imposed by a society dominated by the lineage and age-group system of enforcing control. What is falling apart on an immediate level is the clan system; on a deeper level it is the communal psyche of that particular group. As Okika says towards the end of the novel, all the sons of Umuofia have not responded to the summons of the

village crier beating his "sonorous ogene" who called "every man in Umuofia, from the Akakanma age-group upwards, to a meeting in the market place after the morning meal" (139). The converts have "broken the clan and gone their several ways" (143). The metaphor of snapping and breaking is repeated throughout the novel to emphasize the violence and suddenness of this change. For instance, when Obierika talks about the downfall of Abame he says that the oracle told them, "the strange man would break their clan and spread destruction among them" (97). It is said of Okonkwo's ambition to become one of the lords of the clan that "everything had been broken" (92); and when Nwoye realises that Ikemefuna has been killed, "something seemed to give way inside him, like the snapping of a tightened bow" (43).

Achebe opens the novel with a contrast between the manly qualities of Okonkwo, who fits perfectly into the lineage system, and the feminine subversive qualities of his father, Unoka, who died virtually a social outcast. Ikemefuna is the sensitive and intelligent child who could have mediated between the two extremes and through his life shown how important change could be achieved without completely abandoning any of the old values or traditions, but he is ruthlessly destroyed by the system. This unnecessary and brutal killing gives rise to a chain of events which alters the course of history in Umuofia, since it effects Okonkwo's son, Nwoye, to such an extent that he is driven to search for an alternative solution to such disturbing elements within his own society as the fate of the 'thrown-away' twins, and the awful necessity for ritual murder. He must adopt a new language to describe that solution. He also adopts a new music, "the gay and rollicking tunes of evangelism which had the power of plucking at silent and dusty chords in the heart of an Ibo man" (103); but above all it is the

parables and emblematic moral stories of the missionaries which captivate Nwoye and other converts like him, because they are close to their own oral traditions. That is how teaching was always handed down - through song, story and proverb; thus it was Ikemefuna's "endless stock of folk tales" (25) which helped to forge the bond between himself and Nwoye.

It is the Feast of the New Yam which marks the beginning of Okonkwo's downfall. This most significant of Igbo festivals, celebrating the harvest and the beginning of the New Year, was as noted above, the occasion for the annual census. Achebe describes the attendant festivities and competitions clearly and effectively, passing no judgement on either their moral basis or their artistic validity. He simply offers a picture of traditional festive life at its best. When he writes of the ancient silk-cotton tree - "Spirits of good children lived in that tree waiting to be born" (33), - he is merely voicing the common perception and drawing attention to the psychological reality of an involvement between this world and the world of spirits. The drums, powerfully male, control the level of excitement through the complexities of their rhythms, whilst the young men keep order. Both the wrestling competitions and the team dancing are mechanisms of control whereby possible areas of conflict and contention between the young men from the different villages can be resolved aesthetically, in a way which involves everyone in both the confrontation and in its resolution.<sup>14</sup> The drums create experiential time, the drummers become

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<sup>14</sup> In his discussions of the Zulu Umzansi dance style and the Isishameni style, Johnny Clegg has shown how the structures of team dance engender and resolve tension. The team dance asserts solidarity with the group but the One/One individual competitive dancing which is incorporated into it, allows for conflict between individuals and this conflict could become dangerous were it not controlled by the drummers. This is particularly a feature of Zulu stick-fighting: "So tensions

the mediators between past and present, bringing the past into the present; so complete and instant is the audience's identification with the drummers as instruments of the spirits, that Achebe uses metaphors from music to describe the rise and fall in the level of excitement, the movement away from real time and back into it again: "The air, which had been stretched taut with excitement, relaxed again. It was as if water had been poured on the tightened skin of a drum" (34); and "The drummers took up their sticks again and the air shivered and grew tense like a tightened bow" (35). The wrestling competitions, as well as the dancing, are in Mary Douglas's terms, an expression of the individual's relation to the group.<sup>15</sup>

During communal ceremonies such as the appearance of the egwugwu masks to try legal cases, the beginning of experiential time is heralded by a particular musical sound, that of the iron gong, while drum and flute add to the overall effect, deliberately provoking waves of excitement. The maskers themselves speak in a special guttural language - Achebe calls it 'esoteric language'. Though Achebe uses heavily-loaded words such as 'pandemonium' and 'chaos' to describe the interaction of maskers, musicians and public reaction, the whole ceremony is in fact carefully structured, based one could say, on a 'willing suspension of disbelief'. Kubik's research has shown without doubt that though this is essentially a male ceremony, the women's 'frightened' reactions are absolutely essential if the right atmosphere is to be maintained. Though, as Achebe observes, they are fully aware

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come out. On two or three occasions there's been problems with people armed with sticks which is very difficult because a dance is supposed to be a good thing, a moral thing, but the moment you bring in a drum and sticks you turn it into an ambiguous thing because people have a weapon at hand" (1984, 67).

<sup>15</sup> Mary Douglas, 1969.

on one level that these are not the spirits of the ancestors walking abroad, but perhaps their own husbands in fearsome disguise (63), they nevertheless participate fully in the communal ritual spectacle, and in so doing reinforce the links between past and present. The acoustic properties of such a scene have been analysed by Avorgbedor (1987), in his description of the manipulation of temporal structures in Nigerian cult music. The tiny bells and rattles on the egwugwu's raffia costumes ring at different frequencies and add to the aesthetic effect for the audience as their music builds a continuous stream of sound. Avorgbedor remarks: "The sense and essence inherent in Yeve ritual can only find their full realization when thus integrated in relation to audience pleasure and satisfaction." A more important purpose is to maintain sacred time. Avorgbedor, in analysing the effect of the multiple clapper bells which are rung at different times, writes that the "complex temporal and sonic events therefore, present the listener-spectator with a shifting and conflicting phenomenon which we can easily describe as a 'sound-time maze'", this effect being extremely pleasing aesthetically.

Music, in the context of West African masking traditions, can therefore be said to have a socialising and regulative function. The maskers are not in a state of trance but fully in control of their body movements and should they perhaps become over-enthusiastic there are mechanisms for control built into the whole dramatic performance - certain young men are usually detailed to restrain the masks so that they do not damage themselves or spoil the illusion.<sup>16</sup> In the

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<sup>16</sup> There is an ironic and amusing description of a more modern mask in *A Man of the People*. Odili sees a masked dancer with "its wooden mask-face a little askew and its stuffed pot-belly looking really stuffed" being held in restraint by attendants tugging at a rope. When the rope round his waist came undone however, "the Mask



description of Ezeudu's funeral where the drums whip up communal frenzy, uniting the dead and the living in symbolic representations of the common perception that "The land of the living was not far removed from the domain of the ancestors", one of the maskers becomes violent in an excess of grief, but is restrained from doing serious harm by a strong rope tied round his waist held by two men (85). During a funeral however, there is no restraint on emotional expression since it celebrates man's close proximity to the spirit world. Achebe writes that the "tumult increased tenfold", "men leaped up and down in a frenzy" and "the drums and the dancing began again and reached fever-heat" (86). To describe the young warriors as "cutting down every tree or animal they saw" however, is surely a poetic exaggeration (84). It is during this "delirious fury" that the earth takes revenge for the death of Ikemefuna, and Okonkwo accidentally kills Ezeudu's son. What Achebe describes here is an excess of the masculine warrior spirit deliberately engendered by the drummers. In fact Achebe has considerably simplified the funeral ceremonies to focus attention on the central dramatic act of the accidental death which happens as the dance reaches its climax.

Achebe provides quite a different example of experiential time in his description of Chielo's temporary abduction of Okonkwo's daughter, Ezinma, in her role as priestess of the oracle. It is whilst Ekwefi follows Chielo in her circuitous journey to the furthest of the clan villages and back again — during which dreadful journey time is charted by the phases of the moon — that she has a prophetic vision. Moonlight, sound, the continuous rise and fall of Chielo's non-human

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tamely put his machet down, helped his disciples retie the rope, picked up his weapon again and resumed his dance" (96-97).

voice, and sheer exhaustion, all combine to create in Ekwefi a state of super-awareness in which she becomes conscious of the future: she sees "the shape of a man climbing a palm tree, his head pointing to the earth and his legs skywards" (75). This is a vision of the hanged man of European mythology and literature, a prophecy of the death of Okonkwo, which places the overall meaning of the novel once more within the wider sphere of the whole body of western literature, bringing immediately to mind Madame Sosostriis of T. S. Eliot's The Waste Land.<sup>17</sup> But why did Okonkwo have to be sacrificed? Is it because he so determinedly pursued his own destiny or, to use the terms of West African cosmology, his chi,<sup>18</sup> and that his destiny was at odds with the prevailing communal need of the times for meaningful change? I cannot agree with Abiola Irele's opinion that "Okonkwo's inflexibility, his tragic flaw, is a reflection of his society" or that "Things Fall Apart turns out to present the whole tragic drama of a society, vividly and concretely enacted in the tragic destiny of a representative individual" (1978, 14). Olney talks about this same "inflexibility" meaning inflexible in a moral sense, maintaining that Okonkwo's fate was "nothing less than the symbolic fate of the traditional Ibo society with the advent of the white man" (171). He insists on this view again in implying that it is only when foreign ideas and beliefs are imposed that this community begins to disintegrate (181). Such approaches deprive Okonkwo of all individualism. He is however driven by a deep personal awareness of the cyclic nature of time, of the predictable recurrence of events. All his life was an urgent attempt to escape from his father's legacy of shame

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<sup>17</sup> In "The Burial of the Dead". Collected Poems (Faber & Faber) 62.

<sup>18</sup> Achebe describes chi as a man's "other identity in spirit land - his spirit being complementing his terrestrial human being" (1975, 93).

(13): he is in fact 'possessed' by fear, and thus he becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy - the wheel turns again.

Achebe's concern to present a 'real' picture of West African society leads to certain problems of interpretation for the critics which often centre, as shown above, on the presentation of Okonkwo. As Mahood has said:

This social concern, which Achebe shares with most other African novelists, has been held by some European critics to imply that the established criteria of fiction have no relevance to the African novel; that Achebe's fictional world does not, as it were, turn, in the way that the European novel turns, on the poles of the author's world-view and his individualization of character. (184)

In giving Okonkwo's tragedy broader symbolic associations, Achebe proves the contrary. The readers of his novels must however accept the psychological reality of his world view. Achebe helps one to do this by capturing the whole cultural ethos of the Igbo people in the oral qualities of his work. As Bernth Lindfors has pointed out, he "has devised an African vernacular style which simulates the idiom of Ibo, his native tongue" (1978, 48). Another commentator expresses his purpose in doing so thus: "On the whole, therefore, Achebe links the ethnological implications of language to the perceptual conflicts between African and Western cultures" (Brown, 31).

#### Arrow of God

Just as Things Fall Apart drew attention to the fate of the "thrown away twins" as a means of contrasting different world views and suggesting areas in which a rigid social system could be

disadvantageous,<sup>19</sup> so Arrow of God shows how individual cults and their Gods can just as ruthlessly be "thrown away" should they no longer satisfy the political, religious and social needs of their adherents. In Africa it is the people who make their gods, literally, since they carve their images in wood and other materials subject to decay. Social change, in Arrow of God, is engendered not by the colonisers alone - they merely exploit tensions which already exist - but as a result of a bitter conflict (essentially political in nature) already embedded in the clan system. The conflict in the novel happens, therefore, on two levels, external and internal.<sup>20</sup> It is, as John Jordan says, a novel "about history itself - about the kind of perspective needed in order to understand a foreign culture existing in time and about the concept of time most appropriate to such study" (1971, 69).

That cults can die quite suddenly in West Africa, and gods be thrown away when they no longer seem relevant is documented, for instance, in Chappel's description of the death of the cult of the chiefly ancestors in Rugange, northeastern Nigeria (1973). This factual account throws an interesting light on Achebe's analysis of a

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<sup>19</sup> This recurring motif is introduced when Nwoye first begins to sense a personal need to break with the traditions of his clan. His emotional reaction when he hears the "thrown away" twins crying in the forest is described as a "snapping" and a severing of his psychic identification with the clan (43). Other references are numerous and increase in frequency as the novel nears its climax. See pp 95, 107, 110.

<sup>20</sup> The external conflict is between the political and bureaucratic machinery of the British on one hand and the apparent 'formlessness' of African systems: Umuaro's determination to resist change and Okperi's eagerness to embrace it. The English exploit an internal conflict-situation when they arouse animosity over the land issue, so that they can step in and crush the 'stronger' of the two fighting children, Umuaro. It was the white man who came and reminded Okperi that the disputed land was theirs although the people of Umuaro had been cutting grass for thatches from that area for generations. (20)

similar situation in Arrow of God. To summarise Chappel's findings: the main religious cult in Rugange had been that of the ancestors which was maintained by the chief himself, its primary symbols being anthropomorphic clay pots enshrined in a grass hut situated in a public area outside the chief's compound (70). The pots were called putiye and represented dead chiefs; rites associated with them referred directly to both the fishing season and the maize harvest and were obviously performed in rhythm with the seasons. For example, in August, before the eating of the new maize, the chief performed the ceremony of wanche during which offerings of beer and maize were made to the chiefly ancestors:

The beer was poured over the pots and the chief prayed for the welfare of his people, asking that all their needs might be satisfied during the coming year. (71)

On October 9, 1965, however, the chief was converted to Islam and three days later the chief's cult house with all its contents was totally destroyed, the pots being first broken and then thrown into the river. The chief himself and "a small group of vociferous young men who seemed to be either Muslim or Christian converts and who were openly hostile in their behaviour towards the chief-maker" had been responsible for this act of desecration, the chief announcing that since the cult belonged to him he could do with it as he liked (71). Later, however, the chief admitted that he had felt animosity towards the putiye for a long time but was afraid to destroy them because that was tantamount to destroying his own ancestors. Upon further analysis the destruction of the putiye proved to be almost certainly a political act: the first chief of Rugange had offered allegiance to the Lamido of Yola which meant that the

....chiefly ancestors no longer provided the required sanctions for the exercise of the chief's legitimate authority....the ancestors could no longer be regarded as the only or even the ultimate source of political authority;



instead, the ultimate sanction for the exercise of such authority now resided with the Fulani rulers at Yola. (73)

Chappel concludes that the consensus of opinion in Rugange at that time must have been that if the ancestors had failed as ultimate authority it seemed best to dispense with them altogether and approach Allah directly; however, this act could have far deeper political and social repercussions since it undermines the whole social structure and "perhaps the young men who destroyed the cult objects without recrimination have already decided that they can act further without the consent or approval of their elders" (74). To use Fortes' words, quoted by Chappel, in such a situation jurisdiction is no longer on a pedestal where it is "inviolable and unchallengeable, and thus able to mobilize the consent of all who must comply with it." Furthermore, it is significant that it was the young men who were ultimately responsible for bringing about this sudden change. It was by no means an isolated incident. According to Mahood, G.T. Basden has provided evidence that a god may abandon a group or a group abandon a god, and that a god could be rejected and destroyed. He quotes the Ibo saying, "If a god becomes perky, we will show him what wood he is carved from" (183). Gods were often created to justify political ends. As Akukalia explains, the men of Okperi "made a powerful deity" to augment the reputation of their market so that it became the biggest market in those parts (19). The six villages had individual gods in ancient times, but in order to withstand the ravages of the Abam, their elders hired "a strong team of medicine-men to install a common deity for them" called Ulu (15). It was this change, born of necessity, which laid the foundation for the resentment which the priest of Idemili bore towards Ulu, because Idemili was an older deity and did not like being made a secondary power (40).

The concept of the mutability of Gods is bound up with a synchronic view of time. John Jordan has drawn attention to the different ideas about the nature of time in Arrow of God and to the importance of Ezeulu's role as "watchman of the lunar cycle" (74). His decision not to announce the New Yam feast and thus the beginning of a new cycle of time, can be seen as "a literal attempt to stop time, to lock the villages into the old year for two moons longer" (75). As Claudia Zaslavsky observes, "the whole agricultural cycle, the survival of the villagers, depended upon this lunar calendar" (64). Though it is the British who interrupt the usual chain of events by imprisoning Ezeulu for two new moons and in so doing prove to the Ibos that it is possible to break free from their dependence on ritual observance of the lunar cycle, it is Ezeulu who takes advantage of this interruption to serve his own ends and thus precipitates the 'death' of his god. Zaslavsky says that Arrow of God is essentially the story of an Igbo priest who "remade" time to suit his own purposes (64). Ezeulu's attempt to lock the villagers into the old year has far-reaching consequences since an interruption in ritual does not bring about a corresponding interruption in the natural rhythm of the seasons - "meanwhile the rains thinned out" and the harmattan set in (210). Therefore a ritual which suddenly seems meaningless can be adapted to suit new ends, and after all, the Christian harvest service is not in its essential symbolic meaning, different from the New Yam Festival. John Jordan emphasises the irony of this situation when he says that though Ezeulu is to begin with, the most progressive member of his clan, he is frustrated in his attempts to promote social change, yet by refusing to compromise his traditional beliefs "he becomes the agent of social change in a more profound sense than ever before. By holding back time, he ensures that a new age will come and that the Christian

harvest will replace the New Yam feast" (75). Mahood expresses the same view slightly differently:

In his determination to make the community suffer for the humiliation it has inflicted upon him, he strikes at its very existence, the life-rhythms of the farming year. It is an assault on basic reality, and has to fail. What can happen to the Earth? (186)

Achebe shows that it is possible to throw out the old gods and bring in the new if they speak a similar sort of symbolic language. It is the ritual welcoming of the new year which is important psychologically to the people, the celebration of the dependable recurrence of certain natural events in time, not the particular gods to whom offering must be made. Again as in the case of the Rugange, if the gods no longer seem to have authority over events both natural and political, and if their spokesman, the priest, appears to be acting against the will of the people, then they have failed and there is no more need for them.

In Arrow of God Achebe presents a picture of a particular society's symbolic universe and systematically contrasts two different approaches to reality. The authors of The Homeless Mind\* in their relevant discussion of the term 'modernization' and its impact on modern consciousness, maintain that "Any particular social life-world is constructed by the meanings of those who 'inhabit' it", and these meanings they term 'reality definitions' (1973, 18). Further it is possible to isolate elements of consciousness intrinsic to one culture that cannot be 'thought away' which are different from those of another culture: "Thus it is possible to describe a consciousness that includes the assumption of communication with the dead and to point out how it differs from modern consciousness" (20). This statement is helpful in dealing with the critical problem of Achebe's presentation of Ezeulu which shows him, on the one hand, as a sensitive, intelligent

\*Berger, Berger & Kellner

personality whose tragic flaw is pride, and on the other as merely an arrow in the bow of his god. Ezeulu himself is conscious of belonging to two worlds when he says: "One half of him was man and the other half mmo - the half that was painted over with white chalk at important religious moments" (192). Therefore just as he is about to relent in his decision to punish his people out of pity for them, "he was not to be allowed to remain in two minds much longer" (191). His god speaks directly to him and thus the question of free will does not enter into it. An African world view is based on the idea that man is a guest in the world, not an exploiting proprietor. Again an African conception of reality is based on the idea of living as part of an interconnected fabric of beings. In such a scheme, to quote the words of Jaques Binet:

No being exists by itself. All remain tied to the totality of things and in particular to those that have engendered them. It follows that individualism is strongly limited. No being and no object can be perfectly isolated and every action is susceptible to lead to almost infinite consequences.<sup>21</sup>

This kind of world view contrasts very strongly with what the authors of The Homeless Mind call western 'componentiality' which, when it comes into collision with a traditional society severs the cosmic connection between all things.

Achebe thus has a far deeper purpose in drawing attention to an African view of time, in presenting pictures of traditional communal life involving both domestic and ceremonial occasions which are not in the least idyllic but full of tension and inter-action. Through the

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<sup>21</sup> Jaques Binet, Psychologie economique africaine. (Paris: 1970) The translation is by the authors of The Homeless Mind. This is a view more recently expressed by Ezekiel Mphahlele: "Things are tied up together, man, animals, plant life, the bodies in the sky and so on. It is for this reason that the African looks at a ruler not only as a political authority but also as a centre of religious authority. When the White man came with his Western culture we began to see how it is that Western man can easily separate piety or religious life from political life, which is not in African traditional life" (1984) 17.

divided consciousness of Ezeulu he presents the tragedy of a society which in a sense hangs itself when faced with the inevitability of sudden change, although mechanisms for dealing with and effecting change are in fact imbedded in their social structure, as I have shown above. This is the whole point of the discussion in the novel on what was actually a communal decision to give up the practise of face-scarring (ichi) for as Akuebue says to Ezeulu "your grandfather was not alone in that fight" (133), although he had given his God's sanction to stop doing it. There had in fact been "a long drawn-out dispute before face marks were finally abolished" between the rulers of the clan (210). Achebe shows the frustration of a closed society locked into personal and tribal conflicts which break out on every possible occasion and prevent any kind of concerted action. This is something which the white colonisers are quick to exploit.

#### Concepts of time in Arrow of God

In the key chapter "Collisions of Consciousness", the authors of The Homeless Mind maintain that the two most important symbols of modernity are the wristwatch and the ballpoint pen:

The one refers to literacy and the immense new stock of knowledge that literacy opens up, the other, to that structure of time which, as we tried to show earlier, lies at the very roots of modern technological production and modern bureaucracy, and thus of modern society as such....They are the outward, visible signs of an inward transformation of consciousness. They express the collisions, the conflicts and even the rituals brought about by the intrusions of modernity into traditional social life. (130)

A new organization of knowledge is in fact an invasion, since different individuals and groups have different access to new bodies of knowledge. In particular, in a society where wisdom is associated with old age "there may be a sudden reversal as the young and the very young can plausibly present themselves as privileged interpreters of the



mysteries of modernity" (132). Moreover the type of temporality on which modern technology and bureaucracy depends is "drastically alien to the overwhelming majority of traditional societies in the Third World, and quite possibly to all of them" (134). Besides the problem of different modes of temporality there is also the problem of the reclassification of people. William Hinton's study of the coming of the Communist revolution to a Chinese village and the subsequent reclassification of the population for the purpose of dealing with different groups of people shows that processes like 'detribalization' lead to a complete turnabout in the order of things - the Chinese word for it is "fanshen". As others are reclassified so the individual's apprehension of his own identity is changed to such an extent that he "literally no longer knows who he is" and "a sense of the meaninglessness of things sets in" (137), or as Armah has shown, a debilitating fragmentation of consciousness, and a corresponding loss of moral direction. This is perhaps the end result on an individual consciousness of a collision of cultures when modernization, or 'civilisation' is the ultimate aim. Achebe deals with this in No Longer At Ease; in Arrow of God he is interested in the actual processes involved in bringing about this change.

Wren maintains that "the context of Arrow of God is greatly expanded in both time and space" when compared with that of Things Fall Apart:

....there is no one event, no point in time, no thing that sets the pleiotropic organism into decisive action. A multitude of events - a hundred arrows in the hand of the god - bring about the rite of passage that is the substance of the novel. (83)

Peter Sabor (1979) has discussed Achebe's revisions of the text, drawing attention to the possibility that many of them were designed to

shift the emphasis from the narrator's point of view to that of a character's. A significant example which he gives is that of Ezeulu's search for the new moon where the phrase "rainy season" is altered to "when the rains came" thus shifting the observation from the narrator's consciousness to the priest's. But it does more than that - it specifically draws attention to an African view of time. The phrase "rainy season" is very much a European one covering an indefinite period of time, whereas "when the rains came" is a specific moment both in time and in the recurring cycle of ceremonial and ritual events.

Achebe constantly draws attention to an African view of time, sometimes ironically as when Wright tells the men that the road must be finished in June (Western calendar time) which the interpreter puts to them as: "The white man says that unless you finish this work in time you will know the kind of man he is" (82). The opening sentence of the novel carefully establishes the temporal perspective which is maintained throughout. As has already been observed, Ezeulu's world is governed by the phases of the moon: "This was the third nightfall since he began to look for signs of the new moon." The discussion between the other members of his compound which immediately follows, is a friendly ritual to welcome the moon using the typical leader/chorus structure of most African music. Communal bondage to the phases of the moon or to the necessity of fitting the agricultural cycle to the seasons, also acts as a hindrance to any kind of action which could disrupt the expected repetition of events. For example, the meeting of the younger age grades is unable to strike effectively against the white men after the whipping incident partly because "this is the moon of planting" (84). The Feast of the New Yam has psychological as well as practical implications since it was "the end of the old year and the beginning

of the new", and more importantly, it was a link between past and present reminding the six villages of their coming together in ancient time and of their continuing debt to Ulu who saved them from the ravages of the Abam (202). It therefore constituted an obligation. However, at this point in the novel, when various religious, political and personal conflicts are already well-developed, the people no longer feel this debt quite so keenly since the Abam no longer pose a threat. The Feast of the New Yam is also the time of the census, as noted above, and there is more than one hint in the novel that Achebe is talking about a society already on the decline before the advent of the British. For example, in Ezeulu's prayer to Ulu at the coming of the new moon he observes, "May we increase in numbers at the next counting of the villages so that we shall sacrifice to you a cow, not a chicken as we did after the last New Yam feast" (6). Numbers mean strength, as the men say when discussing Obika's somewhat violent action in defence of his difficult sister: "Why do we pray to Ulu and to our ancestors to increase our numbers if not for this thing? ... No one eats numbers. But if we are many nobody will dare molest us" (12). The irony is, however, that by going to war against a village they are far more likely to decrease their numbers than increase them.

Towards the end of the novel the villagers are able to entertain the concept of time on a much broader scale than that which has applied to the daily running of their lives. They are conscious of the forces of change at work within their society and become sensitive to the subject of change. This means that they entertain the possibility that history need not be a repetition of cycles and events but take a more linear direction. Akuebue says in a very important conversation with Ezeulu, "We did many things wrong in the past, but we should not

therefore go on doing the same today" (132). Anichebe Udeozo says, "These are not the times we used to know and we must meet them as they come or be rolled in the dust" (208). Ezeulu realises that though he could not now for any reason see the present trend reversed, what was happening was a 'punishment' which "was not for now alone but for all time", and he looks back with anguished nostalgia to ancient times when "lizards were in ones or twos" and when the people chose his ancestor "to carry their deity and go before them challenging every obstacle and confronting every danger on their behalf" (219). The final authorial comment on Umuaro's wholesale conversion to Christianity is that "Ulu had chosen a dangerous time to uphold that truth (i.e. that no man is greater than his clan) for in destroying his priest he had also brought disaster on himself." This was not the time for a deity to chastise his priest or abandon him; and yet it was in a sense the only time for Ulu to have done this since both deity and priest had outlived their usefulness. The impulse for change swept through the young age-groups overrunning the lengthy and inconclusive deliberations of the traditional council of elders who in turn derived their authority from the ancestors. The established order was entirely reversed, as with the Chinese fanshen, and from the first Christian harvest in Umuaro, the fields were harvested in the name of the 'son' rather than in the name of the ancestors. Ezeulu was in fact the redundant priest of a dead god.

For practical purposes time in West Africa is governed by economic necessity and named according to market days. But this too is a rigid and unbending system. Thus Akukalia's mission to Okperi is doomed from the beginning since as Otikpo tells him, "You have come at a bad time. Everybody in Igboland knows that Okperi people do not have other

business on the Eke day. You should have come yesterday or the day before, or tomorrow or the day after" (22). Even the war between the two villages is conducted according to the market days: "The war was waged from one Afo to the next. On the day it began Umuaro killed two men of Okperi. The next day was Nkwo, and so there was no fighting" (28).

Achebe uses the repeated motif 'cock crow' as a time indicator. Thus Akukalia and his two companions set out for Okperi at cock crow (18); whilst "from cock crow until roosting time" defines the usual length of any day (20). After a night of drunken revelry, "Obika staggered home almost at cock-crow" (77); the messengers to Ezeulu set out "this morning at the first cock-crow" (139); the all-important meeting of Umuaro elders "began as fowls went to roost and continued into the night" (141); when the two policemen came for John Nwodika "before the crow of the first cock" they find him unexpectedly ill (151); and so on.

#### Music and masking in Arrow of God

Once again as in Things Fall Apart the communal traditional life of the villagers is as much a presence in the novel as the various cultural and political conflicts. Although Achebe is, to use Charles Nnolim's phrase, drawing from "the common petty-cash drawer"<sup>22</sup> of his own culture, the world-view he presents is extremely complex and is not based on the cultural mores and rituals of his own traditional background or even that of his grandfather alone. It is a composite picture, not an anthropological study. Charles Nnolim claims that Simon Nnolim's book The history of Umuchu (1953) is the single most important

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<sup>22</sup> Nnolim, 1978. 219.



source for Arrow of God, together with a book on which Simon Nnolim himself relied (C.K. Meek's Law and Authority in a Nigerian Tribe, (1937)), and there are certainly close resemblances between the two texts. Nevertheless to say that he was "heavily shackled by his source" (1978, 220), is surely to misunderstand Achebe's purpose in using specific historical and literary texts. C.L. Innes shows that Achebe's interest centred on the significance of the ceremonies he describes (and which also appear in the above texts) rather than the bare description of ritual events which Nnolim provides. Innes adds further that Achebe had always been interested in the story of "Ezeagu Uchu" who in 1913 rejected an appointment as warrant chief and, that in 1957 Achebe actually interviewed Nnolim and may have heard details such as the history of the founding of Umuchu and local esoteric ceremonies e.g. the Festival of the Pumpkin Leaves, details of which would not generally be known:

From this germ, the novel must have taken shape over the years with the addition of a multitude of other sources, oral and written. (1978, 245)

Achebe uses similes and references which invoke the traditional world of singing, dancing and masking throughout the novel thus keeping this other alternative reality perpetually in front of us. Examples are numerous. When the children welcome the moon, Obiageli's "tiny voice stood out like a small ogene among drums and flutes" (20). Ibo aesthetics are touched on when Obika's handsomness is described -- he has a finely cut face "and his nose stood gem, like the note of a gong" (11). When Winterbottom listens to the drums beating out in the darkness he wonders about the 'unspeakable rites' going on in the forest and like Marlow in Heart of Darkness confuses his own heart-beat with the rhythmic beating of the drums. The obvious reference to Conrad's work is emphasised by an elaboration of the drum metaphor: "He

attempted to smile it off but the skin on his face felt too tight" (30). By way of contrast the bells of the Christian church ring with a sad monotone (42), and for Ezeulu sing "the song of extermination" (43). When Ezeulu discusses the need to keep pace with the times and explains to Oduche his complicated reasons for sending him to study the ways of the white man he automatically uses a traditional metaphor: "The world is like a mask dancing. If you want to see it well you do not stand in one place" (46). This offers a keen insight into West African aesthetics as well as being an acknowledgement that political movements often assume disguises to achieve their aims. The stylization of African masks has often been commented on but to appreciate their full effect they have to be seen in motion. As Jean Laude explains:

The mask must not be seen merely as an organic and independent volume....It is in fact conceived as varying with movement in a three-dimensional space, to which it is thus related....The mask can be grasped only in....a series of successive and incomplete views, which are never identical and can merge only in the inner consciousness.<sup>23</sup>

One of the most compelling of these musical references is the description of the two drunkards Obika and Ofoedu: "They were like a pair of Night Masks caught abroad by daylight" (79). This also includes the idea of the unnatural reversal of order and it fortells the ending when Obika assumes the role of Night Mask in expiation of his father's crime against Umuofia and in so doing virtually commits suicide.

An example of how traditional songs can be adapted to suit new needs can be seen in the work-song of Obika's age-group which sounded like a funeral dirge in which the much-respected python totem of their enemies becomes the road which 'lies across the way': "Someone had

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<sup>23</sup> In *Encyclopedia of World Art* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967); quoted by Anthony Graham-White, *The Drama of Black Africa* (London: Samuel French Inc.) 1974, p.40.

given the ancient song a new and irreverent twist and changed it into a half familiar, half strange and hilarious work-song" (81). Without knowing it they are in fact singing a funeral dirge because the road is part of the white man's master plan to have immediate access to the quarreling villages and so subdue them. The road will make substantial inroads into the traditional way of life and virtually destroy it. When Wright loses his temper and whips Obika "he only shivered like the sacrificial ram which must take in silence the blows of funeral dancers before its throat is cut" (82). This again foretells Obika's death. Earlier on in the novel Winterbottom observes the roadworkers swinging their blades to the beat of an improvised song and time-line provided by the beating of a piece of stone on an empty bottle (55). The song is creative in that it harmonizes the efforts of the men as well as providing aesthetic interest. When they are told to "Shut up there" the quality of their work deteriorates rapidly, the blades go up and down haphazardly, so the Black warder, wisely reverting to an African way of doing things, moves them a distance away. At that precise moment Winterbottom is reading the directive to develop without any further delay among the tribes who lack natural rulers, an effective system of indirect rule, without realising that he has just witnessed the African sense of community and cooperation at its best. Tension within the clan-structure is caused by private ambitions to be greater than the clan, yet the irony is that Ezeulu refuses the government invitation to be a puppet ruler and so achieve secular power, because he seeks to exercise control at a far deeper level -- he wants power over the minds and psychology of his people, and over time itself.

References to music and dancing are everywhere in Arrow of God. Akuebe uses a musical metaphor when he pleads against rigidity and in

favour of personal expression although he himself is certainly against swapping knowledge with the white man. He says that in all compounds there must be a mixture of types of people: "That is why we say that whatever tune you play in the compound of a great man there is always someone to dance to it" (100). The corrupt diviner who takes home the sacrificial chicken also has an appropriate metaphor to serve his ends: "Do we not say that the flute player must sometimes stop to wipe his nose?" (120) Ezeulu himself uses a musical analogy to describe his psychological link with his God, and the source of his power over others:

But you cannot know the Thing which beats the drum to which Ezeulu dances. I can see tomorrow; that is why I can tell Umuaro: come out of this because there is death there or do this because there is profit in it. If they listen to me, o-o; if they refuse to listen, o-o. I have passed the stage of dancing to receive presents. (132)

The dance/life analogy operates on many levels throughout the novel. For instance, when Nwodika explains how it is that he came to work for the white man he says that three years next dry season (i.e. still reckoning in traditional time) he came to Okperi to learn a new dance as was the custom in the dry season after the harvest, but his friend, Ekemezie, persuaded him that the season for dancing was over, and that he should rather join in the race for the white man's money (169). Here 'dancing' has wide implications and refers to a whole way of life based on traditions firmly linked to the tyranny of the seasons, whereas the concept 'race' offers an alternative world-view where the individual moves away from communal activities to pursue personal goals. Ezeulu uses the same metaphor when he tells Oduche "that a man must dance the dance prevalent in his time" (189). This maxim is used against him when Ogbuefi, in discussing Ezeulu's intransigence in not calling the New Yam festival, says he went to his house and reminded him of his saying that a man must dance to the dance prevailing in his time, though now that



the people of Umuaro had come to accept this as wisdom Ezeulu no longer believed it to be true (212). In fact he seemed determined to stop dancing altogether, and stand still in a silent world. Achebe defines the quality of the silence which surrounds him in what is really a self-imposed exile, by contrasting it with the usual ongoing noise of communal life. Though used to loneliness because his role as priest demanded it, he had nevertheless been aware of the flow of village life around him: "But without looking back he had always been able to hear their flute and song which shook the earth because it came from a multitude of voices and the stamping of countless feet" (218).

In Achebe's world, masking – meaning the appearance of the masked performer as a whole as well as the music-making associated with him – is associated with rule application and the age-sets.<sup>24</sup> This is made clear when the Government corporal, soliciting a bribe, says "When a masked spirit visits you you have to appease its footprints with presents. The white man is the masked spirit of today" (154). Masks become an important element in the development of the action as when Obika's age-group presents a new mask at the Akwu Nro festival. Although Achebe talks about "the mystery of ancestral spirits" he describes the practical arrangements made for creating this mystery and protecting the identity of the masker. The appearance of a Mask is essentially a dramatic performance releasing participants into ritual or experiential time, (signalled by the beating of the ogene), licensing them to say or do uncommon things with impunity. Anozie, in his analysis of the poetics of the mask, writes that its deeper significance is shrouded in the mystery of its esoteric language. Using

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<sup>24</sup> See the discussion of Peter Wiel's research on masking in the Mandinka societies of Gambia on p. 87 of this dissertation.



Saussurean terminology he believes, "It is therefore in the mask as a system of langue that we are, or should be interested" and "that it should be viewed as an autonomous cultural code, a constitutive system of symbols, icons and, possibly too, of allegories" (1981, 117). The mask at rest, he says, is not a meaningless artefact but rather "like an intellectual complex caught up in an instant of time – in short, a poetic image" (116).

Certainly Achebe was interested in the communicatory value of the mask, showing the reactions of the villagers to be absolutely crucial to the power and validity of the entire performance. The women in particular must appear frightened and subdued as masks asserted male dominance. It is during the presentation of Edogo's mask that Obika's excessive manliness – he is "the first spectacle of the day" – prompts him to humiliate the medicine man Otakekpele who "had not come merely to watch a new Mask" (196). Obika too is challenging the gods. The rattles and bells on the Mask's costume add a sonic dimension to the temporal/spatial maze created here. The Agaba speaks an esoteric language and stands for the power and aggressiveness of youth. Edogo who has created the Mask for its owners, views it from a variety of perspectives because only then can he gain a full impression of its power. Anozie, however, suggests a different interpretation of the statement, "Edogo knew, however, that he must see the Mask in action to know whether it was good or bad.":

To the Igbo, Achebe's sense, implied in the quasi-ethical opposition 'good or bad', relates to the nature of the life-force (spirit) incarnated by this specific mask carved by the son of the problematical hero, Ezeulu. In this sense, therefore, the novelist is saying that a mask is 'good', if it represents a good *genii* or ancestor (one which protects and does not harm the people!); or 'bad', if it represents a demonic force. (1981, 114)

The demonic/protective dualism of the mask derives from ancestorism and is a medium to entrap the power of the spirit world. The actual physical act of making the mask is a form of ancestor-worship and a way to pay homage to the ancestors. This is true of very many African art forms.<sup>25</sup>

Edogo desperately wants his Mask to be compared with the famous Agaba of Umuagu, for though tribality of style does not altogether restrict the individual artist, Igbo aesthetics ask for almost perfect repetition of the traditional image. Achebe would seem to agree with Edmund Carpenter in his view that the tribal artist is not a fragmented, role-less individual who seeks to discover himself and to reveal a private point of view (1969, 211).<sup>26</sup> Edogo is above all a traditional artist and in this context, carving or wearing a mask means to divest, not to express oneself. Carpenter continues:

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<sup>25</sup> An example is the xylophone making-and-playing tradition in Venda which is now obsolete. Jaco Kruger reports that an old instrument-maker would not allow him to construct a xylophone but insisted on doing it himself because it was a contact between him and his father; the mere act of xylophone-playing is a way of paying tribute to the spirits of departed forefathers who also used to play the xylophone (1986, 218). The instrument was associated with communal life but with the advent of colonization compact villages disappeared and so did the xylophone. For a similar reason many of the esoteric masking traditions in West Africa have suffered the same fate unless they are directly attached to initiation schools in rural areas.

<sup>26</sup> Anozie refers to a study of Igbo masks by Simon Ottenberg (1975) to support his contention that though a mask like Acali, quite an easy mask to make, has a very obvious tribal style, it also has a great range of stylistic variations upon its relatively static features. Ottenberg has provided a table comparing the masks made by 11 different carvers and Anozie claims that his results show that something like "an Igbo word rhythm" is embodied in the mask; further that the traditional carver exercises much individuality in the form of selection he makes (120). If this is true, then Edogo's subconscious inner dialogue with his father and what he represents, may have prompted him to select variations not entirely in accordance with the mood of the times.

A mask or a role is not an extension of its wearer so much as putting on the collective powers of the audience. The speaker assumes the collective mask of the image he presents. He manifests a corporate attitude toward life. (211)

Private consciousness he says, and private points of view, are products and goals of literacy; with literacy comes the fragmentizing power of print. This would appear to be Achebe's view too when he describes the effect of a letter written by "the big, white priest far away" which reinforces the idea that the best way to deal with the white man was to learn to read and write his language (215). When Oduche reads from his new book he sits apart from Nwafo, Ogbiageli and Ugoye who are telling each other traditional stories after the evening meal (191). For Ibo society the concept of masking is integral to a traditional way of life and Achebe portrays it as such, whilst adding a humorous touch when he describes the Mask as looking on "with the same unchanging countenance" and "unperturbed" during the ritual slaughter of the ram.

### Conclusion

Mary Lewis, drawing on essays by Nancy Schmidt<sup>27</sup> and Bernth Lindfors,<sup>28</sup> discusses Achebe's reliance on aspects of Igbo oral art such as received legends, parables and proverbs, and concludes that, especially in the case of the proverbs, they "reflect the cumulative but alternate responses of people" (1976, 50).<sup>29</sup> Achebe uses proverbs as an integral part of his narrative art in the same way that a

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<sup>27</sup> Nancy Schmidt, "Nigerian fiction and the African oral tradition". Journal of the New African literature and the Arts 5/6 (1968) 10-19.

<sup>28</sup> Bernth Lindfors, "Folklore in Nigerian Literature." (New York: Africana Publishing Co, 1973) 153-175.

<sup>29</sup> Gareth Griffiths (1978) has discussed Achebe's use of proverbial devices and believes that if they are viewed as "part of a total linguistic structure" the 'choice' they offer seems less than adequate (1987, 75).

traditional musician uses rhythm, yet their slick aptitude raises disquietening questions. Iniobong Udcidem hails them as "the kernel which contains the wisdom of the people" (1984, 129). They are, he insists, philosophical and moral expositions shrunk to a few words and form a mnemonic device for effective communication, much one might add, as words function in traditional folk songs. Moreover, as Obiechina has pointed out, they are useful for the author as a well-established and acceptable artistic device for giving complexity to narrative, unity to form, coherence and pattern to action and direction to moral and social insight (1975, 9). However, if as Iniobong suggests, "the cognitive significance of proverbs is grounded in the cognitive significance of the similarity of events" (134), it cannot truly be a creative response to reality for a character to speak in proverbs (as Udiodem maintains), so much as a programmed invocation of the past, for after all, proverbs are "recorded in the memory of the ancestors" (131). Achebe shows that with the advent of the colonizers the memory of ancestors is no longer an adequate source on which to draw since the concept "similarity of events" no longer applies.

As Dan Izeubaye says, Achebe's presentation of the past and the present is not a means of exploring two experiences (a past and a present) but a means of exploring one reality of past-and-present: a continuous flow of experience (1986, 118). His works can be seen as a plea "for the need to define African reality in a more restricted, regional way, starting with the theme of cultural understanding in his novels as well as his essay, Where Angels Fear to Tread, and coming up again in his criticism of Conrad" (134).

Like the characters in his novels, Achebe himself is in the ambiguous situation of being astride the old and the new, and his response to the need for change is that there should be integration between different world views. This, as Dailly expresses it, means "reappropriation of one's total experience" (1983, 213). It implies discrimination, selection and synthesis. Regarded as such, it means fusion of values in the process of a 'give and take' policy during which redundant and even bad aspects of one's culture are abandoned whilst the proven good is retained. If this process does not happen naturally the Igbo will indeed be "like the puppy in the proverb which attempted to answer two calls at once and broke its jaw."



## CHAPTER FOUR

## 'HIGHLIFE' IN THE WEST AFRICAN NOVEL IN ENGLISH

Highlife, or similar popular music, blares forth from a multitude of cafes and record shops in Ghana, decorated with the brilliant signs which combine, in a dynamic and exciting way, local subjects with themes derived from western entertainment media. This fascinating synthesis of indigenous and foreign imagery which results in an entirely African art-form, is a hallmark of both West African song and literature. Highlife is a syncretic style of music which blends traditional Akan dance rhythms with European instruments and harmonies. It originated on the Fanti coast of southwest Ghana, and in the context of Ayi Kwei Armah's obsession with all forms of slavery,<sup>1</sup> it is significant that this region has the longest history of European contact in West Africa: the Portuguese fort of Sao Jorge del Mina was built in 1482 and between the years 1513 and 1514 over one thousand, five hundred slaves were sent from Guinea to Portugal. Because it is a syncretic art form it is continually changing, continually open to outside influence, but more important, it is a powerful vehicle for transmitting Western values and life-styles into the prevailing sociocultural system: on the one hand it denigrates and castigates the very values which revitalise and give it energy and relevance, and on the other, in its ironic or openly satiric mode, it can be used to denounce these same values. Much will depend on the attitudes and intentions of the bandleader himself, and on his song-writing capabilities.

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, in *Fragments* in the scene on the beach in which Juana analyses her motives for working in Ghana: "Over in the far distance, she could see the white form, very small at this distance, of the old slave castle which had not become the proud seat of the new rulers, the blind children of slavery themselves" (44).

Such is its long history of development,<sup>2</sup> that elements in Highlife music can be traced to a variety of sources such as the British brass bands at native military forts from about 1750, and the ubiquitous Christian missionaries who set lyrics in indigenous tongues to traditional church melodies.<sup>3</sup> Particularly important was the blending of sea shanties and folk songs introduced by sailors from the West Indies, the Americas and even other African countries. As John Collins says (and he is a musician who has played with many highlife and concert-party bands), "Where sea shanties met African music, Palm-Wine music was born" (1985: 110). Omibiyi claims that it developed from ethnically based recreational music but borrowed extensively from the various dance forms practised by the Brazilian/Cuban repatriates (1981: 157). Collins points out the influence of jazz and swing records after the 2nd World War citing E.T. Mensah's group as the most famous highlife dance band in West Africa, and to the concert party (vaudeville) or comic opera which uses a certain amount of Akan language as well as pidgin English to depict in a humorous and exaggerated way, stereotypes of present-day Ghanaians. To use Coplan's terms, it is a musical hybrid "which not only transmits musical traits mechanically from the West but organizes them into a new style which retains continuity with the traditional music system" (1983: 3). It is its latter attribute which most interests West African novelists.

What is the origin and significance of the term "Highlife" and what does the music actually sound like? Coplan writes that the term was coined by members of the lower strata of Gold Coast society who

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<sup>2</sup> This summary of development taken from the research of E J Collins (1976, 1983), David Coplan (1978) and M. Omibiyi (1981).

<sup>3</sup> The Christian influence has been researched by R. Sprigge whom Coplan quotes (1978: 3).

would crowd around the entrance to dance halls where African orchestras like the Excelsior, largely composed of poorly-paid musicians, were playing their mixture of Western waltzes and traditional Akan melodies to wealthy Africans in formal evening dress. It is therefore, according to his interpretation, an expression of envy and derision (1978: 8). Omibiyi says that a typical highlife band consists of Western brass and wind instruments, guitars, conga drums, chimes, maracas and clappers: "Thus it is a group music form, which uses brass and wind instruments in the melodic section while the drums, chimes and clappers provide rhythmic accompaniment. Solos are taken by trumpet and clarinet ... A highlife piece begins with an instrumental tutti usually in duple time followed by vocal solo" (1981: 157). Undoubtedly the most important instrument was always the guitar, yet it has been shown that many Highlife tunes were actually based on the melodies of the traditional Akan lute, the seprewa. An early recording of Mensah's for instance, "Owea Kwadumpon", has a guitar introduction entirely in the style of this traditional instrument. In fact, according to Collins, the popularity of highlife in general is due to the approximation of the Akan seven-note scale to the European diatonic scale. Like most African performance, singing is an important integral part. In highlife this is usually antiphonal or responsorial. To refer to Omibiyi, "the melody is short, simple, repetitive and based on Western tonal system" whilst the rhythm "is characteristically simple when compared with that of traditional music", making extensive use of syncopation and the rapid rhythm of South American Samba. In fact what makes musical styles such as Nigerian juju and Ghanaian highlife distinctly West African is the complex call-and-response pattern between the talking drums and the singers. It may well be that the apparent simplicity of the samba rhythm is one of the main impulses behind a return in recent years to

more complex 'roots' rhythms and the success of bands incorporating traditional instruments such as sets of dũndũ drums.<sup>4</sup>

E.J. Collins, himself a musician who has played with E.T. Mensah and Fela Kuti, has researched and written about recent trends in highlife music, pointing to the influence of the Afro and soul movement in America coupled with a new impulse within Ghana itself to return to 'roots' and purer forms of folk music such as Ga street music of Accra. The successful Wulomei (fetish-priests) band formed in 1973 combined traditional percussion with modern guitar techniques using one amplified guitar, local drums, maracas and gong-gong. A similar trend is observable in the popular juju music of the Nigerian, Fela Anikulápo-(a person who carries death in his pocket)-Kuti. The keynote to all this is rapid social change reflected in the style and lyrics of highlife. This is particularly true of contemporary compositions.<sup>5</sup> Collins singles out these prevailing themes: migration from village to towns in search of work, social stratification,

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<sup>4</sup> Dũndũ drums: these are described by Anthony King as being a set of traditional drums normally made up of five instruments, each with a different name such as the onomatopoeic Gudugudu. When they are used for popular music such as Àpàlà, they are combined with instruments from other rhythmic families such as sekèrè, rattles made from gourds strung with cowries. (1961: 110).

<sup>5</sup> In his articles "Post-War popular band music in West Africa" and "The young are reviving Ghana's music", Collins discusses modern trends in full as well as the careers of musicians and groups well known in the West such as Kuti, Osibisa and Wulomei; he also refers to juju music which Omibiyi calls a basically Yoruba idiom which crosses ethnic barriers to become a national type. (1981: 161). Juju music in Nigeria incorporates àpàlà, described in an article in African Beat as "a rootsy Muslim dance music" (ed. Jon Harlow. Summer, 1985). It uses a very interesting mixture of traditional dũndũ drums. Because juju music incorporates elements from Yoruba praise music it is actually responsible for an element of corruption in public life and this has been recognised by the authorities. Omibiyi quotes a lyric composed by Sonny Ade of "African Beats" in praise of a well-known doctor who would pay him for this service. (161) Sonny Ade calls his juju music "Synco-system". Foulshams has recently published African pop roots: the inside rhythms of Africa by Collins.



politics and social injustice, double standards. There are also songs condemning western-style romantic love and gossip – the very titles often point to the dominant message e.g. "Man on top" obviously meaning women are inferior to men (1967: 66). Coplan substantiates this view: "The polyglot nature of highlife lyrics, which might feature several languages in a single song, reflected the role of highlife as a lingua franca of socialization and expressive release from social tensions" (1978: 23). The Nkrumah government realised its potential and began to sponsor bands and competitions. In the 1960s however, with the advent of Western pop music, the highlife fusion of calypso and jazz seemed dated, backward and 'colo' (colonial) to Ghanaian youth. According to Collins, recent trends show a marked upsurge of interest in traditional folk music amongst young people and schools have been asked to make folk music and dance a compulsory part of their syllabus (1983: 2945). Collins denies that that the music of Ghana and West Africa developed in the same way as did black American music "moving from the raw roots sound of the countryside to the more westernised city version. In Africa it's the reverse, with black and white fusion music starting up in the coastal towns and later growing roots whilst spreading into the rural hinterland" (1983: 2947). But once a highlife singer attains popularity, his lyrics often become more overtly political. This is illustrated by the hectic career of the Nigerian juju singer Fela Anikulápo-Kuti whose songs are concerned with pan-Africanism, social and political problems in Nigeria and even daily confrontations with police. (Kuti was imprisoned in 1984 for smuggling currency but has since been released.)

A small controversy arose in the pages of Research in African Literature over the meaning of the many references to death in the



lyrics of Highlife songs. Sjaak van der Geest wrote down the words of a hundred songs many of them broadcast from amplifiers in various compounds throughout Ghana between the period 1970 to 1978. He isolated seven themes relating to death: 1) the mother's death, 2) the father's death, 3) death of a beloved, 4) death is inescapable, 5) no return from death, 6) death as punishment, 7) Ego's death and funeral i.e. someone else's death reminds me of my own future death (1980: 163). From this list he makes deductions about Akan beliefs about death in general and also holds that Highlife lyrics reflect popular Akan beliefs and are a truer reflection of them than traditional songs and myths. This contention is hotly disputed by Kwesi Yankah whose article "The Akan Highlife song: a medium of cultural reflection or deflection" ties the death theme in highlife (which he says centres on misery brought about by social mobility, poverty etc.) to adowa (funeral dirges). He gives examples of the use of traditional proverbs in the lyrics, the true meaning of which may not be known or revealed to an outsider, but which clearly show that a cynical, insouciant attitude to death is not actually the common one held (1984: 568-583). Van der Geest defended himself in an article entitled "Death, chaos and highlife songs: a reply" in which he claims that "culture is an edifice against chaos" (1984: 585), and that popular artists don't need to uphold the established order of things and so are more inclined to shake it by shocking their audience. However in a footnote he says that where artists have vested interests, they do suddenly revert to a traditional view of things and that this is especially noticeable when

the subject is male/female relationships.<sup>7</sup>

While highlife, or popular music, is certainly not a major interest in West African novels, the authors' attitudes towards it are indicative of their self-designated roles as social critics. A common concern of African writers is the fate of the returning 'Been-to' (traveller or student abroad) who has to face a set of expectations, largely material in nature, long nurtured in the minds of those he left behind. If the 'Been-to', already conscious of the vast psychic distance between his traditional past and his modern values, fails to fulfil these expectations, the pressures exerted by his 'loved-ones' may lead to fragmentation of consciousness, a debilitating sense of disconnectedness between past and present and ultimately madness and death. The novels, Fragments and This earth, my brother... are informed by the West African concept of the cyclic nature of life - because the authors place their protagonists at the death phase of the cycle, they owe a great deal in tone and style to traditional funeral dirges.

In Ayi Kwei Armah's Fragments, Onipa Baako has been educated in the West but on his return he is deemed a failure, in the corporate opinion of Ghanaian society, because he does not live up to the role of rich and successful 'been-to' as exemplified by Armah in the satirical study of the odious character Brempong. Baako's story is set within the framework of his blind grandmother's monologues. She is a seer by virtue of the fact that she is on the point of death and thus in close

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<sup>7</sup> Kwasi Asante-Darko to whom van der Geest owes some of his conclusions, has researched this topic together with van der Geest and Nimrod, in the article "Male chauvinism: Men and women in Ghanaian Highlife songs" in Female and Male in West Africa ed. C. Oppong, (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1983) 242 -255.

contact with the voices of the ancestors. The theme of 'death imminent' is established in the first chapter and worked out through the cyclic structure of the novel to its appointed end, which is not only the death of Baako but the psychic death of a people whose characteristic mode of relating to life is one of defeat. The novel uses the larger mythic framework of the returning hero and in so doing emphasizes the contrast between the old heroic quests, and the modern idea of the hero as the saviour of the family unit, who goes abroad for the sole purpose of bringing back cargo and materially enriching society. All the rituals connected with the traditional idea of going and returning, of life as a journey from the world of the ancestors through earth back to that world, have been corrupted. Naana's monologue opens with the lietmotif: "All that goes returns. He will return." Time for her is structured according to natural signs, it is cyclical, measured: "I have watched the sun go down times unending toward the night only to come again the opposite way." The subsequent downward action of the novel is foreshadowed in the heavy warning tone of her repetitions: "He will come. He will be changed." The novel ends with Naana's apostrophe to death in which she repeats the opening motif:

The return of this one traveler had held out so much of good hope. But there were those left behind who had their dreams and put them on the shoulders of the traveler returned, heavy dreams and hopes filled with the mass of things here and of this time (282).

This brings into focus the two time schemes of the novel: the 'ancient' ritual time disturbed when slavery first began to 'disconnect' the people from an awareness of themselves as a powerful unit working for the common good, and modern time measured in terms of wealth and personal gain, which takes for its auditory sign the blaring of hooters and the brash sounds of highlife rhythm.

In an important scene at the cafe of the Silver Shooting Star, the tone is one of defeat and loss. Bukari laments the untimely death of his mother in a way which emphasises Baako's plight as failed 'Been-to':

I have traveled and suffered and it was all for you ... Next year at Christmas I would have come back and given you many things you have dreamed about but never had. Did I not tell you? Was I a bad son to you? (132)

The highlife music being played has a fast joyful beat "with guitar sounds that could have been meant for laughter or for tears" but the words are fatalistic and centre on the theme of the inevitability of death in a somewhat crude way as is typical of many highlife songs: "Tommow I'll be gone/Bluebottle flies swarming over me...." A woman comments on this song: "this music is nice isn't it? And as for death when we came down it was here already, so let me live, if you won't" (134). She starts dancing by herself, a solitary mode of self expression which emphasizes the distance between an African, integrated approach to social events such as dance, (where traditionally the dancer relates to the drummer and to other dancers), and Western culture which tends to focus on individual performance.

The theme of the traveller is very common in highlife.<sup>8</sup> Collins for instance refers to a song which actively reinforces Western values, which has the refrain: "Jagwah, been-to, houseful, carful, fridgeful" i.e. everything a successful man about town should be (1976: 67). Associated with death it is naturally also a very common theme in Akan funeral dirges. Nketia gives as an example: "Fare the well, thou

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<sup>8</sup> On a recent recording *Taste Me* by McGod (Mark Gilbert Oduro Dokyi) there is the highlife lyric "Akwantufo" (experiences of travellers) which details the hardships experienced by travellers, the attitudes of those left behind, and ends with an invocation to the gods to protect them (Pam 01: Popular African music 01, 1979, produced by World Wide Music in Nigeria).

priest./I am going back to where I came from;/Yet I am going forward" (1955: 139). This he says refers to a belief in reincarnation which is so strong that the funeral is in a sense a celebration. The belief that the death of an old person in a lineage was rewarded with births and that if mourning was intense, this might not be realised leads to seemingly callous refrains such as "Grandmother is dead/What do we care?" (6) But in Fragments it is the baby (Baako's sister's long-awaited son) who dies, and this is foretold in the scene in the Cafe when Kwesi, Baako's brother-in-law, pronounces the death sentence immediately after the highlife song, saying that the following Sunday was to be the baby's outdoorings. This traditional ritual was being hastened in an unseemly way, with no care for the baby's health, due to the acquisitive urge of the family to receive the gifts that would accrue.

Another example of the use of highlife in Fragments to comment ironically on events, occurs earlier on in the novel, when Baako's sister, Araba, was being rushed to hospital by taxi to deliver this baby. "So many days I ask myself/ the sum of this my life/what will it be?" wails the song on the radio, and for the baby the sum of his life will be his death(104).

There is one important passage in Fragments which contrasts sharply in tone and intention with the use of music elsewhere to underscore the irony of a social situation and the theme of fragmented consciousness. This is the description of the men pulling in the heavy fishing net (183). The music here is traditional, provided by the boy on a double-gong, described by A.M. Jones as "the foundation par excellence, of the background-rhythm section" of traditional Ghanaian



music (1959: 52). The rhythmic beating of the gong provides the time-line,<sup>9</sup> the auditory focal point: the movements of the men pulling at the net are determined according to this central organising factor. The song itself follows the common African style of alternate phrases sung by cantor (the boy) and chorus (the men) which is endlessly repeated. The voices interlock, coming in against the rhythm of the gong. The singing itself has a cumulative effect: one man "took up the song, his voice deeper but his rhythm the same" and the others join in. In actual time the work takes two hours; throughout, the boy maintains the level of co-ordinated energy necessary to bring in the heavy net by initiating several different songs, "each made up of long and subtly changing verses held over easy chorus hums", so that the work is not monotonous but also creative in an artistic sense. This is an example of 'connected consciousness' and African group activity, the ancient 'way' which Armah so often extols in his major novel Two Thousand Seasons.

Kofi Awoonor's This Earth, My Brother... has two rather similar scenes, one in a nightclub and one dealing with traditional rites of mourning. The protagonist, Amamu, is, according to Gerald Moore, at a point where "temperament and historic destiny can combine to produce a life which must seek the cyclic nature of death and rebirth sooner rather than later" (1980: 244). Awoonor calls his novel an allegory, which presupposes that Amamu's fate embraces that of Ghana. Moore discusses its similarity of theme with Fragments:

Armah's novel, like Awoonor's, appears to urge a return to

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<sup>9</sup> This is described by Nketia as being a constant point of reference by which the phrase structure of a song as well as the linear metrical organisation of phrases are guided. The simplest type of time-line is one in which evenly spaced notes are played by a gong or by handclapping throughout the song. It is the regulative beat (1962: 78).

the true spiritual values of his people, without taking account of those values being rooted in a way of life which has itself vanished ... Both writers see contemporary Ghana as a dungheap, variously decorated with Awoonor's butterfly or Armah's chichidodo bird ... A dungheap however, is also compost for new growth (250).

Awoonor's novel is a complex mixture of heavily allusive passages informed by the deep structures of Yeve ritual, which continue to plague Amamu's subconscious in spite of his western education and subsequent career as a lawyer - and mundane prosaic passages describing the highlights of western-style education in Africa. Throughout, the music of the Christian church with its heavy tone of passive suffering, and the more secular rousing military music of the Empire Days ("Rule Britannia", "Men of Harlech in the Hollow") is contrasted with the traditional "throbbing vibration of ancient drums, husago,<sup>10</sup> atrikpui" (29). But the Gods and their traditional values have been exiled because they have failed to adapt without being corrupted. The novel charts Amamu's decline from a vague feeling of loss and unease, through voluntary exile to a suicidal state of total despair. It poses the question 'Where is home?' and closes at the moment of death when the soul is once again united with the ancient sources of psychic energy from which it had been torn.

Highlife plays a small but vital role in underscoring the main concerns of this novel. The scene at Tiptoe Nightclub - a leftover from the wartime night clubs which catered for the soldiers - is realistically described on one level (we can smell the urinal, see the tables under the trees, the bar and the open square for dancing) but its strong rhythmic tone and allusive poetic language moves it

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<sup>10</sup> Husago is an introductory dance in Yeve cult music. Atrikpui is a ritual after-war dance. The Yeve cult of the Anlo-Eve of Ghana is based on the worship of a thunder-God, a pantheon which has much in common with the Yoruba Shango.

relentlessly towards a point of metaphysical transfiguration. The band on this occasion is Congolese playing Congo highlife (Pachanga), consisting of two guitars (plus amplifiers), a bass, a conga set, "and a half-caste singer who had a face like he was the darker brother of Elvis Presley" (109). Though the electric guitars "whining away with every beat" dominate the sound of the music, it is the rhythm which gives it deeper social meaning and relevance, because it has somehow subtly reverted to the traditional rhythms of agbekor associations music. At this cafe the girls wear western tight-fitting evening dresses, the boys sweat generously in sweaters and leather jackets, but their movements and deep involvement in the pulsing rhythm, are entirely African. It is the intricate rhythmic interplay between the drums which invokes the richness and portent of the past when traditional music was linked to meaningful occasions or rituals--festivities such as birth rites and puberty celebrations: "The drums told their old story. A female and a male mating in rhythm in the order and sequence of the sacred love act." The big forget-me-not tree which stands square between the urinal and the bar loses everything of its grosser context and assumes, through association, the dimensions of the tree of the hanged man. The drums coax the dancing girls through the emotions attendant on copulation, conception and birth, building up the excitement, refusing release, even teasing through the changing intricacies of the rhythm:

The drums plucked up a new tone higher and higher, angry now, thrusting, throbbing in sequence straying away from the echo a second in separation, holding the girls in their embrace, and loving them in beats and they loving back in an ecstasy which only is love's. (110)

What Awoonor wants to capture here is the typical inter-dependent relationship between dancers and drums -- they encourage each other in a performance which totally involves them in something rather more

special than merely passing an evening in a cheap nightclub. From the syllables which Awoonor repeats to capture the sound of the lead drummer, it is not possible to give an analysis of the rhythm, or the interlocking rhythm of the answering drums (the echo), to which the dancers respond. At the end of the sequence the drums assume a muted tone to release the dancers and allow the guitars to fill in and solicit the next dance routine, this being the expected pattern in traditional music where the drummers have a finishing-off routine to bring down the level of excitement. At this point, as if rehearsed, Amamu's mistress, Adisa, makes her entrance. But what she has to offer him by way of a relationship is no different from what she has to offer him in a previous scene by way of musical entertainment - a popular sentimental love song which was for Amamu only the illusion "of escape into other worlds, of dim cafes and lovers, of love, physical contact and sensuous pleasures, an illusion which flees the light of day. Its words are about a promised land, about love gained and love lost" (53). The Congolese band strikes up a slow number and once again the theme is frustrated love and death invoking common links with those other Africans who were taken so long ago into slavery. The band sings of "a faraway country, about black people, about love, tears and death" (111). The husago drums still beat, but the dance itself has been perverted, divorced from its original context and subjected to the materialistic demands of a corrupt and avaricious society. For Amamu the only hope is to await the epiphany of the woman of the sea though it is said "she will not dance again in our time in the paling seasons among the hills of spice". (116)

Does Soyinka enjoy popular night-club life any more than Armah and Awoonor? His first novel, The Interpreters opens with a description of

a cloudburst at an open-air nightclub, the Cambana (7-31). This novel has as its theme the question put by another West African novelist, Yambo Ouluguem, in the portrayal of the hapless character Raymond Spartacus in his attempts to escape the clutches of the evil Saif: "It was in a sense a duty to be revolutionary; But how?" For many West African critics, Soyinka failed to supply an adequate and convincing answer to this question. Maduakor has summarised the burden of critical complaints against him from the Marxist point of view, in his recent article, "Soyinka as a literary critic".<sup>11</sup> Although Soyinka claimed in 1962 that he didn't have any obligation to enlighten, to instruct or to teach, nonetheless, by 1972 political events in Nigeria had forced him to become an active revolutionary which led directly to his detention and to the later publication of his experiences of life in prison in The man died.

Ogunbesan sees in The Interpreters a presentation of a mood – the main characters are the interpreters because their role is to analyse society, not to change it: "Soyinka, by analysing the prevalent mood, aimed to force society to recognise the true nature of its problems" (1979: 4). And yet it seems to me that Soyinka does far more than merely present a mood: through the complex interweaving of patterns of imagery and dialogue, he creates on the one hand perhaps, an irredeemable cycle of errors (to borrow the phrase from Okpewho), whilst at the same time presenting his characters with choices which

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<sup>11</sup> In Research in African Literature Vol.17 No.1, 1986. 1-39. Maduakor writes that the Marxist school of critics "indict Soyinka for his supreme indifference to the responsibilities which the materialist theory confers upon art" (29); further that art should reflect the historical processes at work in society at a given historical moment together with their internal contradictions and tensions (i.e. their dialectics). Otherwise a writer may be accused of deliberate falsification of experience, or even worse, "mythifying".



enable them to break free of the circle. In the Marxist paradigm every worker must become an intellectual in that he must be his own interpreter for unless the people acquire the ability to construct their own images of desire, and engage in an active struggle to realise them, they are, to borrow yet another apt phrase, (this time from Armah), "mere mirrors to annihilation".<sup>12</sup>

The novel records several very different intellectual voices - their interpretations of the meaning of the past and the viability of the gods, of political and social forces at work in present Nigeria, now interlock, now fight against each other as with the rhythms in an interesting piece of African music. Indeed it is possible to make an analogy between the principle of conflict/cooperation so often at work in both traditional and modern African music, and the way that the young interpreters relate to each other in the changing tensions of their dialogue. Chernoff, who has made an in-depth study of Ghanaian drumming, rightly maintains that "the flexible and dynamic relationships of various rhythms actually help distinguish one rhythm from another, and on a basic level one rhythm defines another" (1979, 52). He illustrates his point by referring to the rhythm of the bell pattern in Agbekor music: "Stable rhythmic patterns are broken up and seemingly rearranged by the shifting accents and emphases of other patterns." There is nothing stable in the world of the 'interpreters', neither in time nor place; everything is in flux, and one line of action or inaction crosses another. From this constant tension comes a sense of power and resolution, most noticeable in Bandile's inexorable pity for the purveyors of social corruption and double-standards with which the novel ends. Soyinka of course has an extremely well developed

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<sup>12</sup> From the preface to Two Thousand Seasons, xiii.

sense of the power of music to engender and resolve crisis, particularly in ritual drama.

The novel opens on a harsh discordant note, Sagoe's complaint about the mad screech of iron tables being hurriedly pushed aside by patrons of Club Cabana eager to escape the sudden downpour: "Metal on concrete jars my drink lobes." The dance floor is deserted and the band is isolated from the audience. Various voices interact with the persistent sound of the invasive rain which provides a metaphorical introit into the subconscious concerns of one of the main characters, Egbo. The reader is suddenly thrust back in time to the moment of Egbo's choice between succession to the throne of Osa (a traditional way of life, though even this has been subverted by bribery and corruption) and his modern city career in the foreign office. The choice is made but the emphasis is on death. Water is associated with images of death, but because of the West African belief in the continuity of life, it is also the source of psychic renewal: "I can never wholly escape water, but I do not love the things of death" (8). Perhaps Egbo's involvement with water owes something to the mythical background of the Yoruba Gods on which Soyinka draws so freely. Sango, the god of thunder and lightning committed suicide by hanging himself from an ayon tree in a sacred grove. Egbo is drawn by temperament to "the pattern of the dead" and "despised the age which sought to mutilate his beginnings" (11). The first round of music ends: "The trumpet stabbed the night in one last defiant note, and the saxophone slunk out of light, a wounded serpent diminishing in obscene hisses." The snake in West Africa is a symbol of arcane knowledge and intimately linked with the ancestors; since Soyinka is well-known for his belief in the healing powers of ritual music, this is a supremely bitter

comment on the vulnerability of popular music, which, because it is isolated from meaningful personal experience, may be subverted to any mood. It is also the natural conclusion to Egbo's line of thought: the ancestors have failed them. On this occasion the music only serves to depress its audience. As Sagoe says:

Damn it, I am low. And that wretched band was really to blame. They depressed me the moment they began to play. And then this transition from high-life to rain maraccas has gone on far too long. (19)

A short while later a small àpàlà band takes the stand. Its traditional rhythms, especially those of the talking drum, invade the night clubs and remind the patrons, sucking on western culture like so many bloated vampire-bats, that these drums speak a language they once knew:

Denial was now old-fashioned and after the garish, exhibitionist, bluff of the ligh-life band, this renewed a cause for feeling, hinting meanings of which they were, a phase before, half-ashamed. (21)

The group, itinerant players nearly always very poorly paid, have only one box guitar and three drums "which seemed permanent outgrowths of the armpits." But they use their voices to great effect, interlocking with the rhythm of the drums which speak among themselves, not to the audience. Again the accent is on isolation. It is only when a woman begins to dance that the band comes alive and finds something it can relate to. The woman, immense and dominating, "moved slowly, intensely wrapped in the song and the rhythm of the rain" (22). Soyinka exactly captures the special relationship between drummers and dancer. It is almost as if the band had no beat before the woman began to dance, but now a rhythmic relationship is built up which lends purpose and dignity to both: "The lead drummer moved on her, drawing as it were, her skin on the crook of the drum" (22). It is still raining and occasionally the drummer has to retire to wipe his drum but he never lets go of the rhythm and uses his voice to maintain the inter-action between them.

There is an almost tender relationship between dancer and master-drummer which lasts only so long as the music keeps playing, an active appreciation of each other's art. As soon as the music stops, the woman is surrendered once again to an impersonal self-absorbed world. But the process does not end there on this occasion. The band quite naturally strikes up a more traditional number which, for Egbo, seemed almost an accusation - "The song, a cry and a legend of the past, brought back his own commitments and he tensed." Through his ever active imagination the woman is transformed into a priestess of some ancient cult who would on nights like this have danced to "the clang of iron bells and the summons of shaved drums", the quintessence of the ubiquitous fertile mother-figure, the symbol of the African earth itself. The friends provide a cross-section of opinion: to Sekoni, engineer and sculptor, the woman is beautiful in her abundance, to a cruder imagination the potential fruits of her womb are not as great an attraction as the twin orange slices of her breasts.

Many of the unresolved issues in The Interpreters reappear in a more aggressive form in Season of Anomy which is far more overtly a political novel, taking its point of reference from the crisis in Nigeria between 1967 and 1970, the massacre of the Ibos, and Soyinka's experiences in detention, previously written up and published as The Man Died. In 1972, according to Ogunbesan, "Soyinka moved from being merely the conscience of his society to being a political revolutionary"(5). A major theme of the novel is violence, both ritual and political. For Ofeyi, clearly very similar to Egbo in character and role, though far more deeply motivated, an active and committed approach to redressing social ills is the only one possible. His quest in the underworld of prisons and mortuaries in search of Iriyise

however is no private, tragic existential act, though Soyinka is happy to define it in the terms of a Greek myth. Soyinka writes in The Man Died, "Any faith that places the conscious quest for the inner self as goal, for which the context of forces are mere battle aids is ultimately destructive of the social potential of that self" (87). So by disseminating his doctrines through the people of Aiyero, Ofeyi meant to recover "whatever has been seized from society by a handful, re-moulding society itself" (113). Iriyise (at one stage Venus rising from a giant cocoa-pod, at another Eurydice), the beautiful dancer of the Cocoa Bean Orchestra, may be seen as representing the visionary, transforming impulse, or as Ogunbesan sees it, she is "the symbol of the potential beauty of the society" (6). Ofeyi clothes his very real sexual desire for her in religious imagery which deifies and sanctifies her - it was not that she combined perfection and beauty but that she could reveal within herself "a harrowing vision of the unattainable" (80). At the end of his quest he does find her again but, significantly, she is in a deep coma; in desperation he attempts an almost magical synthesis of subconscious powers to bring her to life: "he tried to concentrate on her actions which were one with what she symbolized ... But she lay still" (301). In this context it is extremely relevant that a great deal of the interest in the novel is centred on the activities of a popular brass orchestra, and on Iriyise's role as the Cocoa Princess. Ofeyi (Orpheus) writes the lyrics which contain a far from subtle condemnation of the avaricious cartel, and composes the basic tune whilst Zaccheus sets them to a catchy rhythm which makes them immediately accessible to the public. For instance, a song of his with the refrain "Who's the friend of the cocoa farmer?/Insecticide!/What is the fate of parasites?/fumigate!" acquired instant popularity "as much by its aggressive rhythm as by its



memorable tune" (57). There is also something of the magician and mountebank about Ofeyi, for instance, he designs elaborate floor-shows with Iriyse as exotic centre-piece, and his friend Zaccheus the bandleader and saxophonist, the adept at providing the right sort of military flourish from brass and drums so favoured by the authorities, plays a most important role in later events as guide and companion. For Soyinka, traditional music is synonymous with enchantment: it puts you in touch with the primitive arcane forces of nature, dissolving the bonds of time and space. So when Ofeyi drives through the grove of rain trees in a moment of respite from the horror and violence of preceding events which have led to the massacre of most of the band members, the brutal abduction of Iriyse, and Zaccheus's subsequent descent into a world of private hell, the imagery is of the traditional music of sacred groves - the sun filtering through the bamboo arouses associations with organ pipes. But the very definite point is made that it is an unreal world conjured up of sun motes in a forest of song, casting a spell, creating an illusion that some healing process is going on. As Ofeyi says, (conscious though that it is a rather cruel illusion), "Places like that seem to possess reserves of healing powers" (143). But Soyinka is not advocating a return to Ahime's world of ancestorism with its secrets and rituals (such as the bloody slaughter of the bulls by priestly butchers and the ceremonial shedding of blood)<sup>13</sup> - here as then he has work to do, and the need to accomplish change is centred on his personal sense of complete alienation from the traditional way of life. His quest is as much for psychic wholeness as it is for the symbolic values embodied in Iriyse,

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<sup>13</sup> Described in great detail on pages 12-18, a series of ritual events which herald a period of experiential time of heightened emotional response. It begins in the hours before dawn when "the song-leaders from the dead Custodian's household" follow Ahime through the sleeping town.

but in contrast with the contemplative, passive suffering of Baako in Fragments, Amamu in This earth, my brother... and Egbo in The Interpreters his approach is a determined, active one: there can be no personal psychic integration that is not harnessed to the needs of society.

Perhaps the last word on the subject of popular music can be found in Cyprian Ekwensi's novel People of the City. The hero of this modern Pilgrim's Progress through the exigencies of life in a Nigerian city, is a journalist and bandleader, Sango, whose calypsos and konkomas delighted the hearts of city women. At the open-air All Language Club which had no bars, social, colour, political or religious, but a different sort of bar "plentifully supplied with all percentages of alcohol right up to a hundred" (36), the patrons are happy to hear any sort of popular music, be it the music of the Hot Cat's Rhythm, or "the Highlife drumming of the unsophisticated Nigerian bands" - they simply want to be seen, decked out in Western-style finery, in an environment of bright lights and happy careless entertainment. Sango, the detached observer, plays a beautiful solo in the style of Louis Armstrong but "Nobody noticed; nobody bothered."

### CONCLUSION

If this literary dissertation draws heavily upon the published findings of Anthropologists it is because it proceeds from the premiss that different cultures have different concepts of time, that these concepts can be most easily approached through a study of traditional music and dance, (both sacred and profane), and further, that West African novelists are so aware of this that an understanding of their novels gains depth and accuracy if approached from within the cultural systems in which they are rooted.

Through the energetic rhythms of his prose, Camara Laye conveys the special kind of knowledge acquired from his cultural background in Guinea, often contrasting two different concepts of time: Western and African. Ayi Kwei Armah and Yambo Ouologuem use the griot and related oral traditions, being particularly concerned with the view of the past and its politics which such traditions disseminate. As the contemporary Senegalese singer, Youssou N'Dour says, griots "are the guardians of history itself" because "they talk to you of a knowledge of causes", yet they are trapped in a system which can "bother the development of the individual." The solution as he sees it, is that the people need "to develop a new conscience".<sup>1</sup> This is a simple way of expressing the complex problems of acculturation addressed in the novels of Chinua Achebe.

Achebe offers a detailed insight into traditional Igbo society but acknowledges that change is an integral part of cultural dynamics and favours integration between different world views. His first novel for

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<sup>1</sup> "Youssou N'Dour; The Dakar Cowboy". Africa Beat Summer '87 Issue 7. Ed. Chris Hawkins. (Norwich: A. B. Publishing) 24-28.

the past twenty years, Anthills of the Savannah, would seem to be explicitly political in tone. Wole Soyinka's works are deeply rooted in Yoruba cultural ethics, yet his novels use a syncretism of style and imagery demonstrable in 'Highlife' and other popular modern musics which combine received modern elements with traditional rhythms and lyrics.

The 'musical qualities' of West African writing have long been appreciated. There has not been space in this dissertation to consider the novels of Amos Tutuola who for some "stands at the forefront of western African literature and by, inference, African writing in English."<sup>2</sup> To have done so in the context of my title would have added another lengthy chapter and it is a subject already well researched.<sup>3</sup> Moreover I do not feel that as a novelist he has the stature of Laye, Armah or Achebe. However, his novels do show an extremely interesting and idiosyncratic use of temporality, often using exact Western time within the vaguer symbolic parameters of African time. There are numerous expressions such as "When it was about two o'clock in the midnight"<sup>4</sup> but very often the time given is as exact as 3 o'clock p.m., 6.30 a.m.<sup>5</sup> and the duration of the stages of the various journeys described is apparently accurately recorded, all within the structural framework of traditional oral literature. The Palm-Wine Drinkard is so heavily based on Yoruba folk-tale that it lent itself quite naturally

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<sup>2</sup> O.R. Dathorne, 1982, 94.

<sup>3</sup> See for instance, Dathorne (1982) who discusses Tutuola's use of the folk tale; Afolayan (1982) who looks at the language of the novels and suggests a fresh approach to the thematic material; and Gerald Moore (1962).

<sup>4</sup> See for instance pp 53 and 56 in The Palm-wine Drinkard.

<sup>5</sup> See pp 11, 41, 62 in The Palm-Wine Drinkard.

to being made into a music-drama. This was done by Ogunmola who uses the traditional songs contained within the structural framework of a folk-tale, "retaining its traditional character, including call-and-response, even though the melodic patterns follow closely the European diatonic scale." (Akin Euba, 1971, 99-100). The composer started with his Western training in music, (and Akin Euba has published examples in western notation) but incorporated wherever possible the original African elements. Ladipo's Qba Koso (The King did not hang) dispenses with Western instrumental backing altogether, mostly using traditional drums and voices. Tutuola's most recent novel, Pauper, Brawler and Slanderer, follows more or less the same structural principles as his previous novels thus giving a new lease of life to this literary paradox.

In conclusion, an extract from Cyprian Ekwensi's short story, Drums and Voices,<sup>6</sup> seems to capture the dilemma of the city-raised African who finds himself caught between two cultural stools and who has, to use Akin Euba's phrase, "lost contact with traditional culture and acquired artistic tastes beyond the confines of the traditional arts" (107). The protagonist, Alfred, has been sent into the rural areas with modern equipment to record fine examples of traditional singing:

Your problem Alfred, he reminded himself, is to capture the soul of this village in the medium of DRUMS and VOICES... Drums that talk and drums that whisper. Drums that dance, and drums that cry, drums that fight and drums that love. Get also the voices of the young, the girls under the trees, the raconteurs.... Forget for a moment that you are one of them. Divest yourself of that illusion immediately and let your artistic conscience take command.

Ekwensi implies that a received artistic consciousness divorces a man

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<sup>6</sup> "Drums and Voices". Black Orpheus No. 7 June '60. 41.



from his cultural heritage and roots, so much so that it is possible to capture its music as product rather than process. Music may be the most powerful medium for recovering those lost connections and creating a healing synthesis between past and present. As Lewis Rowell says, "A theme moving through time is simply not the same as an arrow moving through space" (1986, 231).

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