

## **AFRICA AND THE *WELTVERKEHR* / WORLD TRAFFIC OF TONGUES, BOOKS, AND SCHOLARS**

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### **Summary**

The world traffic of African cultures, mainly with regards to the literary word and its scholarship, is presented by means of a historical sketch of the intercultural relations of Africa with other parts of the world. The pre-colonial and the post-colonial periods are to be distinguished from the colonial period, highlighted by the transatlantic slave trade, which has shaped power relations between Africa and the West, and is still implicated in today's political and cultural relations. Intercultural mediators including missionaries, translators, and scholars from various disciplines in both Africa and the West, have always played an outstanding role in the circulation of African verbal arts and cultural knowledges. While formal comparative literary studies are hardly institutionalized throughout Africa, it is notable that post-colonial African literatures are firmly embedded in the intertextual framework of oratures and world literatures as well as in artistic networks of a worldwide Black Diaspora. Thus, the interrogation of an African *Weltverkehr*/world traffic of tongues, books and scholars demands both historical and comparative approaches. Migration and exile have been a survival condition for many African writers and scholars. While the brain-drain from Africa might be a drawback for the continent, it is obvious that the transnational stature of intellectuals can also be a very fruitful one, for both the host and the home countries. It can be said that a number

of important international literary awards have contributed to the acceptance of Africa's literary genius and to the visibility of African writers in the past twenty years. Yet for the reason of economic restraints, both for artists and publishers alike, as well as the persisting cultural prejudice in the reception of the African literary text, the worldwide circulation and appreciation of African literatures is not yet established well enough.

## **1. Introduction**

This chapter deals with the *Weltverkehr* (world traffic) of African artistic and intellectual imagination, that is, the worldwide circulation of cultures and scholarship from Africa, with a strong focus on its literatures and their critical reception. After a brief historical sketch and a look at some outstanding figures of cultural mediation, we will concentrate on the present situation of the worldwide production, circulation and appreciation of African literatures. Given that Africa is a continent of enormous cultural heterogeneity, we note that our overview does not aspire to cover equally all regions or all aspects of the many African cultures and literary systems. Estimates of the number of African languages range from about 1000 to more than 1500, and any of these languages holds an oral literary tradition or 'orature' (the term used in modern literary criticism) which is being performed and developed creatively till today, beside the written literatures in many vehicular African languages as well as in former colonial languages like Arabic, English, French and Portuguese. Unlike in the Americas where most indigenous languages and religions were wiped out or reduced to limited usage, African languages and religions are vital till today, although they have entered in an (often forced and hybridized) intercultural relationship with Christianity, Islam, as well as the Arabic and European canons of written literatures. There are also literary, as well as social references to the retention and vibrancy of African religious practices which were transferred across the Atlantic to the New World in the heydays of the involuntary migrations of African peoples. Therefore, the transference of languages and religions and their survival in different forms are integral signs of the idea of cultural transfer which is still alive today, albeit through other social agencies.

## **2. Historical Sketch of Intercultural Relations between Africa and the World**

The general narrative of the intercultural relations between Africa and the rest of the world is closely connected to the movement of ideas, peoples and literary productions across and back to the continent. The first major wave of the *world traffic* or cultural transfer was contained in the institution of slave trade which effected the forced migration of several African ethnic groups mainly into the Caribbean islands, North and South America. The expansionist mission of industrial Europe would have a tremendous impact on the entire political, economic and cultural systems of African societies. Literally speaking, colonialism has greatly influenced the nature (content and style) as well as the theory of African literary writings; it is the institutional concept around which much of the discourse and history of contemporary African writing have been developed. Therefore, the standard practice is to imagine much of African letters, or creative imagination to be precise, as belonging to three major periods: pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial.

The "pre-colonial" period of African *world traffic* is essentially an oral one, laden with previously unrecorded legends, myths and folklores of the various linguistic groups on

the continent. Nowadays, those spoken texts, referred to as oral literature, orature or verbal art in literary critical discourse, have been transferred into the written text by African as well as by Western scholars. The masterpieces of African orature include the Sunjata epic of the Mandinka (Mali, Guinea, Senegal), the Mwindo epic of the Nyanga (Congo), the Ozidi saga of the Izon (Nigeria), the Chaka epic (South Africa) and elaborated oral poetry systems like the Zulu *izibongo* as well as Sotho and Xhosa *lithoko* poetry (South Africa), the Yoruba *oriki* and *ijala* poetry (Nigeria, Benin) and the Wolof *taasu* (Senegal), to name but a few. Alphabetical as well as sign-oriented systems of writing were not unknown in Africa before the advent of Islamic and Western colonialism, but they were limited in use and mostly wiped out by the imposition of Arabic and Latin letters. The notable exception is the continuous use of the Ge'ez alphabet for the Semitic languages of the Horn of Africa, that is, Amharic, Tigrinya and Tigre in Ethiopia and Eritrea. This alphabet was developed early between the 5<sup>th</sup> and the 6<sup>th</sup> centuries B.C. Not accidentally, Ethiopia, in spite of a brief Italian incursion, is the only African country which was never fully colonized. With the Arabic invasions and the settler colonization of Northern Africa followed by the spread of Islam in large parts of the continent, Arabic was not only adopted as a new national language (in Northern Africa) and as a religious language, but a number of African languages used to be written in the Arabic alphabet, beginning with the Berber languages in North Africa as early as around 1000 A.D., superseding in this case the formerly used Tamazight alphabet. Although the use of the Arabic language and the adoption of the Arabic alphabet in the writing of African languages were limited to religious purposes, secular poetic works as well as historical accounts in Swahili were already written – in the Arabic alphabet – on the African East coast around the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Also, Hausa, the Sahelian language which linked much of West Africa to the Maghreb, had been committed to writing in the Arabic alphabet in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Therefore, it can be said that the Islamization of North and North-East Africa, the East African coast and important parts of North Western Africa has led to an intensive intercultural exchange with the Arabic civilizations of Asia, although the reception and influence of African oral and written literatures in the Arab countries was itself quite limited. In concluding this section on pre-colonial Africa, the works of the Senegalese Egyptologist Cheikh Anta Diop must be mentioned. In his seminal, although controversially discussed, historical and linguistic research which produced *Nations nègres et cultures* (1954, *Negro Nations and Cultures*), *L'unité culturelle de l'Afrique Noire* (1959, *The Cultural Unity of Black Africa*), and *L'Afrique noire précoloniale* (1960, *Pre-colonial Black Africa*) among others, Diop elaborates on the direct cultural filiations between ancient Egyptian civilization and sub-Saharan civilization, and shows the intercultural and scholarly exchange between ancient Egypt and ancient Greece. Interpretively, Africa was involved in a *world traffic* system of cultural exchange, on a basis of mutual equality, during antiquity and before the incursions of the transatlantic slave trade and colonization.

The earliest accounts of explorations into the heart of Africa by non-Africans are attributed to the fourteenth century Muslim geographer, Ibn Battuta and the fifteenth century Portuguese explorer, Vasco da Gama. The encounter with other civilizations and the reports which followed contributed to the general enthusiasm to explore the unknown continent. The triple heritage of African civilizations has been offered as a way of understanding the complexities, differences, and contradictions of the African

continent in relation to the rest of the world. What followed was the tradition of the colonial palimpsest, the literature of the explorer's voyage, the colonial officer's commentary, or documentary, the Christian missionary's tale, and the Islamic traveler's tale. These were textual raw materials for the emergence of the colonial novel of Africa which would become more established in the major works of Henry Rider Haggard (*King Solomon's Mines*, 1885), Joseph Conrad (*Heart of Darkness*, 1899) and Joyce Cary (*Mister Johnson*, 1939) among others.

On the other hand, there exists a significant number of African 'slave narratives' which serve as both autobiographical texts and literary-historical texts to the experience of slavery, and which appeared within the same epoch that the colonial mission was underway. Examples of these testifying narratives are Ottobah Cuguano's *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Commerce of the Human Species* (1787), Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa the African* (1789), and the letters of Ignatius Sancho (said to have been born on a slave ship heading to the West Indies) which were collected and published in 1782, republished under the Penguin Classics series as *The Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho, an African* (1998). However, the earliest work by any African-born writer to be published anywhere in the world is *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773) by Phillis Wheatley whose prodigious talent brought her fame in both England and the United States in the late eighteenth century. These works have been incorporated into the literature curriculum of African Studies departments in American and European institutions as textual references to the African imagination; they are also considered as the crucial introductory materials to the representation of the African literary mind in colleges and universities on the African continent.

As part of the inevitable *world traffic* of African oratures, the survivalisms and strains of African cultural heritage are still deeply etched in various artistic forms in the Caribbean and more especially in the Americas. For instance, the indelible influence of Yoruba language, religious rites, and poetry seem to be most evident in such hybridized institutions and forms as the Candomblé in Brazil and the Santería in Cuba. A cursory check of bibliographic materials on Santería scholarship reveals how much the philosophical worldview of African mythologies, languages and civilizations are partly sustained and transformed in the cultural memory of the New World. As noted in Wole Soyinka's *Myth, Literature and the African World* (1976), "the symbols of Yemaja (Yemoja), Oxosi (Ososi), Exu (Esu) and Xango (Sango) not only lead a promiscuous existence with Roman Catholic saints but are fused with the twentieth-century technological and revolutionary expressionism of the mural arts of Cuba, Brazil and much of the Caribbean."

The education and the making of the first elite corps of African writers and intellectuals, which started during the colonial period, began to bear literary expressions within the first three decades of the twentieth century. The project of self-representation, of translating African images to the rest of the world, was affected with varying degrees of subjectivity and objectivity. There are two major strains in the process of self-representation, one of which was fully manifested in the Négritude movement founded in Paris during the 1930s, led by the Senegalese Leopold Sédar Senghor, in collaboration with other intellectuals of African descent like Léon-Gontran Damas

(French-Guyana) and Aimé Césaire (Martinique). As a correlative to the concept of Négritude, there was the idea of cultural nationalism which served as the basis of the early writings of the majority of the Anglophone speaking section of Africa. Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Christopher Okigbo, and John Pepper Clark (all Nigerian) with Ayi Kwei Armah of Ghana, Lenrie Peters of Gambia, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Meja Mwangi, and Jared Angira of Kenya, Okot p'Bitek of Uganda, Taban lo Liyong of Sudan, and a host of other writers represent the projection of nationalist stance and cultural revivalism in their various works. Equally, the tradition of protest literature is associated with the most notable works of such South African authors like Peter Abrahams, Can Themba, and Alex la Guma. Social realist anti-colonial literature – as opposed to the lyrical and philosophical tunes of the Négritude generation – did also spread within Francophone Africa with writers like Sembène Ousmane (Senegal), Ferdinand Oyono (Cameroon), Mongo Beti (Cameroon) or Bernard Dadié (Ivory Coast). The significance of the appearance of major African writers in the first two decades which followed the end of the Second World War was that first they collectively prove the presence of creative talents on the continent, and more importantly, their works served as rhetorical responses to some of the stereotypical representations of Africa in a number of colonial writings. Thus, the postcolonial project can be said to have started as early as the 1930s, with the related ideologies of Négritude and cultural nationalism, and consolidated during the 1950s via the appearance of such novels as Camara Laye's *L'Enfant Noir* (1953, *The Black Child*), Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), and William Conton's *The African* (1960). Nevertheless, the anti-colonialist projection in African letters had been anticipated in Joseph Casely Hayford's *Ethiopia Unbound* (1911) and René Maran's *Batouala* (1921). As it were, the expatriate novel about Africa meets with a challenge of re-representation in the novel of Africa. As a critique of the hegemony of power and a theory of intercultural relation, postcoloniality has indeed produced an important discourse that promoted the *world traffic* of Africa, and of Africans, the production and transference of cultural knowledge into the world.

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