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THE AFRICAN WRITER  
AND THE PHENOMENON OF  
THE NATION STATE IN AFRICA

by K.E. Agovi

Introduction

This study focuses largely on four major contemporary African writers who have sought to draw attention to the rise of the modern state in Africa in their creative writing. Although these writers and their works have been randomly selected, it is they who, in my estimation, have actually projected a direct concern with what I have chosen to call the "phenomenon" of the modern nation state in Africa. They have celebrated the anguish, pain, bewilderment, complexity, and violence which have engulfed the modern state in its attempt to come to terms with processes of change, modernization, and development. Such emotional turmoil, which tends to acquire the stature of institutionalized violence and disorder, is what I mean by the term "phenomenon."

Although this phenomenon has long been the concern of Africanist scholars in history, sociology, politics, and economics, it has not been possible to witness the same development in African literary circles. While the material for this is available, as we shall soon see, literary critics have tended to pay more attention to other considerations in African literature, such as social change, cultural nationalism, and the assertion of African identity. The aim of this study therefore is to redress some of this neglect. I will seek to do so by first making some brief observations on the state of knowledge of the traditional literary artist and his relationship with traditional polities. This will be in acknowledgement of the fact that literary artists of the African past did indeed establish a clear relationship with their traditional states, and that the nature of that legacy is still relevant to the circumstances of present-day writers on the continent.

Second, this study will move from there and concentrate exclusively on selected works of Chinua Achebe, Ayi Kwei Armah, Wole Soyinka and Ngugi Wa Thiong'o as the group of contemporary African writers who have approached the subject of the artist-state relationship with a commitment reminiscent of the literary heroes of the past. I must, however, observe that a brief study such as this one can only present bare outlines, but it will be enough for my purpose if this study is able to demonstrate that this corps of elite writers in Africa have all along been deeply concerned with the trauma of the nation state in contemporary African life.

### The Literary Artist and the Traditional State

Let me begin with one of those statements that demands immediate proof and yet is so obvious that "proof" becomes irrelevant. I am talking about the fact that there is a close relationship between literature and politics. This was true of traditional African society where the general tendency was to appropriate the artist and his creativity in service to the state. As we learn, for example, in the works of Camara Laye, the Griot was not only "master of the word," praise-singer, but also an important functionary at court. He enjoyed the confidence of his sovereign, was his "intimate spokesman," a protocol officer, and political emissary.<sup>1</sup>

In much the same way, we learn that Djeli Mamoudou Kouyate, another Griot, also considered his kinship to royalty important. Without the Griot, he observes, "the names of kings would vanish into oblivion" for it is the Griot who brings "to life the deeds and exploits of kings for younger generations."<sup>2</sup>

Trevor Cope has stated that among the Zulu, the function of the praise poem as a unifying force became far more important after Chaka Zulu. It became necessary "to build up national loyalty towards the king as the embodiment of the nation, for he was not related by blood to the great majority of his subjects."<sup>3</sup> To achieve this, the help of the poet became necessary. The situation among the Sotho was largely similar, for when a *Seroki* praise poet performed, "he was not merely showering [the chief] with personal flattery, he was also presenting him to his followers as a leader worthy of their loyalty and support."<sup>4</sup> By the same token, Ruth Finnegan has reported similar findings of praise poetry in other traditional kingdoms of Africa, including the Hausa and the kingdoms of the Congo.<sup>5</sup> More recently, Kwame Arhin has seen the *Apa* poems of the Asante as an "ideology" in the sense of their ability to both "assert the august position of the Asantehene and also show how he has attained that position."<sup>6</sup>

In effect, the whole concept of "patronage" of the arts and artists in traditional African courts tended to lend credence to the idea of a close relationship between the artist and the state. It has also seemed to lead, in the words of Ruth Finnegan, "to poetry of profound political significance as a means of political propaganda, pressure or communication."<sup>7</sup> As a result, views have been expressed of the traditional artist as servile to court and a validator of traditions and accepted values. "Certainly in traditional society," writes Michael Crower, "there was no concept of the artist as 'rebellious, temperamental and generally antagonistic' towards his society. The idea of art as a form of social protest was quite foreign; at best, art might be

satirical as with the Gelede, or the Yoruba, but within the limits strictly defined and accepted by society.<sup>8</sup> Similar perspectives can be found in *The Traditional Artist in African Societies* (W. L. d'Azevedo, ed., 1973) and in the more recent and comprehensive review of the visual arts in Africa by Paula Ben-Amos in *The African Studies Review*.

Yet, as Soyinka observed as far back as 1967, "in pre-colonial days, there was no real collaboration between the creative mind and the political; there was hardly the practical, fruitful acknowledgement of the existence of the one by the other."<sup>9</sup> My own research into the techniques of traditional drum and horn poets--accredited officials of the Akan traditional state in Ghana--has revealed that the ultimate loyalty of both of them was to their "conscience and creative vision."<sup>10</sup> This is probably what the griot Mamadou Kouyate also meant when he declared that "royal griots do not know what lying is..." for not only are they "the memory of mankind" but, more significantly, "the depositories of oaths which the ancestors swore."<sup>11</sup> The special burden which history places on the traditional literary artist and his art has been observed by several writers (Shapera 1965; Vansina 1965; Awe 1974; Finnegan 1970; Arhin 1986). Mazisi Kunene has described it as an expression of "the historical state of the community" in which the literary artist is "a recorder of events, an evaluator of his era in relation to other eras. He has to know in detail the historically significant occasions, select from them the most symbolically representative and on that evolve or affirm an ethic."<sup>12</sup>

This appointment with history, seen in terms of an overriding loyalty to historical "truth," quite clearly suggests a gap between the artist as an overt symbol of state stability and the ultimate allegiance of his work. In my view, this gap was necessary so that art could be **distanced** to fulfil its duty towards society. This duty necessarily entailed a **critical vision** which was so vital to the creativity of the traditional literary artist. Robert Thompson (1973) has observed that criticism is a noted feature of Yoruba art and that it provides sensitive sources of information about Yoruba aesthetics. Iyasere has also pointed out that in the world of the traditional literary artist,

criticism was not divorced from the creative process but an essential part of and adjunct to it. Creativity and criticism enjoyed a symbiotic relationship. Critical evaluation and the composition of a work of art were regarded as facets for the same process and, in most cases, aspects of the same moment.<sup>13</sup>

On the basis of such findings, it seems reasonable to contend that there is a direct relationship between "artistic distancing" and a "critical

vision." Because the traditional literary artist did not feel such an overwhelming allegiance to court "patronage," he was free to embody in his work a critical view of his patrons and what they represented. Although this critical assertiveness was apparently subdued by technical considerations so that it did not ooze out as a "rebellious and temperamental" protest, it was still there as a conscious factor of the artist's affirmation of independence and commitment to life. Accordingly, the tradition of political protest created in the works of traditional literary artists was in practice based on a belief in "artistic distancing" in which a tempered, but critical, attitude towards reality became important.

### The Modern Writer and African Nationalism

While the above observations may seem far removed from contemporary realities in Africa, there is a sense in which they become relevant to a consideration of literature and politics in colonial and post-colonial Africa. In the 1950s, for example, when African nationalism became an irresistible force in dependent territories in Africa, it was also the fashion for African creative writers and artists to lend their active support. The tide of the era did not permit the divorce of creative expression from politics and nationalism. Artists in both the written and oral medium gave their unquestioned support.<sup>14</sup> Of course, the times were different, the circumstances were different; creative writers were largely educated, yearning for new ideals and aspirations, and, naturally, their perceptions and priorities became different. As Claude Wauthier has observed in his most comprehensive book, this was the time when the demand for national independence went hand in hand with cultural revival.<sup>15</sup> It was not surprising, therefore, that as soon as independence was achieved, cultural nationalism emerged to dominate African writing for a long time.

The crusading light in this cultural nationalism was Chinua Achebe, who insisted in his essays that

... African societies did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans; that their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty, that they had poetry and, above all, they had dignity. It is this dignity that many African peoples all but lost in the colonial period, and it is this that they must now regain. . . .<sup>16</sup>

The effect of this new force was to bring politics, culture and literature in Africa closer together than ever before. However, as E. N. Obiechina observed at the time in his brilliant article, "Cultural

Nationalism in Modern African Creative Literature," there was a "definite danger in this nationalist pressure on the writer."<sup>17</sup> Although he had in mind the possibility of cultural nationalism degenerating "into a mere romantic idyllism" (as indeed "Negritude" and "African Personality" increasingly threatened to do), he shared Wole Soyinka's concern that it tended to make the contemporary African writer blind to the "historical present":

. . . Isolated by his very position in society, he mistook his own personal and temporary cultural predicament for the predicament of his entire society and turned attention from what was really happening to that society. He even tried to give society something that the society had never lost--its identity. . . . He was content to turn his eye backwards in time and prospect in archaic fields for forgotten gems which would dazzle and distract the present, never into the obvious symptoms of the niggling, warning, predictable present, from which alone lay the salvation of ideals. . . .<sup>18</sup>

The interesting development on the ground was that by this time, Chinua Achebe had already published his novel *A Man of the People* (1966), and Wole Soyinka himself had only just come out with *Kongi's Harvest* (1967), while Ayi Kwei Armah's novel *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1969) was only two years away. These works, in effect, constitute early "symptoms of the niggling, warning, predictable present" which Soyinka stressed before his African colleague writers in Stockholm. In spite of the dominating assertion of cultural nationalism in African creative writing at the time, these works gave perhaps the first indications of the rise of the modern state in Africa and the writer's intense awareness of it.

### The Rise of the Nation-State in African Writing

Pre-occupied as they were with themes of social change, cultural conflict, alienation, and protest in African literature, critics of the sixties did not pay attention to the image of the modern state as it began to emerge in African writing by the close of the sixties. The Heinemann volume, *Protest and Conflict in African Literature* (1969), for example, among other things isolated the problem of "commitment" in African writing for scrutiny. It examined the concept in its social, political and cultural manifestations, but the "backward glance" was the dominant factor, the displayed framework for examining these.<sup>19</sup> There was also Kolawole Ogungbesan's article on politics and the African writer which largely focussed on Achebe's transition from a "Teacher"

to a "Social Critic," arguing that "the writer's role as a social critic is a logical sequence to his role as a teacher," and, second, that "the writer's role of a social critic is higher than his role as a teacher."<sup>20</sup> In poetry, Thomas Knipp argued that "the political theme is one among many, and the political significance of the poetry is one dimension of a complex, evolving, and dynamic art."<sup>21</sup>

While these early reviews were useful in drawing attention to a political factor in African writing, they did not reveal their awareness of a collective thrust towards an integrated picture of the emergent state in Africa. This is true of Robert July's assessment (1981) of Wole Soyinka's political philosophy in his writings. The same thing can be said of other recent critical evaluations as, for example, in Juliet Okonkwo's article in which she observes,

... (Kofi Awoonor). . . together with Ayi Kwei Armah, Yambo Olouguem (and Achebe in his fourth novel, *A Man of the People*), these second-movement writers focus their attention on the African present, occasionally revealing how the past has impinged on it but generally dissecting the malaise that has afflicted post-independence Africa. The corruption, self-seeking, mismanagement, inertia, excessive materialism, moral laxity, violence, and other ills of modern Africa emerge as their dominant themes. . . .<sup>22</sup>

In *A Man of the People*, *Kongi's Harvest* and *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, it is impossible to miss a direct image of the modern state because the focus is largely on its agents and functionaries. Achebe, for example, constitutes Chief Nanga into the principal agent of the modern state in *A Man of the People*. He acts, talks, and relates to others in full consciousness of a power behind him. His stature in the novel acquires more significance than that of an ordinary parliamentarian, a government back-bencher, who eventually becomes a Minister of Culture. He manipulates state power to further his own interest, and it is the impression of his violence and autocratic tendencies which marks him as the true agent of the state.

Kongi attains the same stature in Soyinka's drama, except that he is also the Head of the new state of Isma. He comes to power through the military, and therefore he is placed in a position to virtually control coercive powers. Thus, in his bid for total power, Kongi displays a certain ruthlessness reminiscent of an emergent military despotism. Although we are allowed to see Kongi as the embodiment of the military state in Africa, the focus really is on the members of the Reformed Aweri Fraternity and the Carpenter's Brigade—agents who

use their brains and organizing skills to create a supportive ideology to sustain Kongi's state terrorism. They push everybody into a common ideology of state that is in effect intended to foster personal rule. Hence, in *Kongi's Harvest*, we witness the traumatic transformation of state power into the most blatant form of personal rule. We come to realize that it is not Kongi who openly advocates it, it is his agents, the party fanatics in the Aweri Fraternity, who bring it to fruition.

In Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, the portrayal of Koomson is not radically different from that of Chief Nanga. Shorn of Nanga's violence and ruthlessness as a state agent, Koomson the politician also displays an agency based on naked corruption. In the words of Charles E. Nnolim,

if Koomson belongs in the Third Circle with the avaricious, the lustful, and the gluttonous, he also belongs in the Eighth Circle of Hell with the Panderers, the Flatterers and the Seducers who are immersed in excrement from which a terrible stench is emitted. In this circle, too, I place the lawyers, the politicians, and the merchant women.<sup>23</sup>

Similarly, he continues, "the police officers and the bus driver and his conductor belong with the fraudulent in Hell, abusing, as they continually do, the persons and the confidences of those they are supposed to serve."<sup>24</sup>

The fact is that Koomson is a "party-man," while lawyers, merchant women, police officers and the bus driver all represent significant social institutions whose activities raise the state into an instrument of corruption. Armah, like Achebe and Soyinka, goes to great lengths to establish a direct link between the activities of these representative institutions and the state. The clinical descriptions of filth, stench and abject decay merely reinforce this link, concretizing it into a physical reality that suggests a sense of the state as a sum total of the activities of its representative agents and institutions. Thus in Armah's novel we are presented with the image of a nation state that cripples in its anti-life, anti-human postures.

Remarkably, all these three creative works of the sixties draw attention to the rise of the military as symbolic expressions of the nation state. In both Armah's and Achebe's works, the military "intervenes," while in *Kongi's Harvest* the military presence is seen as a deadly struggle for total power and control of the state apparatus. Moreover, while in *A Man of the People* military intervention is welcomed as a redeeming factor, Armah's military in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* is seen as part of a problem: the unremitting corruption of the state and its institutional framework. There is a sense of relief, but this



is short-lived as we witness the "saviours" also "eating bribes" at the military check point. On the other hand, when Kongi occupies the center stage, there is no feeling of welcome or relief; he and the military presence are seen as symbols of naked power and tyranny and, consequently, as sources of conflict and instability.

The acknowledgement of the military presence in these creative works coincides with the increasing wave of military interventions in African countries during the sixties. While Soyinka was more prophetic about the military presence in the sense of constituting it as a decisive factor in state power, both Achebe and Armah were more conscious of its **temporary** role in state affairs. Later on, this image of the military was to change radically especially, most recently in Achebe's newest novel, *Anthills of the Savannah*.

#### The Neo-Colonial State in the Works of Ngugi

In the meantime, towards the end of the seventies and the beginning of the eighties, another image of the African state was to emerge. This comes out vividly in the works of Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, particularly in his *Petals of Blood* (1977) and *Devil on the Cross* (1982). The novels focus on Kenya as a concrete example of a neo-colonial state in Africa. They speak of modernization and of the rise of an African clientele elite and its alliance with international capital under the protection of the state.

The two novels are first and foremost creative realizations of Kwame Nkrumah's book, *Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism* (1968), Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) and Walter Rodney's *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1972). It is not by coincidence that in his collection of essays, *Barrel of a Pen: Resistance to Repression in Neo-Colonial Kenya* (1983), Ngugi refers to Kenya as a neo-colonial country by associating it with economic violence. He accuses the state of "an immoral sale and mortgage of a whole country and its people to Euro-American and Japanese capital for a few million dollars in Swiss banks and a few token shares in foreign companies."<sup>25</sup>

In the novels themselves, violence, money, and the state are inextricably bound together. This is concentrated for us in *Petals of Blood* by the deeds and actions of that inimitable character, Nderi Wa Riera, the absentee Member of Parliament for Ilmorog. As Eustace Palmer has pointed out, this M.P. becomes "a real life-size character demonstrating his incompetence, corruption, and indifference to the people's suffering in a number of telling scenes."<sup>26</sup>

He is one of the country's wealthiest capitalists actively supported by the party in power. Hence his readiness to employ terror seems to

know no limits. So, for example, when he conceives details of his plan "to make KCO grow into the most feared instrument of selective but coercive terror in the land" he is reminded by the "top directors of companies, big landlords and other men of status [that] there was always the police, the army and the Law Courts to put down any resistance from below."<sup>27</sup> This is what we witness in the court case involving Muturi, Wangari and the student leader in *Devil on the Cross*. These three had organized a protest march, been arrested and "charged with the offence of disturbing the public peace at Ilmorog Golf Course during a meeting of some **private businessmen** and, in the process, causing the death of seven persons."<sup>28</sup> As soon as the court releases them, the whole courtroom becomes "completely surrounded by soldiers armed with guns and shields and batons. When Wangari and Muture and the student stepped outside the courtroom, they were met with guns and chains"<sup>29</sup> and hauled off to a much quieter detention.

The alliance between the state, foreign capital, and violence is also concretized in the physical transformations of Ilmorog, where the action in the two novels takes place. Ilmorog grows from village to an industrial complex on carefully deployed metaphorical contrasts. The old Ilmorog of principled warriors, rustic fortitude, stability and security, is contrasted with the new Ilmorog "as capitalists move in with their roads, banks factories, distilleries, and estate agencies."<sup>30</sup> Old Ilmorog is destroyed, but accompanying this destruction is the new volume of violence, as Munira reflects upon in *Petals of Blood*:

... what caused things to happen? The New Ilmorog of one or two flickering neon-lights; of bars, lodgings, groceries, permanent sales, and bottled Theng'eta; of robberies, strikes, lockouts, murders and attempted murders; of prowling prostitutes in cheap night clubs; of police stations, police raids, police cells: what brought about this Ilmorog from the old one of sleepy children with mucus-infested noses, climbing up and down miariki trees?<sup>31</sup>

The result of this is the **physical** division of Ilmorog into two: the "Golden Heights" residential area and "New Jerusalem." The neatness, affluence and taste of the "Golden Heights" area is only matched by the unpardonable levity of its inhabitants as we see in *Devil on the Cross*:

... If one man builds a twenty-room house with ten chimneys, the next man will build a twenty-room house with twenty chimneys. If this one imports carpets from India, the other will import his from Iran, and so on. . . .<sup>32</sup>

In contrast, the "New Jerusalem" of workers and the unemployed is described as the place "where the wretched of Kenya live."<sup>33</sup> Their houses are like sparrow nests, and "the walls and roofs of the shanties are made of strings of tin, old tarpaulin and polythene bags. These are the slums of Ilmorog."<sup>34</sup> In such a slum, it is not uncommon to witness the "amazing sight of endless armies of fleas and bedbugs marching up and down the walls, or the sickening, undrained ditches, full of brackish water, shit and urine, the naked children swimming in those very ditches."<sup>35</sup> Moreover, inherent in this kind of slum is the violence of poverty, a state of imprisonment that destroys, dehumanizes, and reduces the souls of men. Surprisingly, in the face of this, the state stands paralyzed, deliberately silent, unable to fulfil its duty of social justice toward the majority.

This very act of abdication is in itself proof of the state's partisanship in its alliance with money and violence. Of the elements in this alliance, it is the factor of violence which becomes the most outstanding characteristic of the 'neo-colonial state' in Africa. Not only does it become synonymous with state policy, it is also the basis of the state's relationship to its citizenry in the operation of the national economy. In other words, we get the impression of the emergent state as being sustained by an overriding sense of violence, operated to protect sectional interests. One can clearly perceive the close similarity between this kind of violence, emanating, as it were, from considerations of economics, business and trade, and the political violence we witness in the earlier works. In both cases, state violence is sustained by the military, police, law courts, and the party as central state agencies. Their close link with the state apparatus is always underlined in the kinds of activities these agencies undertake in the name of the state.

#### Personal Rule As State Ideology

However, in Chinua Achebe's latest novel, *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987), we witness another situation of violence which erects "personal rule" as a state ideology. The central characters in this consist of a triumvirate: Sam, who is the Head of State; Chris Oriko, the Commissioner for Information; Ikem Osodi, the Editor of the *Gazette*, a national paper. These three are bound together by ties of friendship which have lasted for more than twenty-five years. They attend the same foundation school—Lord Lugard College—at age of fourteen. They meet and train in London, and in the course of their various careers, Sam becomes an Army Commander, while both Chris Oriko and Ikem Osodi train as journalists.

The apparently indissoluble tie of friendship between them is insisted upon throughout the novel as they relate to each other by their first names—Sam, Chris, and Ikem. When Sam is invited "to become His Excellency the Head of State" he instinctively turns to his two friends for help.<sup>36</sup> They accept the challenge in the name of their friendship and all of them try to work as a team, until Sam attends his first O.A.U. Conference and learns from President-for-Life Ngongo "the habit of saying *Kabisa*"—"I have spoken, finish!" From that time on Sam sees the possibilities in being an African Head of State and decides that "he must withdraw into seclusion to prepare his own face and perfect his act."<sup>37</sup> From that time, too, "His Excellency" becomes the mode of formal address in their relationship. While Sam is apparently flattered by this and insists on its use, his close friends, including Mad Medico (MM) recognize him only by his first name, Sam. Thus throughout the novel there is the ambiguity for the reader of oscillating between two modes of address in relation to the Head of State—"Sam" and "His Excellency," an ambiguity that creates the constant feeling of something amiss, something gone sour in the relationship of the triumvirate. In addition, there is also the curious situation in the novel in which the identity of all the close friends—Sam, Chris, Ikem, and M.M.—is revealed in the **fullness** of their personal names, except Sam, whose full identity is covered by the formal address of "His Excellency." The suppression of part of his name and its enlargement by a formal title of state suggest the complete identification of the person with the state in the character of "Sam, His Excellency." And it is this close identification which reinforces his desire to be now the "leading light" in the friendship.

However, this identification soon leads to trouble. By becoming "His Excellency, the Head of State" and insisting on being so addressed, Sam opts out of their relationship, breaking down the bonds of equality, mutual respect, and profound familiarity that unite them. He is no longer interested in their "team effort" in government. He insists on being recognized as the Principal, the *primus inter pares*, and the man in charge of affairs. The issue of personal responsibility therefore becomes a sensitive one with him, throwing overboard the notion of collective responsibility and ministerial accountability in Government. Thus when, for example, Chris refuses to suspend Ikem from the editorial seat of the *National Gazette* and threatens to resign, His Excellency formally reminds him,

... Someday you will have a chance to change all that when you become the boss. Right now this boss here won't accept resignations unless of course he has taken the trouble himself to ask for them. Right? This may sound strange to you I know

because up till now this same boss has allowed you and others to call the shots. Not any more Chris. I will be doing the calling from now on and I intend to call quite a few before I am done. Now is that clear? I want that letter to be in Ikem's hands by close of work today, without fail. You may go now.<sup>38</sup>

Such peremptoriness, a symptom of personal rule, is also revealed in a long interview with Professor Okong, Commissioner for Home Affairs. This is after a Cabinet meeting had been rudely interrupted by a goodwill delegation from Abazon, an incident which takes the entire Cabinet by surprise including the Chief of Police. When Prof. Okong tries to apologize on behalf of his Cabinet colleagues, what ensues is the following:

"It doesn't matter. You know I've never really relied on you fellows for information on anything or anybody. You know that."

"Yes, Sir."

"I should be a fool to. You see if Entebe happens here it's me the world will laugh at, isn't it?"

Professor Okong found the answer to that one somewhat tricky and so made a vague undeterminate sound deep in his throat.

"Yes, it is me. General Big Mouth, they will say, and print my picture on the cover of *Time* magazine with a big mouth and a small head. You understand? They won't talk about you, would they?"

"Certainly not, Sir."

"No, because they don't know you. It's not your funeral but mine."

Professor Okong was uneasy about the word funeral and began a protest but His Excellency shut him up by raising his left hand.

"So I don't fool around. I take precautions. You und'stand?"<sup>39</sup>

Later, in the course of the same interview, His Excellency has cause again to remind Professor Okong when the latter compliments him for thinking about everything:

"You know why, Professor. Because it is my funeral that's why. When it is your funeral you jolly well must think of everything. Especially with the calibre of Cabinet I have."<sup>40</sup>

The image of "funeral" as associated with public responsibility emphasizes its uniqueness to the person who holds the office and also, the serious, **moral** weight it carries in the discharge of the duties attached. In this view a sense of public office seems to embody a critical element: it can make or break an individual's reputation in life. However, in practical terms, it is a view in which the moral dimension of duty is much more emphasized than the personal dimension. Its direct association with a high profile in performance and achievement in office makes the notion of it as a personal property irrelevant and dangerous. And yet, that is precisely what happens in the novel. When His Excellency refers to his duties as "his funeral," he seems to stress his personal responsibility for that office **because** he is the person who would experience the shame and humiliation that goes with failure or non-performance. He does not appear to think of the duty to achieve results, but only to avoid shame and failure. This is why he cannot stand demonstrations, opposition or criticism of any kind—because they suggest failure and non-performance. They suggest a confrontation with his pride and a challenge to his authority.

It is interesting that Ikem Osodi, one of the triumvirate, also appears to share the same notion of public office as that of His Excellency. He protests against the idea that his editorial coverage of events be censored by his Ministerial boss, the Honorable Commissioner of Information. He fumes about it, declares that the act is not good enough for him, that it is his "**name** and address which is printed at the bottom of page sixteen of the *Gazette*. . ." and that it is him, the Editor, "who'll be locked up by Major Samsonite if the need arises. . ."<sup>41</sup> In short, it is **his** funeral. Unfortunately, he misfires; he is told that "Chapter Fourteen, Section Six of the Newspaper Amendment Decree gives the Honourable Commissioner general and specific powers over what is printed in the *Gazette*."<sup>42</sup> While this is a brief encounter in the novel (it happens on the phone and takes no more than a few seconds), the **emotional** contrast between Ikem and Chris in this episode is intended to be significant. Ikem's anger, sometimes degenerating into vulgarity, is contrasted with the sanguine and legalistic attitude of Chris, who underlines his ministerial responsibility **under the law**. We get the impression that Chris is fulfilling a duty expected of him, while Ikem is being overly anxious about the safety of his person. Whatever the merit, it becomes obvious that Chris' legalistic attitude is intended to **distance** the duties of the office-holder from his

person, while Ikem's traditional notion of it as one's "funeral" provides room for confusing the two. Ironically, it is this scope for confusion embedded in the traditional notion which fuels the antagonism among the three friends.

In the course of a conversation between Chris and his girl friend Beatrice, the latter tells Chris that the story of Kangan "is the story of the three of you. . . ."43 While this observation is meant to be a casual affair in the conversation, it nevertheless assumes a significant commentary on the nature of appointments to public office in the novel. Sam, the Army Commander, "is invited by the even younger coup-makers to become His Excellency the Head of State."44 In turn, he instinctively turns to his old friends for advice and subsequently appoints Chris Commissioner for Information, while Ikem is made the editor of the *National Gazette*. Professor Okong is appointed Commissioner for Home Affairs on the personal recommendation of Chris. And Mad Medico (M.M.), we are told, "got on very well with His Excellency, as everybody knows. It was their friendship which brought him (to Kangan) in the first place, made him hospital administrator and saved him a year ago from sudden deportation."45 Similarly, we are also told that in spite of "unconfirmed rumors of unrest, secret trials and executions in barracks," His Excellency was able to ride "the storm quite comfortably thanks to two key appointments he had personally made--Army Chief of Staff and the Director of the State Research Council, the Secret Police."46

In the novel itself, these personalized appointments give rise to the primary conflicts which inform it--betrayals, sycophancy, personality clashes, perversions, and ruthlessness. There is not a single significant character that does not define his relationship in the novel in terms of these factors. In his anxiety, for example, to dissociate himself from the perceived personality conflict between Chris and His Excellency, Professor Okong sells the idea of Chris' stubbornness at Cabinet meetings as being the result of the long-standing friendship between His Excellency and Chris. Since the latter is His Excellency's bosom friend, he feels no obligation to obey him or be loyal. Professor Okong sells this idea in full knowledge of the fact that Chris is his "political patron," the one who recommends him to his ministerial appointment in government. By this act of denunciation, he intends to assure His Excellency of his own good faith and make genuine affirmations of undivided loyalty. It is such situations of duplicity and betrayal which characterize the atmosphere of the novel. Consequently, throughout the novel, we are made to believe that the major conflicts between characters are the direct result of a personalized conception of public office and public appointments.

### Features of the Modern State in Africa

In the works so far examined, there is a haunting sense of the misuse of state power and the state machinery through its political, economic and military functionaries. Party officials, businessmen, traders, and law enforcement agencies that we encounter see themselves as agents of the state and therefore reveal an inordinate tendency to see their actions and activities as synonymous with the legitimate interests of the state. Their sense of authority and consequently their "authoritarianism" within the state structure seem to derive from a firm belief in the concept of the state as a matrix of client-patron relationships. This feature was prevalent in the *barankata* system of the Fulani-Hausa Emirate under British colonial rule (Tlibenderan, 1989: 73), while Arhin has identified it as being reminiscent of the Akan traditional "ideology of patrimonialism":

. . . This is to say, that the operational principles of these organizations are precolonial ones and not those subsumed in their counterparts borrowed from the erstwhile colonial powers. In concrete terms, an African state, or political party and associated public or semi-public organizations such as the numerous state enterprises, tend to be run as kinship or patron-client structures normally associated with indigenous polities. Consequently, they tend to differ operationally from what may be expected from the structures and functions set out in the "constitutions" and "charters," of what are avowedly modern organizations. In practice they tend to be "total" institutions as were the pre-colonial African polities and organizations.<sup>47</sup>

The patrimonial state in Africa places a high "premium on political power" for obtaining economic benefits.<sup>48</sup> Goran Hyden has called it the "politics of affection [which is] characterized by the investment of individuals and social bodies in patronage relations at all levels."<sup>49</sup> Also known as "prebendalism," it has led to influence peddling, the giving of exorbitant commissions to political cronies, and the use of public funds for private purposes or narrow partisan and class interests. This is what we witness in *A Man of the People*, *Petals of Blood*, and *Devil on the Cross*.

Associated with this primary feature is the corresponding ascendancy of "personal rule" seen in the context of a military state. Both Amos Perlmutter (1969) and Opoku Agyeman (1988) have described this situation as a feature of the "praetorian state" in which the military sees itself as a "core group" completely taking over the political leadership of the state. Wole Soyinka's *Kongi's Harvest* and



Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* raise our consciousness of this phenomenon. The "military factor" in state affairs is seen in these works as a means of usurping state power and installing the most vicious form of autocratic rule. In this regard, public appointments are made on sufferance, sycophancy becomes rife, and political openness--public debate, criticism, demonstrations, and free speech--are effectively controlled or outlawed. According to Ibrahim K. Sundiata, this form of tyranny has been identified as part of the "Warrior Tradition in Africa." He cites Ali Mazrui (1975) who

. . . places present-day African tyrants within "a tradition which has at times collapsed in exhaustion under the terrors of white hegemony, but which also had its moments of resurrection." In such a tradition, violence "sometimes assumes a disproportionate air of sacredness and mystique. Manhood becomes equated with capacity for ruthlessness, as well as with potential for virility." In this case, the argument comes close to one for African atavism. The explanation for despotic dictatorships in Africa rests on factors of social psychology rooted in the "primordial" conditions of the precolonial past. . . 50

In Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*, the conception of public office and the attitude towards its responsibilities is captured in the imagery of "my funeral," as we have earlier discussed. The use of the imagery seems to suggest a kind of social psychology rooted in the "primordial" conditions of the precolonial past. Similarly, the symbolism of "eating the first of the New Yam," as we witness in *Kongi's Harvest*, also postulates a continuity of forms of political power and authority between the past and the present. From Kongi's point of view, his political Kingdom becomes "wholesome" only when he appropriates the traditional paraphernalia of power to legitimize his dictatorship. The ironic paradox in this situation is our awareness that between Kongi's dictatorship and Oba Danlola's traditional autocracy, there is no difference, one flowing into the other, the old into the new.

Closely related to the foregoing is the outstanding image of the African state as an instrument of force, repression, and naked violence. This feature is found in all the writers cited in this paper. The impression is given of a state in which "praetorianism," "autocratic rule," "patrimonialism," and "clientele relationships" combine to generate a kind of violence that undermines political, economic, social, and cultural stability. Its general effect is for the state to abandon the rule of law and to operate without any semblance of legal constraints. The state abandons its responsibility towards the broad mass of its

people, distancing itself, as Ikem Osodi reflects in *Anthills of the Savannah*, from "the vital inner links with the poor and the dispossessed of this country, with the bruised heart that throbs painfully at the core of the nation's being."<sup>51</sup> At its worst, the violence of the modern state in Africa forces thousands to laugh "so blatantly at their own humiliation and murder."<sup>52</sup> It reduces the people to a painful state of passive indifference, and it is this ultimate reality of state violence that all the writers react to without constraints.

All the writers discussed in this work react to these conceptions of the modern state in Africa with techniques that suggest a relationship without deference. They deploy satire, ridicule, and parody to reveal a certain **distancing** from the assumptions of the modern state. An attitude of moral outrage is inevitable, but this is displayed with the utmost technical restraint. Some of the writers—Ngugi and Soyinka—are abrasive in their depictions, oftentimes revealing traces of anger, irritation, and frustration, but these are always **tempered** by extreme sophistication in the use of techniques and craftsmanship. Although they leave the reader in no doubt as to the fact that they cannot be reconciled to the pretensions of the modern state, they nevertheless provide creative insights that seek to educate the reader on the reasons for the state of affairs they paint. Hence, their criticism is also informed by a considerable amount of understanding, objectivity, and tolerance. In this respect, these modern writers in Africa do not appear to be radically different from their creative ancestors in the oral tradition. Both categories of artists seem to relate to their different polities with a great deal of tolerance and sympathy. Both of them indulge in political criticism, but the intensity of the dissent seems to be tempered by the restraining influence of technique. These observations are made against a background of political states that are as different from each other as time and changes in circumstances would permit. But there is also an awareness that although social change has affected political systems in Africa since pre-colonial times, there are trends toward a revival, toward certain continuities in political culture and practices. Such trends of revival and continuity provide a basis for considering the depiction of the relationship of the African artist to the political state as a tradition that is not so recent as to exclude a consideration of the pre-colonial literary artist.

### Conclusion

Our study of the phenomenon of the nation state in contemporary writing in Africa is based on a random sampling of texts

in fiction and drama. It seems to reveal that from the sixties well into the eighties, African writers have consistently dealt with the rise and growth of the nation-state in Africa. They have warned against it in terms which leave the reader in no doubt about the perversions of the state in African life. They have warned of its threat to democratic aspirations and its lack of equity in the economic and developmental obligations to the citizenry. They have underlined its human cost, stressing its corrosive effect on spheres of social and cultural interaction. They have shown how individuals, under the guise of institutional allegiance and membership, have taken advantage of the state machinery without any constraints; they have underscored how the state itself, consciously employing its coercive powers, has taken sides in protecting and championing sectional interests of foreign monopoly capital. They have revealed the increasing alliance and identification of the state with its military establishment, paving the way for the most autocratic and despotic rule of military agents, thereby undermining the democratic culture and aspirations of African societies. In fact, these African writers have, in the words of Soyinka, "truly responded to the political moment of [their] society" and decided to face its attendant "disillusionment."<sup>53</sup> In dealing with these fundamental concerns, these writers have endorsed Soyinka's observation that "the real African consciousness establishes. . . [that] the past exists now, this moment, it is co-existent in present awareness."<sup>54</sup>

They have examined present day political, social and economic realities with the same passion and technical mastery as they bring to bear on their depiction of the African past.

Few publications, as earlier indicated, have focused on aspects of politics in contemporary African writing, but fewer still, if any, have found it necessary to examine issues within the specific context of the emergent nation-state. This neglect is regrettable because Africanists in the social sciences have become increasingly concerned with such issues, and it will be interesting to complement their studies with similar ones in African literature and drama so as to arrive at a much more comprehensive picture of what is happening on that front in Africa.

Also within the domain of African literature itself, a large proportion of literary critics have tended to maintain an attitude of "equal but separate development" with regard to both the written and oral literary traditions on the continent. Consequently, although a lot of work has been done on the traditional literary artist and his relationship with traditional states and politics as reflected in recorded works, it has not been possible, or indeed advisable, to perceive of this contribution as a viable tradition of political dissent of which their modern successors are a part. The need to establish a primary link between artists of the past and those of the present in the matter of a common tradition of

political observations, criticism, and commentary is long overdue. But we cannot undertake such a primary linkage without recognizing that contemporary African artists in the written tradition have also been deeply concerned and involved with the central issue of political commentary and criticism in their works—particularly with regard to what they now perceive as the phenomenon of the modern state in Africa.

<sup>1</sup>Camara Laye, *La Maitre de la Parole* (Paris: Plon, 1978) p. 183.

<sup>2</sup>D.T. Ninae, *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali* (London: Longman, 1980) p. 1.

<sup>3</sup>Trevor Cope, *Izibongo: Zulu Praise-Poems* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968) p. 32.

<sup>4</sup>M. Damane and P.B. Sanders (eds.), *Lithoko Sotho Praise-Poems* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974) p. 27.

<sup>5</sup>Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Literature in Africa* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970) p. 82.

<sup>6</sup>Kwame Arhin, "The Asante Poems: The Ideology of Patrimonialism," in *Paideuma* No.32, p. 163.

<sup>7</sup>Finnegan, *Ibid.*, p. 83.

<sup>8</sup>Michael Grower, "The Contemporary Nigerian Artist: his patrons, his audience and his critics," *Presence Africaine*. No. 105/106, p. 134.

<sup>9</sup>Wole Soyinka, "The Writer in a Modern African State," in *The Writer in Modern Africa: African-Scandinavian Writers' Conference, Stockholm 1967* (Uppsala: The Scandinavian Institute of African Studies) p. 18.

<sup>10</sup>K. E. Agovi, *Literature in Action: Techniques of Traditional Drum and Horn Poets* (Mimeograph) (Ligon: Institute of African Studies, 1980) p. 20.

<sup>11</sup>D. T. Niane, *Op.Cit.*, p. 1.

<sup>12</sup>Mazisi Kunene, *Zulu Poems* (U.S.A. Africana Publishing Corporation, 1970) p. 14.

<sup>13</sup>S.O. Iyasere, "African Oral Tradition: Criticism as a Performance, a Ritual," in *African Literature Today*, No. 11, p. 170.

<sup>14</sup>See K.E. Agovi, "The Political Relevance of Ghanaian Highlife Songs Since 1957," in *Research in African Literatures*. Vol. 20, No. 2, pp. 194-196.

<sup>15</sup>Claude Wauthier, *The Literature and Thought of Modern Africa* (London: Heinemann, 1978) p. 17.

<sup>16</sup>Chinua Achebe, "The Role of the Writer in a New Nation," in *Nigerian Magazine*, No. 81, p. 157.

<sup>17</sup>E. N. Obiechina, "Cultural Nationalism in Modern African Creative Literature," in *African Literature Today*, No. 1.

<sup>18</sup>Wole Soyinka, *Op.Cit.*, p. 17.

<sup>19</sup>Cosmo Pieterse and Donald Munro (eds.), *Protest and Conflict in African Literature* (London: Heinemann, 1969).

<sup>20</sup>Kolawole Ogungbesan, "Politics and the African Writer," in *African Studies Review*, Volume XVIII, No. 1, p. 49.

- <sup>21</sup>Thomas Knipp, "Poets and Politics: Speculation on Political Roles and Attitudes in West African Poetry," in *African Studies Review*, Volume XVIII, No. 1, p. 47.
- <sup>22</sup>Juliet I. Okonkwo, "The Missing Link in African Literature," in *African Literature Today*, No. 10, pp. 99-100. See also Kalu Ogbaa's article, "Literature and Politics in Africa: Achebe's Latest Contribution," in *Nigeria Magazine*, Vol. 53, No. 3, pp. 50-57 and, also, David Carroll's review of Achebe's *A Man of the People*, in *Critical Perspectives on Chinua Achebe*, p. 255.
- <sup>23</sup>Charles E. Nnolim, "Dialectic as Form: Pejorism in the Novels of Armah," in *African Literature Today*, No. 10, p. 211.
- <sup>24</sup>*Loc. Cit.*
- <sup>25</sup>Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, *Barrel of a Pen: Resistance to Repression in Neo-Colonial Kenya* (Trenton, N. J.: African World Press, 1983) p. 53.
- <sup>26</sup>Eustace Palmer, "Ngugi's *Petals of Blood*," in *African Literature Today*, No. 10, p.162.
- <sup>27</sup>Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, *Petals of Blood*, p. 186.
- <sup>28</sup>Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, *Devil on the Cross*, pp. 230-1.
- <sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 232.
- <sup>30</sup>Eustace Palmer, *Op.Cit.*, p. 157.
- <sup>31</sup>*Petals of Blood*, p. 190.
- <sup>32</sup>*Devil on the Cross*, p. 130.
- <sup>33</sup>*Loc. Cit.*
- <sup>34</sup>*Loc. Cit.*
- <sup>35</sup>*Loc. Cit.*
- <sup>36</sup>Chinua Achebe, *Anthills of the Savannah*, p. 12.
- <sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 145.
- <sup>38</sup>*Loc. Cit.*
- <sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 15-16.
- <sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 19.
- <sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 26.
- <sup>42</sup>*Loc. Cit.*
- <sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 66.
- <sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 12.
- <sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 55.
- <sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 14.
- <sup>47</sup>Kwame Arhin, *Paideuma*, pp. 163-4.
- <sup>48</sup>*Perestroika without Glasnost in Africa: Conference Report Series* Volume 2, No. 1 (Atlanta, Georgia: The Carter Center, 1989) p. 14.
- <sup>49</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 4.
- <sup>50</sup>Ibrahim K. Sundiata, "The Roots of African Despotism: The Question of Political Culture," in *The African Studies Review*, Volume 31, No. 1, p. 111.
- <sup>51</sup>*Anthills of the Savannah*, p. 141.
- <sup>52</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>53</sup>Soyinka, *Op.Cit.*, p. 16.

<sup>54</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 19.

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