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THE BLACK AESTHETIC AND AFRICAN BOLEKAJA CRITICISM

by

Chidi T. Maduka

John Killens in his topical book on the Afro-American's quest for identity in America - Black Man's Burden - retells a popular American story about a man's encounter with a lion:

A little boy had read numerous stories about various life-and-death struggles between a man and lion. But no matter how ferociously the lion fought, each time the man emerged victorious. This puzzled the boy, so he asked his father, 'Why is it, Daddy, that in all these stories the man always beats the lion, when everybody knows that the lion is the toughest cat in the jungle?'

The father answered, 'Son, those stories will always end like that until the lion learns how to write.'<sup>1</sup>

The story aptly dramatizes what Richard Wright rightly sees as the battle between whites and blacks for the possession of reality in America and also captures the spirit of cultural nationalism animating the various conferences and symposia organized by Black artists and thinkers throughout the world at various stages of the long drawn-out battle for the affirmation of the humanity of Blacks.

It echoes in particular the preoccupations of many authors and critics of African ancestry who fervently use their works to forge a new image of the Black man. The positions of Langston Hughes, Etienne Lero, Leon Damas, Aime Cesaire, Leopold Senghor, Edward K. Brathwaite and Joseph Okpaku are typical. Langston Hughes asserts in his celebrated "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" that the Black writer should explore himself fully and authentically by seeing himself as a Black man who happens to be a writer and not as a writer who happens to be Black:

One of the most promising of the young Negro poets said to me once, "I want to be a poet - not a Negro poet," meaning, I believe, "I want to write like a white poet;" meaning behind that, "I would like to be white." And I was sorry the young man said that, for no great poet has ever been afraid of being himself.<sup>2</sup>

Then in self-pride he makes a declaration whose impact :  
felt throughout the length and breath of Africa and th  
Diaspora:

We younger Negro artists who create now intend  
to express our individual dark-skinned selves  
without fear or shame. If white people are  
pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't  
matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too.  
The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. If  
colored people are pleased we are glad. If they a  
not, their displeasure doesn't matter either. We  
build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know  
now, and we stand<sub>3</sub> on top of the mountain, free  
within ourselves.

Etienne Lero who admires Hughes (and Claude McKay, another  
forceful writer of the Harlem Renaissance) speaks in the sa  
vein when in his polemical La Legitime Defense published  
1932, he calls (along with his collaborators) on Francopho  
West Indian poets to stop their sterile imitation of Fren  
writers especially the Parnassiens and develop their own idi  
rooted in the West Indian experience. And the proponents  
the Negritude movement, Damas, Cesaire and Senghor, realize  
that it is futile for Blacks to deny their humanity in ord  
to fit into the mold of European experience, call for  
positive affirmation of Black values by idealizing features  
African life in their works. As for Edward Kanau Brathwai  
who is at the vanguard of the quest for the West Indi  
Aesthetic, he believes that the "aesthetic formulation f  
ourselves begins with rhythm; Survival rhythm, emancipati  
rhythm, transfiguration rhythm; and how the one, the eg  
comes to this, comes of of this, relates to this and us a  
others."<sup>4</sup> And Okpaku of Nigeria who in his critical a  
publishing activities tries to reassert the dignity of t  
African, categorically declares that the "present practice  
judging African literature by Western standards is not on  
invalid, it is also potentially dangerous to the developme  
of African arts. It presupposes that there is one absolu  
artistic standard. Consequently, good African literature  
taken to be that which most approximates Western literature.

There is thus a current running through the depths  
the creative consciousness of the African peoples of t  
world, which calls for a radical redefinition of the criter  
for understanding Black creativity, just as there is  
equally strong one (represented by, e.g. Eustace Palmer  
Sierra Leone) asserting that de-Europeanising these criter  
manifests an unwarranted display of cultural chauvinism sir  
"Our considerations must be literary and cultural rather th  
ideological, nationalistic or political."<sup>6</sup>

The proponents of The Black Aesthetic movement and the African Bolekaja criticism are ardent articulators of the first position. They strongly object to the idea of evaluating African works with canons rooted in European critical tradition by insisting on developing criteria based on values from the African Heritage.

The Black Aesthetic movement embraces a group of practising artists such as Imamu Baraka (LeRoi Jones), Mwalimu Haki R. Magahabuti (Don L. Lee), Carolyn Rogers, Nikki Giovanni, Sonia Sanchez, Mari Evans, Sun Ra, Etheridge Knight, Norman Jordan, and Keorapsetse Kgositse. Addison Gayle, Jr and Hoyte Fuller are its leading theorists. The movement came into existence in the 60's when militant Black nationalism called for a total redefinition of the image of Blacks in America, and when most African states became independent -- a phenomenon that fuelled the zeal of the nationalists.

Since then a lot of works have been published to explain its ideology to the republic. In 1968, its leader, Imamu Baraka, coauthored The Black Fire with Larry Neal; in 1970 the prestigious Black World formerly known as Negro Digest carried a special issue on the movement; in 1971, Addison Gayle Jr. edited the widely-read The Black Aesthetic and wrote his other controversial work, The Way of the New World: Black Novel in America in 1975; and Stephen Henderson, who is a highly respected scholar-critic, did an incisive analysis of the poetry of the group in his book Understanding the New Black Poetry (1973).

The radical group of critics from Africa whose views resemble those of the members of the Black Aesthetic movement is made up of - to borrow Wole Soyinka's term - the troika: Chinweizu, Ihechukwu Madubuike and Onwuchekwa Jemie. All of them are practising poets: Jemie and Chinweizu generally write in the vein of the militant, iconoclastic style of the partisans of the Black Aesthetic movement, while Madubuike uses images from traditional African society to capture the plaintive tone of nostalgia for traditional African values characteristic of the poetry of Kofi Awoonor and Gabriel Okara. They are however better known as scholar-critics. They all came into contact with the Black Aesthetic movement during their stay in USA, as students and as university teachers. Their book Toward the Decolonization of African Literature which is dedicated to thirty-three "giant voices of the Black World calling us to Liberation"<sup>8</sup> has the force of a literary manifesto. "We are bolekaja critics," they tell us, "outraged touts for the passenger lorries of African literature."<sup>9</sup> Bolekaja is a Yoruba word meaning "Come down let's fight!"



Many critics are frightened by the views of this crop of cultural nationalists from America and Nigeria because they hardly take into account the socio-historical context of their ideas, which is itself conditioned by the attitudes of certain European critics of Afro-American and African literatures.

#### Eurocentric Criticism

As is well-known, many European critics of Black literatures generally perceive Black America and Africa as intellectual colonies of Europe. They see these areas of world cultural heritage as entities that have been colonized through language. The European languages thus symbolize values and sensibilities that the colonized should aspire to acquire. Accordingly, these critics, each in his own way, analyze the works written (in these languages) by authors of African ancestry as objects of study that have validity only in so far as they embody qualities recognized as artistic in Europe. Frequently, certain elements that appear strange are evaluated negatively, and depending on the degree of the critics' prejudice, the works can be treated with contempt, condescension or utter rejection. Specifically, the criticism may take the form of any of the following characteristics: Parochialism, punditry and insensitivity to literature in African languages.

(1) Parochialism: The critic consciously or unconsciously believes that what is good for Europe must also be good for Africa, and that the African is culturally inferior to the European although he could (in evolutionary terms,) eventually become as 'civilized as the European. Accordingly, he views African literatures as moving organically towards a level of sophistication that is generally associated with European literatures. This attitude is epitomized by some of the observations made by Charles Larson in his controversial book, The Emergence of African Fiction and Robert Bone in his influential works, The Negro Novel in America and Down Home. The Eurocentrism becomes all the more irritating when the word "universal" is used to denote "European," a usage that has infuriated such articulate author-critics as Achebe, Wa Thiong'o and Killens.

(2) Punditry: The critic often speaks with a tone of unquestionable authority by overstating some points, ignoring his weaknesses and arrogantly dosing out instructions to the authors on how to become accomplished Europeanized writers. Lacking in tact and humility he tends to forget that literature is not yet an exact science, thereby taking his personal opinions for immutable literary laws. Bone, for instance, asserts that:

Art is not life; it is not a branch of  
politics; it is not to be used as a front

for any cause however just. Art is a different kind of human activity from politics -- more or less valuable, depending on one's point of view -- but in any case different. To respect this distinction is the beginning of wisdom for the Negro novelist. The color line exists not between the covers of a book but outside, in the real world. Its obliteration is a political, not a literary task. Let the Negro novelist as citizen, as political man, vent his fury and indignation through the appropriate protest organizations, but as novelist, as artist, let him pursue his vision, his power of seeing and revealing which is mankind's rarest gift.<sup>10</sup>

It is difficult to understand why he displays such an intellectual authoritarianism towards the Black novelists, when it is well-known that the relationship between art and life persists as a debated issue in literary theory and criticism. Most sociologically oriented critics would surely deprecate his views. For example, Jean-Paul Sartre's qualification of such a position as a bourgeois manifestation of irresponsibility is well-known.<sup>11</sup>

### (3). Insensitivity to Literatures in African Languages:

The critic often ignores the validity of literatures in African languages, thereby overlooking the influence of these literatures on the works of the authors writing in European languages. The positions of Peter Young and Robert Clements are typical. Young thinks that it is parochial for an African author to write in his mother tongue because literature in an African language is "national" while that in English is "international."<sup>12</sup> And Robert Clements in discussing the place of African literature in World literature asserts that:

The greatest deterrent to World literature is of course the language problem, already a challenge to any comparatist, especially if we are to sample the major literary works of the five continents. Africa, which would seem at first to present the major language problem, presents fortuitously little difficulty, for the literary vehicles will remain French and English. Portuguese will surely decline, especially as the chief theme of its poetry, liberation, has been achieved.<sup>13</sup>

Clements completely overlooks the point that such African languages as Kiswahili, Hausa, Zulu, Yoruba and Igbo -- to mention but a few -- are already vehicles of literary expression and do have the potential to develop to great heights. It is now becoming obvious to many scholars that

oral and written literatures in African languages have a lot to contribute to World literary heritage because they reveal facets of human experience that form an integral part of world Culture. Moreover, they have influenced many of the African authors writing in European languages. Non-recognition of this fact on the part of Eurocentric critics has resulted in a distorted view of African literatures.

To summarize, the ideas of the advocates of the Black Aesthetic movement and the African bolekaja criticism can better be evaluated in the context of Eurocentric criticism which, as has been demonstrated, reveal such objectionable traits as parochialism, punditry, intellectual arrogance and contempt for literatures in African languages. Our evaluation of their position will centre on two areas of analysis: autonomy of African and Afro-American literatures, and the future orientation of the literatures.

#### Autonomy of African and Afro-American Literatures

The partisans of the two movements forcefully assert that Afro-American and African literatures in European languages cannot be subsumed under the mainstream of European literary traditions. Each one constitutes an autonomous entity with distinctive patterns of historical development. Consequently, it is imperialistic for Eurocentric critics to unabashedly consider these literatures as component parts of the European literary heritage.

But there is an enigma here. These literatures are written in non-African languages. How can the authors of African ancestry claim ownership of literatures written in languages that are not their own? In fact, many European critics believe that the literatures embody the values incarnated in European literatures, and this explains why they view them as underdeveloped appendages of European literatures.

The advocates of the Black Aesthetic movement and the African bolekaja criticism disagree with such a position. And in doing so they use arguments similar to those evoked by Americans, English and French Canadians, Australians, Brazilians and other South Americans in declaring their literatures independent of those of the metropolis.

In his article "The Search for a National Language: A Problem in the Comparative History of Post-colonial Literatures" David Haberly examines the nature of the quest for separate national literatures in the United States, Brazil, Argentina, French Canada and Australia, and the eventual emergence of such literatures as distinct and



independent. He points out that the struggle centered on the debate over the basic nature of language: "whether language irrevocably controls the thoughts and emotions it is used to express or is itself shaped by ideas, perceptions and feelings of those who use it."<sup>14</sup> The former thesis, which is Whorfian in character, rules out the possibility of the emigres having independent national literatures because the language they used would determine the character of their thought processes and literary creativity, while the latter favours independence because the new environment in which the emigres found themselves would influence the character of their language thereby affecting the orientation of the literature written in it. "The debate was everywhere resolved in favor of the second view, but the search for linguistic independence strongly influenced both the form and content of post-colonial literatures."<sup>15</sup>

Similarly, the Afro-Americans argue that the English they use has been made peculiar by the Black experience in America.

Black people do not expect white people to understand a phrase like "what happen" or "You smoke?" Yet a Black can go anywhere in this country and get an automatic response to those phrases which, in fact, mean much more than what is overtly stated. Those combinations of words conjure up Black images/provoke responses. On the other hand, I do not understand what white people say most of the time. I hear the words but the tonal range -- the pattern -- rhythm is off.<sup>16</sup>

In fact, she contends, like most members of the movement, that Black English is the vehicle of Black literature and Black literature in turn is rooted in Black experience. The Black writer mines the resources of this experience which is embedded in spirituals, sermons, blues, jazz and conversion experiences. Hence the literature has a distinct character, a distinct tradition, a distinct history: it therefore exists independent of the (white) American literature. The white critic (as well as the Black critic with a white mind) has to recognize this fact. Henderson has indeed underscored this point in his classic work Understanding The New Black Poetry in which he observes that the poetry of the Black Aesthetic practitioners is undeniably Black in theme, structure and saturation.<sup>17</sup> By "theme" he means what is said in the poem, "structure" how it is said and "saturation" the ethos of the Black people. The sub-title of the book is revealing: "Black speech and Black Music as Poetic References."



In the same vein, Chinweizu, Madubuike and Jemie categorically declare that to "insist on judging African literature by European criteria, or by criteria allegedly universal which turn out to be European, is indeed to define African literature as an appendage of European literature, and to deny its separateness and autonomy."<sup>18</sup>

Their argument which is anti-Whorfian in character, can be summarized as follows: Language expresses thought; it does not determine it. Accordingly, the European languages used by African writers do not predetermine the orientation of the thought processes of the writers; rather they express the thought processes as products of the authors' cultural environment. As they forcefully affirm:

That Tutuola, Armah, Efua Sutherland, Ama Ata Aidoo, Flora Nwapa, p'Bitek, Brutus, Peter Abrahams, Nicol, Ngugi, Achebe, Mphahlele, or Menkiti, for example, speak or write in English, however perfectly or imperfectly, does not make them Englishers, and their works belong to them and through them, to African literature - certainly not to England's literature. And the point is not so much their passports as the consciousness they project in their works, and the primary audience to which their works are directed. The grounds for the place accorded language in our ordering of considerations is perhaps best brought out by an example from the other arts. Just because an African or Afro-American plays a piano - a European invention - does not at all mean that the highlife or jazz he produces on it is European music, which therefore should be judged<sup>19</sup> by the same standards as European music.

The positions of the two groups however differ in the area of the use of European languages as vehicles of literary expression. Imamu Baraka and his group feel at home with the use of English language which they domesticate to the point of incorporating Kiswahili expressions into their English idiom. This does not however make them think, like James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison, that the forging of their experience in that language makes them co-inheritors of American/European civilization. As far as they are concerned, English language has been successfully transmuted into an idiom that is distinctively Afro-American.

On the contrary, Chinweizu, Madubuike and Jemie show a marked ambivalence towards the use of the language. They do not agree with Obi Wali or Ngugi Wa Thiong'o who argue that

only literatures written in African languages are African.<sup>20</sup> Yet they enigmatically agree with them for, although they insist that the literatures in European languages are African, they paradoxically affirm that these literatures will one day be replaced by those in African languages after the languages in which they are written shall have been abolished as the official languages of African countries. In other words, the place of<sup>21</sup> the languages in African culture is of a temporary nature.

#### Future Orientation of the Literatures

The critics centre their discussion on the future orientation of African and Afro-American literatures on two major issues: discovering the criteria for evaluating these literatures and mapping out the path of the future growth of the literatures. In both cases, their attitude captures the spirit of Langston Hughes' widely anthologized article "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," which is frequently cited in the writings of the author-critics. The article -- it is necessary to repeat the point -- fervently calls on Blacks to decolonize their minds by thinking, feeling and writing as Blacks without caring whether whites (or Blacks with white minds) approve of their writings or not: "We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter."<sup>22</sup>

The first issue is closely related to the question of White/Western aesthetic. The author-critics rightly assert that there are a set of values that constitute the norms for determining what is beautiful among the peoples of the West, and that in spite of the beliefs and practices of many Western critics, these norms are different from those of other non-Western peoples and are even more or less related to the racist ideas that permeate Western civilization. Addison Gayle asserts:

The question of a white aesthetic is academic. One has neither to talk about it nor define it. Most Americans, black and white, accept the existence of a "White Aesthetic" as naturally as they accept April 15th as the deadline for paying their income tax-with far less animosity towards the former than the latter. The white aesthetic, despite academic critics, has always been with us: poets of biblical times were discussing beauty in terms of light and dark-the essential characteristics of a white and black

aesthetic-and establishing a dichotomy of superior and inferior which would assume body and form in the 18th Century."<sup>23</sup>

He then clarifies his position by making an analysis of Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe which, embodying the tenets of the White Aesthetic, validates the notion of "the inferiority of Black people as opposed to the superiority of white."<sup>24</sup> Crusoe is associated with little England (or the white race) and Friday with Africa (or the Black race). The two characters are delineated accordingly: "Crusoe is majestic, wise, white and a colonialist; Friday is savage, ignorant, black and a colonial."<sup>25</sup> At the end of the novel, Africa is transformed into a little England and Friday becomes a white man. Thus, Gayle concludes, "Friday was parochial and inferior until, having denounced his own culture, he assimilated another."<sup>26</sup>

Chinweizu, Madubuike and Jemie on their part assert that the works of such European critics as Adrian Roscoe, John Povey, Charles Larson, Gerald Moore and Ann Tibble are rooted in Western aesthetic. Characterized by "a phony universalism which is nothing other than a commitment to a Western imperialist world view,"<sup>27</sup> Eurocentric criticism assumes that the Western aesthetic provides the criteria for judging African works. The self-styled experts on the novel model their analysis on the concept of the 19th Century European novel a la Balzac while, strangely enough, ignoring two elements: first, the innovations introduced in the European novel by such artists as Joyce, Kafka and Beckett and secondly, the techniques of African oratures. The critics of poetry centre their evaluations on the Euro-modernist sensibilities embodied in the works of T. S. Elliot and Ezra Pound, and popularized the criticism of F. R. Leavis.<sup>28</sup>

The difference in the positions of the author-critics revolves around the use of the epithets "white" and "Western." Whilst the proponents of the Black Aesthetic movement mostly use the former the bolekaja critics use the latter. The difference is attributable to the nature of the race-conscious American society where almost every facet of social reality is perceived racially; hence, one frequently hears of such terms as "White/Black politics," "White/Black business," "White/Black churches," "White/Black literatures," etc. The terms "White Aesthetic" or "Black Aesthetic" do not necessarily refer to racial concepts; on the contrary they point to cultural referents, the Aesthetic of Americans of European origin (i.e. "Western" or "European") or the Aesthetic of Americans of African origin (i.e. "African"). Consequently, when Baraka and his group say "White Aesthetic" or "Black Aesthetic" -- terms that look racist -- they are generally talking of "Western/European Aesthetic" or "African Aesthetic" -- terms that



denote cultural concepts. Many unsympathetic critics whose hostility to the movement is shaped by the apparently racist terms "White" and "Black" advance their views without taking into consideration the socio-historical context of the terms.

The second issue, as has already been noted, deals with the critics' concern with the nature of the future development of the literatures. Their basic philosophy is rooted in the idea that literature is a form of social criticism which, in order to be effective, has to reflect the totality of the writer's/critic's way of living. The authentic Black writer/critic has to imbue his creative consciousness with the values of African civilization. Dudley Randell's poem "Black Poet, White Critic" captures the spirit of their preoccupations:

A critic advises  
not to write on controversial subjects  
like freedom or murder,  
but to treat universal themes  
and timeless symbols  
like the white unicorn.  
A white unicorn?<sup>29</sup>

A good poem is functional and not autotelic; its theme, style, rhythm, imagery etc. must spring from the ethos of African civilization.

Accordingly, as Carolyn Rogers contends—and this in the spirit of the preoccupations of most members of Black Aesthetic movement—Black literature captures the rhythms of life embedded in Black experience. For a Black writer to be successful, he has to "think Black" (to borrow the title of one of Magahabuti's works), that is, he has to see himself as a Black man who happens to be a writer and not a writer who happens to be Black. His idiom, outlook and patterns of imagery will reflect the Black way of life. Only Negro writers imitate white models; real Black writers create their own models from Black history. And this history reaches back to Africa. Black is beautiful. Africa is beautiful. One notices at once that there is a touch of negritude in the creative imagination of the Black Aesthetic authors, a characteristic that negates Wilfried Feuser's contention that there is no trace of negritude in Afro-American literature.<sup>30</sup>

Similarly, the three Nigerian bolekaja critics assert that the literatures written by Africans in European languages should draw their inspiration from the ethos of African peoples. Accordingly, African writers/critics should be sensitive to the genres, themes, forms and patterns of imagery characteristic of African oral tradition, for they constitute the texture through which elements borrowed from other

cultures are transformed into authentic attributes of African literature. Such African poets as Soyinka, J.P. Clark, (early) Okigho, Echeruo and Egudu have produced bad works because their creative consciousness is steeped in Euromodernist sensibility with its resultant qualities of obscurity of language, foreign imagery, allegiance to the whims and caprices of European audience and insensitivity to social issues relevant to African socio-political consciousness. On the contrary, Okot p'Bitek, (later) Okigbo, Matei Markwei, Lenrie Peters, Kofi Awoonor, Mazisi Kunene and Senghor have written in the spirit of the African Aesthetic. As for the novelists, they have performed creditably well, although they are grossly misunderstood by the Charles Larsons and their African counterparts (e.g.) Izevbaye and Eustace Palmer.<sup>31</sup> The group then anchors their argument on the much-quoted statement of Hughes:

A liberated African consciousness will do and judge things entirely on its grounds. To adapt a famous declaration by Langston Hughes: If Europeans are pleased, it doesn't matter; if they are not, it doesn't matter.<sup>32</sup>

Just like the proponents of the Black Aesthetic movement, Chinweizu, Madubuike and Jemie write in the vein of negritude movement. The only difference is that they are less idealistic than their American counterparts. This notwithstanding, they portray a common worldview which has been perceived by some critics as racist, parochial and ever smacking of inferiority complex - the very charges that have been levelled at the Negritude poets Senghor, Cesaire and Damas. Senghor has already spoken for them when in defending Negritude he affirms:

On l'a identifiée soit a un racisme, soit a un complexe d'infériorité, alors que'elle n'est rien d'autre qu'une volonté d'être soi-même pour s'épanouir.

("It has been identified with either racism or inferiority complex, whereas it is no other thing than the will to be one-self in order to develop one's potentials to the fullest).

Toute révolution véritable est retour aux sources: a l'homme vivant. Pour paraphraser Andre Gide, la littérature la plus nationale, la plus raciale est, en même temps, la littérature la plus universelle.<sup>34</sup>

("Every authentic revolution is return to the source: to the human being. To paraphrase Andre Gide, the literature that is the most national, the

most racial, is at the same time the literature that is most universal.")

The "return to the source" of the author-critics is basically characterized by a militant if abusive use of language in defending the African civilization against what the Trinidadian J. J. Thomas called Froudacity or what the Ghanaian novelist Ayi Kwei Armah called Larsony. Froudacity is a neologism from the name James Anthony Froude, a great British author, journalist and historian who on paying a visit to the West Indies in 1887 wrote a book The English in the West Indies: The Bow of Ulysses in which he developed the thesis that Blacks were inferior human beings who could not handle the problems of independence. Jacob Thomas was so infuriated by the ideas of Froude that he coined the word Froudacity to designate vicious fallacies about Blacks, and had to write a book about it - Froudacity: West Indian Fables Explained.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, Ayi Kwei Armah of Ghana stung by indignation at the ideas expressed by the well-known Africanist Charles Larson in his book The Emergence of African Fiction, coined the word Larsony to designate the practice of inventing lies about African reality in order to pander to the prejudices of the Western audience.<sup>36</sup> Chinweizu, Madubuike and Jemie in making use of the concept assert: "Many Western critics are guilty of Larsony. Some, like Adrian Roscoe, are guilty of Larsony in the first degree."<sup>37</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

The use of acrimonious language by the author-critics in defending the values of African civilization has understandably put off many scholars - European and African. Although their language may be perceived as provocative, one must not ignore the fact that they are pitted against an array of formidable Eurocentric critics whose rhetorical excesses are objectionable. The situation has produced a common casualty in the form of assault on human dignity.

The present stage of world civilization calls for an atmosphere of mutual respect, interracial understanding and cross-cultural fertilization of ideas among the various peoples of the world. And for that, certain observations have to be made.

First, the impression created by some of the author-critics that Whites/Europeans cannot meaningfully criticize Black/African works has to be dispelled. A conscientious, rigorously disciplined, unassuming and tolerant White/European scholar can be an effective critic of Black/African works as long as he operates within the bounds of the humility of scholarship.



Second, the ideas of the scholar-critics can be better understood within the context of literary manifestos. As is usual in literary history, manifestos serve as touchstones for understanding new forms of ideas or styles that are blazing through a period. New strategies of interpretation are normally developed to cope with the complexities of change in literary traditions. This idea is tersely articulated by Morse Peckham in "Three Notions about Criticism":

As ideologies change, and as styles change, the grounds of judgements of competence change. John Sparrow once judged what was then "modern poetry" to be simply incompetent; the poets hadn't learned how to write poetry. Free verse was initially judged to be the consequence of incompetence, then judgements of competence in writing free verse were gradually developed.

Third, it is proper to place the criticism of the author-critics within the context of the larger struggle of the peoples of African ancestry for economic, political and social recognition, and not just to see it as a pure literary exercise. It is revealing that some of the author-critics themselves have published some works in the sphere of this larger context: for instance, Baraka, The New Nationalism Magahabuti (Don L. Lee), From Plan to Planet and Chinweizu The West and the Rest of Us.<sup>3</sup> It is probable that criticism of this persuasion will be less frequent with the winning of more economic, political, social and cultural rights by the peoples of Africa and the Diaspora. For a Western critic to avoid further blunders, he must eschew parochialism, punditry and intellectual authoritarianism from his scholarship, for they mar the development of healthy inter-cultural relationships between Europe and Africa.

#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Killens, Black Man's Burden (N.Y.: Dial, 1965), p. 46.

<sup>2</sup> Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" in The Black Aesthetic, ed. Addison Gayle, Jr. (N.Y.: Doubleday 1972), p. 167.

<sup>3</sup> Hughes, p. 172.

<sup>4</sup> Brathwaite, "The Love AXE/I: Developing a Caribbean Aesthetic," BIM, Vol. 16, No 61, 1977, p. 65.

<sup>5</sup> Okpaku, "Tradition, Culture and Criticism," Presence Africaine 70, 1969, p. 139. Quoted by Edgar Wright, "Critical Procedures and Evaluation of African Literature," The Critica

Evaluation of African Literature, ed. Edgar Wright (Washington, D.C.: INSCAPE, 1973), p. 4.

<sup>6</sup> Palmer, The Growth of the African Novel (London: Heinemann 1979), p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> Seriatim: Baraka and Neal, eds. Black Fire (New York: William Morrow, 1968); Gayle, Jr. ed. The Black Aesthetic (New York: Doubleday, 1972); Henderson, Understanding the New Black Poetry (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1973).

<sup>8</sup> Chinweizu et al, Toward the Decolonization of African Literature (Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishers, 1980), p.v.

<sup>9</sup> See for instance, Larson, The Emergence of African Fiction (London: Macmillan, 1978), revised edition, p. 277; Bone, The Negro Novel in America (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958); and Down Home (New York: Capricorn, 1975), p. xv.

<sup>10</sup> Bone, The Negro Novel in America, p. 246.

<sup>11</sup> "Presentation des'Temps Modernes'," Reprinted in Maurice Nadeau, Le roman francais depuis la guerre (France: Gallimard, 1963), pp. 194-199.

<sup>12</sup> Peter Young, "Tradition, Language and the Reintegration of Identity in West African Literature in English" in The Critical Evaluation of African Literature ed, Edgar Wright (London: Heinemann, 1973), pp. 24-25.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Clements, Comparative Literature as Academic Discipline: A Statement of Principles, Praxis, Standards (New York: MLA, 1978), p. 31.

<sup>14</sup> David Haberly, "The Search for a National Language," Comparative Literature Studies, Vol. XI, No. 1, 1974, p. 85.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 85.

<sup>16</sup> Carolyn Rogers, "Feelings are Sense," Black World, XIX, 8, 1970, pp. 5-6.

<sup>17</sup> Henderson, Understanding the New Black Poetry, p. 10; and "Saturation: Progress Report on a Theory of Black Poetry," Black World, XXIV,8, 1975, pp. 4-17.

<sup>18</sup> Chinweizu et. al. op. cit., p. 10.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p. 14.

<sup>20</sup>Wali, "The Dead End of African Literature," Transition 4, 1963; Ngugi, "Wa Thiong'o: The Making of a Rebel," Index and Censorship, Africa and Argentina, June 1981, Vol. 9, No 3.

<sup>21</sup>Chinweizu et. al, op. cit., p. 205.

<sup>22</sup>Hughes, op.cit.; p. 172.

<sup>23</sup>Gayle, "Cultural Strangulation: Black Literature and the White Aesthetic," in The Black Aesthetic, p. 38.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid, p. 41.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid, p. 41.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid, p. 42.

<sup>27</sup>Chinweizu et. al., p. 99.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid, pp. 7-146; pp. 147-238.

<sup>29</sup>Henderson, Understanding The New Black Poetry, p. 234.

<sup>30</sup>See Wilfried Feuser, "Afro-American Literature and Negritude" Comparative Literature, XXVIII, 4, 1976. See Chukwudi Maduka's partial rebuttal of the contention in "Comparative Literature: Concept and Scope," Nsukka Studie in Literature, 1980.

<sup>31</sup>Chinweizu et. al., op. cit. 147-299.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid, p. 237.

<sup>33</sup>Senghor, "Qu'est-ce que la Negritude?" Liberte 3 Negritude et Civilisation de l'universel (Paris: Seuil 1977), pp. 90-91. Translation mine.

<sup>34</sup>Senghor, "Francite et Negritude," ibid, p. 22 Translation mine.

<sup>35</sup>J.J. Thomas, Fraudacity: West Indian Fables Explained (London: New Beacon, 1969); First published by T. F. Unwin London, 1889.

<sup>36</sup>"Larsony: Fiction as Criticism of Fiction," First World, 1, 2; 1977.

<sup>37</sup>Chinweizu et. al., op. cit., p. 132.



<sup>38</sup>Morse Peckham, "Three Notions about Criticism" in What is Criticism? ed. Paul Hernadi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981).

<sup>39</sup>The New Nationalism (Chicago: Third World Press, 1972); From Plan to Planet (USA: Boadsie Press, 1973); and The West and the Rest of Us (New York: Vintage Books, 1975).