

Kenyan Literature: A Call for Discourse

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The nation we call Kenya did not exist a hundred years ago; it consisted for the most part of independent tribes before the beginning of the twentieth century. Today, the descendants of these tribes constitute the bulk of the nation's population, outnumbering by far descendants of immigrant populations from Asia and Europe whose ancestors are Arab slave traders, Asian traders and railway builders, and British colonialists and settlers. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the British occupied the country, naming it British East Africa. According to an article in *The Journal of African Travel-Writing*, the country was referred to as the "winter home for aristocrats" and "the brightest gem in Britain's cluster of colonies" (111). In 1920 it was declared a colony.

Spearheaded by men and women of legendary or messianic proportions, resistance movements, in opposition to alien control, marked the period that the country was under Britain. A. T. Matson and Maina wa Kinyatti have recorded the activities of some of these movements. The resistance against British rule, however, went hand in hand with collaboration. Some indigenous people played an active role as agents of the colonial enterprise, thwarting the aspirations for independence and, therefore, becoming a stumbling block in the struggle for freedom. In the end, however, the country became independent in 1963; and as an independent nation, it became a member of the East African Community, the Organisation of African Unity, the Commonwealth, and the United Nations Organisation.

The final stretch of the road to independence was short and swift: a bitter war waged against colonial rule started in 1952 and came to a formal end in 1959, and the country was independent within five years—constitutional documents for the new nation having been worked out in the capital of the British Empire. The British suzerainty was to change the character of the country forever even after it became an independent nation in 1963. The Cold War was on when the country became independent; in the event, the country claimed that it took no side on this war. Protestations to the contrary notwithstanding, however, the side it took was Western, in line with a decidedly capitalist path. This choice, coupled with the stand of those who had teamed up with the coloniser to oppose the struggle for independence and the constitution made in Britain to usher the country to independence, might account for the continued dependence on foreign aid to balance the nation's budget and, in the end, can be seen as an impediment to the development of a national consciousness. Who knows, the fascination some Kenyans have for Britain might explain the charm the West casts on our national psyche, the struggle against which is summed up two epigraphs in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Writers in Politics* and which underlies the spirit of a conference of teachers of literature:

Ignorant of their country, some people can only relate tales of ancient Greece and other foreign lands.

If we want to turn Africa into a new Europe, then let us leave the destiny of our countries to Europeans. They will know how to do it better than the most gifted among us. (3)

It is evident from symbols of nationhood such as a flag, an anthem, and a court of arms, and from defined boundaries enclosing a territory bordering Tanzania, Uganda, Sudan, Ethiopia, Somalia, and the Indian Ocean that Kenya is a nation. Further attesting to its nationhood are collective memories, whose one hallmark is resistance against alien control that culminated in independence and that is characteristic of the psychology, as well as the history, of the nation. Today, the sense of belonging to the nation is evident in endeavours to institute a new constitutional dispensation; the constitution-making exercise it is involved in attests to national sovereignty, in a way, bringing to light the impressive steps the nation has taken upon itself to consolidate its nationhood and map out its destiny. Unlike the constitutions of the 1960s made in London, the capital of imperial Britain, the current constitution is being made in Nairobi, the capital of independent Kenya. Now the country is busy debating a constitutional order, underscoring concern with its destiny. All these factors give the country a national character, consciousness, psychology, or temperament that must be distinct from any other.

Numerous languages—as well as cultures, races, religions, and tribes—characterise the country the British yoked together into a nation. Two broad groupings of the languages can be identified as indigenous and imported. By far the most numerous, languages indigenous to the country reflect the ethnic composition of native people; indeed, some of these languages are unique to the country. The main languages imported into the country are English from Britain and Arabic, Hindi, Punjabi, and Urdu from South West Asia. English is the official language and, for the most part, the language of instruction in the education system. Kiswahili, a hybrid of Bantu and Arabic, occupies a singular position in the country; the language not only is widely used in the eastern region of Africa but also is the national language for Kenya and Tanzania.

The mix of the three categories of languages reflects the unique composition of the country's population, as well as the unique history of the settlement of the country. At the same time, the importance English and Kiswahili have assumed has implications for moulding the country into a nation, for within the heterogeneity of the languages in the country are both smouldering passions whose fantasies, if realised, would tear the nation apart. There are races and tribes speaking different languages, but the nation for the most part uses Kiswahili or English for mutual intelligibility; in effect, the two languages are intended to be agents of (implying that the other languages could be impediments to) national cohesion. In this connection, the two languages occupy such a central place in the education system that one is required to pass in one of them in order to pursue post-secondary education. In the end, the two languages become active forces for national integration. Further, it suggests that the

imaginative experiences the languages mirror should give rise to a literature whose sensibility is unique.

The sensibility is expressed in the languages in which the literature exists and in the context as well as in the setting of the literature. The literature uses oral or written modes of transmission. The nation continues to pass on the inherited, as it produces new, indigenous, and at times borrowed, orally transmitted literature, some of which researchers have collected and collated in its languages of creation and translated into, by and large, English. Into the bargain, a lot of literature has been written. On the whole, I am persuaded that all this literature is part of the nation's struggle to create a distinctive culture delineating its national status as Peter Amuka and Arthur Luvai point out when they show that Kenya has been struggling to create a distinctive culture, which, I am persuaded to believe, also embodies fundamental features of humankind's universal culture.

This literature has been discussed or studied within cosmopolitan or domestic contexts. The cosmopolitan context binds the country's literary heritage, largely the written tradition, to literatures outside our national borders, while the domestic context explicitly or implicitly recognizes the existence of the country's literature—both oral and written—as a local product with hardly any connections to foreign literatures.

Within the cosmopolitan context, the literature has been discussed or studied as belonging to or being part of the literature of a group of nations: Commonwealth, African, or East African. Thus perceived, the national literary heritage becomes an adjunct of Commonwealth literature, an offshoot of African literature, or a branch of East African literature.

Treated as part of Commonwealth literature, Kenyan literature becomes part of the heritage comprising a body of literature written in the official language of the British Empire. I suspect that in an environment in which countries have valiantly struggled to chart paths—such as “the Kenya Government's White Paper on African Socialism” that, according to Goran Hyden, “doubtlessly reflected an immediate post-independence optimism, found almost everywhere in Africa, that state action could rapidly solve the fundamental problems of national unity and development” (6)—different from the body of literature the coloniser bequeathed its colonies on independence, the treatment of their literature as an appendage of a colonial heritage would become, quite understandably, increasingly difficult to defend. In the light of such developments, would it appear not strange—indeed, unfashionable—to treat the country's literature as integral to a Commonwealth heritage?

The treatment of the literature as part of African literature appears to arise out of a perception that Africa is a cultural entity, the “metaphysical landscape” Chinua Achebe talks about (63), not to mention that it is a geographical entity that has gone through some similar historical experiences. (Some of these perceptions must have given rise to the Organisation of African Unity and the African Union.) Conferences, notably the African Writers' Conference held at the Makerere University in 1962, to define the nature and discuss the role of African literature have taken place. The conferences have not agreed on its definition,

though they have underscored the continental quality of the literature of exploring the African 'metaphysical landscape' and, implicitly or explicitly, reflecting an African consciousness. The Africa-metaphysical-landscape syndrome received a boost when two conferences, held in 1974 and 1980, agreed on the need to place the study of African literature at the centre of the country's secondary school literature syllabus. In the course of time, relatively consistent and fairly prevalent has been the perception, as well as the study, of the Kenyan literature as part of a continental heritage. Consequently: Henry Owuor's study of Luo Songs appears in *Introduction to African Literature*, David Maillu's and Ngugi's characters appear in *The Prostitute in African Literature*, Ngugi features in *An Introduction to the African Novel*, *African Literature Today*, *Literature and Society in Modern Africa*, and *Stylistic Criticism and the African Novel*, and Grace Ogot and Meja Mwangi appear in *Conversations with African Writers*. A result of the emphasis on the continental character of Kenyan literature has been to downplay the national nature of the literature. In the process, the perception that the country's literature is subsidiary to a continental literary heritage perhaps accounts for the emphasis on the central place African, not Kenyan, literature plays in the curriculum in secondary schools recommended during the conferences that I have referred to. *Teaching of African Literature in Schools*—the title of a collection of papers presented at the conference held in 1974—demonstrates that emphasis. In the event, putting up a case that there exists national literatures would seem to run counter to the Africa-metaphysical-landscape syndrome that is in line with a recent assertion that the continent's "postcolonial novelists are no longer committed to the nation" but to "the continent and its people" (Kwame Anthony Appiah qtd. in Wole Ogundele: 130). In the end, a result of the emphasis on the continental character has been to downplay the national nature of the literature, the country's literature becoming subsidiary to the continent's literature.

A regional perspective informs a number of studies, subsuming the literature under a regional literary heritage. This is especially the case relative to the country's East African identity whose roots lie in Britain's endeavours to yoke together its three East African colonial possessions through institutions such as the East African Common Services Organisation and, once independent of colonial rule in the early 1960s, the three countries' efforts at economic cooperation through the East African Community. I think that it is in line with this identity that *Oral Literature of the Asians in East Africa* and *Poems from East Africa* should be appreciated, though the country's literature has been studied as part of an eastern and southern literary heritage in *Uhuru's Fire*. From whatever regional perspective the country's literature is discussed or studied, in the end, using a regional perspective implicitly denies the literature its national identity.

Within the domestic context, there is implicit recognition of the autonomous existence of country's literature, for the discussion or the study of the literature is not bound to a literary heritage outside the county's borders such as when it is tied to a Commonwealth, an African or an East African literary heritage; ethnic, authorial or textual perspectives inform this recognition. Studies done from an ethnic perspective chronicle or present the oral literature of ethnic groups—races

or tribes—as is apparent from *Oral Literature of the Maasai*, *Oral Literature of the Embu and Mbeere*, *Oral Literature of the Asians in East Africa*, *Keep My Words*, *Oral Literature of the Luo*, and *Gikuyu Oral Literature*. To date, these studies offer the oral literature of only a small number of the country's numerous ethnic groups, thereby revealing few patterns of a colourful and variegated mosaic of the country's oral literature. The authorial perspective examines individual writers such as in *Ngugi wa Thiong'o*, while the textual perspective analyses individual texts such as in *Notes on Francis Imbuga's "Aminata."* A few studies on oral literature are written from a broader perspective than the ethnic one; *Kenyan Oral Narratives* and *Oral Literature* are examples of such texts. To the extent that they are not ethnic-based, the studies subsume a national perspective in the presentation of the country's oral literature; in this category belong too author-based and text-based studies on written literature. At best however the national perspective is ambiguous and not stated.

Whether the perspective is ethnic-based, author-based or text-based there is a dearth of studies on the country's literature from a standpoint which would show how the literature captures and delineates national consciousness—the sense of belonging to a nation—as well as the parameters that go with it: history, territory, language, psychology, outlook, destiny, and so on. I am persuaded that it is from this standpoint that Laurence looks at some of the literature from Nigeria in *Long Drums and Cannons*, which obliquely subverts the African-metaphysical-landscape syndrome by implicitly recognising that once independence is won colonies in Africa develop, or go through the motions of developing into nations. In this regard, *Long Drums and Cannons* accepts that Nigeria, which had been independent for only eight years when the book was published in 1968, had evolved distinctive a national ethos that its literature defined and reflected.

Kenya has been independent for over a generation. That it has developed a literature with a national character is explicit or implicit in Henry Indangasi who limits his study, "The Kenyanness of Kenyan Literature," to written literature but who, arguing that Kenya has a national literature, defines Kenyan literature, Ogundele who discusses the relationship between the tribal and the national in the works of Ngugi wa Thiong'o, the dedication of the inaugural issue of *The Nairobi Journal of Literature* to the examination of "identity issues in Kenyan literature," and an electronic entry that delineates the history, as well as modes and languages of transmission, of the country's literature:

Oral literature is the oldest form of literature in Kenya, and oral narratives continue to play an important role in the lives of most Kenyan communities. Written literature—in Swahili and later in English—developed in the early 20th century, when these languages were adopted for use in schools throughout the colony. However, it was not until independence in 1963 that Kenya began to develop a national body of written literature. Since that time, Kenyan writers have produced literary works in English, Swahili, and various vernacular languages. Kenya's most famous post-independence writer is novelist and playwright Ngugi wa Thiong'o. (*Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia 2000*)

The country's literature however has been neither discussed nor studied to show the extent to which it defines or reflects the character, consciousness, or psychology of the nation—despite the existence of a corpus of literature the people have produced before and since the country became independent in 1963.

As a rule this literature should capture human relations in early social formations, reflect relationships between indigenous peoples and their invaders and how the relationships affected the later development of the country and explore human relationships in the contemporary society, defining and reflecting a national culture. In the process, it becomes a mosaic of gender, ethnic and class relationships over time, a chronicle of becoming and being a nation, mirroring not only the composition of the population of but also areas of concord and conflict in the nation. Depicting numerous experiences the people have in common and revealing schisms that thwart efforts geared towards national concord, the literature should suggest a way out of the schisms by demonstrating that the people have more that unites than divides them; what is more, that they share similar experiences and aspirations with the rest of humankind. The suggestion of an aesthetic ideal expressing our national aspirations is discernible in the literature produced in this country down the years. In this regard, the oral literature pre-colonial, colonial and independent peoples have created has entertained and instructed them and, in the process, helped them cope with living.

I will illustrate this assertion by recapitulating arguments developed in "Some Reflections on Oral Literature": As a reflection of human experiences, oral literature created in ancient times assisted its creators understand and survive in, as it gave them impetus to advance from, a primitive social formation; in the process, it became a beacon of hope for them and an affirmation that literature helps people cope with issues arising in the course of everyday living. Yet, from the vantage of the present, the ancient literature is an avenue for entertainment, an engine for social development, a repository of national culture... Not only that: teaching citizens of an independent nation from where they have come, it is a chronicle that infuses them with confidence that they too, like their ancestors, can survive and develop. The contemporary society recognizes the relevance of ancient oral literature as both a chronicle of survival and an embodiment of hope for the ancestors of the contemporary society, which has stepped up research into, as well as preservation of, oral literature, incorporated oral literature in the education system as well as written literature borrowing narrative techniques from it.

To date, neither has a seminar been held nor has a comprehensive critical work been written to define the nature or discuss the function of Kenyan literature. In the circumstances, discourse on the body of literature the people have produced over the generations is opportune, necessary, and, perhaps, overdue. Building upon the discussion contained in sources such as Indangasi, Ogundele, the inaugural issue of *The Nairobi Journal of Literature*, and *Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia 2000* the discourse is capable of exploring the national sensibility of the literature, discussing how the nation produces literature and how the literature narrates the nation, and, in the process, examining facets such

as origin and development, modes of communication and implied audiences, genres and languages, and particularity and universality of the literature and issues such as how the literature defines and reflects national consciousness and aspirations, as it delineates national culture. To this end, the discourse would assist the nation understand itself, unravel the aesthetic ideal the literature embodies, and, hopefully, galvanise the nation for a unity of purpose arising from yearnings for harmonious social relationships the aesthetic ideal embodies. That is not all, however: The aesthetic ideal is dynamic, for it has continually emerged from the time the country was made up of disparate people living in tribal enclaves down to the time that colonialism brought them together under one rule and independence began to wield them into a nation. Consequently, the aesthetic ideal should help the people understand where they have come from, where they are, and where they are going.

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