EGERTON JOURNAL
of
Humanities, Social Sciences and Education

Vol. X, 2011 ISSN 1021-1128

Published by Egerton University

Volume X, 2011

EGERTON JOURNAL
of
Humanities, Social Sciences and Education

Egerton University
Njoro

Egerton Journal of Humanities, Social Sciences and Education is published annually by Egerton University, P. O. Box 536, Egerton 20115, Kenya.

Subscription/Prices per copy

Kenya	KShs.400
Rest of Africa	US$15
Rest of world	US$25

ISSN 1021-1128

Typesetting and cover design by S. A. E. I. Mbanda-Obura

Printed in Kenya by Danste Agencies
P. O. Box 9654-00300
NAIROBI

EGERTON JOURNAL of Humanities, Social Sciences and Education Vol. X, 2011

Contents

Instructions to Authors of Papers for *Egerton Journal of Humanities, Social Sciences and Education*

Egerton Journal of Humanities, Social Sciences and Education is a refereed periodical published once a year, in September, by Egerton University. The ideas contained in the papers reflect the opinion of the authors and not necessarily those of Egerton University or the Editorial Board of the journal. As an editorial policy, original and unpublished papers in Arts, Humanities, Social Sciences, Education or other disciplines which advance university teaching or otherwise stimulate intellectual life, the economic and cultural development of Africa and the world, or any other related material will be considered for publication. Review articles, which discuss previously published work, must indicate the period under review and must show originality in the discriminative selection of material for comment and assessment of the current state of research and knowledge in the topics under review. An open, scholarly, and multi-disciplinary periodical, the journal has established a layout and style that authors are expected to follow (see Style Sheet).

When papers are received from authors, they will be given to appropriate referees for evaluation. If papers are rejected on any basis, the authors will be notified. Papers that need to be improved in any way before being published will be returned to authors with appropriate instructions. Before the camera-ready copy of the journal is submitted to the printer for production, copies of papers included in the journal will be sent to authors for final examination. In this case, the authors concerned will be required to notify the editors of the journal about changes they want made in the final draft within forty-eight hours following their reception of their respective work. The changes made at this point should not go beyond proofreading of the paper. Failure to do so within this time will imply that they have accepted their papers to be published as they are.

Papers should not exceed 25 pages in length. They should be typed and double-spaced. The manuscripts should be stored on hard copy (three copies, two of which should not bear the author's name) and should be mailed to the following address:

The Editor
Egerton Journal of Humanities, Social Sciences and Education
Division of Research & Extension
Egerton University
P.O. Box 536
Egerton 20115
KENYA

Papers should be accompanied by a cover letter, which should include the author's particulars necessary for efficient communication between the author and the editors. Among these particulars should be the following: the author's full name, title, institution, post office (or street) mailing address, e-mail address, and telephone number.

An electronic version should be provided only when the manuscript has been approved for publication.

The Word and Nation-Formation: Towards a Utilitarian Reading of Literature in Kenya

Peter S. O. Amuka
Department of Literature, Theatre and Film
Moi University

Abstract

This short essay is about literature and nation-building in Kenya. In more ways than one, it is a mixture of statements and questions seeking answers on how literature may be harnessed as a tool for promoting national consciousness and understanding, and establishing and enhancing a cultural identity. Most of the essay is therefore both speculative and programmatic. A reading of Jomo Kenyatta's Facing Mount Kenya *as a political, literary and nationally unifying text sets off the project. My conversations with historian Atieno Odhiambo pit his discipline against the stance of the literati even as debates rage about what literature, oral and written, contribute to the construction of the nation and its identity or identities. In the final analysis, all literature is the word, oscillating between the real and unreal, the realised and unrealised, the now and the coming and thus participates in mapping what the nation is, was and aspires to be.*

Introduction: Kenyatta's Gazing Body

When Jomo Kenyatta published *Facing Mount Kenya* (1938), his eyes were riveted on the mountain and Agikuyu culture if one reads the title and the book literally. If one chooses to read the title as *Gazing at Mount Kenya* then the assumption would be that his eyes were unwaveringly stuck on the symbolic behemoth of Kenya's oneness as a country and being. That would literally confine interpretation to the sense of sight. Yet Kenyatta's whole body was facing the whole country; helplessly eyeing at every nook and corner of the country: his back and sides and front were all looking at Kenya(ns). His gaze and the whole body joined the one snowy and highest peak in the country and embraced Kenya. Together the joint gazes pierced and drank the diverse national cultural differences and similarities. Put simplistically, *Facing Mount Kenya* is about all Kenyan mountains, valleys, landforms, cultures and

peoples, not one single mountain and one single dominant cultural community. Why am I attempting this interpretation?

One is because, although Kenyatta's seminal text is regarded as an anthropological study, a literary mind in the 21st century may read it as a construction, a creation or a symbolic representation. This kind of reading means that the book is a collection of words, crafted and scientifically argued under anthropologist Malinowski's guidance to produce a cultural treatise on a community. It can be replicated among other communities. Politically and physically it is contiguous to other communities and is therefore like them although unlike them: its gaze embraces them as theirs embrace its staring body, so to speak. Their gaze interlocks with Kenyatta's body thus uniting their differences. Second, and arising from the foregoing, is that a text is a text because my reading makes it that. It cannot be if I do not make it one. This should not be strange if one reads deconstructively. It therefore follows that a text comes into being when a reader so chooses. By the same token, a text is meant to be used by the reader: I obviously pore into it in search of knowledge. The next question is about the purpose of the information acquired. The answer is *what* I want to use it (information) for. And this is where interpretation comes in and I christen the text a metaphor, a figurative enterprise.

A metaphor has no inherent meaning. A reader must look for it, must relate the metaphor to something outside it (metaphor). Thus the tale of the elephant that seeks shelter among smaller animals, gets it and then pushes them outside into the wild is a metaphor for colonisation and material and spiritual deprivation of indigenous Kenyans. Which meaning is located outside the metaphor. This leads me to the purpose, the significance of *Facing Mount Kenya*. The obvious one is that you can read it as a metaphor, as something outside itself. And this is where reading it as a Kenyan rather than Kikuyu text comes in. What I am getting at is that Kenyatta's book is readable and applicable and usable outside the Agikuyu community. I am also thinking of the conventional classroom where every Kenyan is expected to get some education. The resultant question is why I teach literature using this great book. My simplest but perhaps contestable answer is that the book is so Kenyan, so national.

In Kenya, literature, and almost everything else is taught so that students pass examinations and earn certificates. No more, no less. Knowledge is secondary, and is more often than not, forgotten immediately the examination is over. The sense of belonging to a nation, the sense of nationhood, nationalism, national

values, can arguably be taught in the classroom, using rich texts like Kenyatta's. For nationhood and the lifelong feeling for it must be nurtured and developed in the classroom. And to do this, Kenyans need to be aware of all the diverse and different cultures and swear oaths of allegiance to all of them by learning and relearning them all the way to university and beyond. Differences ought to be highlighted and celebrated positively, not negatively the way Kenyans have done since the early 1990s to the present. Without a cultivated positive national consciousness we cannot sustain and develop what we call a nation with universal human values. Thus far I have chosen to treat narratives, whether fictional or factual, as literature, as language in action, for utilitarian purposes. I have also proposed that such texts be used for political and cultural ends in the curriculum. We can make literary and non-literary work for us to boost nation-building and national consciousness.

Let me say more about Kenyatta's text by providing a summary of a classroom experience with a course that entailed doing a comparative reading of Kenyan fiction and history[1]. Some students were mortally worried about the one compulsory question which might be about Odinga Oginga's *Not Yet Uhuru* (1967) or Kenyatta's *Facing Mount Kenya*. Remember this is 2007, the year Kenyans voted to gleefully murder, maim, rape, burn and evict one another. If I set a compulsory query on Odinga, those students were worried about my reaction should they write negatively about him. I had not taken sides with any author or personality but my ethnic background put me squarely in the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM) camp where Oginga would presumably have belonged were he alive. I was not made aware of this fear until well after the examination when those students were relieved the dreaded text was not compulsory, after all. I should not repeat the obvious fact that ethnicity more often than not permeates the teaching and reception of literature. Again I accuse our educational policy and curriculum: everything is tailored towards passing examinations, not learning, imbibing and enjoying all the histories and cultures of Kenya.

I have deliberately called Kenyatta's study scientific to underline the false assumption that this was the last and perhaps most authoritative narrative of Kenya. There were many more narratives he gazed at without seeing and transcribing. His was just another micronarrative among others. It was not universally Kenyan but all the same exemplary and worth emulating as a model for composing others. That is why I say it is (was) symbolic. I want to add that it is also socially symbolic for Kenya and Kenyatta's authoring a socially symbolic act[2]. We can go on and on, citing other narratives, fictional

and realistic. They are symbolic and historic and in many ways sources of moral edification for all Kenyans in the classroom because the family as a place for informal education is virtually dead[3].

Futile Abolition?

By abolishing the Department of English at the University of Nairobi in the late sixties and replacing it with the Afrocentric Department of Literature, the cultural revolutionaries struck a big blow for postcolonial Kenya: it became possible to study literature in various Kenyan languages and cultures but in theory only. In the context of Kenyatta's *Facing Mount Kenya*, I am theorising about a possible Kenya, a nation-to-be. In retrospect, however, the paradox is amusing and almost humiliating because Englishness did not end with the death of the department. I read oral literature in English and strained to translate the untranslatable from my mother tongue. Fieldwork was full of annotations if only to satisfy departmental requirements that an English reader had to make sense of whatever I was communicating in whatever Kenyan language.

I am not sure the new constitution and the burgeoning counties will accord prominence to indigenous Kenyan languages to develop their literatures, package them into publishable forms and let me read the poetry, drama and fiction in Kenyan languages[4]. To make myself clearer, I provide a summary of a narrative. A very highly educated medical doctor recently lost his temper with a pre-primary school for instructing his daughter in a local language and Kiswahili rather than English. And if Kenya's parliament were to have its way, the use of indigenous languages would be banned from public offices (and maybe in all public spaces including schools). I do not want to say more but language does what the composer and consumer make it do. It is nonsensical banning indigenous languages. That, to me, is another theorising about nation-building only wrong-headed because languages are only tools, not ends unto themselves. They are innocent if the politics is right. More questions arise from this observation. What's in a name, what's in changing a department's name? Was anything abolished or changed? Was (is) the name change a fiction? Was it an expression of desire for change that never came? What's in a word when that which we call literature is actually English and may become more English as Kenya grows older, Kenyan historian Atieno Odhiambo argues thus. Even Kenyan English is still English[5]. While we communicated by snail-mail, he addressed all my letters to the 'English' or 'Kizungu'

Departments. For him Literature meant English and English meant Literature (including Kenyan Literatures).

Whilst I was on a Rockefeller Fellowship at Rice University in Texas (USA) in 1990/1991, we discussed the change of name and Atieno insisted that not much had changed and that my mentors at the University of Nairobi were wallowing in a dream-world. After all, the leading voices, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Taban lo Liyong, were creative writers, people living in the world of imagination with little or no attempt to acknowledge the reality that the name change has (had) had virtually no impact. He was literally agreeing with Chinua Achebe that English had enabled him tell his stories as well as he could. After all, English enabled him reach a larger community than the Igbo language. If there is any local cultural currency (oral traditions) worth involving in nation-building, then Atieno was, to a very large extent, right because the exchange took place in English, a supposedly foreign currency. My answer is that any language can be developed and popularised to enable a nation reach the world. The language may be English but does not have to be English only.

Idlers

"I write poetry when I am idle," Atieno told me. I read some of Atieno's poetry one night in Houston, Texas, but he did not let me take them away. They were raw and still awaiting refinement. I did not have a chance to read the final product if he ever got idle enough to look at them again before falling ill and eventually passing away.

In claiming idleness for poets or associating it with the poet's craft, Atieno was almost being platonic. In pooh-poohing the 1968 change of departmental name, he literally banished Ngugi and others from the state. He thought they were too far removed from Kenya's reality. He was busy mixing or confusing fiction with reality. He was bad for Kenya's national cultural growth and stability. The implication was that he was imposing a cultural dictatorship on Kenyans; he was busy imprisoning the mind even after claiming he had liberated it from colonialism. He was replacing one colonialism with another and his colleagues were extending their patriotism and nationalism too far for Atieno. His contention was that Kenyan Literature was not promoting any local language: every literary gem in school and outside was couched in English. To date there are only two dominant languages in Kenya, English and Kiswahili, but not many take literature seriously except for passing national

form four examinations. Kiswahili, the so-called national language, does not go beyond itself in examinations: except for itself all other subjects are taught and examined in English.

Coincidentally, Atieno's essay entitled "The Formative Years 1945-1955" was written about the same time as his arguments on creative writers' idleness. I recall saying the active, relevant and productive would not know how active they were unless idlers were around or next to them as their opposites. Over twenty years after reading the essay in its handwritten form, I find the concluding paragraph very close to what I thought was straightforward binarity (Ogot and Ochieng, 1995). I may have been echoing Levis-Strauss then but let me confess that I did not notice the Foucaultian angle the conclusion of the essay takes: "Foucault argues somewhere that when people engage in a discourse it creates boundaries, but that the boundaries do not define exclusive categories. So be it with the Kenyan discourse[6]." Words may be conflicting in discourse but they break boundaries, break imprisonment in the self, culture and ethnic cocoon.

Inference from the foregoing: he and the idlers were sides of the same coin in a discoursing Kenya. I still cannot claim we have a language and literature sufficiently interlocked with identitarian issues relating to Kenya's nationhood and its standing in the global community. (I am weary of the so-called global village that is just a new form of recolonisation through regime change, e.g. the Arab Spring of 2011. America and the western world deployed Information and Communication Technology (I.C.T.) to get Arabs to change governments for them: no more direct military intervention).

Narcissism

In many respects, the Literature Department at the University of Nairobi regarded itself as revolutionary and was viewed as such and critiqued by many including Atieno. There was nothing the department had done that had not been done before. Kenyans had made attempts to decolonise themselves well before 1963, in the 1940s[7]. Decolonisation was thus an ongoing process and decolonisers should not lock themselves against one another. They would rather join hands and listen to one another. Thus the Kenyan literati should not think they had all the answers in their revolution and imprison themselves in an ideological box. If they insist on doing so, they will be excluding a reality that may enrich their oversexed reality. They need not assume monopoly of the right knowledge. After all, there can be no right without left and no left

without right. Only in the world of fancy would one imagine the non-existence of the other. And that would be unproductive (or should I say "unreproductive"?) and therefore narcissistic.

The foregoing are inferences but they lead me to a poem by Proscovia Rwakyaka that Atieno associated with Narcissus (1971). Again this was part of a discussion at Rice University. The upshot of his stance was that the poet had done what any simple-minded griot could do, namely sing about a beard and thus subject a reader to a very personal rather than social experience. He critiqued the poem from memory and we never got to read it because we did not have a copy of Cook and Rubadiri's collection that night (1971). Were we to do a close reading together, I know the discourse would yield more dimensions than his. This was his perspective and there could have been more. In "On the Dying Whimpers of Uhuru Worship" and "The Historical Sense and Creative Literature in East Africa," Atieno decries the type of creative writing that lacks the historical sense, breadth and depth, focuses on the personal and asocial and does not highlight "man in society" (1974). He most probably meant the likes of Rwakyaka, Taban and his ilk.

He seemed to think that a creative writer was a lesser intellectual mortal than an historian. In calling them idlers, he was being Platonic as I have already said but he also contradicted himself in many pronouncements. Better still, I think he was discoursing, Foucault-style. After all he argues in "The Historical Sense" that "the imaginative process is important, even decisive in literature and history" (1974). That cannot have been the thinking of a philosopher hell-bent on ostracising the creative writer as a non-thinking idler and narcissist. He was a self-admirer who, despite writing and talking so much about historical discourse, did not seem to have had space for Hayden White's thoughts (1978). He said he had heard of and read him but thought they were writing about nearly the same issues for differing audiences and reasons. In most of their arguments, Hayden White and Atieno concur about the nature of literature and history and how they are written: acts of emplotment and manipulation of experiences for special effects on the reader are but some of the strategies common to both[8].

By now we should be inferring that fact and fiction are products of imagination, that they are constructions and that the politicians', anthropologists', historians' and creative writers' mission is to make them plausible to the reader and listener. By now, we should be arguing that there are differences and similarities between fact and fiction and that the two are

actually bedfellows because one cannot exist in the absence of the other. In deconstructive terms, the two become more similar by being opposites.

Gambling

One day at Rice University, Atieno photocopied Okoth Ogendo's poem in *Poems from East Africa*, labelled it "subversive" and mailed it to Nairobi for him to read (1971). He was amused Okoth was such a keen supporter of President Moi and yet he had written a poem lampooning his (Moi's) role model and predecessor Kenyatta as a gambler who sold Kenya to neocolonialism. Most creative writers escaped censor by the powers-that-be because the latter either had no time to read or were too ill-educated to read between the lines. That is why Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Prisoner* easily won the Kenyatta Prize despite its unflattering portrait of Kenyatta's authoritarian government. Other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences were normally brutally frank and easily drew the attention and ire of political leaders. Ngugi had to indulge in open theatre to sufficiently draw Kenyatta's attention and anger. More historians had found themselves in trouble, ranging from William Ochieng to Maina wa Kinyati and Atieno Odhiambo himself. Some of Atieno's questions about the historian and Kenyan literature were answers at the same time. Do the numbers of the persecuted matter or is it the content and stories of historical and literary discourses that vary and determine readers' responses? Is the quality and power of discourse determined by the social reaction of the ruling political and economic elite? Does fictionalising reality camouflage it too much or so much that the audience misses it? Or are creative writers and actors so shallow and deeply sucked in the world of imagination that they miss reality or portray it in a manner that diminishes its value? Or was William Ochieng right in accusing Ngugi of chasing the ghost of Kenyatta rather than doing research before writing on him? According to Atieno one absolute and final answer is not possible because Kenya is in process, in a state of nation formation.

A popular argument is that creative writers in Kenya do not respect readers and care little for the production of quality knowledge. They thus think a mere ten to twenty lines on a poetic beard should draw the attention of their readers and fill bookshops[9]. Many Kenyan creative writers confess they do not conduct research for their works and do not need it anyway. They would rather imagine everything they write. I think Atieno's literary essays and William Ochieng's stance on Ngugi are a good response to such writers. To echo B. A. Ogot, they need not shout that they are more sinned against than sinning.

They, like some historians, have their flaws in the world of imagination (1971).

Theory and Assumptions

Ali Mazrui's *Triple Heritage* rubbed Atieno the wrong way the day it was launched in the city of New Orleans (1985)[10]. He argued, in a vote of thanks to his Makerere teacher, that he (Mazrui) was imagining and assuming for Africa by claiming or implying in the documentary that Islam was closer to African culture than Christianity. He did not think the religion would save the continent and reminded Mazrui that his family were owners of massive tracks of land along Kenya's east coast against a backdrop of thousands of squatters and landless people. In addition, most able-bodied African people were captured by Moslem Arab slave traders, taken to Arabian countries and castrated: they must not procreate and contaminate Arab blood. Islam could not therefore be Africa's friend and saviour: it could only plunder the wealth and murder (al Bashir of Sudan is a topical reminder of Arab racism).

Ideological and intellectual narrow-mindedness meant/mean that the literati restrict(ed) themselves to the worship of formal criticism and Marxism. Yet some of them had not read even a line by Karl Marx or on Marx, Atieno averred. An Ogun is more revolutionary than Marx anyway if one reads the *Ogun Abibiman* (1976) Atieno bought me in 1991. Soyinka is bigger than the *Lion and the Jewel* and only the mentally and intellectually lazy avoid *The Interpreters*, *Death and the King's Horseman* and others. You need not worship the mourning "intellectual Ayatollahs" of Literature (Soyinka describes *Triple Heritage* as triple tropes of trickery)[11]. They will not cause any revolution but only dictate and suppress creativity and free thinking by distorting reality and reducing it to the most bare, simplistic and dogmatic form of ideology and empty theorising. Let us extend the discussion by roping in the public and oral literature.

The Public and Oral Literature

I start off with a paraphrase of a conversation I had with a cousin in his early seventies. When I informed him of an oral literature conference in April 2010, he wondered why one would bother to have the world listen to a discussion of oral literature for nearly a week[12]. There were more urgent matters to attend to on medicine, technology, Al Qaeda, global warming, poverty, hunger, illiteracy and, in keeping with the tradition of forever being political, the

August 2010 referendum on the proposed Kenyan constitution. What this encounter implied was that there was a disconnect between the public and the study and purposes of oral literature (and other literatures) in Kenya if we agree that my cousin represented the public. Having read the few things I had penned on oral literature, he certainly doubted the national value of my efforts and cynically concluded that any semi-educated person was capable of gathering, translating and publishing tales, songs, proverbs, myths, rumours, anecdotes, riddles and others. After all, his children lied their way through high school by lifting oral material from published books and pretending they had actually conducted fieldwork. And to crown it all, they discarded the stuff and followed him into what he called "the hard sciences."

The public is apparently amply aware that my cousin's sciences exist and that they are superior to the humanities. I tried to deploy my interpretation of Blanchot that opposites attract one another, coexist as cognitive bedfellows who stare at and argue with one another and are viable entities, enjoying their differences together, but my cousin did not understand (1992). Literary scholars like seeing and saying things that do not exist he countered. My take on this was that he was not satisfied with the way scholars were packaging oral literature. He said he could not spell Derrida or Blanchot or Malinowski: They did not feature in the tales he had heard in childhood thus rendering scholarship in oral literature in particular and literature in general esoteric and inaccessible to learned people like himself. As far as he was concerned, theory is in the subject and the subject of study is in the theory. Theory should not travel from outside the subject; it should travel inside the subject with the subject. Why can't you literary scholars be like Okoth Okombo who explains so lucidly how indigenous producers of oral literature have theoretical constructs embedded in the oral literary artefacts, he reprimanded (1992). Mathematics does not need to borrow from elsewhere; if I have a problem in algebra or quantum physics or geometry I solve it within itself, not from outside itself, he claimed.

I am sure the mathematician he was needs much more (formulae) from outside to solve mathematical problems. Most renowned philosophers were originally scientists or mathematicians or both before wedging their mathematical or scientific minds into philosophy as a professional discipline. Kenya's Odera Oruka the philosopher was an undergraduate mathematician and physicist[13]. And I have deliberately mentioned him because he relied heavily on Kenyan oral tradition as the principal source of what he called sage philosophy. I am saying that tools of analysis and the methods of collecting oral literary material

need not be restricted to that material alone. I am also saying that a modern scholar should essentially be multidisciplinary even if he purports to be specialised in one single area. Here scholarship means bringing differences together and interrogating them, putting disparate parts and whatever number of opposites in one crucible and mapping around multifarious identities, under one blanket so to speak. Ultimately one may argue that the scholar is trying to create a nation. A homogeneous public, not a mathematical one-plus-one-is-equal-to-two, but a logically negotiated marriage of differences and their complexities. After all, and many authorities concur, most African art is not art for art's sake. Collecting and analysing oral literary art for a social purpose and ensuring the transparency of the process will liberate the scientist from the professional box. I suspect I am saying there is not or there should not be scholarship for scholarship's sake; rather it ought to set people, public, members of the nation thinking towards one another and reflecting on those thoughts, not away from one another in the name of ethnic chauvinism and narrow-mindedness. As a reminder Kenya is my reference point as a conglomeration of differences, whether political, economic, social, ethnic or cultural. At this point, I bring on board Taban lo Liyong and his role in the study of oral literature as a national resource.

I first came across the discipline of oral literature when I read Taban's book entitled *Popular Culture of East Africa* (1971). His undergraduate students plunged into the field, collected oral literary material and processed it for him to edit and publish. The most obvious reason for the whole venture was to create material for teaching and learning oral literature in the classroom. As a reminder, the Department of English at the University of Nairobi had already been baptised the Department of Literature in the late 1960s. I actually ought to say English was abolished and replaced with Literature. That English Literature ceased to be the core area of study in the department meant that alternative and indigenous literatures had to be either created or sought from the field. That passes as the second reason for Taban's project. Other reasons may be derived from the two: there was need to go to the roots of African Literature (or rather East African); it was absolutely essential to have literary material with a distinct East African identity and flavour; there was a very postcolonial drive for intellectual and cultural independence from British cultural imperialism and hence the scrounging for material by Taban's students. Put another way, Taban meant to create indigenous and intellectual property rights for East Africans in the literary world.

You may be curious to know why I am talking about East Africa at this stage when I have already touted Kenya as my centre of reference. You may also wonder why Taban was such a key engineer in the conception, moulding and eventual birth of East African oral literature when he was a Southern Sudanese (I knew him as a Ugandan from the north on some of the blurbs of his earliest publications). The truth is we almost had an East African state in the 1960s and early 1970s but politics and differences failed us. We actually had the East African Community and Inter East African undergraduate student exchange arrangement in the 60s and 70s until the community broke up thanks largely to Idi Amin and other forces within Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. In the interests of Taban's place in all this, I want to stress that most boundaries in Africa are artificial colonial creatures that ruptured cultural communities and imposed imperial national identities. Thus the border between northern Uganda and Taban's Southern Sudan was a signifier of cultural disruption his intellect defied all the way to Kenya. His seminal oral literature book already referred to basically represents Zinjanthropus pulverising the boundaries that mutilated East African knowledges (oral and written literatures) and boxed them into national properties. A character in Okoth Okombo's *Masira Ki Ndaki* is so famous that her reputation wafts across into a neighbouring country without a care for the boundaries (1983). Taban is (was) such a character without imputing any similarities to Okombo's fictional character. Thus if we were to re-map and re-engineer the study of Kenyan oral literature to the most logical and satisfactory conclusion we would be reawakening Taban's legacy by crossing the borders. The oral literature we are studying would tell us that it blows like the wind beyond ethnic and national boundaries and that nobody can catch and cup it (wind).

In the world of oral literature, Taban, while in Kenya, sought to build an East African (re)public in the classroom. If being in Kenya meant there was something Kenyan in his intellectual enterprises then we may also conclude that Taban was physically resident in Kenya but mentally bigger than political boundaries. He heartily partook of Mozart and others but was the first to christen oral literature as popular culture (I am thinking here of the current popularity of popular culture in literary scholarship and reminding the disciples that Taban started it all in Kenya some forty one years ago). Thus although Shakespeare, Handel, Beethoven, Tolstoy, Joyce, Ngugi, Blake etc. may have stood for high culture and art, he readily embraced, valorised and disseminated East African popular culture (including Art) in the academy within the African continent and beyond and therefore made it equally high

and abreast. He empowered it and made it a source of knowledge of the various attributes of East African life, being and identity.

The Kenyan Experience, Past and Present

In one of the richest and most readable publications on African oral literature, Furniss and Gunner observe in the introduction to the anthology that there often is an "appropriation of expressive forms for particular purposes" (1995). I want to use this insight out of the editors' context by giving a summary of a history of Kenya's oral tradition (oral literature).

Close to the beginning of the 20th century, A. C. Hollis does the anthropology of the Nandi and Maasai (1909; 1905). Among other reasons, he says he is using the research exercise to learn Maasai and Nandi thoughts and ideas before their inevitable extinction under the weight of Anglo-Christian capitalist and imperial civilisation. The study falls under folklore (for our purposes oral literature) with tacit recognition of existing Nandi and Maasai intellectual traditions. Traditions to be dissected to edify the imperial administrator whose singular mission is to decimate and replace the selfsame traditions with British culture. Attitude, ideology, objectives and presumed (preconceived) conclusions influence one another and determine the findings. Whether we choose to call all this fakelore or not, the significance of the study for us is to be found in the relationship between the scholar and the state: he manipulates material in the interests and service of the empire (as represented by the District Commissioner, District Officer, Governor etc).

Paul Mboya comes dangerously close to Hollis in his declaration of intent as he writes on the Luo community. He fears the imminent death of the community's culture. He must therefore do a book in which the presumably ill-fated culture may be preserved. Among other cultural items, he collects a few sayings (*ngeche*) he claims have meaning and purpose (1938). The obvious implication is that the expunged sayings are good-for-nothing and culturally backward. Mboya, the colonial chief, the Seventh-Day Adventist Pastor, the one among the few who attended the coronation of Queen Elizabeth in the early 1950s, uses proselytising as the smokescreen for the denigration. Like Hollis, he is in the service of the powers-that-be. He dabs his materials with colours that make indigenous cultures and knowledges look bad and evil and amply justify colonial slavery.

What about the modern, postcolonial university-educated Kenyan born after Paul Mboya? How does he treat oral literature? And why does he treat it whichever way? The simplest and most obvious answer to all the three is that the modern Kenyan writes for the academy. This includes primary and secondary schools and universities most of them imitations and relics of Kenya's colonial experiences. The many available texts largely explain oral literature to the student hell-bent on doing no more than read for literature examinations. Major authors for our purposes are Karega Mutahi, Wanjiku Kabira, Naomi Kipury, Okumba Miruka, Onyango Ogutu, Ciarunji Chesaina, Asenath Odaga and others. At whatever level, a large number of Kenyan students forget whatever they have learnt in class almost as soon as they have taken an examination on it. This means literary scholars ought to try other strategies by widening their nets to include the policy formulation process and other influential members of society. These will in turn, influence curricular and instructional policy and help stop rote learning for examinations? Most of the foregoing are like questions that are also answers and may be like others not included here, rhetorical and largely so because the building of a nation is an exercise in searching for answers, not relying on fixed notions.

My major concern is largely how to study oral literature and for what reasons in Kenya. It is not enough to gather material and aim it and its analysis at prescribed learning institutions. Learning institutions also exist outside the classroom and the methodology and objectives in Ogude and Nyairo's *Urban Legends, Colonial Myths* could very well be adopted to target and capture the learner outside the traditional literature school. More than that the scholar ought to aim at being comparative in analytical approaches in addition to updating them in order to encompass topical issues and current events. The hyena that eats and shits without caring that his neighbour is starving is very much like the Kenyan legislator who wants his salary to keep rising while his constituents have only four meals a week. A statement like this one should necessarily replace the hyena with a human character if only to hit the Member of Parliament directly and yet is probably more effective in its metaphorical jacket as it hits indirectly. Re-modelling and upping oral literary content and form from the practice and culture of the past for them to catch up with the present and be topical should be the modernising motto: the practice and culture of doing things with words (oral artefacts) to capture the present, the-would-have-been and the idealistic should be the guiding spirit in the academy and surrounding society, to echo and paraphrase Ruth Finnegan out of context (2007).

Conclusion

Let me conclude that the things done with words are not all public. Some are private and personal. B. E. Kipkorir, for example, argues that sms and internet communication cannot replace the deep feeling in the word written on paper and is therefore implying that the word behaves differently according to the medium used to articulate it (2009). What the word does depends on the context, relationships, tradition, intentions of the user and expectations of the receiver among other possibilities. I concur in the process, with Finnegan's confession that there need be no war Ong-style between the oral and written word. Moving the word through the digital form of technology may be a threat to the spoken word but then Kenyans are still so oral that orality in its own right pervades every mode of communication. The word articulates the real and unreal world. In crafting *Facing Mount Kenya,* Kenyatta is dreaming about a Kenya that achieves independence some twenty-five years later. Ngugi has written about a desired Kenya, a Kenya that should be. It is such dr ms that can be exploited in the literature class to foment national consciousness. In a way, Kenya's Vision 2030, the blue-print for national development, is a dream of a future, a Kenya-to-be or better still, a fictional Kenya or a Kenya in words. Words with a "socially active meaning" that serve Kenyans positively, to echo and quote Wole Soyinka out of context (1984).

Notes

1 A third-year undergraduate course "Kenyan Fiction and History" I created in 1987 at the then Department of Literature but now Department of Literature, Theatre and Film, Moi University. I taught the course between September and December 2007 just before the tragic and disputed general election that resulted in hundreds of thousands of human displacements and deaths. Ethnicity played a major role in the spine-chilling experience.

2 I am obviously alluding to Frederic Jameson's *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act.* New York: Cornell University Press, 1981.

3 The immediate postcolonial Kenya Government's Sessional Paper No. 10 seemed to evoke the family as a basis for social responsibility. The implication for me is that cultural values would be imparted at the family level. This informal education was however gradually eroded until, by now, one can safely and reasonably argue that it is either dead or in the death-bed. My thesis is that classroom education with Kenyancentric texts

points the way forward to national consciousness and awareness of the value of nationhood.

4 A new constitution was promulgated by President Mwai Kibaki after a referendum in August 2010. A cornerstone of the historic document is the devolution of government and power to 47 counties.

5 Personal communication and correspondence with the late E. S. Atieno Odhiambo between 1973 and 2004.

6 Atieno argues that the process of decolonisation started in many forms well before independence in 1963. Nobody and no group can therefore claim monopoly of the struggle to free Kenya. For details see "Decolonisation: A Theoretical Perspective" by Atieno Odhiambo in *Decolonization and Independence in Kenya, 1940 – 1943*. Nairobi: EAEP, 1996.

7 Atieno read intolerance and presumptuousness in the Department of Literature, University of Nairobi in the 1970s and 1980s: under Ngugi wa Thiong'o's leadership, the department seemed to him to assume monopoly of the correct interpretation of the history of the struggle for independence from colonialism and re-colonialism in Kenya.

8 Like the literati, there are many cases in which historians fictionalise reality and experience and indulge in what Hayden White calls "emplotment" in "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact" in his *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1978, pp. 81-100.

9 Proscovia Rwakyaka's poem "The Beard" is in Cook and Rubadiri's *Poems from East Africa*. Nairobi: EAEP, 1971.

10 After Ali Mazrui's speech on *The Africans: A Triple Heritage* (BBC and PBS, 1986) in New Orleans, U.S.A. in 1986, Atieno passed a vote of thanks in which he criticised his former lecturer for a consistently condescending attitude towards Africans. The occasion was the African Studies Association conference that I attended and took notes.

11 Soyinka thinks Ali Mazrui and M. Gaddafi are alienated Africans subtly or bluntly trying to impose Islam as correct and only humane religion in the lines of the dictational theocracy of the Ayatollah of Iran. For details see "Triple Tropes of Trickery" in *Transition* 54, pp. 178-183.

12 ISOLA (International Society of Oral Literature in Africa) conference, Mombassa, Kenya. April 2010.

13 As opposed to P. Hountondji, Odera Oruka trusts African oral traditions as sources of philosophy. His numerous publications include *Sage Philosophy: Indigenous and Modern Debate on African Philosophy*. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill Publishers, 1990.

References

Atieno Odhiambo, E. S. (1974) *The Paradox of Collaboration and Other Essays*. Nairobi: East African Literature Bureau.

_____ (1995) "The Formative Years." In: B. A. Ogot & W. R. Ochieng (eds), *Decolonization and Independence in Kenya, 1940-93*. Nairobi: EAEP, pp. 25-47.

Clark, T. (1992) *Derrida, Heidegger, Blanchot: Sources of Derrida's Notion and Practice of Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Cook, D. & D. Rubadiri (eds) (1971) *Poems from East Africa*. Nairobi: EAEP.

Finnegan, R. (2007) *The Oral and Beyond: Doing Things with Words in Africa*. Oxford: James Currey.

Furniss, G. & L. Gunner (eds) (1995) *Power, Marginality and African Oral Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Gurr, A. (1971) *Black Aesthetics*. Nairobi.: East African Literature Burreau.

Hollis, A. C. (1905) *The Maasai, their Language and Folklore*. Oxford: Negroes University Press.

_____ (1909) *The Nandi, their Language and Folklore*. Oxford: Negroes University Press.

Kenyatta, J. (1938) *Facing Mount Kenya*. London: Martin Secker and Warburg Ltd.

Kipkorir, B. (2009) *Descent From Cherangany Hills: Memoirs of a Reluctant Academic*. Nairobi: Macmillan.

Liyong, T. (1971) *Popular Culture in East Africa*. Nairobi: Longman.

Odinga, O. (1967) *Not Yet Uhuru*. London: HEB.

Okombo, O. (1992) "The Place of Ethnomethodology in the Study of Oral Literature." In: Okoth Okombo & Jane Nandwa (eds), *Reflections on Theories and Methods in Oral Literature*. Nairobi: KOLA, pp. 19-32.

_____ (1983). *Masira Ki Ndaki*. Nairobi: Mawazo Publishers.

Mboya, P. (1938) *Luo Kitgi gi Timbegi*. Kendu Bay: Adventist Press.

Soyinka, W. (1984)'The Critic and the Society: Barthes, Leftocracy and Other Mythologies.' In: Henry L. Gates Jnr. (ed.), *Black Literature and Literary Theory*. New York: Methuen, pp. 27-57.

_____ (1976) *Ogun Abibiman*. London: Rex Collings.

White, H. (1978.) *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.