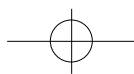
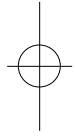
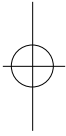
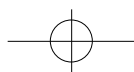
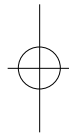
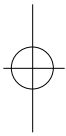


CULTURE, SOCIETY,
AND POLITICS
IN MODERN AFRICAN
LITERATURE





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TEXTS AND CONTEXTS

TANURE OJAIDE
AND
JOSEPH OBI

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CONTENTS

PREFACE VII

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS XI

CHAPTER 1 Introduction (Tanure Ojaide) 3

CHAPTER 2 The Sociology of Modern African Literature
(Joseph Obi) 11

CHAPTER 3 Things Fall Apart: The Politics of Negation,
Nationalism, and Negotiation in an African Novel
(Joseph Obi) 21

CHAPTER 4 Text and Context: Teaching Teachers of Chinua
Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (Tanure Ojaide) 33

CHAPTER 5 Teaching Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's
Horseman* to American College Students
(Tanure Ojaide) 43

CHAPTER 6 Art, Ideology, and the Militarized African Post-
colony: A Sociological Reading of Wole Soyinka's
Season of Anomy (Joseph Obi) 49

CHAPTER 7 Cheik Hamidou Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure*:
A Note on African Cultural Dilemma
(Tanure Ojaide) 65

CHAPTER 8 Writing as Painting: Place and Community in Naguib
Mahfouz's *Fountain and Tomb* (Joseph Obi) 75

CHAPTER 9 Being a Woman in the Nigerian Colonial Situation:
Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*
(Tanure Ojaide) 81

vi Contents

CHAPTER 10	Art, Ideology, and Ngugi wa Thiongo's <i>Devil on the Cross</i> (Tanure Ojaide)	95
CHAPTER 11	Contexts in Mariama Ba's <i>So Long a Letter</i> (Tanure Ojaide)	107
CHAPTER 12	Tsitsi Dangarembga's <i>Nervous Conditions</i> (Tanure Ojaide)	117
CHAPTER 13	The Troubadour: The Poet's Persona in the Poetry of Dennis Brutus (Tanure Ojaide)	125
CHAPTER 14	The New African Poetry in English: Content and Form (Tanure Ojaide)	139
CHAPTER 15	The Half-Brother of the Black Jew: The Poet's Persona in the Poetry of Syl Cheney-Coker (Tanure Ojaide)	147
CHAPTER 16	Literature and the Social Functions of Language: Critical Notes on an African Debate (Joseph Obi)	159
NOTES		173
INDEX		181

PREFACE

Culture, Society, and Politics in Modern African Literature: Texts and Contexts is a collaborative work of a sociologist and a scholar-poet, both of whom have experienced African literature in various ways. Instead of working singly, we have agreed to work together on the project because we believe in the old adage of two heads being better than one! One of us specializes on the sociology of African literature, the other on African literature. We both studied in Africa and the United States and have also taught African literature in various courses in Africa and the United States. Over the years in brainstorming sessions on the phone and whenever together, we have discussed African literature from our different but complementing perspectives. We also discovered from previous publications and conference presentations in Africa, the United States of America, and elsewhere that we have been dealing with issues of culture, society, and politics in African literature. Teaching African Studies and literature in the United States and observing other teachers and also reading critical works of scholars on modern African literature, we became more convinced by the necessity for a work to examine texts by way of contexts. We discovered that there is a gap between the African literary texts and their interpretation in the forms of published essays and books. These problems are on one level general and on another level specific to authors and texts. We set out here to address general and specific problems in the understanding of African literature so as to bridge the gap of perception. This is very relevant since African literature forms a minor part of the literature curriculum in American colleges and universities, where the mainstream Euro-American/Western literature is the main focus. Teaching the literature of a foreign culture is not the same as teaching one's people's literature in its home setting. Teaching or studying African literature in America therefore elicits aesthetic and other considerations that need special attention of the contexts of the production of the texts. There is a "Western canon," the "Great Tradition," that forms the core of the critical endeavor in the United States as in the West. Should African texts be subjected to the Western canon or judged by some other canon? Is there a missing empathetic balance in a literature produced in Africa and interpreted by readers and scholars (African and non-

viii Preface

African) living outside the continent? In interrogating these paradoxes and ironies of African literature, we set out to write this book.

Starting from the premise that literature is a cultural production of a people, we have come to the understanding that a meaningful discussion African literature needs knowledge of what factors influencing modern African writers have given rise to their artistic productions. A myriad of factors easily comes to mind in the culture, society, and politics of African people. It became inevitable therefore that we bring together our separate experiences and do this in a way to promote better understanding and, by implication, appreciation of African literature. Our approach does not condone essentialism—one does not need to be an African to understand and appreciate modern African literature as much as one does not need to be British or American to understand and appreciate British or American literature. However, there should be some understanding of Africa's culture, society, and politics since generally African writers, more than contemporary Western writers, find themselves in a historical vortex to which they respond. After all, in Africa many of us studied the social history of Elizabethan England and Victorian England to understand the literature of those periods. We also found it relevant to study the social history of the times in England that gave rise to the English novel.

The colonial experience, the post-independence era, and the economic conditions of African states have bearing on the writers' works. African writers in their attempts to defend their cultures because of their denigration in colonial times are more prone to be political than, for instance, Western writers. This is exacerbated by the utilitarian function of art inherited from their oral traditions of literature. The writers are watchdogs of their societies whose values they often guard. So they reflect the existential conditions of their people. African writers are deeply rooted and are products of their individual environments. The aesthetics of modern African literature arise from the culture of the people.

We do not deny the hybridity of the modern African experience, which has bearing on the literature. In fact, modern African literature is a product of traditional Africa as well as the European/Western literary tradition. After all, the writers whose works will be examined have had a taste of Western education and literary tradition.

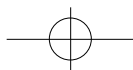
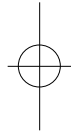
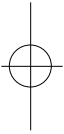
We also accept the individuality of the writers. Each writer appears to be expressing the self in as much as it is touched by the environment—culture, society, politics, the economy, and history, among other aspects. Responses to the African experience is diverse, and each response marks the individuality of the writer even as he or she is cognizant of the African and Western literary traditions.

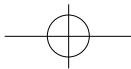
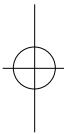
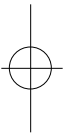


Preface ix

We wrote the separate chapters of this book at separate times. Some were published essays in journals, others were written to fill gaps within our anticipated holistic work, a sort of scholarly quilt. We have tried to achieve a certain measure of consistency in style, but at the same time left the earlier-written essays in their old formats. We also want to be faithful to our different but complementary disciplines of sociology and literature. In any case, this is a deliberate decision and any shift in style from one essay to another, we believe, will not interrupt the overall thesis of our joint work.

Tanure Ojaide, Ph.D.
Joseph Obi, Ph.D.
February 4, 2001





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