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AFRICANITY IN MODERN AFRICAN LITERATURE

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AFRICANITY IN MODERN AFRICAN LITERATURE

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The search for "Africinity" in modern African Literature may presuppose that it is not there at all, or that it is there but difficult to find, or that we do not even know what it is precisely. This is so particularly because very few people, if any, have today stopped to think of Americinity in American literature, Europeanness in European literature, Australianity in Australian literature, etc. In these other cases the fact is taken for granted, but not so with African Literature. And tied up with the issue of Africinity are, of course, others that concern language, subject-matter, meaning, and style of African literature. For example, it has been argued that African literature in, say English, is not African, because it is not written in an African language; that modern African literature in English is, in fact, an extension of English literature¹; and that African literature can be written (and indeed has been written) by non-Africans. It may be necessary therefore for us to establish what we mean by "Modern African literature" (as against African traditional literature) and "Africinity" before we can say whether or not there is the latter in the former.

The issue of what language modern African literature should be written in is more than a decade old. In a paper that sparked off arguments and counter-arguments, Obi Wali said, inter alia, that until African writers begin to write in African languages, "they would be merely pursuing a dead end, which can only lead to sterility, uncreativity and frustration".² To Wali, language is the sole criterion

for determining what is African literature and what is not. Antecedent to Wali's view is Tom Hopkinson's observation that the "attempts" of "Africans eager to write what they have to say in English" are not only "doomed to failure, since English is not their 'mother tongue', but a betrayal of their own background and heritage".³ Although history has shown that African writers' "attempts" are not a "failure", the point about "background and heritage" is, as will be seen later in this paper, significant to modern African literature.

In response to the question of the language of African literature, Barry Reckord does not think that what makes any "stuff" literature is its being written in one language rather than another.⁴ But correct as this stand may be, it is too general to help us determine what African or any other "national" literature should consist in. John Knappert appears more helpful in this direction, though his contribution is fraught with difficult implications. He says that "since Swahili literature is more than a century older than any other African literature ... there can be no better language for Africans to write their literature in than Swahili"⁵ Two major implications are obvious. In the first place, Swahili is, at least, a third (not first or second) language to all modern African writers whose mother tongue it is not. This means that a Nigerian writer who wants to produce African literature in accordance with Knappert's prescription, must learn Swahili language over and above his mother tongue and English. The result is that he is still expressing his original ideas in a language which, though it is African, is foreign to him. In the second place, if language is the criterion for "national" literature (though it need not be), there will be no Nigerian, Ghanaian, South African literature,

for example, we will end up having only Swahili literature.

It is Chinua Achebe who, from experience, offers us an intelligent compromise. He feels that the African writers "should aim to use English in a way that brings out his message best" and "aim at fashioning out an English which is at once universal and able to carry his peculiar experience".⁶ Achebe has shown how this can be done. For example, he translated Igbo proverbs in his novels literally into English, thereby maintaining the original imagistic effect of those proverbs. But no degree of "fashioning out an English" can make the result any other than one kind of English or make it Igbo, Hausa, Yoruba, or Swahili. In other words, if we insist that African literature must be written in African language, no version of English should be admissible. However, we do not so insist, and, I think, we should not. For Chinweizu and group seem to me to be correct when they say that "what we write in borrowed Western languages will still be African if it ... captures the qualities of African life";⁷ though what these "qualities" are is yet to be determined (more on this later). Besides, one may like to know why John Milton's Elegiarum and Sylvarum Liber are still classified as English Literature despite the fact that they are written in Latin; and why Ezra Pound's Dans Un Omnibus de Londres which is written in French, is regarded as a piece of American (or is it English?).

Aside from the attempts to find the meaning of African literature through language, efforts have also been made to explain the nature of this literature by means of subject matter and setting. To Ezekiel Mphahlele, African literature is "creative writing in which an African setting is authentically

handled or to which experiences originating in Africa are integral".⁸ If this were to be the yard stick, those writings of Ernest Hemingway, Joyce Cary and Graham Greene, which are set in Africa would all qualify for inclusion in African literature; and conversely, J.P. Clark's America, Their America and his poems about America, Gabriel Okara's The Snow Flakes Sail Gently Down and Spirit of the Wind, Wole Soyinka's Telephone Conversation and Massacre, October '66, which are all set outside Africa, and most of which deal with experiences not originating in Africa, will not be classified as African literature.

Another critic remarked that African literature "could mean literature written on an African topic in African language. It could also mean literature written in a foreign language on an African topic".⁹ The emphasis here is on "topic" since, according to the critic, language may or may not be African. But "topic" does not make literature what it is: the response to experience, the mind behind the response, and the style of response are nearer the heart of literature than the topic. Thus one would tend to agree with Cyprian Ekwensi's view that "subject matter is incidental" in the consideration of what is African literature. What Ekwensi considers essential in this connection is at least one of the relevant criteria, and that is the "psychology of the African" which he says embraces "reactions to situations and to the social order, religious beliefs, interpretation of moral codes, inter-relationships within the family. These factors interacting, create the African character which gives its stamp to African writing...."¹⁰

No matter the way one chooses to look at the problem there seems to me to be one constant factor that should

determine what is African literature, and that is the fact that the writer must be an African. If literature is an artistic response to experience, it follows that the personality of the artist is central to that response. It has been said that literature is art, and art is life seen through a temperament, and that is the temperament of the writer.¹¹ If the African writer in his response to any kind of experience reflects a personality that is African, his writing is basically African literature. Modern African literature, therefore, is that literature which is produced by writers who are African irrespective of whatever language in which the literature is written and irrespective of its subject-matter.¹²

But this is not to say that all writings that are African literature have the same degree of Africanity in them. This brings us to the issue of what Africanity is or should be. Certainly the first requirement for the Africanity in any work of literature is that its author be an African. Over and above this, however, there are other requirements which have to do with the artistic and other characteristics of that work. Aside from the African origin of the authors of African literature therefore, the constituents of Africanity include African myths, legends, tales and songs taken from African oral literature; African traditional symbols; the paraphernalia of African vernacular rhetorics (what Solomon Iyasere calls "traditional modes of linguistic expression"¹³), and African indigenous imagery.

The character Ononye in Onuora Nzekwu's Blade Among the Boys said that it is "our traditions which distinguish us from all other people ..." Similarly, it is our artistic tradition which will distinguish our literature from that of all other peoples. Before we look at the use of this

artistic tradition in our modern literature it may be necessary to set down some criteria for evaluating such use; for the effective use of traditional material does not consist in merely reproducing folk songs, myths and tales in modern works. The collection itself is, of course, very important for their preservation and for the education of younger generations. But when used in modern creative works, these and other genres of our traditional literature should have some definite creative functions to perform. In the first place, they can serve a thematic use. The writer can use them for ordering his own modern experiences, in which case the traditional material plays an interpretative role. In the second place, the material can be used for structural purposes, that is, for characterising setting and underscoring structural movements in a work of art. Finally traditional literary repertoire can be purely ornamental and therefore used to embellish language and imbue it with deeper implications and richer artistic resources. We may now take up some modern African poems, novels and plays and see to what use the elements of African oral literature have been put, and how effectively this has been done.

As Chinua Achebe has correctly said, "proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten".¹⁴ And this applies as much to other African peoples as to the Igbo people about whom the remark is specifically made. The import of the statement is that proverbs, which constitute a significant dimension of African traditional literature, are as important in Igbo rhetoric as a fact for embellishment, as palm oil is for seasoning and making meals attractive. And though these rhetorical devices belong to the oral tradition, they are still employed today by the elders and other native speakers with as much fervour and gusto as were found among the people of the

past. And today we find them used to effect not only in speeches but also in written works.

The most effective use of proverbs in modern African poetry, occurs, I think, in I Heard a Bird Cry by the Ghanaian Kofi Awoonor.¹⁵ The poem, which is a passionate lamentation over the change wrought on the "old" by the "new", is heavily punctuated with striking proverbs. The change is described by a number of proverbs all of which point to the fact that things are now turned Upside-down: the "dog does not bear a child in public", but it now appears to do so; "you do not thirst/when your palm trees are prospering", but the ancestors' thirst is burning; the "snake" does not bite a child "in front of its own mother", but it does so now. Nothing of the "old" is left undefiled in this chaos of change, for "where has it been heard before" that "the bush fire burnt the bush/But did not touch the bush rope?" The devastation of the old order is complete, and so everybody should be prepared for death, since "life" not rooted in the past is meaningless:

The Culture says, it pays
Because helpers are not there
That is why
I have shorn my head
Awaiting my funeral

It should be noted that the function of proverbs in this poem, as indeed in most of the other poems to be dealt with in this study, is both thematic and ornamental. We can reach the meaning of the poem through those proverbs which are themselves pleasing as verbal entities.

In Idanre,¹⁶ Wole Soyinka, aside from generally making use of the myth of Ogun (Yoruba god of iron, creation and destruction), employs proverbs effectively. In Section IV of the poem, Soyinka criticizes the tendency in men to seek for

extra-ordinary solutions for ordinary problems. Men have sought the aid of the ambivalent god, Ogun, in their war against fellow men; and as we learn later in the poem, this god becomes so drunk with enthusiasm that he falls on his clients and destroys them. To warn against this kind of unreason among men the poet says:

Because the rodent nibbled some-what at his yam,
The farmer hired a hunter, filled him with wine
And thrust a firebrand in his hand

We do not burn the woods to trap
A Squirrel; we do not ask the mountain's
Aid, to crack a walnut.

It is not too much to say that these proverbs are the main clue to the meaning of a poem which is otherwise difficult because of obscure allusions.¹⁷ So that, as in the case of Kofi Awoonor, proverbs are here tools for both thought-making and image-making.

Some other poets have not used proverbs, but have distilled some of their images from well-known folktales or songs, and those images are exquisite in their functions. In Christopher Okigbo's DARK WATERS of the beginning (Labyrinths, p.4), we find the following lines:

Rain and sun in single combat;
on one leg standing,
in silence at the passage,
the young bird at the passage.

The poem as a whole deals with the poet's "exile" into Christianity, the beginning of which (exile) is marked by confusion and dilemma. The situation is described effectively with the two images contained in the lines quoted. The poet drew the first image from a song chanted by children when there are rainfall and sun-shine together. Chinua Achebe has,

incidentally, made use of one version of the song in Things Fall Apart (p. 32):

The rain is falling, the sun is shining
Alone Nnadi is cooking and eating.

But the version from which Okigbo took the image under discussion is as follows:

Rain is falling, sun is shining,
Oil-bean is cracking in the sky.

The "cracking of oil bean" is the physical symbol of the collision and conflict (Okigbo uses "combat") between the two incompatible elements -- rain and sun-shine (water and fire). The appropriateness of this image is indicated by the fact that at the beginning of his "exile" there was a conflict in the poet's mind between the allegiance to the home religion and that to the foreign one.

The second image -- the bird standing on one leg -- is drawn from an anecdote about a fowl which visited a foreign land. When it arrived, it raised one leg and stood on the other. On seeing the fowl standing thus, the inhabitants of the land were tempted to kill it saying it had committed a crime by standing on one leg. The fowl pleaded it did not know that that was a crime, and its life was spared. Now in the poem, the poet sees himself moving into the foreign land of a new religion as a fowl ("bird") in a strange land. And like the fowl he would stand on one leg, not knowing the custom of the new religion. In other words he has to learn through experience.

Working in Okigbo's style, Glory Nwanodi (now Okogbule Wonodi) recaptures in his Getting Married (Icheke, p. 13) the spirit of an Igbo idiom and a folk story, creating vivid images out of them. The protagonist of the poem is urging his fiancée to quick marriage, which should take place in the church since the local "custom" and "religion" are "old and out of date".

since the local "shrine" and "altar" have been ravaged by the forces of Christianity. Although he is prepared to wait, if the girl insists, "until the eyes see the ears", he wonders how long that will be; will it be when "fruits are grown on leaves"? The idea of eyes seeing the ears (which is an impossibility, except it be through a mirror or literally when the ears are cut off the head!) is an Igbo idiomatic expression used only when an extraordinary calamity occurs. The other imagistic expression is taken from a folkstory about the eternally cunning tortoise. Once when the tortoise's father was seriously sick and in danger of death, the tortoise decided to travel to a distant place in an attempt to shirk the responsibility of financing the funeral ceremony of his father. Before leaving home, he instructed his relatives never to send for him to return unless something that had never happened should occur. Not long after his departure, his father died, but his relatives could not send for him since death of a father had often been occurring. However, during a meeting, they thought out a trick with which to force the tortoise back home. They sent one of them to tell the tortoise that "palm nuts had grown and ripened on palm leaves" -- something that had not happened before. Though this was a lie, it worked effectively, for the tortoise on receiving the "news" returned to undertake his father's burial. By his reference to this story, therefore, Wonodi has most effectively communicated to us the sense of interminable waiting which his protagonist is involved in.

With another poet, Pol Ndu, it is not just a matter of fashioning images out of folk stories or idioms; he adopts in some of his poems the form, mood and tone of Igbo traditional religious songs. Two of his poems Ofo and Afo¹⁸ are particularly remarkable in this connection. The first section

of Ofo is a prayer set in a sacrificial scene. The protagonist response to the words of the priest with "ahaa" at regular and relevant intervals; and in each case he responds "with all intent". This solo-chorus form, according to Chinweizu, is characteristic of African oral poetry, and should therefore be adopted by every African poet.¹⁹ But much as this form is authentic and useful, one wonders whether modern African poetry (if all were to be written in that form) would not be monotonous, and whether our poets would not be merely writing another less authentic type of oral poetry. Mr Ndu's poem, however, has this form and would have been a complete success as an example of this type of poetry but for the distracting and rather incongruous "Abraham and Isaac" in the first stanza and "litany" in the fourth.

Part I of the second poem is also modelled on the traditional poetic form, but this time that of invocation; and it has the tone of urgency and devotion which is appropriate for a protagonist anxiously praying his god "Igwekala" to bring him relief in his "frustrated loneliness". Perhaps what is most interesting in these poems is the use to which the poet puts the forms taken from oral tradition. Both have been used to explore themes that are fairly personal to the poet: in the first poem he contracts the efficacy of his prayers to the home god, with the ineffectual "Amen" which "today, we say .../with less content", and in the second poem he deals with the quest for a "maid met at cross-roads", an "innocent play-mate on noon-sand". The poet has therefore not adopted these forms for their own sake, but because they are most suitable for the themes he has dealt with.

Even in a few cases where some African poets appear to have reproduced myths taken from folklore, they still show such a degree of personal response to the myths that the poems are

no longer mere reproductions of the old material. This is true of J.P. Clark's "Imprisonment of Obatala", and the "Abiku" poems by Clark and Wole Soyinka.²⁰ In the first poem it is the consequence of the wrong done to a god for a "child" that knows not what it is all about, which is the poet's concern. Similarly in his own "Abiku" Clark's sympathy is with the mother whose "body" has become "tired" from the frequent transient "coming" of the spirit child. On the other hand Soyinka is preoccupied in "Abiku" with the imagined view of the child who is conscious of its special power to triumph over all efforts on the part of the mother to make it stay, and this is based on the belief in re-incarnation which is central to the "abiku" myth. Thus each of the three poems, while based on traditional material, reflects enough of creativity on the part of the poet to make it a new piece of literature.

Of all modern African poets of English expression, Okot p'Bitek is one whose works are most consistently influenced by African literary tradition and vernacular modes of expression. Chinweizu and group have indicated most of the traditional elements in p'Bitek's work; "African imagery Proverbs, laments invocations and curses".²¹ The point they have not mentioned is the fact that p'Bitek uses actual folk songs (not mere imitations of them) from time to time to illustrate or reinforce his points or to create comic effects. This element is one of the strongest links between his works and African oral tradition. Such pieces include the following from Song of Lawino: "Father prepare the kraal" (p.44), "You, Ring-worm" (p.54), "Odure, come out" (a satirical song) (p.75), "The beautiful one" (pp. 79-80), and "The mother of the beautiful girl" (p.91).

Aside from this, however, p'Bitek's imagery appears to me the most effective element in his poetry with regard to meaning,

beauty of expression, power of imagination and consciousness of the African environment. A couple of examples taken again from Song of Lawino (which is fraught with them) may suffice for illustration. In Section 2, Lawino sarcastically describes Clementina (Tina), the woman with whom she shares her husband, in the following terms:

Her lips are red-hot
 Like glowing charcoal,
 She resembles the wild cat
 That has dipped its mouth in blood,
 Her mouth is like raw yaws
 It looks like an open ulcer,
 Like the mouth of a field!

 She resembles the wizard
 Getting ready for the midnight dance (p.22)

And in contrasting a typical African kitchen with all its cooking equipment with the foreign one, she personifies the indigenous cooking-stand thus:

The mother stone
 Has a hollow stomach
 A strange woman

 She never gets pregnant;
 And her daughter

 Never gets fatter
 She gets smaller and smaller
 Until she is finished (Section 6, pp.72-73)

This kind of imagery, simple and straight-forward as it is, makes p'Bitek's poetry fresh, unassuming and artistic but not artificial, and it imbues it with a rare degree of originality.

Moving from poetry to the novel, we notice that it is no more a matter of creating images from proverbs, idioms, and folktales; whole tales, anecdotes and legends are woven into the fabric of the novel where they perform significant functions.

In addition, in some of the novels, proverbs and folk songs feature prominently, as is particularly the case with Achebe's novels. In Things Fall Apart and Arrow of God,²² for example, proverbs are profusely used to embellish language, reinforce the narrative, and generate humour. But of more general significance in both works are folktales and songs, which are used for characterizing setting, and, more importantly, for underscoring structure.

Both novels are set in Igbo villages, where at night and on other relaxed occasions people, especially children and women occupy the time with narrating folktales. In Things Fall Apart, the anecdote about mosquitoes (p.68), the tale about how the tortoise tricked the birds at a feast by assuming the name "All of You" (pp.87 ff), and the bridal song (pp. 107-108) are primarily used for characterizing setting and atmosphere. Other songs that perform a similar function are the rain-song (p.32), and the wrestling song (p.46). Ikemefuna's song (p. 54) has the special effect of premonition and warning. It foreshadows his own death and the grief Okonkwo would experience for taking part in killing him. Furthermore, the story about mother Kite and her daughter (p.127) is a rhetorical device employed by Uchendu to illustrate the danger in killing "a man who says nothing", thereby showing that the people of Abame were irrational in killing the white man who came to the town, and therefore they merited the heavy loss of lives that resulted from the act.

One other folktale in the novel performs quite a different kind of function -- that of characterisation. This is the story about the quarrel between "Earth and Sky" (p.48), which Nwoye narrated in his mind. The scene is that in which Okonkwo is telling his sons stories of heroic activities -- "masculine stories of violence and blood shed", stories "about tribal wars",

and "how, years ago, he had stalked his victim, overpowered him and obtained his first human head." Now, rather than pay attention to Okonkwo's stories, Nwoye the first son is inclined to remembering beautiful folkstories which his mother used to tell him and other children when they were small; and the one that comes to his mind readily is about Earth and Sky. This folkstory is quite antithetical in tone, seriousness and general function to those his father is telling them, for folkstories are regarded by the seriously minded people as meant for "foolish women and children."

The significance of the story about Earth and Sky consists in its contribution toward the exposition and development of the character, Nwoye. It is known that before the end of the novel, Nwoye has become a Christian convert and assumed the name "Isaac" and is sent to the "new training college for teachers in Umuuru." (p. 165). Okonkwo is bitter over Nwoye's defection, and says to the other sons of his:

You have all seen the great abomination of your brother. Now he is no longer my son or your brother. I will only have a son who is a man, who will hold his head up among my people. If any one of you prefers to be a woman, let him follow Nwoye now while I am alive so that I can curse him. If you turn against me when I am dead I will visit you and break your neck. (p. 156)

But it is not as if Okonkwo had ever had confidence in Nwoye growing into the man of his dreams; he had much earlier on predicted this tragedy of his first son, the type of tragedy that causes an Igbo father great concern in view of the belief that if the first son becomes a failure in life, the others are likely to follow in his footsteps. One proverb puts it thus: "If the leading goat eats the wrong (deadly) leaves from the bush, the other goats following will eat similar leaves." So Okonkwo had early prescience

of Nwoye's "waywardness." For instance, in the scene where Obierika's son, Maduka, comes to Okonkwo's house and has a hand-shake with him, Okonkwo congratulates the boy on his successful "wrestling the other day" which he says "gave me much happiness." Then addressing Obierika Okonkwo says:

He will do great things If I had a son like him I should be happy. I am worried about Nwoye. A bowl of pounded yams can throw him in a wrestling match ... (p. 59).

The fear of Okonkwo's which is proved right when Nwoye abandons the ways of the clan and becomes a Christian, is confirmed by Nwoye's persistent love for folk stories (like the one cited above) as against the "masculine" stories told by his father. Thus, besides everything else, the story which occupies Nwoye's mind is an early indication of the type of character he will grow to be. The case of Nwoye therefore confirms, in the opposite direction, his father's belief that "a chick that will grow into a cock can be spotted the very day it hatches." (p. 60.) Unfortunately for Okonkwo, Nwoye is certainly not such a chick.

Over and above all these functions of the traditional stories and songs in Things Fall Apart, there still remains the structural function performed especially by those tales and songs that have to do with nocturnal relaxation and happy occasions. In Part I of the novel, we are shown the normal life in the village, with its customary activities such as marriage ceremonies, festivals with wrestling matches, planting operations, children's games, and normal family occupation. Before Okonkwo's first major crime -- that of inadvertently killing a boy during the funeral ceremony of Ezeudu -- nothing serious disturbed either Okonkwo's family or the entire clan. Okonkwo's breach of the Peace of the Land during the "Week of Peace" is not considered a serious offence, and he makes up for it through some customary ritual. It is therefore during this period of normalcy in the novel that we find all the happy stories

and songs, which help to mark that part of the novel off from the other parts.

Part II deals with the period of Okonkwo's exile in the land of his mother and the invasion of the clan by the agents of Christianity. This is a period of gloom and depression for Okonkwo with his family and for the rest of the people. This part of the novel is marked by absence of songs and tales. Life is no longer normal.

In the very early stage of Part III (from page 155 to the top of page 156) there are signs of a return of lost dignity for Okonkwo. He would rebuild his house, "build a bigger barn than he had had before", initiate his sons into the OZO society. As a first sign of success, "his yams grew abundantly, not only in his mother-land but also in Umuofia." But all these are very transient, for shortly after, it appears his Chi has not really said "yes" so that things grow progressively worse for him. His son Nwoye, as noted before, is converted to Christianity; some titled men in the clan join the new religion, Christianity takes control over the land -- one of the masquerades, egwugwu, the most dreadful, is unmasked in public by Enoch, one of the converts -- and finally, Okonkwo himself kills the Chief Court-Messenger. This is his second major crime, and it leads to his hanging, which is his last major crime.

Thus Part III, in the main, deals with another period of sadness, which is even more serious than in Part II, since this time the whole land is affected, and Okonkwo loses his life. As the pattern is in the novel, there are no joyful tales or songs in this last part. The only song we find in it is "Kotma of the

ash buttocks" (p.153), which is a wailing and mocking song by the prisoners of the Christian Religion. the prisoners are

moaning over their lot as well as trying to mitigate their suffering even if temporarily; they are also mocking their oppressors, especially the courtmessengers, who are also doing the work of prison warders.

To compare Things Fall Apart with Arrow of God, we note that all the elements of African oral literature found in the first novel are also present in the second (the tales and songs are of course different), and they perform similar functions generally. Examples are "Nwaka Dimkpolo" (pp.79 - 80); women's eating song (pp. 144 - 145); "Tell the mother her child is crying" (pp. 153 - 154), and the story about the jealous co-wife (pp. 235 - 239). Each of these contributes to the setting of the novel and constitutes a kind of diversion in a story that is generally tragic.

Like in Things Fall Apart also, these elements underscore the structure of Arrow of God. If we divide the novel into four sections roughly, we have the following: first section -- pp. 1 - 166: a period of normalcy, with little or no disruption in the life of the people; second section -- pp. 167 - 223: the period of Ezeulu's imprisonment at the Government Hill and the resulting general unrest in the clan; third section -- pp. 225 - 252: return to normalcy with the return of Ezeulu from prison; fourth section -- 253 - 287: the period of conflict between Ezeulu and his own people resulting from his refusal to announce the New Yam Festival, of the death of Obika, his son, and of the victory of Christianity over traditional religion. In the first section are contained most of the songs in the novel; there is neither a song nor tale in the second; the third contains a song and a tale; and in the fourth there are two funeral songs, one heard in a dream and the other in reality. On the basis of when

and where songs and stories feature in these novels and of the nature of the songs and tales, the two novels are similar. There is, though, this difference that while in Things Fall Apart there is no marked break or concrete relief between the two periods of sorrow and dejection, there is in Arrow of God some considerable relief between two such periods.

Like Achebe's novels, The River Between by Ngugi Wa Thiong'o²³ contains some elements of traditional literature, but they are not as pervasive as in Achebe's works. Two instances of the use of such material in the novel are, however, remarkable. The first is the scene in which Chege educates his son Wayaki on the origin of the people of Kameno and Makuyu. Chege relates to Wayaki the whole legend of Gikuyu and Mumbi who founded Kameno and Makuyu, and tells him that Mugo wa Kibiro, the "great Gikuyu seer of old" was born in Kameno. He further informs Wayaki of the two important prophecies of Mugo: "There shall come a people with clothes like butterflies", and "Salvation shall come from the hills. From the blood that flows in me, I say from the same tree, a son shall rise. And his duty shall be to lead and save the people." (pp. 2-4, 20-24). As is revealed later in the novel, the "people with clothes like butterflies" are the whites who came to the land and occupied part of it; and the "son" who will "rise" and "lead and save the people" is Wayaki.

The significance of this legend in the novel is that it serves as a flash back and an effective exposition: it introduces the central theme of the novel - the rift between Kameno and Makuyu which has been existing from time immemorial, and which is exacerbated by the coming of the whitemen; and the need for unity among the people; it also introduces the major character, Wayaki, whose development through the novel is largely determined by his

consciousness of and response to the call to save his people.

For example, much later in the novel we read: "Wayaki often found himself trying to puzzle out the meaning of the old prophecy. Did Chege really think Wayaki would be that saviour? Was he to drive out the white man? Was that the salvation? And what would a saviour do with the band of men who, along with Joshua, stuck so rigidly to the new faith?" (p. 93).

Certainly Chege meant that Wayaki should be the saviour, for he had earlier charged him with that responsibility: "Arise. Heed the prophecy. Go to the Mission place. Learn all the wisdom and all the secrets of the white man. But do not follow his vices. Be true to your people and the ancient rites." (p.24) Thus Wayaki can only fight the white man effectively by means of the weapon provided by the same white man, and that is, education. This objective has therefore been directing Wayaki's thoughts and aspiration. And whenever he dreams of the possibility of success, he feels elated, as the following passage demonstrates:

... And Wayaki saw a tribe great with many educated sons and daughters, all living together, tilling the land of their ancestors in perpetual serenity, pursuing their rituals and beautiful customs and all of them acknowledging their debt to him. He felt grateful at the thought. Perhaps this was the mission that the Sent One would carry out. Yes - Wayaki would strive, strive. He was elated by his thoughts as he beheld this vision of greatness ..." (pp. 100 - 101).

Thus it is this legend of the people which contains the prophecy that has become the seed of hope for greatness not only for Wayaki but also for the entire people.

The other important elements of traditional literature used in the novel is a folktale about why wild animals do not run away from women. Chege takes Wayaki to the "hills deep south of Kameno"

and instructs him generally on the use of certain herbs. He says to him: "The bark of that tree is good for a fresh wound. The roots of this plant are good. When your stomach bites you you boil them in water. Drink the liquid". (p.18). As they move on, they disturb an antelope which runs away from them. Wayaki wonders why it runs away, and Chege tells him that wild animals run away from men, but not from women. And to explain this he narrates the story of how women were originally the rulers of the land. But they were harsh and the men resented "their hard hand". Eventually, when all the women became pregnant, men overthrew them. This time the goats and other animals realized that women were weak and so they did not fear them.

The significance of this tale here is that it forms part of the education on the lore of the land which Chege is giving Wayaki, preparing him for the role of a leader. For it is necessary that such a leader be versed in the knowledge of the indigenous culture as well as in the "wisdom" of the whiteman. Furthermore, as in Achebe's novels, the story helps to characterize the setting and atmosphere in the novel, an atmosphere which is purely African.

In modern African drama, as in poetry and in the novel, there are also good examples of effective use of material and techniques taken from African traditional literature. With regard to folktales, for example, the use made of them in our drama is more like that in poetry than in the novel. This is particularly the case in the plays of J.P. Clark. In scene "FOUR" of The Raft,²⁴ Kengide is teasing Ibobo with fantastic stories about the actions of the white men. For instance, Kengide says that a white man "shot through an orange planted right/ On the head of his only son". When Ibobo doubts that this could have been done with a gun without the boy dying, Kengide says it was "with his bow and arrow".

Then Ibobo retorts:

Come, Kengide, you think you are pulling
my leg, but I'm tortoise
myself and must tell you it's the prop-root
Of the mangrove you have in your hands, not my leg.
White men don't use bows and arrows (p.127).

The imagery in Ibobo's speech is created out of a folk story about the tortoise and the Leopard. The latter was once pursuing the former to catch and devour him. The tortoise ran into a hole under a huge tree. The tiger got to the place, put his hand into the hole and started pulling the tortoise by the leg. Each time he pulled the tortoise's leg, the tortoise said "you are merely pulling the root of the tree". So the tiger let go his leg and pulled at the root. The the tortoise would say, "you are pulling my leg too hard", and the tiger continued until he got exhausted and went away, frustrated. The main function of this story in the play is to provide the background for the tortoise image with the accompanying humour, which helps to promote the unfolding of the plot. Besides, it sheds some light on the character of Ibobo, who is after all not the stupid man Kengide thinks he is.

Clark makes use of another folkstory in the same way -- for creating imagery -- in The Masquerade.²⁵ Early in this play the characters are disturbed by the fact that fishermen could not catch fish and they are wondering what the cause might be. One of them, FIRST NEIGHBOUR, thinks in the following manner:

Undoubtedly it must be this
High tide. Either the waters have grown
Too heavy for baits to have the right hang
Or the fish,
Taking after the current, steer a through course
And will not be distracted like dogs
To stop for a bite. (p.52).

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The contrast with dogs is based on a folkstory about the dog and the tortoise. According to the story, in the beginning of the

world. God asked men to choose between temporary death with the possibility of coming back to life and permanent death with no chance of returning to the earth. As there was division among men, some chose the first option and others chose the second. The first group sent the fast-moving dog to inform God of their choice, and the second group sent the tortoise. Both set out. But on the way, the dog, feeling over confident in his ability to out-run the tortoise, stopped and went into a near-by bush to feed and have a nap. The tortoise, however, continued in his slow but steady pace and eventually delivered his message to God before the dog arrived. People believe that this is the reason why people do not come back to life once they are dead.

From our knowledge of this play, the allusion to this story is simply a decorative device used to embellish the speech of one of the characters. But this alone is significant, for the type of language a character speaks helps to identify him or her. The character who has made the allusion is likely to be versed in the lore of the land, and his speech reflects the manner of speech of our elders.

Aside from this device that is rather rhetorical than thematic, Clark has employed the story of the fastidious girl in the same play to reinforce its theme. The story of a girl who rejected all human suitors and chose a monster with a beautiful human appearance and suffered for her choice later, is very popular among Africans.²⁶ In the play Tufa is seen by SECOND NEIGHBOUR as such a monster with human appearance:

Oh, wasn't that splendid, the glorious man
Who on the way home was set
Upon by bill, fig-tree and others, and before
Bride could regain breath, her sun-figure
Had turned scare-crow! (p.62).

The theme of the original story is the evil consequence for a girl of choosing to marry a stranger, especially against her parents'

wishes. This generally agrees with the theme of the play, and in spite of Obumsele's argument that "we cannot today ask young women to beware of strangers, nor would we wish parents to dictate whom we should marry"²⁷ (all in the name of modernity), we can, and should advise against one mistaking appearance for reality, or against plunging into a sea before we sound its depth. Besides, the custom of establishing the family circumstances of a suitor and the differences and similarities between his culture and the girl's is one of those of our traditions which should be incorporated into our modern life, since it is based on logic and makes for realistic and happy future living for both the man and the woman.

In his latest play, Ozidi,²⁸ Clark exploits a traditional legend of the Ijaws. Clark tells us that the play is "based on the Ijaw saga of Ozidi", which means that he has not merely reproduced the saga, but used it to communicate some of his own experiences in and responses to life. And as noted before in this study, this is a most fruitful way in which our modern writers can use the material from our traditional literature. The use of the Ozidi legend in the play is generally thematic, and a number of themes and motifs are comprehended within the play, for example, that revenge is an evil, no matter how justified; that choice of leaders based on rotation from family to family (or clan to clan) does not always make for progress. The play also fully exposes such cultural traits as magic and witchcraft and their influence on the life of the people. Furthermore it provides some social commentaries which are particularly relevant to our modern society. For instance, part of the story-teller's prayer in Scene one of Act One (pp. 3-4), exposes the fact that some people make money by foul means in "Lagos, Benin, Ibadan, Enugu and Kaduna". And in Scene Two of the same Act, Temagedege's proposal to have "a Career Taker Committee of seven virgin girls who will whisper/ Appropriate words into our ears" is a satirical comment against the old Nigerian

politicians who were noted for their weakness for women:

... One shall fetch me my royal chewing-stick, another
my goblet

Of morning glory, three shall pick the grey hair
And lice on our sacred head, and anything climbing up
Our arm-pits; all this as we recline

Basking in the evening glow of our life,

Two shall pare our finger and toe nails, and one

Scratch our tender back although we both know

The itch in the flesh is far down elsewhere (pp. 11-12).

Another criticism of society appears in Scene Three of Act Three where an 'Attendant' asks Ozidi (Junior) questions about the late Elder Ozidi. In his reply, Ozidi says his father was "no mean shopkeeper" but a warrior who always pursued his business "in the interest/ Of the state". Furthermore, Ozidi explains that his father had not "turned public/ Service to private profit", and that on the contrary "he suffered great personal loss -- his own/ Life and no less". (p.66). In reading all these passages, our interest has shifted from the legend per se to its social significance and relevance in modern times. What Clark has done with the Ozidi saga is therefore to reinterpret it with reference to modern society and its problems.

In the light of this, it is not easy to see how the play, Ozidi, is according to Bruce King, "a less thoughtful attempt to adapt traditional material to the stage" than Soyinka's plays which he, King, referred to. It is difficult to understand what Bruce King means by saying that Soyinka's introduction of mime, masquerading and dances into his plays while retaining the highly formalized plot structure of European drama is an example of the kind of the fusion possible and it has enabled him to reach an international audience"²⁹. What is the sense in an African playwright striving to write "European Drama"? How has Bruce King understood enough of Ozidi to be able to so criticise it without being a Nigerian, if it does not communicate to an international audience? It is simple for the reason that Ozidi is faithful to a lot that is African that one should consider

it an African play, and not a "European" one.

There is, however, one disturbing element in the story of Ozidi as handled by Clark, and that is the obvious echoing of foreign literary works in Scene Five of Act One and Scene Four of Act Four. In the first scene (pp. 19-20) Orea is dissuading Ozidi (the Elder) from joining the hunt for the King's tribute, and does so in a tone that calls to mind a similar scene in Julius Caesar where Calpurnia is advising against Caesar going to the Capitol (Act II, Sc. ii). There is in each case an omen which points to the danger in the man moving out from home. In the second scene (p. 110) Odogu's wife tries to learn the secret of the young Ozidi's powers, just as Delilah has done in Milton's Samson Agonistes. There is this difference though, that where Samson "gave up my fort of silence to a Woman", Ozidi rather makes bid to sacrifice the temptress "to my shrine you sought to defile". In any event the similarities noted tend to minimize the originality of the play in the parts they appear. And even if these motifs were to be found in the original legend of Ozidi, their close resemblance to those in the foreign works cited would still be a matter for concern to the reader.

The way in which Clark has employed the legend of Ozidi for the purpose of original creativity resembles generally that in which, as we have seen earlier, Soyinka employed the myth of Ogun in his long poem "Idanre". For in each case, while retaining the general outline of the story, the author has ended up giving the reader something new and enriching. This observation is necessary with regard to Soyinka, because he has used the same myth of Ogun in two of his plays, at least, but in neither of them has he explored the myth as fully as he did in the poem.

In A Dance of the Forests,³⁰ for instance, Ogun plays the very limited role of Patron of carvers, which is why he protects Demoke against the machinations of the "wayward cult-spirit", Eshuoro. We do not see the other sides of the very ambivalent

Yoruba god. Again in The Road,³¹ although the spirit of Ogun is present throughout the play, it is just that aspect of him that has to do with road accidents which is at work. Little or nothing of his creative aspect is dealt with. For example, in Part Two of the play, Samson advises Kotonu to 'kill us a dog before the hungry god (Ogun) lies in wait and makes a substitute of me'. And shortly after he warns: "The one who won't give Ogun willingly will yield heavier meat by Ogun's designing". (p.59). Thus in neither of the plays is the myth used to explore the central theme; nor is more artistic or theatrical effect achieved by the presence of the myth. The impact of the myth in the plays is rather peripheral and therefore not felt as much as in "Idanre" or even another of Soyinka's poems, "Death in the Dawn".

But two other elements of traditional literature: namely dance - music and heroic poetry, are used in some of Soyinka's other plays to theatrical and thematic effect. Dance-music is used in two significant scenes in The Lion and the Jewel.³² The first scene is that in which 'game-playing' in the tradition of "play-within-play", is used to caricature both the stranger from Lagos and the half-formed symbol of modernity, Lakunle; and the second scene is the last in the play in which is celebrated the marriage between Baroka and Sidi. With regard to the first, Sidi says: "Let us dance the dance of the lost/ Traveller". And shortly after, she goes through the dance, with the others joining later:

You are dressed like him
You look like him
You speak his tongue
You think like him
You're just as clumsy
In your Lagos ways --
You will do for him. (p.14)

The song is of course addressed to Lakunle who belongs to the same camp with the stranger. Aside from the theatrical effect

of this song with dance, it structurally and thematically foreshadows the defeat and mockery which modernity, as represented by Lakunle, suffers at the end of the play.

In the last scene of the play--the marriage scene -- we see Sidi singing and dancing. The occasion is a festive one, and the song, which is a love-song, with its ritual about child bearing and hope for the future, is most appropriate:

Mo te'ni. Mo te'ni. I spread the mat. I spread the mat.

Mo te'ni. Mo te'ni. I spread the mat. I spread the mat.

Sun mo mi, we mi, Draw near me, wrap me with your hands

Sun mo mi, fa mo mi Draw near me, press your body on me

Yarabi lo m'eyi t'o le d'ini ... God only knows the one who's
fruited with child.

Soon after, the "crowd repeat the song after Sidi", varying the first two lines:

Tolani Tolani 'Tis for future. 'Tis for future.

T'emí ni T'emí ni (p.64) It is mine. It is mine³³

One problem about this song is that Soyinka has not cared to translate it into English, at least, for the benefit of those who do not speak or understand Yoruba.

The use of songs and dance is also very effective in Kongi's Harvest³⁴ where they are indeed more pervasive than in the other plays. In it songs do not only serve theatrical purpose, but also promote the plot and assume full thematic implications. Early in the opening scene of the play Danlola's song "Don't pound the King's yam/ In a small mortar" and Serumis's, "non but the King/Takes the oil from the crossroads" (pp. 2-3) help to establish the Oba's eternal dignity and serve as a timely warning against any attempt to undermine that dignity. The songs also provide an early occasion for the introduction of the central conflict in the play -- the conflict between the old order and the new. Later on, in Part Two, we hear more songs (pp. 57-60)

from the Oba's Praise-Singer, Sarumi and Oba himself, all meant to amplify the traditional importance of the Oba and the futility of all plans to overthrow him: "The King is/He who chews on the haunch from an offering/The King is god" (p.57). And a little later we hear:

A King's wisdom is awesome measure
 Whatever fly cuts a careless caper
 Around the scent of sacrifice
 Will worship down the spider's throat (p.60)

Directly opposed to these praise-songs in intention and orientation are the revolutionary songs from the carpenters and the women. The Carpenters' Brigade express the ideology of the revolution: "we saw and plane and tame the wood/To bring the grains to light/Converting raw material/To 'Made in Ismaland'" (p.65). And the women see the new movement as "a new wonder of wonders" for "Kongi they say, will eat the King's yam". (p.74).

But the "wonder" is short lived, for it gets debunked when Segi presents to Kongi that terrible dish of her father's head, which is the symbol of Kongi's cruelty and which sends a crushing chill down his whole frame. This is done amidst a song which harshly satirizes the rugged despotism of Kongi's movement: a movement marked by "scourges" and "crown of thorns", the pounding of the "head of the first born" instead of yam for food, and the use of the "thigh of the first born" as faggot where "there was no dearth of wood" (p.82). In so lavishly and effectively employing folk songs which he has reinforced by his poetic vision in this play, Soyinka has fully demonstrated the dramatic potentiality of this genre of African traditional literature.

Most of what we have so far done in this study is simply to point to a few examples of the use of material from our oral literature to give the quality of Africanity to our modern literature. A lot more examples do exist which cannot be dealt

with in a limited study such as this. However, certain important facts can be established with regard to the concept of Africanity that has to do with the oral traditions. In the first place, it does not consist merely in including in a creative work a catalogue of the features of "an African poetic landscape with its flora and fauna ... elephants, beggars, calabashes, serpents, pumpkins, baskets, towncriers, iron bells, slit-drums", as Chinweizu has strongly recommended.³⁵ On the contrary it must be demanded that the writers who make use of this "landscape" use it creatively, for example, for the purpose of creating imagery or symbols. Secondly, fidelity to oral traditions does not mean simply adopting the form of our tales, myths and legends as Obumsele suggests.³⁶ Much as "form" is important, we can still recapture in our creative works enough of the spirit of the traditional literature through other technical devices, and more importantly by using the content of our myths, legends and tales for communicating new personal experiences and themes. Thirdly, though one is right in insisting that for a modern African literary work to assume the quality of Africanity in full it must be characterized by some or all of the elements of African traditional literature, the fact remains that the mere presence of those elements in such a work does not ipso facto make the work a success as literature. Thus we must insist on effective creative use of those elements, which will make for a successful work of art.

It is against this background of the artistic use of the material that Amos Tutuola's works can be seen to be not as successful as many people think they are. For, in spite of the abundance of oral traditional material in his writings (which of course make for the Africanity in them)³⁷, he has not employed it for original creativity; he has not effected that desirable trans-

formation of the raw material which is the function of creative imagination. In Tutuola's works what we have ~~are~~ extended, sometimes distorted versions of the stories that we have always heard and told. Hardly is any new artistic function assigned to them in his writing

But inspite of this great need to explore our "usable past" in order that our modern literature may be imbued with the quality of Africanity, we find foreign stylistic influences or echoes of foreign works (as was pointed out above with regard to Ozidi) in some modern African literary works. For instance, there are echoes of Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot and others in the earlier poetry of Christopher Okigbo; and those of G.M. Hopkins in some of J.P. Clark's earlier poems. There is no doubt that such echoes go a long way to undermine the Africanity (if not the originality) of these works. However, it is interesting to note that the writers have tried to eschew the foreign 'intruders' from their later works. This is especially true of Christopher Okigbo. The presence of foreign influence in the works of modern African writers should therefore be seen as something which is not desirable in itself, but which marks a stage in the evolution of modern African literature -- a stage at which the writers were not quite sure of self-confidence, identity and authentic voice. It is to be hoped that this stage is now superseded by one of the emergence of truly African literature firmly rooted in African literary tradition.

It is this tradition which should provide the writers with African literary style and which should constitute the basis of their African identity and the Africanity in their works. We may therefore reasonably demand of our writers that, of their diverse experiences -- educational, linguistic, literary

and many others -- they use enough of the African traditional literary material to easily demonstrate this identity and Africanity in their works.

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Notes

1. Ben Obumselu did remark once that "the African Poem in English is necessarily a memorable ordering of English words". See "The Background of Modern African Literature", Ibadan, No. 22 (June, 1966), 52.
2. "The Dead End of African Literature", Transition, Vol. III, No. 10 (1963), 13 - 15.
3. "Afro-English Awakening in Our Time", The Observer, September 17, 1961, p. 28.
4. "Polemics: The Dead End of African Literature", Transition, Vol. III, No. II (November, 1963), 7.
5. "The Dead End of African Literature: Swahili as an African Language", Transition, Vol. III, No.13 (March-April, 1964) 6.
6. "English and the African Writer," Transition, Vol. IV No. 18 (1965), 29.
7. Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie, and Ihechukwu Madubuike, "Towards the Decolonization of African Literature II", Okike: An African Journal of New Writing, No. 7 (April, 1975), 81.
8. "African Literature and Universities", Transition, Vol. III No. 10 (September, 1963), 17.
9. S. M. Olu Tomori, "Linguistic Considerations in the Selection of Texts", Seminar Paper, No. 113, Department of Adult Education and Extra-mural Studies (University of Ibadan, 1965), p. 1.
10. "Problems of Nigerian Writers", Nigeria Magazine, No. 78 (September, 1963), 218.
11. See W. H. Judson, Introduction to the Study of Literature
12. A similar point has been made by Rev. Joseph V. Landy with regard to the issue of national literature in general. In his paper "What is a National Literature?" which was read at the English Departmental Seminar in the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, 1974, Landy said inter alia: "A national literature ... is a body of literature by the people of a given nation. Nothing more. Any attempt to make it mean more is a distortion of history." (p. 1.). We can compare this firm stand with the series of unanswered questions raised by Rene Wellek and Austin Warren, questions which do not suggest any stand taken by the authors. See Theory of Literature (Penguin Books, 1963, repr. 1970), pp. 52 - 53.
13. "Oral Tradition in the Criticism of African Literature", The Journal of Modern African Studies, Vol. 13, No. 1 (1975), 107.

14. Things Fall Apart (London: Heinemann, 1967, repr. 1969), p.6.
15. Contained in Night of My Blood (New York: (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1971), pp. 42 - 53.
16. Idanre and Other Poems (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1967 repr. 1969), pp. 61 - 85.
17. Chinweizu observed that in "Idanre" and his other later poems Soyinka "chose to wallow in dense obscurities."
See "Prodigals, Come Home! Okike, No. 4 (December, 1973), 10
18. Songs for Deers (1960 - 1970) (NOK Publishers Ltd., 1974).
pp. 3 - 4 and 13 - 15.
19. Chinweizu, op. cit., pp. 2 - 4. He quotes from Okigbo's "Elegy for Slit-drum" and "Hurrah for Thunder" for illustration, and shows how the latter poem is modelled on a Yoruba oral poem "Oriki 'Erin'."
20. The three poems are contained in Modern Poetry from Africa, ed. Gerald Moore and Ulli Boier (Penguin Books Ltd, 1968), pp. 113, 117 & 152.
21. See Okike, No. 7, p. 1.
22. (London: Heinemann, A.W.S., 1965, repr. 1967).
23. (London: Heinemann, A.W.S., 1965, repr. 1969).
24. Contained in Three Plays by J. P. Clark (London: O.U.P, 1964), pp. 89 - 88.
25. Ibid., pp. 49 - 88.
26. See Obumelu, op. cit., p. 56: He notes that the same story with a variation at the end features also in Amos Tutuola's The Palm Wine Drinkard.
27. Ibid
28. (London: O.U.P, 1966)
29. Introduction to Nigerian Literature, ed. Bruce King (University of Lagos: Evans Brothers Ltd., 1971), p. 9. My italics.
30. (London: O.U.P., 1963).
31. (London: O.U.P., 1965).
32. (Nairobi: O.U.P., 1974).
33. I have been helped with translation by Dr. M.A. Ojo of the Department of Social Studies, University of Benin, Benin City.
34. (London: O.U.P., 1967, Imp. 1972).
35. Chinweizu, op. cit., p. 4.
36. Obumelu, op. cit., p. 50.

37. See Bernth Lindfors, Folklore in Nigeria Literature (New York: Africana Publishing Company, 1973). Lindfors says that Tutuola is "the most African of African writers" (p.61). But Lindfors' interest is more in Tutuola's stories than in what he has done artistically with those stories; and in any event it is not obvious that the stories have any artistic functions in Tutuola's works other than to entertain by their own presence. If we compare Lindfors' treatment of My Life in the Bush of Ghosts (pp. 62 - 70) and his discussion of Achebe's use of proverbs (pp. 73-92) and folktales (pp. 94-102), we find that the latter writer assigns specific literary functions to his proverbs and tales. Lindfors himself agrees that Achebe "often uses proverbs and folktales to comment indirectly on eccentricities of human behaviour.... The lore thus senses a moral purpose, interpreting as well as reflecting contemporary social realities". (p.94).