

African Literatures

edited and introduced by
Frank Schulze-Engler and Geoffrey V. Davis

POSTCOLONIAL LITERATURES IN ENGLISH

SOURCES AND RESOURCES

Edited by

Tobias Döring, Frank Schulze-Engler and Gerhard Stilz

VOL. III

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General Preface

Postcolonial Literatures in English have become a central field of research and study. If studying 'English' was once synonymous with studying literature from Britain, and later with looking into a bipolar literary world comprising Britain and the USA, it is today a critical engagement with a global network of English-language literatures and cultures. This engagement encompasses a broad spectrum of linguistic varieties, including speakers or writers who may use English (or a variety of English) as only one of the options available to them in their specific socio-cultural context.

The six volumes of *Postcolonial Literatures in English: Sources and Resources* aim to help students and teachers of literature in exploring the diversity of this global network. Postcolonial Literatures in English are linked through a common history of colonisation and decolonisation, but also through current transnational connections in an increasingly globalized world and by transcultural lifeworlds established by large-scale migration and diasporic populations. At the same time, these literatures are very specific engagements with widely diverging experiences of colonisation and decolonisation, local histories and entangled modernities. The volumes in this series on (1) *South Asian Literatures*, (2) *Australian, New Zealand and Pacific Literatures*, (3) *African Literatures*, (4) *Canadian Literatures*, (5) *Caribbean Literatures*, and (6) *Black and Asian British Literatures* address both the local, regional or national contexts in which these literatures have emerged and the transnational and transcultural connections that link them to each other and the wider 'English-speaking world.'

The volumes bring together fully annotated original historical and critical texts documenting the material, political and cultural conditions from which anglophone writing has emerged and continues to operate in the specific regions. Each volume contains an introduction setting out major trends and developments in the region, provides recommendations for further reading and explores the specificities of the region within a general framework focussing on histories, identities, language, education, movements and genres as well as transcultural perspectives. The book series allows easy access to helpful background knowledge on the broad range of postcolonial literatures, aims at facilitating critical dialogues with literary and intellectual voices from relevant regions, and hopes to generate further insights into the interconnectedness of anglophone literatures around the world.

Tobias Döring, Frank Schulze-Engler and Gerhard Stilz

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■ Countries where English is an official language and/or widely spoken

Introduction

The well-known Nigerian author Chinua Achebe opened one of his recent essays with a remark that neatly underlines the rationale for the present book. “Of all the explosions that have rocked the African continent in recent decades,” he wrote, “few have been more spectacular, and hardly any more beneficial, than the eruption of African literature, shedding a little light here and there on what had been an area of darkness.”¹ In seeking ourselves to “shed a little light” on the phenomenon of African literature, its growth and variety, we are of course aware that it is well-nigh impossible to do justice to such a vast topic in a single volume. While restricting our purview to the English-language literatures of Africa may be thought to reduce the field to somewhat more manageable proportions, it does not relieve us of the challenging, but entirely rewarding task of familiarising ourselves with the political, social, cultural and linguistic diversity of the continent which forms the context of these literatures. Confronted with a degree of diversity which comprises over fifty nations, more than fifteen hundred indigenous languages, innumerable systems of religious belief, not to mention a wide-ranging array of political and social issues, we will need to explore the still inadequately known territory of African history and African affairs.

What the present volume seeks to provide then is an introduction to the English-language literatures of Africa through a series of texts selected for the contribution they make to the contextualisation of these literatures. Thus we have included texts which comment on such matters as the history of the English language on the African continent, the use of the language by African writers, the oral tradition, the impact of missionary education on Africans, the issues of identity which have informed their writing, the debates which have surrounded the emergence of African literature in English and the present state of African literary practice. The volume pays considerable attention to the history of the subject because we are mindful of the importance of knowledge of the past for an understanding of the present. In presenting such an anthology, which to some extent uses the English-language literature as an exemplum of African literature generally, we should bear in mind the transcultural and comparative aspects of African literatures. There are parallel developments of great interest in the francophone and lusophone literatures and cultures of Africa, not to mention those in indigenous writing.

Anyone who has ever been asked to fill in the names of the countries on a blank map of Africa and failed the test miserably can confirm that even the most basic facts of the geography of the continent can constitute a problem when one begins the study of African literatures – which is one reason why this volume contains a map. The vast continent, which is some 4600 miles across from East to West and approximately 5000 miles from North to South, encompasses a great diversity of topographical features and climatic conditions, which have been prime

¹ Chinua Achebe, “Politics and Politicians of Language in African Literature” in: Achebe, *The Education of a British-Protected Child* (New York: Knopf, 2009), 96.

determinants of human development. The Sahara and Namib deserts, the equatorial rainforests of the Congo and Ghana, the savannah of West Africa, the mountain ranges (including Mt. Kilimanjaro) and the Great Rift Valley of the East, the high veld of South Africa and Zimbabwe are examples of the kind of terrain which have decisively and variously influenced the spread of human settlement. For centuries the Sahara effectively formed a barrier between North and South, which meant that the Northern and the sub-Saharan regions developed quite separate characters. It was only when the desert was crossed and maritime links to West Africa were established that trade between North and South could flourish and the spread of Islam to the South begin. Human settlements were widely scattered, there were long distances between them and transport was always difficult. Extreme climatic conditions and adverse environmental factors often proved hostile to settlement, while diseases such as malaria severely limited population growth. In many regions agriculture proved onerous because of the poor quality of the soil and unreliable rainfall; in some areas pastoral pursuits were rendered impossible due to the presence of insects such as the tsetse fly, which killed cattle. Patterns of settlement depended on such factors and continue to do so – desertification, for example, continues to pose a threat to a number of sub-Saharan African countries.

While we owe to early Arab settlement along the Mediterranean coast and the emergence of literate societies there the fact that much is known about the history of North Africa on the basis of written documents, the widespread perception of sub-Saharan Africa was for many years that the region had no history of its own and that consequently there was little to interest historians before the coming of the Europeans. It is perhaps surprising that such attitudes began to change only recently. African historiography is a comparatively new phenomenon, dating back as an academic discipline only to the 1950s. Interest in the role of the African diaspora in the Caribbean, North America and elsewhere as a constituent factor in African history is even more recent.

The main problem we encounter in studying the early history of sub-Saharan Africa is that the societies established there were mostly non-literate and written records thus hardly exist. Such sources as are available to the historian primarily take the form of archaeological findings, although due to climatic conditions and the nature of the building materials employed, the number of sites tends to be limited. It is increasingly being recognised too that the oral tradition – stories handed down from generation to generation – might also be understood as historical evidence, although that does pose the interpretative problem of how to distinguish history from myth. Early writing in languages other than English such as Geez and Amharic in Ethiopia, which have long literary traditions, and Kiswahili, which has long functioned as the East African lingua franca, also provide extensive historical source material, to which modern writers have had recourse. For later phases of African history, from about the 15th century onwards, the writings of early travellers, traders and missionaries assume importance, since they offer eye-witness accounts of events. There is a great deal of travel literature, particularly in the case of South Africa, beginning with early Dutch accounts. Historians have,

however, recognised that such writings are not always reliable, since their authors tend not always to be free of prejudice.

In studying the history and cultures of Africa it is useful for our purposes to distinguish three periods – the pre-colonial, the colonial and the post-colonial. It is, however, advisable to bear in mind that terminology is always open to contestation. Some may object to the primacy of the colonial as a point of reference for societies, cultures and literatures that have long outgrown the colonial nexus from which they once emerged and that today face a plethora of new challenges related to democratization struggles, social justice and Africa's role in a globalized world; others may dispute the political appropriateness of the term "post-colonial" to describe a continent, some of whose societies continue to display political and economic structures inherited from the colonial period and where the term "neo-colonial" may seem more apposite.

African history is of great antiquity. The continent is older and has been inhabited longer than any other region of the globe. Not the least of its attributes is the fact that the human species itself first evolved in Africa some four to six million years ago, although there continues to be some disagreement amongst scholars as to whether its origin should be traced to East or to South Africa. Accordingly, Africa boasts a number of ancient cultures, including that of Ancient Egypt, which has not always been studied in an African context. Sub-Saharan West African history has been traced back some 2000 years, much evidence of its early period having been found at the oldest urban centre at Jenne in Mali, which existed for some sixteen hundred years from the third century BC onwards. By about 1000 BC Bantu-speaking peoples originating in West Africa had spread to the Great Lakes region of East Africa and from there began a gradual migration south towards what is now Zimbabwe and South Africa. By AD 400 Bantu-language speakers are known to have settled in East and Southern Africa. These complex processes of migration have been convincingly documented from archaeological and linguistic evidence. Such evidence was used, for example, to refute the specious arguments of apartheid ideologues in South Africa, who were wont to claim that Europeans and Africans had arrived in South Africa at about the same time.

After about AD 1000 settled societies began to be established in equatorial West Africa. They successfully practiced agriculture, mastered ironworking, set up trading networks and amassed considerable wealth based in part on their possession of gold. Consolidated between the 11th and the 17th centuries, the most renowned of these societies were the three kingdoms of Mali (13th to 15th centuries), Songhay (on the Niger; 15th to 16th centuries) and Asante (in what is now Ghana; from the 17th century). East and Southern Africa saw similar developments. Great Zimbabwe, built in stone from 1300 and rich in gold, became a trading centre of major importance (modern research has effectively refuted the prejudiced view once widely held in the region that such an imposing structure could not have been built by Africans). In the 17th and 18th centuries the East African region saw the creation of important kingdoms such as Buganda, Rwanda, and Burundi.

The first European presence in West Africa dates back to Portuguese voyages down the African coast. It was here in what is now Ghana that the first European fort, El Mina, was built in 1482. If the attraction of its location lay initially in the opportunity it offered for capturing West African gold, it soon became a centre for a trade which would prove much more lucrative – slavery. Various forms of enslavement had existed in both East and West Africa, and recent research shows that the number of slaves taken from both regions may have been almost equal. The institutionalisation of the transatlantic trade by Europeans, which had a devastating effect on African society, may be dated to 1441, the first shipment of slaves on a direct regular basis to the Americas to 1532. It has been reliably estimated that over the whole period when the trade was carried on upwards of 12.5 million slaves were transported across the Atlantic to Brazil, the Caribbean islands, and North America. The demographic impact on West Africa must have been almost incalculable, but its full extent is not known. The degree to which Africans themselves facilitated the trade by selling slaves to European traders is not now doubted. It is clear that the Ashanti Empire, for instance, thrived on the slave trade and that participation in the trade generated considerable internal conflict between West African societies. Ships of most European powers participated in the trade, which the British abolished by Act of Parliament in 1807 (although they subsequently had to take naval action off the African coast in an effort to prevent foreign ships continuing the trade).

English-language literature in the three major regions of sub-Saharan Africa – East, West and Southern – obviously dates back to the first presence of the English, whether as soldiers, administrators, missionaries or settlers, in the respective region. Colonialism played a major role in the emergence of writing in English in Africa, both initially by the English themselves and later by African authors. The number of territories conquered or annexed by the British in Africa was large and the range of literatures covered by the term “African literatures in English” is thus correspondingly diverse. In West Africa the British colonies were The Gambia, Gold Coast (later Ghana), Nigeria, and Sierra Leone; in East Africa they were British Somaliland, Kenya, Uganda, Tanganyika and Zanzibar (later amalgamated into Tanzania); in Southern Africa they were Bechuanaland (a protectorate, later Botswana), Basutoland (a protectorate, later Lesotho), Northern Rhodesia (later Zambia), Nyasaland (later Malawi), South Africa, Southern Rhodesia (later Zimbabwe), and Swaziland. In addition Britain controlled parts of Cameroon under a League of Nations Mandate and later as a United Nations Trust Territory (jointly with France), Egypt (from 1882-1922), and the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, which was administered as a condominium from 1899 to 1956.

For most African states the colonial period was relatively short, however, most territories having been acquired in the late 19th century and granted independence in the 1960s. British rule in the Gold Coast, which was the first African colony to become independent, lasted only from 1911 to 1957, for example. Colonies such as The Gambia established in 1888, Nyasaland set up in 1891 or Kenya occupied in 1895 were all ruled by the British for comparatively short periods of time. One reason for this was that what interested the British was not settlement in territo-