<u>Problems in African Literature</u> (1992)

by

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From the very beginning when I started writing I had no choice but to write in Zulu, my mother tongue. I had no choice for several reasons. First, there was no other language allowed in our family besides an African language. Language was therefore, from the very beginning, a combative weapon that had to be used against occupation by the foreigners ("they who live by a selfish code," *untukazana*), the British and the Afrikaners. Language was also meant to operate as an instrument for the re-assertion of African values, African history, and a whole ideology justifying the existence of the African world against "their world." The fierce sense in which this was inculcated into our minds by both the Kunene Clans and the Ngcobo Clans, to which we belonged, had an almost sacred aura about it. It was logical then that, when, at the age of eight of nine, I began to write in what then was perceived as an "unusually poetical language," I immediately received special attention. Special attention came particularly from my father and from Mr. Ngema, the principal of our school and a man, who revered the correct usage of the Zulu idiomatic language. I therefore learned very early that language is not merely for communication but also entails a sacred trust requiring me to regard its usage with a deep sense of reverence. In this sense, language was not language but "Words"—their meaning, their correlation to reality, and their prophetic and magical substance. Reality itself could not be "real" until it had been named, in other words, until it had manifested itself directly to the subjective psyche of the observer. Words, according tot his thinking, involve one's engagement with the phenomena at the level of one's own existence. Further, as I was judged to be a poet (*imbongi,* praiser, one who celebrates the desirable qualities of existence, the receiver on behalf

of. . .), I had to learn the traditions, the institutions, the philosophies, and the histories both from a practical point of view, because I had to deal with others, and also from the perspective of teaching them through my writings. The situation approximated what happened among the Mayas who, realizing that the Spaniards were on the verge of destroying all that was sacred to their great culture and religion, came together as the Cauecs, the Great Houses, and the Lord Quiches to preserve the Holy Book of the Mayas, the Popol Yu. The same sense of seriousness led my father to buy me a special folding table to use as I followed the sun around our building in the process of writing poetry. The same sense of reverence surfaced on many an evening when I was required to read to my father all the poetry I had written during the day. In the same spirit, my father proclaimed, "The Ancestors have visited our House!"

So intense was my training and exposure to various teachers that I came to the conclusion that I was not loved. I seriously thought I had been adopted as an abandoned child. I was made to do all the hard chores such as the after-school herding and care of the cattle, in spite of the fact that we had a large enclosure for them. Yet, it was always with a certain sense of seriousness that my father discussed with me the genealogy of our Royal Clan, the histories of past wars, and the general truths of our African philosophy and values. The grandmothers treated me in the same manner. After all, they told me, it was I, among the numerous children of the Kunene Clan, who had been chosen by my grandfather at a young age to return to the Kunene regions and to "accompany" him as he was dying.

These statements should not mislead people into believing that I was a spoiled or privileged child. African philosophy and African thought are deeply ambivalent about the freak (genius) child. Rather, the whole approach of African philosophy requires the socialization of the individual's unique qualities rather than the praising of them in isolation. Indeed, it is logical that so-called trickster stories

demonstrate both contempt and admiration for the trickster. The individual can equally be praised (*"bonga")* and denounced *("bonga")*. T he category of the absolute, the "genius," is absent. In short, whenever an individual with a superior quality emerges, he or she is quickly absorbed into either the secret societies of priesthoods or diviners or into the semi-secret societies of thinkers. Attention is paid to the potential qualities of a particular child simply according to the needs of the particular historical period. In fact, the child is constantly reminded about those who, in the past history of the family or society, possessed great abilities. This type of education training is regarded as successful only if the child "genius" thoroughly learns the virtues of humility. As the Zulu saying goes: a person must learn from children and madmen.

The preparation for my own role as "keeper of the sacred word" was not different from the preparation of those who, in other parts of Africa, also go through the rigorous but friendly training for special services to society. Such children tend to be but dimly aware of any special attention that is paid to them. Certainly in my case it was only later in life that I understood the formal adult strategies that were applied to my own training. Such training takes place largely within the general framework of society and social life. This background is essential if one is to understand the crucial aspects of African philosophical attitudes toward language and its importance as a tool of knowledge. Within this context, the Word itself is sacred and meant to invoke the divine qualities of creation. This aspect of language relates in a profound way to the African world view that recognizes two levels of meaning in all phenomena (i.e., the thing as it is in itself and the thing as it appears). Clearly, since all meaning leads to more meaning, that which is stated and observed belongs only to one aspect of meaning, for it is limited by the observer and not by the qualities of phenomena.

To reflect these several levels of meaning, the use of language must employ symbolism, metaphor, and a complex set of nuances. This need is made even more complex by the fact that African life is 90% public; therefore, the meaning of things must aim at incorporating the composite responses for the different levels of audience response. The African philosophical system is not the only one that recognizes two levels in the cosmic order. Nevertheless, in its integrated and interlinked postulation of phenomena, it is unique and perhaps closer to Eastern perceptions of the world order than to those of the Westerner, who has rigidly separated the world conceived in physical terms and the world that constitutes a separate spiritual reality. The mystical element in African thinking is an intellectual conclusion arising from a series of interrelated physical and spiritual observations that tend to integrate and universalize the dual aspects of reality. In other words, the subjective levels of meaning describe only one aspect of observation, whereas the metaphysical description becomes an acceptance (and probe) of the impossibility of simultaneously grasping the totality of meaning. Consequently, language, particularly the language of literature and artistic expression, must incorporate these realities, sometimes as ritualistic invocations. Some of these meanings might seem contradictory, but they are only partially so. In terms of the whole phenomenon, they demonstrate a continuing order that cannot survive without the generative reality of contradictions. For example, the gods and the Ancestors are both human and divine, destructive and creative, human and animal, base and elevated. Such concepts are not born of an inability to understand the higher meaning of order, but of an observation that requires the sacred word to describe and integrate according to the sacred order of the universe.

For one to talk about the proper language to use in the creation of African literature, one must understand the fundamental realities of its philosophies. One must answer the question: what language or languages best serve the interests of cultural, social and economic

development within the African world! In other words, *the issue is not language at all but the philosophies and values that characterize the African world.* Therefore, the intrusion of foreign languages and the subsequent debate about language-choice is meaningless without a simultaneous and far-reaching discussion of African philosophies and cosmological meanings. For this reason, an in-depth examination must first be made of African thought systems—their origins, their meanings, and their goals—before one can decide the question of language. Can language exist without the philosophy or the realities that characterize a given society?! Can philosophy have meaning without language? Indeed, the apparent proliferation of languages in Africa and India seems to reflect different strategies of language usage than those that had led to the integration of languages in the European world. Some factors seem to favor the elevation of one main language over others. What are they? Is there a philosophic outlook to language invention and diversification? Does it go deeper than the mere isolation of groups or their conquest by outsiders? Is there a cultural and philosopher tolerance of language differences (as we suspect) in some regions as opposed to others? Why is it easier for Africans or Indians to co-exist in one world with differing and divergent languages? Why is it easier for the African to learn and grasp more than one language? Is there an attitude that encourages respect for a multifaceted universe and consequently allows for the existence of the other worlds (languages) in juxtaposition to our own? Surely the disappearance of the Egyptian civilization also entailed the disappearance of the Egyptian language.

And yet the idea of language imposition as a strategy of power and political control must be kept in mind as a crucial political and social question. Clearly, the "national" aspect of language does not always correspond to the social aspects of language use. In other words, even if a country desires to adopt a particular language for nationalistic reasons, that language might not be acceptable to the vast majority of the population. In some cases a socially desirable language might not

be acceptable to a powerful elite that stubbornly refuses to adopt the social language spoken by the majority. This problem has arisen in many parts of Africa, where it has often created a separation between the language of the "educated" (assimilated) elite and the language of the "masses." Similar problems arise in situations where a large segment of the population has become marginalized as a political force. Consequently, when language becomes an issue of nationalism, the political authority shifts to the masses, reactivating the need for a common language to mobilize the people and to provide the mythical force necessary for national reassertion. At this point, the "intellectual elite" must either integrate itself into the current national language fever or de vise a compromise language. The process itself is not a radical one, since there are always remnants of once powerful priesthoods and/or royal clans that only partially respond to the new challenge. Besides, the Royal Clans have their own privileges to protect.

There is a tendency for people in many recently occupied and colonialized countries to regard the colonial experience as unique to themselves. The style and manner, the intensity and efficiency of colonial occupation was perhaps new, but the sorts of political and economic control elaborated under colonialism are actually as old as the earliest human codes of power. For this reason, we must divide our argument into two phases: internal occupation and external occupation, with all the implications that are implied by rigid cultural control. Insofar as language and lifestyle are concerned, internal occupation implies an adjustment (by the rest of the population) to an elite that regards its own cultural, political, and economic privileges as sacrosanct. This tendency is invariably characterized by an aristocracy that sees itself as the guardian of true and high culture.

Because of its minority status, however, the aristocracy evolves all kinds of mythologies to justify its power and position. One of the

most effective ways at its disposal involves the appropriation of the arts to disseminate its grand images, thus transforming the once-popular idiom of art and literature into propaganda for the values of the few. In pursuit of its power and in an attempt to protect that power, the aristocracy actively participates in and encourages the arts as long as they affirm (and do not challenge) its position. The mythification of a social elite in literature is elaborately exemplified in numerous epics and dramas from different societies: *The Aeneid, Mahabaratha, Sundiata,* etc. By its very nature, the identification of a national ethos with the interests and values of those in power requires the elaboration of a myth of power. Elite groups thus eventually establish the idea of high and low cultures that correspond to the correct national (official) language, on the one hand, and several supposedly inferior dialects or languages, on the other. Under these circumstances, some languages die; others are creolized or become assimilated into the dominant "national" language. The latter is not only touted as the correct way of speaking; it is also promoted as the noblest and best vehicle of thought (literature). The masters of the literature become the court mythologists, the positive dramatizers of power, the literati, the guardians of the "high" language.

In time, the people forget the historical incidents that led to the choice of a particular language and accept the court language, or the classical language, as normal. Of course, since such a language recruits the best minds, the best artists, the best minds, the best artists, the best full-time performers, it incorporates "superior" methods of language development. What gives this "official" or "classical" language a national validity are the resources available to it, including the patronage of he elite and the grandiose traditions of great heroes. Sometimes the "superior" language of the rulers is equated with the language of the gods or of God—a linkage often maintained by an erudite religious priesthood that cultivates the preserves the mythologies of power. The association between

spiritual (or cosmic) forces and the authority of those in power becomes the nexus that guarantees the validity of classical or national literature and reinforces the division of cultural expressions into valid and invalid forms. This hierarchical organization of society means that those acceptable to the elite must bear witness to their participation in an established image of the power structure by adopting the "correct" use of languages and symbolic gestures. In short, they must imitate, or adopt *in toto* the culture of the elite.

The question than arises as to whether high and low culture can co-exist and become capable of cross-fertilization. In many cases, cross fertilization does take place, but in others the elite language achieves an absolute dominance that erodes "mass," "folk," or "low" culture, and demoralizes it practitioners. This process often leads to the remolding of popular culture in the image of the aristocratic or elite culture, thus bringing about a Classic or Golden Age. My contention is not that the Golden Age or Classical period came about simply as the result of he remolding of popular culture. On the contrary, by endorsing many elements of popular culture, the power structure enriches popular culture and endows it with a scope that often enables it to transcend its local origins and achieve a universality of meaning. The masters of such periods utilize the available historical, artistic, human, and material resources to elevate the arts to the status of supreme symbols for the national ethos.

But what has all this to do with literature in Africa or with the choice of which language to use for literary purposes? As I have stated before, I believe that a writer's choice of language presupposes a full or partial adoption of the cultural tradition that obtains in his or her society. Indeed, I am convinced that the choice of language in literature is often preceded by a full integration of the writer's psyche. In short, writers who write in a foreign language are already part of foreign institutions; to one extent or another, they have adopted foreign values and philosophical attitudes, and they

variously seek to be a member of that culture They cannot be said to be African cultural representatives who write in another language because, in spirit, at least, they speak from the perspective provided for them by the effective apparatus of mental control exercised by the former colonial power. As my grandmother used to say when she forbade us to utter even the slightest word in English, “This language is responsible for the death of many of your Ancestors.” What she desired to prohibit was not the English language *per se*, but all the values, institutions, ideologies, and attitudes that inevitably accompanied it. Language itself is merely a symbolic embodiment of this complex of cultural values.

Phanuel Egechuru has written an enlightening work entitled “Black Writers, White Audience.” It is enlightening because it demonstrates how colonized African intellectuals focused and directed their writings to an outside audience or to a small African audience that had been schooled to reason and think in English. Members of this latter group, unable to recognize their own alienation and disorientation, often claim they can better express their ideas in English or French or Portuguese. However, they are often afraid to express ideas which are mere colloquialisms in the African context, but which sound as though they are profound and intellectual when translated into a foreign language. This tendency has often been justified on the grounds that writing in English, French, or Portuguese will enable them to address sophisticated foreign audiences or to reach a wider public among the people who speak these languages. In other words, they tacitly admit that the internal audience is either illiterate or too insignificant to be regarded as a source of consumers for their ideas. This situation is further exacerbated by the small number of elites who actually speak only and write only in European languages, thereby limiting the African audience even further.

The greatest mystery, however, is why a literature written in foreign languages and with a foreign audience in mind is not generally regarded as part of mainstream Western literature? The answer is simply that this literature is not acceptable as an example of "high" culture in European countries, although some "African" writers would obviously welcome the acceptance of their works into the canon of English/French/Portuguese literature. Yet, as Lewis Nkosi once stated, there really are no African writers among those who write in English, French and Portuguese. In fact, their acceptance into the European tradition would solve a major problem because it would enable authentic African writers to function as the true representatives of African values and to emerge as rightful masters in their own houses. How absurd it would be to classify an Englishman who wrote in Latin as an English writer merely because he had been born in England and was writing works that were set in that country! James Steward wrote in Zulu; why is he not regarded as an English writer? Why are the Hong Kong Chinese who write in English not treated as Chinese writers? Why is Conrad not treated as a Polish writer? Why is Wole Soyinka not treated as a great English writer?

Such questions lead us directly to a re-examination of colonial occupation and its relationship to arguments about the appropriate language of literary expression in Africa. However, to broaden our discussion it will be illuminating to consider the impact of colonial occupation on indigenous literatures in other societies. In the English language, the first universally celebrated writer was Chaucer. When Chaucer first wrote in English, his language was no more than a common man's vernacular. Indeed, he himself occasionally composed celebratory poems for the aristocracy in Latin. In Medieval England, the next most "valid" language was a Latin "creole" called French. Next to Latin, it represented the most acceptable vehicle for speaking in the tradition of the Roman power structure. The audience for Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* is one of the earliest attempts by the formerly enslaved English to recapture their cultural freedom and

national pride after their language and culture had been marginalized by the Roman occupation; however, Chaucer's revolt was not against the Romans but against the mentality of a colonized elite.

Chaucer is therefore significant in the history of the English language for having re-established the validity of his own language and culture. His work is also significant in the sense tat it laid the groundwork for the nationalism that eventually eliminated any pretensions to Romanism. Like Westerners today, Romans in their heyday assumed that only Roman values and traditions were valid and civilized. Within this context, Chaucer is justifiably regarded as a hero of the English language and its literature. However, his role was part of a process that addressed itself not only to the language issue as an instrument of cultural revolt and national reassertion, but also as a way of re-establishing English values and traditions, albeit in a somewhat diluted but more universalistic fashion. In other words, Chaucer wrote as an English person; he elevated the lifestyle of the English and created a story that was firmly English in its content as well as in its form. Yet the most significant aspect of Chaucer's contribution is not its status as a masterpiece (which it isn't) but the fact that it was written in English primarily for an English audience. Chaucer did not address a world audience in the idiom of the Romans but an English-speaking one in its own language.

Needless to say, the choice of native languages as instruments of revolt against occupations is neither new nor confined to African societies. The Persians under Arab occupation produced many outstanding authors who secretly wrote in their own language; for example, Nasir Khursaw refused to use any Arab word in his writings. His fierce resistance to intellectual occupation still makes him a hero among Parsee speakers. The Arab occupation of Persia is particularly relevant to the situation in Africa because the Arab conquerors, convinced that their language was the language of true

belief and thought (science) mercilessly punished those who attempted to use other languages. As a result, writers such as Firdausi and Rumi not only wrote under difficult publishing conditions; they were also obliged to write under conditions that threatened their survival. Similarly, in America, the great Cherokee thinker Sequoyh produced a syllabary of eighty-six characters in 1821. In the newspapers that he started, The Cherokee people used this new script and began to enrich their literary heritage. According to Sequoyah, the whiteman's power could only be circumscribed by the creation of one's own form of writing.

Several scripts have emerged in Africa. Among them are the Bamum, Fulfulde, Hausa, and Vai. In America, Africans faced with violent methods of de-culturation developed a variety of symbolic languages such as that from which tap dancing developed. The most astounding language for cultural communication for the preservation of history and thought among African-Americans is the means by which they communicated their thought, feeling, and secret messages. Perhaps no people on earth is as variedly gifted in this respect as they are. African-American music became an inimitable sacred language of communication and a method for preserving culture. So personalized is this language that each time outsiders try to imitate it, the music itself changes, and its external forms of expression are immediately modified. Clearly, African-Americans found alternative methods of communicating their literature in a cultural climate that was foreign to their own cosmology. The methods used by the Africans in America blend easily with the African system of values and with the thought patterns from which their cultural ideologies evolved. Such similarities persist despite many years of separation from their parent world in Africa. Indeed, to understand the religious and secular cultural expressions of African-Americans, one must be familiar with the ancient forms of expression that existed in pre-colonial Africa. In the Baptist church, for example, the relationship between the court poet and the ruler is

replicated in the relationship between the Baptist clergyman and his "courtiers." There is also a democratic involvement in the public approval or disapproval of the performance of the poet-King (Pastor). The pastor is both a spiritual and a political leader; through oratory (sophisticated language) as well as performance, he mobilizes the people and denounces their enemies in the most virulent language.

To maintain their cultural identity, the Jewish people have also remained deeply attached to their sacred works of literature in Hebrew, demonstrating that the language of communication. In short, the simple language of communication must be distinguished from the "sacred word" of a people. Thus, in many African communities, the "Keeper of the Sacred Word" is the most celebrated individual. His power and authority surpass even those of the king. Many inept rulers live in terror of the "Keeper of the Sacred Word"; in fact, they often are powerless to prosecute him for the blasphemous statements he might hurl against them. The true "poets" represent the essence of popular authority. By the use of words, they can even depose a ruler. The "Keepers of the Sacred Word" *(djeli, griot, mbongi,* etc.) thus embody the democratic institutions that guarantee the independent authority of the people. More than an amalgam of simple codes of meaning, the "Sacred Word" is a powerful social and political force, although its role in the presentation and preservation of thought is often baffling to foreigners or even to alienated African intellectuals. Too often they ignore the subtleties of meaning contained in the literary language of Africa. At times oratory and eloquence are so important to communication of thought in Africa that what one says can be less significant than how one presents it. Men or women at the Assembly must not only exhibit skill in debate; they must also be historians who quote freely from historical precedents and philosophers who use aphoristic statements to express universal truths. Similarly, storytellers are often accompanied by singers and presenters because the dramatic communication of the form and content requires a

special language that integrates various artistic expressions to convey nuances of meaning.

Radical differences between the cosmology of former European colonial powers and that of African societies constitute a crucial factor in the choice of an appropriate language for literary expression on the continent. For if, as I believe, language choice is a consideration that occurs to people after they have chosen a cultural lifestyle, then the choice of a language is either motivated by a sense of cultural surrender or a commitment to a cultural assertion. The latter would actually be an acknowledgment of the superiority of African cultural forms within the African context. The situation differs from that of the European world that was absorbed into a Roman linguistic and institutional sphere in the sense that Europeans shared a world view that reflected the region in which they lived, the energies generated by the crisis of occupation, or the political unification process that linked them together. In contrast, the values and cosmological outlook of Africans had more in common with those of Asians than with those of Europeans.

African institutions and values must be distinguished from those of Europe because the real issue here is a choice between African traditions (as expressed through language) and European traditions, which are also expressed through language. The reassertion of the English language in the face of Romanization and Latinization is in many ways based on the same principles of resistance as the efforts of those who are defending the African world against the intrusion of European languages and cultures. The present situation in Africa presages the emergence, in the next ten to twenty years, of a fervent nationalisms that will find expression in an aggressive African scholarship in science, philosophy, and literature—a scholarship that will be written and disseminated in African languages. Such a development will require more than political speeches, for it entails a re-establishment of the African's humanity and his pride in Africa's

past achievement and future goals. This process has already begun in the critique of European models for development and social change. Scholars such as Cheikh Anta Diop, Joseph Ki-Zerbo, Isidore Okpewho, Amadou Hampate Ba, B.A. Ogot, Boubou Hama, H. Mokhtar, Theophile Obenga, and H. Djait have fired the first salvos. Yet we still do not know the vast dimensions of an authentic African literature in African languages. In the present context, it is obscured by the glorification and the excessive critical attention accorded to marginal literatures written in foreign languages. Heavily subsidized and promoted by the cultural institutions of the former colonizers, this pseudo-African literature continues to be elevated at the expense of genuine African literatures.

An examination of African and European physical environments reveals profound differences in scale and structure—differences that are reflected through institutions, value systems, and belief structures. The fact that Africa is a large continent whose geography has permitted easy mobility has affected not only thought systems and their classifications but also the very definition of language usage. The mild climatic conditions in Africa influenced the emergence of societies that are largely open and public. It would be impossible here to detail all the aspects that have contributed to the articulation of a specifically African philosophical outlook; in any case, this outlook is not monolithic, for it reflects a variety of regional phenomena. However, what is crucial is the recognition that African thought systems are *different* from Western ones and that they are characterized by *their own specific categories.* The sense of intellectual inadequacy inculcated into the African colonial elite predisposed them to believe that African systems of thought are lagging behind those of Europe or their occupiers or simply do not exist; the conclusion they drew from this belief was that these systems must either be improved or be replaced by a totally new, supposedly more advanced Western ones.

The Western hierarchical structure confirms this order by establishing selective and subjective criteria that reinforce the mythologies of European superiority based more upon the fact of conquest and the desire for power imposition than upon a dispassionate examination of reality. To achieve an objective evaluation of these systems, we must therefore understand them in their own terms and acknowledge the ways in which they have arisen from the circumstances of he history and physical reality in which they are embedded. In some cases, African systems of thought operate in a completely different way from Western concepts. For instance, while the Western system views human life from an individualistic perspective, the African system has developed a complex communal system that recognizes how men and women are part of a larger composite world. This difference alone means that, in dealing with language, people in the African context are not considering the same phenomena as those who employ Western concepts and classifications of meaning. The very idea of humanity is perceived in the Western system as occurring within a moral category, whereas in the African system, humanity is regarded as the sum-total of those qualities that require social action to activate them; therefore, the African idea of humanity presupposes a potential and not, as in the Western system, a concept of moral rectitude.

Another example of divergence between the two systems involves the concept of life after death (or of death itself). According to the African system of thought, continuity is central to all activity. It overrides the idea of death, which is viewed primarily as a state of physical and spiritual transition when the body becomes integrated into the sacred earth and when the spirit or the shadow goes through a series of clearly defined stages until it enters the womb of eternity. Each stage represents a continuing link with the living until after a certain period has elapsed. In short, there is no disjunction between life and death at any point; there is only a series of cycles emanating from the beginning of time. An awareness of these cycles might be

incorporated in a religion, but in themselves, they are merely a logical description of cosmic behavior. According to the African view of the world, the spiritual is not dislocated from the physical. It is one aspect of the immaterial continuity and involves a different form of consciousness. This "after-death life" continues in a dual form of existence. The only change that occurs is the growing dominance of the spiritual dimension over the physical and the spiritual enables the African to perceive the burial place of his Ancestors as a sacred world in which life continues and therefore demands elaborate shrines and representations to the living-dead. In this sense, the pyramids, the sacred mountains, and the mountain cairns of Africa can easily be explained as an appropriate expression of this philosophical outlook.

The link between the living and the dead is the most seminal concept in all African belief systems. The terror of death or of what happens to a person after death is neutralized by the conviction that the living join their Ancestors after death. The Ancestors themselves continue to exist in their ever-expanding reality until they become celebrated as gods or until they are given titles that link them with the good qualities they once displayed and continue to possess. In dealing with the African world, we are dealing not with individuals but with the community (or with individuals as defined by the communal doctrine); this fact has crucial implications for literature, art, and music. Within the African context, words are not meant to be used merely as labels, for they also serve as active agents in a reality where there is no disjunction between the spiritual and the physical, between life and death. From this point of view of the African observer, words and their meanings bring phenomena into being. The observer who defines is also being defined; in other words, the naming of things is an act of creating a world. Such a world need not be pleasant, but it certainly must be realistic. The awareness that the observer is always being observed accounts for the reverence with which African writers and artists approach their creations, for the representation of an idea in literature or in art is not a "think," but

rather a product of our creative reasoning that expresses our existence and our force. The proliferation of symbolic references in literature, art, and humanized "objects" reflects a reality of a living organism that is only partially expressed in Western art forms. Yes, African art does speak; yes, authentic African literature comes alive in performances through which it succeeds in expressing a broader, more universal meaning. The mythification of reality (as opposed to its symmetrical representation) is the norm in African art and literature, but for an idea to be mythified, it must be known on all its various levels, and all its qualities, physical and potential, must be recognized. Once this idea has been fully grasped, it becomes clear that European languages omit a great deal of meaning precisely because of their "precision" and their rigid classification of reality as a constancy of experience.

Unfortunately, the study and analysis of African philosophy remains in its infancy, not because there is a lack of competent scholars, but because African philosophy is lived rather than academized or practiced by the privileged members of an exclusive elite. To express public and communal meaningfulness, this philosophy has developed numerous strategies for making its tenets accessible to the people. For this reason, the most elaborate and complex philosophical statements are couched in the form of aphorisms or mythological narratives. Universally applicable philosophical insights are invariably linked with an identifiable, concrete reality. Abstract, esoteric language is avoided. In fact, the same motifs recur in many African cultures, and they often refer to similar concepts: the chameleon for the cosmic eye and cosmic being, the sacred snake for movement, life, and continuity, the ram for eternal movement, the rainbow for the male/female generative forces, the "thunder" plants for cosmic movement, the sacred pool for the womb of life, the lizard for speed and destruction, the eagle for the link between sky and earth, etc.

On the basis of our observations, we conclude that African literature must take advantage of the African's relationship to the natural world by becoming an integral part of dramatic performances in feasts and festivals, which are sacred occasions for the activation of communal qualities. In its multiple artistic approach, literature must draw upon dance, drama, and oratory to accentuate its meanings and to celebrate its philosophy of movement. In the African context, movement characterizes almost ever process—death, birth, creation, destruction, earth, sky, religion, etc. For the African, movement is a philosophic condition that encompasses all existence. As such, it must be dramatized through a variety of meaningful movements that tell a story and comment on life. It must be incorporated in the dramatic contortions of the shape of things. It is the essence of the unending, the simple, the complex, the short and long cycles that characterize the cosmos. To be meaningful on all its various levels, movement must be symbolically expressed and dramatized, not merely stated.

Such concepts are manifested in the suggestive meanings of the greatest African literature. Thus, a *djeli* can narrate an entire history of Sundiata's life and his era in a song that lasts no longer than ten minutes! He can do so because the key events are known by the general public, but also because the text lends itself to multiple meanings. Bearing these factors in mind, it becomes clear that European languages are totally inadequate to express the African philosophical reality. European languages state, describe, detail, and formulate an atomized reality, whereas African languages already express an integrated and universalized artistic reality. For one thing, African literature presupposes an active participation on the part of the audience. This situation is not, as some have surmised, merely a response to the absence of writing. Many African societies (even those with written languages) prefer a literature that is performed in fact, the performance of literature has become such an important component of literary form that is accounts for a large part of the

text's meaning. Besides, with the development of visual technology, the performance of literature may yet become more fashionable than the silent written word. Readings of poetry have indeed become mote and more fashionable. In any case, it is always puzzling how Western written literatures could have jumped over night from an oral to a written tradition with little or no traces of orality or its extensive influence in the written diction. "Keepers of the sacred word" train for many years; often they have large numbers of followers and establish elaborate schools for novices. Such schools are administered by celebrated master of literature or by families that are traditionally associated with them. Novices in these schools are not only trained in the skills of oratory and in the rituals that are connected with literary and other ceremonial performances, but also in the philosophies of their society. The art of literary performance in African has indeed gone far beyond that of the individual balladeers and troubadours in medieval Europe. Daniel Biebuck reports that it took about fourteen days to record the performance of the Mwindo epic in Zaire. Presuming the tradition of the great Mali empire, the Kouyata family has remained "Keepers of the Sacred Word," for as the *djeli* proclaim, "we are the keepers of the word."

The classification and depiction of literature are often based on false assumptions. More often that not, debates over the nature of literature reflect "high" and "low" cultural standards that I discussed earlier. The fallacy of such classifications can be clearly understood when one compares literatures of peoples from different parts of the world. The advantage of a literary tradition with links to the power structure is obvious. Since "high" culture enjoys considerable material advantages, "high literature" inevitably reflects the interests and values of the privileged class. The impact of this attitude on the definition of literature is colonized Africa fostered the misconception that only Western literature could validly be classified as literature. In many cases, colonial officials and educators treated African literature as the "simple emotional outpourings of irrational minds."

It never occurred to them that literature might be defined and classified differently in different cultural contexts.

The greatest disaster was undoubtedly the emergence of a colonized elite which developed a deep sense of inferiority with regard to their art, their literature, and their lifestyle. Trained in colonial schools, they aspired to the lifestyle of those who had colonized them. Writing in the colonial language was therefore hailed as the greatest achievement a native could make. Such attitudes continue to influence the definition of African literature today. In fact, they provide the context in which arguments about the language to be used for African literature can arise. Thus, "high" and "low" cultures become identifiable in terms of their relationship to the language used by those who wield this power. For this reason, writers who write in African languages are marginalized and have difficulty publishing their works. Within this context, literature is evaluated not according to its quality but in proportion to its proximity to the style an the dominant concerns of the ex-colonial country, which in turn promotes "African" literature written in its language by offering prizes, invitations, and an assortment of other rewards. The activities of the colonizing country in this domain are hardly altruistic, for its "cultural exchanges" programs are designed to further its own political and material interests. Yet because only a small percentage of the people can speak or read European languages, this literature has had little impact on the bulk of the African population.

There was a period in South African history when many books and newspapers were written in African languages. This publishing activity had a great impact on the population in terms of promoting the discussion of ideas and literature. Those who could read invariably formed reading circles in which hey read aloud to those who could not read I myself read to many such groups during my childhood. However, by imposing African languages through the Bantu education acts, the South African apartheid government

fostered a reactive antipathy to the literary use of African languages. Such attitudes must be corrected in a new mood of national awakening. The African people cannot afford to abandon their linguistic heritage merely because the South African government tried to abuse it. The classification of literature has thus exercised a great influence on what is considered good literature in Africa and on what languages people think they should be using in creating that literature. My contention is simply that language is not neutral in such questions. Language integrates disparate elements of one's culture and ties them together in a single meaningful expression according to the imperatives of that culture. It projects nuances of meaning that many non-native speakers will be unable to understand. It embodies attitudes that vary according to the context in which a word is used. Indeed, some words in African languages can have opposite meanings depending on how they are used, who uses them, and how repeatedly they are used (e.g., *thanda* can mean "love" or "hate" and *bonga* can mean "praise or "swear at").

In African languages, the frequency and differentiation of metaphorical usage corresponds to the perception of a dual universe. It also allows for a shift in meaning from literal to symbolic statement. The following example demonstrates how different thought patterns in English and Zulu can be:

> Ngoba ngizalwa yinyoni
> Ngiyehluleka ukukubelesela ngothando lwami
> (from *The Beads of Princess Nomadishi)*[1]
>
> [Because I am born of a bird
> I cannot forever give you my love]

[1] All Zulu poems are from unpublished manuscripts of Mazisi Kunene.

Within a Western frame of reference, the idea of a bird giving birth to a person would be regarded as bizarre or implausible. However, within an African frame of reference, the bird image can be used in indirect speech to avoid naming someone (e.g., the bird stole by soul). It can also be employed to create multiple levels of meaning or to symbolize qualities associated with maternity, protection, and sheltering. Understood within the African context, the line therefore means that the speaker is the daughter of the Mother of song, i.e., a great singer.

When Western writers use personification, they accord human qualities to non-human objects. For instance, they might refer to the branches of a tree as arms, thereby describing a non-animate thing as if it were operating in human terms. In contrast, personification in the African tradition embraces the tree as it is as well as the idea of a tree as a phenomenon in its own right. That is, symbolic personification incorporates the appearance of a tree (i.e., the tree as part of the physical world), while at the same time hinting at a greater depth of the meaning behind the fact of its existence. In other words, the subjective appearance of things is less philosophically significant in the African context than is the idea of things as essences, as entities that exist in and for themselves, whether or not an observer is present. Such signifying processes presuppose the need for language patterns capable of integrating both levels of perception—the object as an observed phenomenon and the object as an existential essence. When the Zulu poet alludes to a "tree" (the observed phenomenon) and the tree as it is in its own essence. The effect of this symbolic personification is evident in the following example:

> Ubusuku nemini nglila emsangweni enkosi yami
> Ngamemeza kuyo ngazozonke izinhliziyo rami
> Gzaengabayisihosho ngaze ngahoshozela
> (from *Terrors of the Wilderness*)

[Day and night I wailed at the gates of my King I called out to him with all my hearts until my voice was hoarse]

In Zulu society, the highest degree of excellence can only be attained by engaging in social action that involves generosity, consideration, and a willingness to sacrifice for the sake of others. Such virtues are expected of any "kind," who is associated with them at their highest level of expression. The term "my King" in the above lines thus refers to the essence of "kinghood"—not to an actual king, but to a particular person as an observed phenomenon who possesses or personifies the qualities of excellence (i.e., "kinghood").

Another example can be drawn from the language of the diviners, priestly sects, and initiation societies. By definition, such language is esoteric and obscure. Initiates and novices must receive special training in order to understand its compressed meanings and the seemingly unrelated philosophical statements that characterize it. However, the African poet seeks to make obscure symbols and esoteric language accessible to the majority of people by continuously integrating art with philosophy. Having acquired the necessary reflective discipline to grasp the complex, multi-layered symbols of he divine language, he is *constantly* alert to the dual meaning of the universe. Thus, he becomes capable of universalizing images that would otherwise be perceived as accidental or only temporarily significant. The effective use of priestly symbolism is apparent in the following Zulu poem:

Buzofika ubusuku bufike ugengelezile
Buzowuminz umendo wezimimi zethu
Beseikubona ukukhanya kunyamalala
Kunyamalala kancane kancane
Kuzekubaneke ngezinhlasi emazulwini
Izinkanyezi eziyimsheko emide yasemaphakadeni
Kukhona abebi abeba ubuthina baluke ngabo

Balunguze ngabo phambili naphambili lapho siyakhona
(from *Terrors of the Wilderness*)

[The chasm of night has opened
It has swallowed the pathways of our existence
And the eternal light is frightened into its little holes
And like a broken wave it has vanished into the earth
But its tails are left as white specks of light
The stars are the abandoned fire-places of time
With these they peer into the unveiling of our tomorrow]

In the first line, night is represented as a primordial being. It is not merely darkness; it is an active organism. It is the creative substance of all that exists. The second line comments on the multiple nature of truth and its relativity, whereas the third and fourth lines evoke light as a being and speed as a quality of light's existence, the fragmentation of light into separate entities, and the persistence of light that has fled into the "little holes." The fifth line alludes to the memory of the existence of light as a principle of reality, but it also distinguishes between its reality as a physical phenomenon and its reality as an illusory appearance. In the sixth line, the stars symbolize a previous beginning. Their glow represents a point of attainment or fulfillment, where "time" refers to an eternal movement. Lines seven and eight remind people that stars are older than humanity. Time is represented as treacherous, capable of retaining the shadows of our former life, and of revealing that we are always the sediment of a previous existence.

Ceremonies and rituals are ways of interpreting phenomena in the African context, and the frequency of their occurrence enables the poet to exploit references that he can expect his audience to comprehend in a ritual or ceremonial sense, as in the following Zulu passage:

Ke ngabengilindela imini eakuba ngeyami
Lapho ngiyobesengithintitha izintuli zayizolo
Laho sengiyakuwuwela umfula omkhulu
Lapho ngiyawuzigeza izinywao zami namakhanda
(from *Terrors of the Wilderness*)

[Then I must wait for my day of glory
When I shall no longer be covered with yesterday's dust
When I shall cross the great river
And there to wash my feet and my two heads]

The first line of this excerpt from a loner poem contains a reference to the community's responsibility to confer glory on the individual and not for the individual to seize it from the community. However, the person who is waiting for glory must complete the journey of the tortoise (i.e., life or cosmic time) before being confirmed in his glory by the community. The second line refers to the person's need to be cleansed from all the tragedies that have beset him or her within such a time scale. He or she can only re-enter society after the rituals of purification that are associated with death are left behind. In the third line, the final act of purification is experienced by those who have seen, experienced, and participated in death. Water itself becomes new blood (or new life) for this person. The fourth line evokes the corresponding images of feet and heads, suggesting that the person is not alone in the purifying rite, but is, on the contrary, always accompanied by his or her shadow The idea of the duality of life is of course re-echoed in this final line.

Most Western systems of thought are binary in the sense that they emphasize the total separation of the physical dimension. In African systems of thought, however, the sacred and secular are not rigidly divorced from each other; on the contrary, they coexist in the same integrated whole and spawn a language that approximates everyday life with all its rituals:

Ibumba selikwenzile loko elikwenzileyo
Ilowo nalowo ubona ngokubona kwesazi somhlaba
Konke esikwelamelayo emhlabeni wonke
Kuyiqiniso lako loko esingakwaziyo
Sibelethe amathunzi ethu emhlane njengabantwana
Inzululu yobuhlakani bethu isichumile ke. . . .

[The clay has molded these images of life
Each vision is the vision of the seer
All that we see everywhere
Is the truth of what we do not know
We carry out shadows on our backs like children
The power to reason has survived]

In this passage, the clay echoes the idea that the Creator is the only power capable of creating itself. Images of life become manifest, and each is shaped according to its own essence, becoming part of a corporate vision. The idea of creation is not celebrated separately from the idea of everyday life. In contrast to Western systems of thought, according to which sacred language should remain separate from secular language, this poem reveals how the secular cannot be divorced from the sacred in the African context. Yet the poem is not a religious one; in fact, it is a "secular" poem that comments on the observation and celebration of everyday life. African societies and priestly languages do of course distinguish between the sacred and the secular but the point is often to alleviate the demarcation of their difference by integrating them into the same totality. When the poet refers to "all that we see everywhere," he does not mean to imply that which initiated the idea of existence, but rather the truth (representation) of what we do not know. In this way, the divine and the banal (human) are regarded as co-existing dimensions of the same phenomenon

The use of repetition by African-language poets has also been misunderstood by scholars who claim that it represents no more than a mnemonic system in "non-literate" societies. In actuality, African-language poets frequently employ repetition to expand and elaborate meanings and to enlarge the scope of the ideas they are presenting. This is true of many Indian languages as well. Far from reducing meaning, repetition in the African-language context serves, as it does in the following Zulu example, to enhance it by creating a sort of cumulative meaning.

> Uma ngibuka wena
> Ngibuka emphefumulweni wakho
> Ngizengihleke, nawe uhleke
> Nawe uhleke, ukuhleka okungokwasekuhlekeni kwethu
>
> [When I look at you
> And state into your soul
> I laugh and you laugh
> I laugh the laughter of laughing
> And you too laugh the laughter from the reservoirs of
> our laughter]

The repeated word "see" in this short poem is deliberately chosen because in the second usage it allows for a somewhat different meaning (i.e., "to enter into"). Similarly, each usage of the word "laugh" hints at a different meaning (i.e., the first meaning indicates physical juxtaposition, the second refers to a spiritual experience, and the third designates a metaphysical locale that is universal and all-embracing of our being). Nuances of meaning derive from such elaborate techniques in African-language literatures that texts are often riddled with numerous suggestive meanings, some seemingly contradictory, others accentuating meaning, and still others hinting at satirical meanings that appear to be praises. Each of these aspects of

African literature requires separate treatment if it is to be fully understood.

In conclusion, we can only say that, until the full meaning of African philosophy and cosmology is understood in its own right, confusion will persist and such inane questions as “should African literature be written in African languages?” will continue to be seriously asked. Those who want to study English protest literature written by Africans should certainly be free to do so. However, they should also analyze the alienation of the African colonial elites who failed to mobilize their own African-language communities because they were addressing foreign audiences. In addition, people need to study African-language protest literature in order to clarify the nature and meaning of African thinking during periods of political struggle. For instance, what are the differences between those who articulated their demands for political change in a foreign language and those who articulated their demands in an African language? Were they alienated from each other? In time, the disoriented and broken colonial elites will perhaps find their way back to Africa and begin to contribute to her glory without the terrors of stigmatization. For this to occur, however, a new era of national re-awakening is needed—a deep sense of self-pride, a new form of definition, and a reassessment of the strategies and meaning of development within the African world and for world literature as a whole.