The African e-Journals Project has digitized full text of articles of eleven social science and humanities journals. This item is from the digital archive maintained by Michigan State University Library. Find more at: http://digital.lib.msu.edu/projects/africanjournals/

Available through a partnership with

Scroll down to read the article.
on the Negritude issue for example where he writes: ‘Soyinka, while criticising Negritude, made the remark which has haunted him, that the tiger does not proclaim his tigritude’ (p.90). Then, on the next page, cites Lewis Nkosi’s report on the African Writers Conference at the Makerere University College in Kampala, Uganda in 1962. Nkosi observed that while the ‘older writers like the South African, Ezekiel Mphahlele and the Nigerian, Chinua Achebe, looked by far the calmest, most disciplined and trustworthy, in what appeared to be a company of literary cut-throats, out to get one another at the slightest provocation... (t)he young Nigerian playwright, Wole Soyinka, went so far as to invent a ‘negritude’ poem on the spot, while addressing the conference, in a sudden astringent parody of Senghor’s poetry and its preoccupations with the African personality, an act of creation which succeeded only too well for it enraged the delegates from French West Africa’ (p.91)

Follow-up materials supplied in Janheinz Jahn’s Neo-African Literature: A History of Black Writing are absent where the issue is revisited following a 1964 Berlin meeting. There the commentator was reported to have said, ‘As Aime Cesaire said, it is quite common for things to be quoted out of context and for portraits to be issued by foreign critics and even by African interviewers which end up by a little bit of distorting the real image. The point is this that, to quote what I said fully, I said: “A tiger does not proclaim his tigritude, he pounces”. In other words: a tiger does not stand in the forest and say: “I am a tiger”. When you pass where the tiger has walked before, you see the skeleton of the duiker, you know that some tigritude has been emanated there. In other words: the distinction which I was making at this conference (in Kampala, Uganda, 1962) was a purely literary one: I was trying to distinguish between propaganda and true poetic creativity. I was saying in other words that what one expected from poetry was an intrinsic poetic quality, not a mere name-dropping.’

A work of this significance and nature in my view is an opportunity to balance out and set records straight, particularly where the novelist’s peers are concerned.

This also goes for the references in the book to the Charles Nnolim debate when the critic announced that he had found a source for ‘Arrow of God.’ Ayi Kwei Armah also suffers in the procession of Ohaeto’s poor and imbalanced portrayals.

...A young Nigerian-born writer, Idowu Omoyele lives in London.

Inhospitable streets


Reacting to a 1996 report which estimated the number of street children and youths in Nairobi, Kenya at about 100,000, Jinmi Adisa, a United Nations consultant on conflict resolution, exclaimed jocularly that Nairobi is now taking ‘giant strides’ in the production of street children in Africa! Comical as it may appear on the surface, Adisa’s remark draws powerful attention to a phenomenon which has become one of the cornerstones of contemporary social discourse and political action in this fin de siècle - the phenomenon of urbanisation with its concommitant effects of demographic hyper-explosion, economic stasis and social dysfunctionality in the modern African polis.

Report by Pius Adesanmi
When all the structures of modernity and the factors propitious to human development are concentrated in the city as is the case in Africa and the Third World in general, the stage is set for the progressive disempowerment of the rural areas, thus forcing the mass of impoverished peasants to migrate to the already overcrowded cities where amorphous survival strategies occasion serious spatial pressures. This centrifugal process, which continually draws rural dwellers to the eldorado of the city, has been canonised in most disciplines as rural-urban migration. The net consequences of this situation are vividly described by Michel Marcus in his report on the International Conference on Urban Security held in Saint-Denis, La Reunion in 1995:

Our cities are full of social malfunctions in terms of the family, education, employment, culture, ethnic relations, relations between young people and adults, the place of women in society, housing, access to land and so on... Our cities have become insecure, while at the same time failing to provide their inhabitants with the ingredients of sustainable development (14).

In this equation, space in the African city has become highly commodified and is rigidly governed by a profit-oriented axiology. Given that the commodification of space in the African city is complicated further by the factors of marginalisation and unequal access to opportunities, the ground is prepared for the activities of the informal sector and the underworld to develop. Interestingly, recent empirical indices from Africa show that children and youths now form the bulk of urban street actors. Indeed, every African city now has an army of children and youths for whom the street has become a permanent home. Naturally, these street children construct their own subcultural ethos which are often at variance with the regnant socio-cultural orthodoxies of the larger society. This creates tensions and contradictions which are inimical to the management of urban space in Africa.

In response to this intimidating urban challenge, the Ilan-based French Institute for Research in Africa (IFRA) convened an international symposium on the theme, 

Youths, Street Culture and Urban Violence in Africa in Abidjan, the economic capital of Cote d’voire, from May 5-7 1997. The symposium, which was co-sponsored by the French Ministry of Cooperation and the Urban Management Programme of the UN, availed a good number of experts from Africa, Europe and the United States the opportunity of establishing diverse but mutually enriching positinalities on the topic.

Prior to the symposium, Professor Georges Herault, IFRA’s erstwhile director, had commissioned eight city-specific papers from seasoned scholars. The cities are: Abidjan (Alain Sisoko), Dakar (Ousseyenou Faye and Momar Cumba Diop), Johannesburg (Marti Shaw), Kano (Olawale Albert), Kinshasha (Tshikala Biaya), Lagos (Jimmi Adisa), Nairobi (Deyssi Rodriguez-Torres) and Umtata (Eghosa Osaghae). The submissions of these scholars in their various papers formed the epistemological pivot of the symposium. Discussions bordered mainly on the need for fashioning out appropriate methodological paradigms for apprehending the phenomenon of street children; the need to put the amorphous dysfunctionalities of the African city in proper perspective as well as a close examination of the interface between street culture and urban violence. Other issues examined include the identification of the ‘trigger issues’ responsible for the high incidence of street deviance in African cities, the role of the state and the civil society in the area of intervention strategies. The role played by the familiar binarism between tradition and modernity in frustrating intervention efforts was also discussed.

With regard to methodology, participants were of the opinion that only a multidisciplinary approach could enable the scholar to grapple with the complexities of the phenomenon of street culture and urban violence. They however noted that the scholar must ensure that his findings are not merely a reflection of his own idiosyncratic perceptions. Apart from this problem, the symposium also had to address the thorny question of defining who precisely is a street child. This task was made all the more difficult by the obvious fluidities of the concerned subjects in terms of age and identity. Quoting Schurink (1993:5), Osaghae described street children as:

All categories of boys and girls who have not reached adulthood, for whom the street in the widest sense of the word, including unoccupied buildings, wasteland, etc. has become the habitual abode and/or source of livelihood, who are inadequately protected, supervised or directed by their families or responsible adults and in no position to assert the rights due to them as youths, be they children on or of the street, runaways or throwaways.

The symposium went ahead to establish three categories of street children on the basis of their mode of street occupation. They are:

1. Mid-career street youths
2. Temporary street youths
3. Permanent street youths
career street youths. While a
good number of these actors
work in the informal sector
(street hawkers, bus conduc-
tors, car washers, porters, car
guards, beggars) others are
involved in illegal activities
(pickpockets, shoplifters,
area boys, touts, rapists, drug
dealers, etc).

While the African partici-
pants reasoned that the ma-
jor cause of the phenomenon
is the widespread poverty
occasioned by the
wrongheaded foisting of
Structural Adjustment
Programmes on weak African
economies, the French par-
ticipants argued that the
main causal factor should be
located in the break up of the
family and the progressive
erosion of traditional control
systems. This disagreement
notwithstanding, the sympo-
sium noted that the overall
effect of street deviance in
Africa lies in the generation
of stress, chaos and, ultimately,
vigilence. One of the partici-
pants, Stephane Tessier, ad-
dressed the issue of violence at
length. Rather than view vio-
lence as a phenomenon gener-
ated by asocial street actors as
is often the case in social sci-
ence practice, he preferred to
construct street actors as vic-
tims of the psycho-social, sym-
bolic and economic violence
produced by the larger adult
society in the public space.

Consequently, Tessier ar-
gued that the forms of violence
which street children inflict on
society should be seen as a re-
ponse, a sort of counter-vio-
lence to the violence they un-
dergo. Examining efforts made
in various African countries at
stemming the tide of the ugly
phenomenon, the symposium
observed that African govern-
ments, apart from erroneously
seeing all street actors as pub-
lic enemies, often tend to per-
ceive private initiative (by
NGOs) as affront. Thus,
rather than complement each
other, governments and
NGOs see themselves as com-
petitors. The symposium also
noted that government effort
is largely ineffective because
the African state has col-
lapsed and can no longer
meet its social obligations.
The action of NGOs were also
criticised as being 'sympathy-
driven.' At the end of the
three-day symposium, wide-
ranging suggestions and rec-
ommendations were made to
the appropriate authorities
but Jimmi Adisa insisted that
'there can be no solution to all
the problems we have dis-
cussed in the last three days
so long as our society does not
learn to invest in its own
people.'

ISSUE NUMBER TWO • 1997 •

A Rhyming Diary
Sanya Osha

Uche Nduka CHIAROSCURO, published by

EXILE isn't always a
pleasant experience
for many artists. And this is probably
truer in the case of literary art-
ists who have to make greater
effort in capturing the native
smells, colours and textures of
their homelands. The fact of
exile usually disrupts or
severes these nostalgic sensa-
tions. But fortunately, Uche
Nduka's latest offering of po-
etry, Chiaroscuro passes
through the crucible of exile
and emerges on the side of po-
etic maturity. Nduka has cer-
tainly grown in stature since
the publication of Flower child
(1985). In that collection,