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Colonial Lagos

LITERATURE AND THE CITY

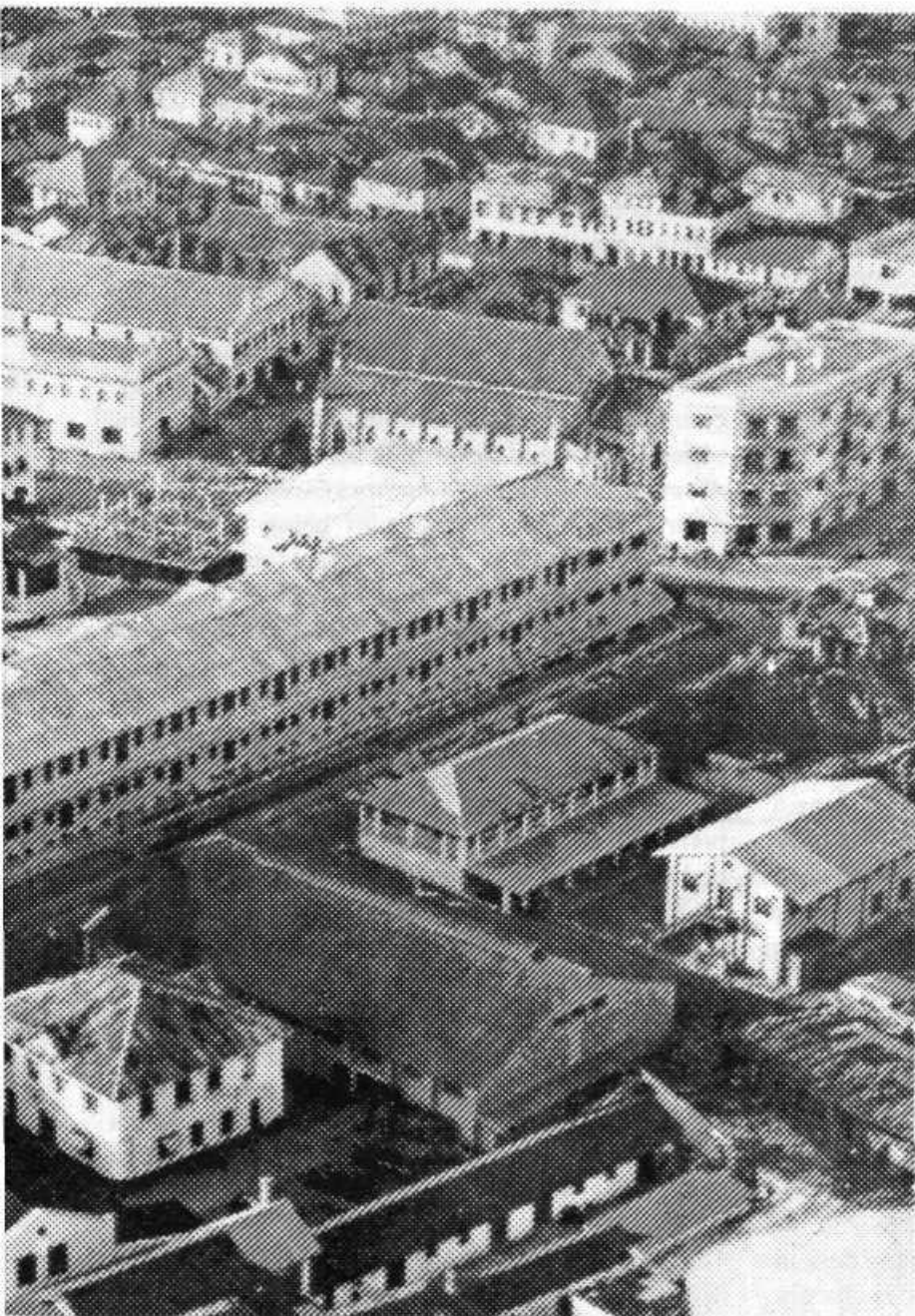
NIYI OSUNDARE

Our cities today are hell; real hell! Each time I go to Lagos I marvel at the audacity and the courage of people who live there. There is so much chaos, so much degeneration. There is no planning. There is really no time to stand and

stare. So I think, in a way, our cities discourage creativity because when you spend four hours on one spot in a traffic hold-up, it is not likely that you will get

home and write your best poem or your best short story or your best play.

You are simply fagged out and angry.



Our cities have been dehumanized and that is why those who are their inhabitants have been dehumanized. Cities are supposed to be inspiring. Dublin for James Joyce, Abeokuta, Ibadan and Ishara for Wole Soyinka, London for Charles Dickens, etc. Cities have some anonymity about them; that

kind of plural mentality which should really make creativity possible. But that is when these cities are organized: where there are parks and open spaces; when there is enough shelter for everybody; when highways are not blocked by garbage. These are the negative things you see in our cities today. The

governments we've been having have not planned any of our cities as centres of inspiration. But be that as it may, this is not enough reason for us to fold up our hands and say all is lost.

Certainly not. There is some kind of negative inspiration, after all. Although the cities are so bad, we are still writing about them. We criticize and satirise all those who get the funds to improve our cities but put these money in their bank accounts and their stomachs. So creative writers and artists are asking for the authorities to bring some humanness back into our cities.

However, cities are not the only place in Nigeria. In fact, the cities cannot exist without the rural areas. I'm a poet of the rural areas, for example. There is nothing wrong in our writers going to the countryside. In fact, the trend in the developed parts of the world today is towards rural migration. There is also nothing wrong going abroad to write. I have done it before. *Midlife* which won an award was basically written in Iowa City, USA in 1988. I was then a resident artist at the university under the International Writers' Programme. The manuscript I have in press now, *Horse of Memory* which is due out any time from now was written in Yaddo in New York. It really helps a lot when you can step out for a while and recapture some of the inspirations that the home base has provided.

It was once a trend for African-American writers to go to France, especially Paris, to write. Langston Hughes and James Baldwin are typical examples. I have a collection I'm working on which is a kind of travelogue in poetic form. As an artist I have tried to ensure that every part of the world that I have been has become a part of me and also that I am part of that area of the world. I'm not a stranger anywhere: China, Australia, Japan, Canada, US, France, etc.

This world belongs to all of us. **GR**

EDITOR'S WISHES

A yawning problem has for long, for too long we have every right to say, defined Nigeria's art and literary landscape. And this is the problem of space. A problem of medium. Today, hardly any reputable journal exists in the country that services the vocation of artists, writers, musicians and film makers. A few which made initial valiant efforts were snuffed out of existence by a combination of debilitating forces, chief among which is Nigeria's prevailing economic gloom.

Some publishing efforts which became the voice of artists promptly relocated abroad when it became inevitable that their founders/editors should migrate, presumably prompted by the general decline of the climes of existence in a nation which only too recently was the luxuriant hub of assorted art and literary activities.

Have the artists and writers consequently ceased to exist? If no, would they continue to remain voiceless? True, in the last decade we have witnessed an upsurge of interest in the arts and in literature by the managements of leading Nigerian national newspapers. The leaders here being the banned *Guardian* and the *Daily Times*; the reviews pages of the latter I have both reported for and edited in the past six years. But these only helped to expose more problems: the allocations of space could never satiate the growing activities of cultural workers, especially when it is borne in mind that we had to face an almost limitless landscape of genres and art forms. Visual artists had to besiege my desk in *Daily Times* on many occasions with charges that I resorted to granting more audience to film makers, literary artists, sometimes musicians. And when we made conscious efforts to level up somewhat, we had angry expletives from some of their counterparts specializing in the other genres to cope with. And then the worst began to happen: the famous art feature columns began

to vanish weeks on end whenever extra advert placements were recorded; they very conveniently usurped the traditional spaces on which the arts and books columns normally appeared. The very worst to follow was the widespread ban of influential and vibrant newspapers, leaving us with only a few.

We must pay tribute to former attempts similar - and whenever they do resurrect, we shall be happy to say, complimentary - to this. Aside from serving as the official voice and news bulletin of the group, the *Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA) Review* had a far more noble objective of being a reputable annual review. There also was *Okike* founded by the novelist Chinua Achebe; *Black Orpheus* (published in the early 1960s in Ibadan by the German scholar Ulli Beier, long since out of print); *Positive Review* (formerly produced in Ile-Ife, Nigeria); *Opon Ifa* (edited by Femi Osofisan); *Transition* (which only recently resuscitated in the United States) and a host of others. Many of those are now extinct. *GR* does not pretend to attempt to fill any of their shoes - beyond, perhaps to keep up irregular fevered heartbeats.

GR is first and foremost a Nigerian review but with a broad international perspective. It is an effort on the whole to amplify the voices of those creative people of Nigeria and of Africa wanting to speak to the rest of the world. If we do it well - and there is no reason why we would not - doubtless, the world would not only listen but would speak back through us to Africa and to Nigeria.

The choices of materials are in our own self-evaluation defective in that they have not been able to inclose sufficient representative voices. But this is only an initial attempt, the very first step. With your help, we are sure the ground under us will not give way.

Dapo Adeniyi.

LETTER

Yusuf Grillo, Bruce Onabrakpeya, Kolade Oshinowo, Obiora Udechukwu, Ben Enwonwu, David Dale and the list goes on and on. Each year, we are bewildered by a variety of exhibitions and retrospectives from these Nigerian artists. The galleries that sponsor these exhibitions always go to town and label these exhibitions contemporary African art. Pray! What do we really refer to as contemporary?

The Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary defines contemporary as 'of the time or period being referred to.' Are we to believe that this art being practised by these gurus of the brush and pen is really contemporary and of the time? These masters have been practising for perhaps up to thirty years and even much more. In my humble opinion, these our masters have been at their easels for decades satisfying our yearnings for art. I can also bet that the tag contemporary has always been added to classify these our proud masters. Are these works really contemporary or is the Nigerian art scene evolving towards a loci that we can really call contemporary?

We are daily inundated by our so called critics everyday with this bastardised cliché 'contemporary African art'. The galleries do not spare us either. The artists also have developed fads and do not stop rushing for exhibitions that are constantly being offered if not embarrassingly to a populace that is constantly being fawned over by exorbitant and glossily printed catalogues. The question really is who determines contemporary African art? The artists themselves, the critics or the populace that knows no better. I think that the Nigerian artist has a case to answer concerning this. The art world is in a constant state of revolution. Important landmarks are being created world-wide in contemporary art, Africa and indeed Nigeria must find its own

footing in this epoch. Yet the repercussions of this world-wide scheme of things is still being felt too slowly in these regions. Are we really still primitive and tribal in our artistic offerings? Do we really have contemporary art in Nigeria? Embarrassingly, we still find that the offering of the yesteryears still reigns supreme today.

Not that this observation is meant to support a group of Nigerian artists and run the others down. The Zaria school, the Ife school, the Osogbo school and the Yaba purveyors all herald and constantly strive for ideals. One cannot but be easily swayed by their offerings. The question is, are these leanings so different and are they really contemporary? The market scenes, the Fulani milkmaid, Durbar, mother and child and drummers are so typical of recent offerings. Is this what we can

really call contemporary? Don't we really need to shut down our exhibitions and our schools for some time to give our artists time to repossess thoughts and really evolve contemporary art? On the other hand, are we to call the art of the 1940s being practised by our still living masters as contemporary? Have they really evolved in what they are doing to occupy that niche we can present and juxtapose with our western contemporaries? Or are we to present our new practitioners with their overflogged themes? Try as much as we can, we cannot run away from the fact that there is a problem that needs addressing, if Nigeria is to evolve a truly contemporary art scene. The problem is 'has Nigerian Art evolved at all?' and where is the longevity, the strength and continuing vitality?

Wole Olagunju,
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The Palette

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