
The Question of a National Literature for Nigeria

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Haka aka ce in ji mai ba da labarin rarya.

“So they say,” as the teller of false stories always says.

In the designation of countries, objective and subjective criteria cleave the notion of country into two quite different entities: the state and the nation. The state is marked by a tangible, observable, recognizable set of facts. The state has borders, a central government, a population, an economy, and a bureaucracy, all of which act to maintain and perpetuate continuity. The nation, on the other hand, constitutes itself through the will and the imagination of the citizens of the state. The health of the nation depends on each citizen's desire to identify with the entire population of the nation despite racial, ethnic, or religious differences. This idea of loyalty to the nation above and beyond individual differences is known as nationalism, and often competes with fervent loyalties to subnational groups. Yet within each nation those loyalties differ, and thus no one determined course of action can be employed in the name of nationalism. In effect, rather than molding itself on universal terms, nationalism shapes itself to fit the particular needs of each nation.

Unlike nineteenth-century nationalist rhetoric, which mused romantically upon the consent and will of the people who desire to live together “with a healthy spirit and warmth of heart” (Renan 17), twentieth-century criticism has roundly rejected the idea of a natural nation as homogeneous or singularly ethnic. With few exceptions, the preponderance of nations are necessarily invented, consisting of diverse groups whose loyalties must be bent toward the nation through psychological means other than family or clan affiliation. For the reality of the nation, broad in both geographic and cultural terms, is that no one citizen will ever know the majority of his or her compatriots, and so a figurative bond must be substituted in order to maintain the “imagined community” (Anderson 6) of the nation. Modern scholars thus consistently subscribe to theories of the nation as discourse; an invented or imagined, fictional construct.

Given the reality of virtually all African countries, their clinically induced birth at the Berlin Conference regardless of traditional ethnic boundaries, nationalism has had little to cling to in the sense of even vaguely natural, homogeneous affiliations, loyalty or trust. Anthony Smith has suggested that “short of prolonged and intense application of centralized force” (147), the only way to draw a nation's diverse peoples together is through rewriting history, diminishing if not effacing ethnic differences, replacing them with conflated pasts and new, imagined, unifying experiences. Ernest Gellner concurs, insisting that culture must be shared if the nation is to cohere. Problematically, the idea of one shared culture is undermined by the prolific small cultures tied to oral folklore and

variegated histories which resist unification. Peasants, especially illiterate ones, according to Gellner, do not make good nationalists. Education emerges as the great leveler of difference, creating a nation of potentially mobile “clerics,” and the state is the only organization large enough to take care of education and shape national culture. Nationalism succeeds when universal education produces a homogenized “high” culture. This culture, virtually imposed on the populace, while manifesting links to various folklores and histories of “low” cultures, represents a new, hybrid, “high” culture. Literacy thus opens the door to an education program aimed at homogenizing the nation’s culture by inventing a new culture, which is, in fact, a fiction.

A regular pattern of literary metaphors emerges in the various discourses of nationalism: rewriting the nation’s history on the palimpsest of forgotten pasts; creating a fiction of the nation; disseminating nationalism through print; harnessing literacy to reformulate a modern hybrid national culture. Although the “state” has been reified into a series of facts and numbers, the “nation” remains more ephemeral, a psychological bond, a state of mind, an act of consciousness (Kohn 10). Invented, imagined, reordered at will, the nation is constituted by a fiction, a willed belief in unity where there is no natural affiliation.

Yet by the very nature of that fiction, the nation remains a fluid, unstable entity, amorphous, complexly layered, and slippery. Homi Bhabha reminds us that the nation, rather than representing a historical certainty, emerges as an ambivalent metaphor, “more hybrid in the articulation of cultural differences and identification—gender, race or class—than can be represented” (292), consequently tending to slip into metonymical representation. Like many African countries, Nigeria exemplifies the overdetermined metaphor of nation, which as yet has failed to stabilize and hold. The fictions of Nigeria’s nationhood are rife with conflict, strong ethnic loyalties and central organizing weaknesses. There are many who think Nigeria has not even achieved nationhood, stalled in the complications arising from its complex state formation (see Afolayan; Hutchinson; Smith). The tenuous condition of the Nigerian state has directly influenced the nation’s sense of identity as fractured and unfraternal throughout the twentieth century.

Nigeria was originally conceived of as three separate colonial territories, Lagos, the North, and the South, each independently administered. In 1914, Lugard united the territories in the name of Nigeria, but maintained the distinct administrations. By 1945, regionalism had become a reality, as the north, southeast, and southwest each possessed a capital, parliament, high court, and budget, dominated respectively by the Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba. State leaders themselves proclaimed Nigeria a sham nation, “a mere geographical expression” designated by the British but not ratified by the Nigerian people (Coleman 320). Prime Minister Tafawa Balewa stated unequivocally, “Since 1914 the British government has been trying to make Nigeria into one country, but the Nigerian people themselves are historically different in their backgrounds, in their religious beliefs and customs, and do not show themselves any sign of willingness to unite” (qtd. In Coleman 320). Wole Soyinka, in *The Open Sore of a Continent*,

has suggested that if a nation is constituted by the will of a people, then perhaps we should think of Nigeria as a non-nation. The 1993 election disaster destroyed any semblance of nationhood Nigeria might have clung to, he rages, and until democracy succeeds, Nigeria exists in name only.¹

The most facile observation concerning Nigeria's failure, one that is made by most analysts, is that ethnic loyalties and religious differences precede and supersede any notions of national loyalty (see Afolayan; Amoda; Coleman; Ekeh; Okoye). A wealth of evidence supports this line of logic. Unlike many African nations that drew together, despite internecine factionalism, in order to achieve independence, Nigeria has been repeatedly beset with ethnic and regional forces that threaten the disintegration of the Nigerian state. The 1950s witnessed the successful policy of "northernization," which, while combining and strengthening the religious, economic, and political ties of the north, set that region against the south. The motto "One North, one people" exemplified the limiting effects of regionalism, which meant, as Amoda points out, "that individuals were not socialized into a national community" (36). The northern political parties, reflecting traditional emirate policies and Islamic conservatism, continually agitated for "distinct and separate development of the north," which led to two threats of secession in 1953 and 1956 (Coleman 65). The choice to form a federation allowed the Northern political entities to advance the ruse of a central government to disguise the reality of often hostile relations between the disparate regions of the state. As late as 1990, in an attempted coup against Babangida, Major Gideon Oguza Orka seized a radio station and announced that the rebels "meant to exclude five northern states, containing the vast majority of emirates, from the Nigerian federation" (Sklar 33-34).

Peter Ekeh argues that ethnicity has emerged as the foremost principle of identity formation for Nigerians, and that there has been little or no transition in the loci of citizenship from an ethnic to a national center (83). Moyibi Amoda concurs, saying that "the ethnic factor prevented the development of a national consciousness" (47). Paul Beckett and Crawford Young bring up a crucial point when discussing the paradoxical nature of Nigeria's government. Nigeria, they theorize, remains in "permanent transition," whereby military rule is continually legitimized through "a sense of progress toward creating its own alternative: civil democratic government" (4). That progress, as has been demonstrated repeatedly, and most dishearteningly in the quashed elections of 1993, remains perpetually elusive. Thus Nigeria remains trapped in a state/State of always becoming and never being, a permanent ambivalence. Given this ambivalence, it is little wonder that the national consciousness suffers from indeterminacy. The ambivalent metaphor of the nation, to return to Homi Bhabha's postulate, cannot hold its shape, and "produces a continual slippage into analogous, even metonymic categories" (292). In the absence of a discernibly stable national identity, ethnic and religious preferences constitute the metonymic categories, and have dominated both the political and cultural arenas of Nigerian life.

The question then arises, can Nigeria have a national literature if the nation itself remains in limbo, in a permanent state of transition? And what role could that national literature play in shaping national identity? National literatures, much like nations, do not arise naturally, nor are they limited to one particular model. They are constructed, chosen to represent the general populace and its cultural output through an elaborate set of social and economic systems. Robert Armstrong asserts that if a text is written by one informed by the political and social values, perceptions, and aesthetics unique to the author's nationality, and those attributes are reflected in the text, then the text may be said to participate in a national literature (120). Sarah Corse elaborates on this idea saying, "[I]t is felt that the unique experience of national life generates a national, collective consciousness, or in some formulations, a 'collective unconscious' marked by a distinctive set of values, tensions, myths, and psychological foci" (1). A novel that reflects or mirrors the unique characters and experiences of the nation would then represent an example of national literature. Conversely, a novel that is read by the majority of citizens, a staple of high school literature courses for example, inculcates in the reader a sense of national fraternity and identity. In their broadest definition, national literatures demonstrate what is unique and special about one nation to its own citizens and concomitantly to the outside world.

Yet these broad and already vague, general terms—the national character, the national ideology—begin to collapse when one considers the body of Nigerian literature. It is highly contestable whether a Nigerian national character can be said to exist, or whether the nation has a singular ideology. What then become the defining criteria for a literature of a nation-in-the-making? For Nigeria, the issue of language represents perhaps the most salient and distressing impediment hindering the definition of a national literature. Two sides emerge in the debate, the argument that a national literature comprises all the literary and oral traditions of the nation versus the belief that only texts written in English can represent a national sentiment that rises above ethnic partiality. The argument hinges on the disparate interpretations of the nation. For those who conceive of Nigeria as a haphazard conglomeration of distinct cultural units united by a federal government, the notion of a national literature must represent all culture groups and recognize their particular literary talents in their indigenous forms. Given that as yet no national culture exists in Nigeria, the national literature must be thought to embrace the various contributions from all nationally acknowledged languages. For those who perceive the nation as a singular entity that requires an effort toward homogenization and that takes precedence over local allegiances, English is seen as the harbinger of national unity. Ironically, the widely spoken language of Pidgin, which has no ethnic affiliation and is arguably a natural Nigerian language, remains a pariah among Nigeria's languages, receiving no government recognition or promotion. For critics such as Achebe, the thrust for English aims at both the realized and potential audiences, assuming with great certainty that only English will actualize its role as the dominant language of Nigeria.

Three factors weigh heavily in the favor of English language texts winning the role of representing Nigeria's national literature: publishing, prestige, and criticism. In her evaluation of national literatures, Course stressed the role which economics and social criticism play in forming the national canon. Prize-winning novels, novels that receive good reviews, novels that publishing houses choose to advertise, these are the texts that gain entry into the national canon. Wendy Griswold situates the Nigerian novel in the same competitive environment and argues that to reach publication, Nigerian literary productions have had to "satisfy the aesthetic sensibilities and market considerations of British publishers" (722). Nigerian authors who hoped to publish via the wealthy British houses were forced to write in English. While Nigerian publishing houses have existed in abundance, the poor quality of their typesetting and the lack of financial support to advertise, promote internationally, or even pay the author, further encouraged authors to look abroad for help. Ironically, while the English-language novel might have been perceived as the potential unifier of the disparate ethnic groups through the use of an impartial foreign language, Griswold contends that British publishers preferred what she calls the village novels, which tend to emphasize an ethnic partiality. Rather than preserving and relating distinct cultural heritages, she argues, the village novels only served to further promote ethnic identities which ultimately undermine the national consciousness.

Meanwhile, writing in English brings prestige to authors, whose mastery of the colonial language usually signifies social success. "In keeping with its colonial legacy," writes F. N. Akinnaso, English continues to carry "the highest symbolic value," imbued with the notions of power, competence and future possibilities (46). Authors choose to write in English not only to secure publication, but to further their social prestige through international recognition, to obtain a wider reading audience and a release from the perceived social stigma of ethnic or regional provincialism.

Once published, the texts become available for commentary and criticism. Those texts which receive admiration and critical praise enter the first phase of canonization. Almost exclusively, Western critics review texts written in colonial languages, languages that they can read. Thus despite the occasional nod to indigenous language literatures of long standing, reviewers depend upon colonial language texts. Studies that bear titles like *Early Nigerian Literature* (ed. Bernth Lindfors, 1982), *Modern Nigerian Novels* (Vladimir Klima, 1969), and *Long Drums and Cannons: Nigerian Dramatists and Novelists* (Margaret Laurence, 1968) cite English language texts exclusively, disregarding and thus consigning to obscurity all non-English texts. Other scholarly works include indigenous language literatures, yet marginalize these literatures to the realm of the traditional, often oral arts. Bruce King's *Introduction to Nigerian Literature* (1971), for example, includes a section on Yoruba, Hausa, and Edo oral poetry, a brief survey of modern literatures in those languages, and then eight chapters on assorted English-language authors and their stylistics. What is even more remarkable is that Nigerian critics participate in the marginalization or complete disregard for indigenous language literatures. Yemi Ogunbiyi's *Perspectives on Nigerian*

Literature (Vol. 2) (1988) contains thirty-seven articles, of which only six discuss Yoruba or Hausa language literatures. Other examples include *Nigerian Writers on the Nigerian Civil War* (Olu Obafemi, 1992), *Reflections: Nigerian Prose and Verse* (Frances Ademola, 1962), and *Strategic Transformation in Nigerian Writing* (Ato Quayson, 1997), all of which adhere strictly to English-language texts. Is this emphasis on English-language texts a result of a strong nationalist effort to unite Nigeria through English? Are writers and editors swayed by Western demands for texts that they can read and criticize themselves? Or is it assumed that indigenous language texts simply do not fulfill the requirements of a national literature?

When Wendy Griswold and Misty Bastian embarked on a bibliography of Nigerian novels, they imposed certain criteria to demarcate acceptable entries into the list. They insisted that the author had to be Nigerian-born; the novel comprised texts of only 60 pages or more (an assignation no more random than E. M. Forster's minimum of 50,000 words); and finally this:

We are including novels written in English only. These novels are accessible to most literate Nigerians, whether their first language happens to be Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo, or one of the many other languages spoken within the country. There is an active fiction market in Yoruba and some novels are written in or translated into other languages as well. But our interest is in specifically *Nigerian* novels, not Yoruba novels. (215)

This final comment reveals quite explicitly what remains often implicit in the critique of Nigerian literature, and, I would argue, the formation of a Nigerian national literature. Griswold and Bastian echo Achebe's own distinctions when he said:

A national literature is one that takes the whole nation for its province, and has a realized or potential audience throughout its territory. In other words a literature that is written in the *national* language. An ethnic literature is one which is available only to one ethnic group within the nation. (1975, 56)

This statement is, however, highly problematic. Why is an ethnic literature available only to one ethnic group? Is it simply a question of language accessibility? Or is it a more complex issue, as Ngugi insists, that links language with culture and, in this case, with ethnic identity. Ngugi believes that "ethnic literatures" are capable of restoring a unified identity to their localized audience, whose sense of self was fractured by the intrusion of colonial languages (18). He suggests that engaging language to restore local cultural identity would then facilitate a healthy psychological balance within the multicultural and multilingual environment that is characteristic of so much of Africa. Achebe, however, perceives indigenous-language literatures as divisive. Rather than working toward national unity, they maintain and even exacerbate the antagonisms that pre-existed the artificial nations imposed by colonialism. To this end, Achebe prefers the use of a foreign *national* language, which he assumes will provide a common

ground for the various ethnic groups. In his statement, Achebe suggests that English claims this space exclusively in Nigeria, yet in reality the designated “official” language of English shares this space with the three national languages: Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo, as well as the unofficial language of Pidgin, which ranks among the highest of spoken languages in Nigeria (Bamiro 275). Each of these four languages is widely used in the educational system and their literatures have been harnessed and encouraged to promote literacy. Unofficial estimates put the number of English speakers in Nigeria at only around ten percent of the population; thus the “potential audience” to which Achebe refers won’t exist until well into the future, while the “realized audience” may in fact only exist abroad (Bamgbose, “The English Language” 38; Okedara and Okedara 98).²

If indeed language is the actual barrier, the issue of availability can be resolved through multiple translations. Discussions about choosing one Nigerian language to replace English have proven fruitless, and English is spoken by far too few to adequately represent the national language. If Nigeria hopes to become a nation in the immediate future, it must become a polyglot nation, with shared status divided equally among the most popular languages. Despite the difficulties encountered in translations, they provide the best possible solution at hand.

But perhaps Achebe intended more emphasis on the last statement of the quote *A national literature is one which takes the whole nation for its province*. Nigerian literature, he is asserting, must be about Nigeria, or a problem that concerns the entire nation. The inference follows that ethnic literatures do not take Nigeria as their province, but are instead limited by their immediate ethnic horizon. Yet in a nation deeply divided by its troubled, even warring factions, regionalized by strong ethnic ties, several religions and an uneven colonial experience, how many novels actually do take the whole nation as their province?

Perhaps the most famous novel to have ever emerged from Nigeria is Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958). Ironically, Emeka Okeke-Ezeigbo has said that Achebe’s novel is “technically an Igbo novel translated into English” (9). While Achebe’s insistence that he thinks and writes in English is not to be doubted, one wonders if the novel is not, in fact, an Igbo novel *written* in English. Or, to put it differently, it is a novel about the Igbo experience written in English. The major themes of the novel focus on the description of a complex and honorable precolonial culture existing within Nigeria, which was then transformed by the arrival of the British colonizers. Yet while missionaries introduced Christianity into southern Nigeria, setting up schools and pursuing a high moral agenda of “civilizing the natives,” that same cultural imperialism did not reach the north to the same degree. Mustafa Abba explains that the British administration, having found a thriving literate culture in Arabic and a well-established Islamic education culture, was “convinced that the North had achieved a higher state of civilization. Consequently, it tried to prevent any external influences that could interfere with the religious and social institutions for the area” (3). A. Babs Fafunwa compares the colonial influence between the north and the west of Nigeria, saying that “in the North, the Emirs

were able to pressurize the British government to keep the missionaries out of Muslim strongholds [. . .] but in Yorubaland [. . .] Christian schools were established in practically every town and village” (68). As Western schools gradually grew in numbers throughout Nigeria, the numbers of students in the north were always considerably lower than in the east and west. In 1957, for example, primary students in Western schools numbered 205,769 in the north, 982,755 in the west, and 1,209,167 in the east (Fafunwa 174). Due to the lack of direct British intervention, the religious and cultural values of the north remained essentially intact. Located in the north and already significantly different from their southern counterparts, the Hausa experienced a very different kind of colonialism. While the south became Europeanized, unified by English and to some degree Christianity, the north remained linguistically Hausa, and religiously Islamic. How then can we say that *Things Fall Apart* takes the whole nation as its province if it in no way represents the Hausa experience? Ironically, the novel has been lauded as depicting the classic colonial encounter with Africa. Cultures across the continent embrace the novel for its accurate description of both the dignity of precolonial African cultures and the ruptures they suffered from colonial intrusions. These pan-African parallels belie the notion that *Things Fall Apart* is a specifically Nigerian novel. It is both an Igbo novel in its specificity and an African novel in its generality. Given the disparity in Nigeria’s own colonialization, however, the novel does not reflect the experience of the entire nation. In the same vein, we can ask in what way Soyinka’s *The Road* (1965), replete with Yoruba mythology and imagery, represents the Hausa experience. In what way does Flora Nwapa’s *Efuru* (1966) reflect Hausa attitudes? The medium of English does not, in effect, render all novels “national” novels. Nor do many of the highly esteemed Nigerian novels take the whole nation for their province. Each novel, in its own way, still very much reflects the origins, ethnicity, and still fractured identity of its creator.

So the question must be asked once more: Should a national literature be constrained by language? Are ethnic literatures “ethnic” through language or topic? Must Nigeria’s national literature consist only of works written originally in English? Ayo Bamgbose suggests that the function of language in national development has led to two complementary myths: having several languages in a country necessarily divides, while having only one language always unites. In reality, he argues, “some of the real causes of divisiveness have nothing to do with language” (“Pride and Prejudice” 33-34). Many nations thrive with a multiplicity of languages; language is not the real problem, yet it is exploited to represent the actual terms of division. Thus, to return to Gellner’s theory of an imposed high culture, it may indeed work toward unifying a nation, but does it follow that only one language can serve to disseminate that high culture? In fact, Gellner’s theory focuses on universal literacy and bilateral communication, i.e., officiating in several languages; these are developmental issues that need not be hindered by multilingualism.

Damion Opata argues that “language per se does not constitute an intrinsic literary criterion for the determination of a national literature”

(41). Given the rich opportunities that Amos Tutuola offers in his works of nonstandard English (see *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* and *The Palm -Wine Drinkard*), as well as the the growing body of literature written in Pidgin (see Saro-Wiwa's *Sozoboy*, 1985), it would seem that language can indeed act as *one* of the criteria influencing a national literature, yet should not represent the limitation of that national literature. Opatata offers a different set of criteria, emphasizing the use of national types, myths, themes, and sentiments. Opatata's error, however, lies in assuming that such national categories pre-date a national literature. Perhaps recognizing this incongruity, he finally suggests a synthesizing approach, in which the national literature comprises the combined efforts of all writers whose novels *attempt to give shape to a national identity* for their readers. Returning to Achebe's notion of a text that takes the nation as its province, couldn't indigenous language novels be examined and assessed as possible contributors to Nigeria's national literature? In other words, do Hausa and Yoruba and Igbo writers truly write ethnic literatures, or could they be reassessed as writing national literature in the Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo languages?

A look at one of the prize-winning Hausa novels from a 1980 competition sponsored by the Nigerian Federal Department of Culture permits a comparison to be made between modern Hausa fiction and Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People* (1966), a novel normally regarded as part of Nigeria's national literature. Hausa authors, rather than emulating the Western concept of the novel, have combined elements of traditional poetry and folklore to create a uniquely Hausa form of the novel. Unlike the Onitsha market literature, which proudly exhibited abundant references to Shakespeare and other British canonized authors taught in the Western schools, Hausa novels rarely reflect anything other than their own literary history. Infused with proverbs, praise songs, and the social criticism intrinsic to the Hausa poetic tradition, the novels demonstrate a blend of oral traditions placed within a new literary framework.

Turmin Danya [The strong man] (1982), by Sulaiman Katsina, provides an excellent example of a Hausa novel that deals with typical Nigerian characters, themes, and sentiments. The story takes place in a fictitious country, but one whose name *Jarniya*, as well as its neighbor *Jarni*, easily unscramble to reveal anagrams, using Hausa orthography, for Nigeria and the neighboring country Niger. The story takes place in fictional towns, but the people in the story are immediately identified as being Hausa. The story also takes place in an unspecific time, yet the takeover of the government at the end of the novel alludes to the installment of President Shehu Shagari in 1979, just a few years prior to the novel's publication (Pilaszewicz 45). Despite Katsina's weak attempts to disguise the novel's true subject, halfway through the story he breaks into the story to assert a lengthy authorial opinion on the topic of *Nigerian* nationalism:

It is my belief that it all goes back to the colonial rulers—the British. Before they came to Nigeria people worked together in cooperation. There was pity and people helped each other. No one wanted to hurt his brothers or foreigners, and people weren't

obsessed with seeking out wealth in every possible way. [. . .] Now they're gone, but people here still follow their ways; instead of repairing their country, Nigerians have turned it into a new one. This is the way in which the toadies are milking the wealth of Nigeria and bringing European ways and flashy, low quality products into our homes. Now citizens are stealing the milk of their country and bringing it to the godfathers of other countries, leaving their people to drink black water, leaving them nothing but the dregs.

Since those flashy goods are expensive, most people have become aggressive about money to the point that they will knock people down and take their belongings in order to get ahead. I wonder if people will be able to change their needs or maybe find a more peaceful way of life.

From whatever perspective you look at it, it's all related to these issues [. . .] they all stem from the same source. And that is a lack of nationalism, a lack of concern for poor people and a lack of fear of God. (45- 46)³

Following this diatribe, the narrative returns to its fictional setting, but all semblance of the ruse has been dismantled.

Katsina focuses on one main character, the nefarious and extremely powerful Alhaji Gabatari. Surrounding him are a host of minor characters, each a manifestation of a different shade of moral corruption, with only a few exceptions. The story presents an elaborate portrayal of moral, social, and political bankruptcy as it touches upon all aspects of society. Gabatari runs an illegal import business along with a shady contracting business. He oils the system with lavish bribes and regularly produces shoddy work. Addicted to uppers, he stays up nights, dallying with favored mistresses or arranging the illegal transport of goods. He controls much of the region's illegal activity, and rules the area's citizens as well.

Despite the northern setting of the story within the specific arena of Hausaland, Katsina broadens the ethnic context to demonstrate that the problem is not Hausa-specific. Samai Aciba, the director of customs on the border, actively shares in the avarice that seems to affect everyone. Described as "a native of a town called Agema, of the ethnicity of Yango," he "welcomes any path which leads toward money. Patriotism, which he studied at school, was all forgotten long ago. He himself did not know what he had done with it" (21-22). Threaded through the entire story, this theme of lapsed patriotism and the avaricious nature of the modern Nigerian paints a disturbing portrait of the nation. Yet Katsina's intent is not to describe a nation in stasis but rather a nation in turmoil, and the answers, he contends, lie in political reform. With an honest government at the helm, he suggests, a moral health will return to the populace. Somewhat fancifully, yet not unbelievably, Katsina ends the novel not only with governmental reform, but individual reform as well. Two of the minor characters, a prostitute and a local degenerate, bleed Gabatari for an immense amount of money, but later emend their professional and

personal morals, marry, and become upright, honorable citizens. While their actions reflect the return of the nation to general health, their plans to reform precede the national crackdown on local crime. Thus Katsina signals a natural inclination on the individual's part toward moral behavior when given the means to do so. The mixed message he sends, however, that morality depends upon financial stability, perhaps reflects his estimation of the actual Nigerian character, that money does indeed play a crucial role in the happiness of modern Nigerians.

Stylistically, Katsina draws from the oral traditions both in content and intent. Praise names, such as the one alluded to in the title, and especially proverbs, abound in the text, providing both a means of commentary and added texture to the literary development. The use of these traditional maxims allows Hausa wisdom, in this terse but complex form, to enhance the newer literary form of the novel, thus rendering it more familiar and uniquely Hausa. Katsina also draws on the didactic nature of poetry, by far the most prestigious literary form in Hausa culture, for his strong authorial commentaries. Twice the author breaks in for a page-long diatribe on the ills of society, and several minor characters appear to be little more than mouthpieces for the author's outrage against those social ills. At his most sarcastic, the author asks, at the end of the novel, after Gabatari has been sentenced to death, "Where is the strong man now? He reaps what he sows" (129). Katsina thus extends the well-established poetic tradition of social commentary and criticism into the novel, providing a new forum for the author's voice couched in a less didactic form.

How then is this novel so different from Achebe's *A Man of the People*, that one sits inside the designated circle of national literature, and the other sits outside? In many ways the two novels are quite similar. *Turmin Danya's* 129 pages fall only twenty pages short of *A Man of the People*. Both texts make liberal use of proverbs, deftly weaving their wisdom into the fabric of the story. Both texts confront the moral and political corruption that plagues Nigeria as it struggles to find its postcolonial identity, and both authors provide endings in which a new government, in the classic *deus ex machina* form, arrives to save the nation. Critical of the current regimes and the moral decrepitude that has tainted the populace, these two novels each paint a shameful portrait of Nigeria and place the blame equally on the shoulders of the faulty government and the apathetic, confederate citizens.

Yet while Achebe is one of Nigeria's most famous writers and his work has been highly touted as setting the standard for a national literature, his first three novels take place in an Igbo village setting; in this fourth novel, the setting is not Nigeria, but some unnamed African country. The novel's ending, in which a military coup hastens the demise of the current corrupt regime, bears such remarkable resemblance to actual events in Nigeria concurrent with the book's publication that associations between the novel's country and Nigeria became inevitable. Despite Achebe's accurate foresight, however, Bernth Lindfors argues that the novel should not be seen as limited to a description of the moral and political decay of Nigeria alone, but as a parable for much of Africa: "By ending with a coup, an event anticipated yet still unknown in Nigeria but familiar elsewhere in

Africa, Achebe added a dimension of universality to his story" ("Achebe's African Parable" 254). Lindfors's theory bears consideration, for while Achebe's three earlier texts locate their stories clearly within Nigeria's cities, villages, and ethnic groups, the fourth novel inhabits imaginary cities and refuses specific ethnic or cultural identification. The political and social problems that regulate the plot—bribery, kickbacks, incompetence at high government levels, greed, and social apathy—represent not just Nigeria's maladjustment to independence but that of many African nations. How different is *A Man of the People* from the Ghanaian novel *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1969), or the Senegalese novel *The Last of the Empire* (1983)? In fact all three serve to exemplify, or rather prove, Fanon's theories of disastrous neocolonialism when power falls into the hands of the greedy elite. Despite the similarity to actual historical events to Nigeria in 1963, the riots, turbulent election campaigns, the political corruption, Achebe refuses to limit his story only to Nigeria. Just as Armah named his working-class protagonist "the man," Achebe makes use of the general to enlarge its representational possibilities. It becomes not the story of Nigeria but the story of any West African nation, an elaborate parable of the pitfalls of neocolonialism.

Chinua Achebe's texts have long been considered the quintessential Nigerian novels, despite their Igbo specific village settings, or the use of imaginary or vague signifiers that allow both *A Man of the People* and *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987) to be seen as parables for the postcolonial African nation in peril. Katsina's text, on the other hand, allows for no such ambiguity. Initially working under the guise of an imaginary, but highly referential name, Katsina quickly reveals his real subject in several pointed references to Nigeria's social and political ills. Dwelling on the thwarted goals of nationalism, Katsina writes from the premise that Nigeria is a nation struggling to find its identity, a goal that he takes as inevitable. Katsina writes from the Hausa perspective, but he addresses the problems of Nigeria as a whole nation.

Would Achebe, if he had read this novel, deem it ethnic, or regional, or unnational? Probably not. Yet Achebe has most likely not read this novel, nor has any non-Hausa speaking reader, because it has yet to be translated into any other language. Given the particulars of the Hausa experience of colonialism, its defensive positioning for cultural integrity within the national identity crisis, and the socially influential literary tradition cultivated over centuries in the Hausa language, the language question is really no question at all. Hausa writers continue to write in Hausa, but this does not make them any less Nigerian than an author who chooses to write in English. As Richard Fardon and Graham Furniss suggest, "monolingualism has never been the norm in Africa that it is in much of Europe." Rather, they propose, "the state may best serve its own interests by enabling people to develop the personal language portfolios *they will anyway continue to acquire*" (24, emphasis added). Given the incentives to speak to neighbors in state-sanctioned languages, they see multilingualism as a potential strength, not a divisive factor. English is but one of the many languages in which Nigerians choose to express themselves. Translations,

then, must be seen as the key to defining and refining Nigeria's national literature. While the Hausa choose to write almost exclusively in the Hausa language, the topics and themes of the novels are no different from those of many of the most renowned Nigerian writers. Read in translation in any of the national languages, these novels can contribute to the shaping of the national identity as well as the ongoing discussion of national problems and their possible solutions. All texts must be considered, no matter what their language of origin, as contributing toward building the national character and ideology. As Nigeria continues its search for self-definition and nationhood, only the combined literatures of its disparate citizens, taken as a whole, can ultimately reflect the national character.

NOTES

1. The recent successful elections of 1999 give us hope that Nigeria is indeed on its way toward statehood, although the choice of a former general to lead the nation maintains a disquieting connection between the military and the government.
2. The Okedaras write: "The English language tops the list as an official language of literacy in both public and private businesses in all the twenty-one states [. . .] however, less than 10 % of the entire population of Nigeria speaks English" (98).
3. All translations of *Turmin Danya* by Joanna Sullivan.

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