



Bernard Magnier

The presence of African literature

The evolution of literary criticism, publishing, and readership

Africa's growing role in western European culture is reflected in the increasing interest in its literature. Confined during the 1970s and 1980s to politically radical circles, African authors now appear in the culture pages of major journals. New anthologies from leading French publishers have raised the profile of African writing, while increased funding has enabled the professionalization of translation. Though channels of distribution are still at present weighted towards the West, African literature is on its way to becoming a vital manifestation of a universal literature, says Bernard Magnier.

Kourouma, between Kafka and Kundera

A lack of impartiality and awareness in the reception of African novels has meant they have always occupied a singular position in the French literary landscape. Met by either genuine sympathy or condescension, excessive enthusiasm or systematic rejection, and provoking reactions between absolute contempt and compassionate consideration, ignorance and empathy, racism and open-mindedness, African works have often been perceived through a deformed prism, tainted by misunderstanding arising from confused consciences both good and bad. It seems that the last two decades have tended to view writers in a new way, recognizing them and their works for their talent, literary weaknesses and qualities, free of prejudices and preconceived ideas. *The colonial era* A brief glance at the criticism and reviews completed during the pioneering years of African Letters — mainly in the first half of the twentieth century — reveals that the names of the preface writers, columnists, and critics also appeared on colonial and missionary registers. Often, colonial officials supported a rising talent from within their "flock". Civil and military administrators, and missionaries of all faiths, who promoted African writers introduced an author by proposing a book to a reading committee, or by prefacing a text and providing a literary review of the work.

Instead of reading the works from a literary standpoint, the readers took a friendly point of view, producing sympathetic critiques. The discourse rarely addressed an aesthetic topic, taking up instead a historical, sociological, or political theme, with the subject generally being far from subversive. A touch of well thought out reading, an enthusiasm for humanism, and an outburst of generosity does not necessarily constitute the ingredients for good literary criticism. In these prefaces, the biography of the author sometimes became a qualitative guarantee; the prefacer not only expresses admiration for the author, but also praises the sense of "spontaneity" and "naturalness", and sometimes the "naïveté" and "innocence" of the writing, in order to demonstrate its implicit "authenticity".

During this period, a number of writers were attracting the attention and support of their peers in France, some of whom were named by René Maran. Thus, Breton introduced Césaire, Sartre wrote "Black Orpheus" to preface Senghor's *Anthology of New Black and Malagasy Poetry*, and Mauriac introduced Rabemananjara. Gide, Aragon, and Desnos, on the other hand, were not involved. *The role of universities* Later, it was the universities that served a wider readership with their knowledge and insight through occasional literary criticism. While some reserved their talents for the university alone, or to a chosen audience, others wrote reference books on the emerging theme of African literature, either voluntarily or on commission. This resulted in anthologies, special collections, columns, and reviews in the daily papers and in big weeklies and monthlies. *Professional criticism* For some years now, literary criticism has to a large extent been professionalized. Now, literary journalists cover the current state of African books in the same way they would any other literature, regardless of geographic origin. Thus, African books are no longer routinely placed on the desk of the senior "political" columnist — as was long the case. Instead, they are featured in the book section of the daily paper. This development, which has taken place as part of a wider movement recognizing the African continent, has established a place for African writing in the realm of a more universal literature, as well as placing upon it the same constraints as other literatures.

An African style?

In a review of current events, there is more to say about Africa aside from seeing it as the territory of human dramas, of famines and *coup d'états*, of massacres and natural disasters, the continent where place names have the unpleasant habit of entering our memories as tragedies of history (Biafra, Soweto, Somalia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone). Little by little, the continent is also acquiring a place in cultural news. For the first time in ten to fifteen years, Africa is, on the artistic plane, not only the place of music, of dance and traditional ceremonies. Excellence in the arts no longer has to be proved, but is welcomed in museums.¹ Musicians, singers, and African groups occupy a prominent place on the stage and the radio. Contemporary art is increasingly attractive, and it is important to note the success met by certain plastic artists. The most spectacular is unquestionably the Senegalese sculptor Ousmane Sow, whose exhibition was outdoors and free of charge.

This craze (or this renewed craze) for African arts is accompanied by a much more banal and mercantile movement. The sudden presence of an "African style" in decoration, upholstery, design and colouring, and manufacturing "trends" is apparent. The opening of several businesses offering these various products shows this, as do the recent exhibitions organized by certain department stores under the generic sign advertising "Africa"... It is advisable to distrust this phenomenon, while at the same time making use of its beneficial outcomes. *Behind the mask... the poet* In the field of literary expression, the African continent, for the first time with a large audience, succeeded during this period in surpassing the image created by its stories, epics, traditional language, and oral tradition. Thus, poets, novelists, and playwrights took their place beside musicians, dancers, sculptors, and storytellers, and there is no doubt that this "recognition" contributed to a greater movement that modified the long-term image of the continent and its inhabitants, as was possible for Latin America some decades earlier.

Increased visibility

An immediate corollary of the development of literary criticism was a substantial modification in France's muted reception. African books came more and more to feature in the columns of the review pages, so that they could be seen in shop windows and on bookstore and library shelves. This allowed for an increased visibility for the production of African literature. The award of top literary prizes, as distinguished as the Nobel Prize for Literature and ones of lesser impact², along with the wide-spread success of Amadou Hampâté Bâ, Ahmadou Kourouma, and more recently Fatou Diome, contributed to — for some, regrettably posthumously — the notoriety of the distinguished authors. There was also a practical impact from which their "colleagues" were able to benefit.

The organization of events, such as the Youth Book Exhibition of Montreuil, Étonnants voyageurs in Saint-Malo and Bamako, and more specialized events such as the International Festival of Francophones in Limoges, and Festafrica in Lille and in N'Djamena, assured welcomed and needed promotion. The appearance of new editors (Serpent à plumes, Dapper) and the publication of new collections ("Africa" by Actes Sud and "Black Continent" by Gallimard) also contributed to a developing awareness of African literature. Likewise, the professionalization at all stages of book production — and in particular at the level of translation — allowed available funds to grow and quality to improve. Professional translators sometimes specialize in a particular author, country, linguistic space, or sub-region. Of note is the recent emergence of African translators.³

The remarkable works of talented writers such as Mozambican Mia Couto, Sudanese Taïeb Saleh and Jamal Mahjoub, Tanzanian Abdulrazak Gurnah, Somalian Nuruddin Farah, and Zimbabweans Tsitsi Dangarembga and Chenjerai Hove, revealed for the first time that the literature of entire countries existed on a literary plane.

All of this contributed to the renewal and development of the literary "landscape", thus arousing the interest of a new readership. *The emergence of a new reader* An audience with considerably altered intentions has grown. In the initial decades, the European readers of African books were often guided by a personal or familial attachment to the African continent. An "uncle from the Congo", parents who had been "ex-pats" in Senegal during their childhood, military service completed under the banner of cultural or scientific cooperation, often enabled the discovery of a novel, an anthology, or readings tied to a country. Later, from 1970 to 1980, readers were motivated by more political and military interests. Thus, the denunciation of dictatorial regimes, the struggle between apartheid and the liberation of Nelson Mandela, or more obviously, engagement in a humanitarian cooperation, drove militants to African readings.

In the last ten years, it has no longer been political leanings, militant engagement, or any other circumstantial motivation that has sparked readers' interest in African literature. A new, curious, and demanding audience is emerging, whose interest lies in African authors as though they were any other authors. It is an audience who chooses a Senegalese or Nigerian novelist, after having read a Latin American writer, and before heading towards another literary universe — Japanese, Czech, Parisian, or Mongolian...

The African book: a book like any other?

Have African books, since then, become a book like any other? Without being smug or unduly optimistic, it is correct to observe that these demonstrations of interest have certainly contributed to normalizing the way these literatures are received — that is, judged, with neither pity nor condescension, with the same (im)partiality as other literature. This recognition gives an opportunity to see the continent and its cultural products in a new light.

Still, the fundamental economic authority of publishing, disseminating, and promoting is situated in Europe. The authors are, at present, often condemned (in the Francophone world in particular) to appealing to the authority of western decision-makers. The accompanying problem is to see — whether voluntarily or not — this literature as being shaped by a Eurocentric judgment. In years to come, there will be a struggle to control the cost and pricing of books, so that a book produced at a certain cost will not be able to be sold to an African audience. Joint publication between African and European editors seems the only possible alternative. But, this is a wish that it is easier to express than to grant, such are the barriers on both continents.

Without waiting for these dreams to come about, the positive evolution of France's reception of African works is already noticeable. This normalization should be pursued. It is about time that African books be read without ostracism or false glory, without complacency or imbecilic rejection, alongside the works of other continents. Everything African is no longer systematically judged on the basis of reference or deference. To call Sony Labou Tansi the "African Molière" and Soyinka the "black Shakespeare" is no more advanced. There will be a justifiable revenge in the near future when a young French, English, Portuguese, or Swedish writer is proclaimed as a "Scandinavian Hampâté Bâ" or a "European Jamal Mahjoub"... When Kourouma is finally placed between Kafka and Kundera. Or better still, when they are placed side by side on book shelves all around the world, without any other classification or separation.

¹ In recent years, several places have welcomed some of the most remarkable pieces of African art: in Paris, the Dapper Foundation, the Museum of African and Oceanic Arts experienced a considerable increase of visitors until its recent closure. The new rooms of the Louvre foreshadow the future Museum of First Arts. In Marseille, the opening of the Museum of African, Oceanic, and Amerindian Arts, and the development of several collections in the museums of Lille, Lyon, and Angoulême are examples of the growing appreciation for African arts.

² Four Nobel Prizes for Literature have been awarded to writers from various African countries: Nigerian writer Soyinka, Egyptian writer Mahfouz, and South Africans Gordimer and Coetzee. Also, an Inter-Book prize, a Goncourt student prize, and a Renaudot Prize for Ahmadou Kourouma are among other literary awards given to African writers.

³ Samuel Millogo and Tinder Bissiri from Burkina-Faso translated Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy* (Actes Sud) and Togolese Kangni Alem translated *Lemona* by the same novelist (Dapper).

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