

# Ekwensi and Modern Nigerian Culture

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THE theme of culture conflict, with its corollary of the faithful delineation of pre-colonial African society, is recognized as the most pervasive in the first harvest of post-war African literature. Most of the writers, beginning with Achebe, expressed, implicitly or overtly, the damage done to African indigenous societies during the colonial period. One writer, however, participated only in a very superficial way in this protest. Cyprian Ekwensi's burden in his major and serious novels — *People of the City*, *Jagua Nana*, *Beautiful Feathers*, *Iska* — is articulated by one of his characters, Wilson Iyari, pharmacist and proprietor of the Independence Pharmacy and leader of the Nigerian Movement for African and Malagassy Solidarity:

If only he could acquire that "inner state" nothing would ever touch him. Nothing. That was the great trouble with Africa today, he thought. In the old days the African had a bond with an Ultimate Being. Then came 'civilization' that took away the older religion and substituted something new and unstable. Now that which the white man had substituted was gone. There was nothing. At moments like this the New Black Man — he was one of them — was alone. Alone!<sup>1</sup>

This reflection is prompted by a passage from a book which Iyari has been reading: "Religious people act with religious care . . . conscientiously . . . in ritual or in the attainment of certain inner states . . . This rigorous care in devotion, services, and observances aims at a bond between man and an ultimate Being and Power. . . ." What impresses Iyari is the contrast between the ability of certain men to shape their lives through deliberately charted and purposeful courses achieved through the acceptance of a higher morality, and the lack of it in modern Nigeria.

Ekwensi's novels focus on present-day Nigeria; he "is writing about events as they happen. He has always been a chronicler of right now."<sup>2</sup>

His preoccupation is with the moral chaos which set in in the wake of the dislocation of traditional life and values by the influx of new patterns and new values from the Western European civilization particularized by the presence of the colonizing British:

He is concerned with the quality of modern Nigerian life, specifically with the ways in which traditional values and institutions were redefined as a result of the presence of Europeans in West Africa during the colonial period. His theme then broadly defined is concerned with the conflicts which the colonial presence promoted in Nigeria, and the cultural, social and political changes which resulted.<sup>3</sup>

Ekwensi's attitude to this dislocation differs significantly from that generally assumed by many other Nigerian writers. Although he refers from time to time to certain features of the Nigerian past in order to compare them with the present, he is not nostalgic over them. In fact, on a number of occasions, he satirizes those who still cling to the old ways as though history must be erased. Mr. Layeni of the *West African Sensation* is an example,

He was one of the old school of Africans who believe that the younger generation were getting too cute. They were rude, did not bow to their elders as of old. They called it 'education' but he had another word for it. They lacked 'home-training'. He would show them.<sup>4</sup>

It is Mr. Layeni, however, who is always shown in the most ridiculous or unfavourable light. Confronted with these two sets of descriptions, it is not difficult to guess which is spontaneous and which is forced.

Something about this girl's personality impressed itself unforgettably on Wilson's mind. He sensed immediately that she had breeding, beauty and elegance. Her hair was striking and distinctive, piled high above her head and secured at the nape of her neck with a glittering pin. It was not raining, but she carried a slim umbrella and her dress was cut in two pieces of a light material, cool to the eyes and carefully matched with everything she wore. (p. 23)

Wilson saw how Kwame was staring in the direction of the girl. The top of her blouse was shifted down and she sat carelessly, apparently unaware of the yawning things that revealed the darker labyrinths. The roots of her breasts — sapling stems of sucklement — buried their thickness in two hefty ridges. Her bosom seemed to be divided into these two roots and nothing more, tossing up the lower edge of the blouse so that the midriff stood revealed. The skin of her breasts reflected the smile on her face.

Wilson stood beside Kwame for a few moments then muttered under his breath, 'African womanhood.' (pp. 145-46)

In spite of the muttered "African womanhood," it is clear that the sophisticated and modernized girl of the first passage appeals more to the writer; the description is more evocative. In the second passage one gets the impression that the writer is trying very hard to say something which is not quite clear in his own mind; therefore the need for the extra label as fortification. It is significant that Ekwensi has never devoted any full length novel to a systematic delineation of life in traditional Nigerian society as Achebe, Nzekwu, Amadi, Nwapa and many others have done. Perhaps it is impossible for Ekwensi to do this because the circumstances of his birth, early life and career deprived him of a first hand knowledge of the traditional system. His involvement with the modern in Nigeria is therefore inevitable, being himself caught up in its influences from the very moment of his birth. He shares with Soyinka a complete identification with the contemporary and chooses it as the arena where all the battles have to be fought and won. To Ekwensi, the dislocation of the old ways is inevitable and even welcome for any culture that is isolated and deprived of the cross fertilizing influences from without soon atrophies. What he laments is the absence of any kind of organization that could draw out some worthwhile and enduring patterns to stabilize this exciting new that is full of opportunities. Ekwensi wants a re-birth similar to that of the proverbial phoenix:

Ekwensi constantly criticises the city for the greed, the impersonality, the lust and the corruption which he sees

there. But his feelings are divided, for he loves the city as well and his liveliest writing is one of life in Lagos.<sup>5</sup>

That Ekwensi's novels are set mainly in the city is no accident; for the city is the symbol of the new life. As a physical location, it tears men and women away from the restricting village environment, offering opportunities for the development of the individual, both socially and materially. The city exhibits the outward signs of affluence in its glitter of night lights, its better roads, its department stores, its extravagantly dressed citizens, and, although it contains many slums, its better houses. It offers a new and exciting lifestyle. The shops and offices cater for a new breed "with pencils stuck in their ears, fashionable girls with baskets of shopping slung over their arms, ice-cream hawkers pedalling bicycles, motorists tooting their horns" (*People of the City*, p. 69). The snack bars are always "crowded with people of the city out to relax and look at the lagoon. They were mostly girls of the Dupeh type fashion plates of the most devastating type — to young men. With every swing of the doors, the restaurant filled more than it emptied" (p. 66). Beatrice the first "made no secret of what brought her to the city, high life, cars, servants, high-class foods, decent clothes, luxurious living" (p. 68).

This pull of the city is often contrasted with the drabness and poverty of village life. Each of Ekwensi's major characters, Amusa Sango (*People of the City*), Jagua (*Jagua Nana*), Iyari and Yaniya (*Beautiful Feathers*), Filia Enu (*Iska*) at some point in the novels takes a trip back to the village. Any lingering doubts about their need of the city are completely dispelled by the chilling dullness, slowness, poverty and serene conservativeness of real village life. Sango is forced to confess "The city is overcrowded, and I am one of the people over-crowding it. If I had your idea, I would leave the city; but it holds me" (p. 115).

The city acts as a liberating force. It cuts the bonds which inhibit experiment and progress on many fronts.

Work brings people from many parts of the country and even of the world together. The night clubs break the barriers between ethnic groups, bringing together men and women who for a few hours meet on equal terms to respond to the message of the trumpets, saxophones and drums. The All Language Club is one of them:

The proprietor had been in the Civil Service when the idea of the All Language Club occurred to him. He wanted to take a practical step towards world unity, he said. To create a place where men and women of all languages and social classes could meet and get to know one another more intimately. It was his earnest desire that the spirit of fellowship created here would take root and expand. (pp. 38-39)

It is the city which makes possible the marriage between Iyari and Yaniya: "Their parents were too far away to interfere," between Sango and Beatrice the Second, Beatrice the First and Mr. Grunnings, the alliance between Jagua and Freddie, Uncle Taiwo and numerous others who at one time or the other come within her orbit. Filia Enu's tragedy begins with a union of this type which breaks all the usual traditional barriers of tribe and language. What has fired the impressionable Bayo's imagination and raises him to acts of chivalry is the love of a Lebanese girl, Suad Zamil. The thought of losing her sends him into fits of depression:

Bayo's condition was pitiful to see. Dull were his shoes, wrinkled his tie; and the hair of this erstwhile dapper youngster was for once uncombed. Was this the same Bayo who trifled with women's hearts? So terrified of everything that might hurt Suad Zamil? (pp. 121-22)

In fact, practically all the personal attachments in Ekwenski's novels cut across tribal boundaries. The overcrowded nature of the city where tenants inhabit single rooms in houses that sprawl out in an effort to gather in all the land of a plot helps to promote this intermixture. 20 Molomo Street is like that; so is Jagua's place of abode. Even Lajide, the wealthy landlord, has rooms in one of his own buildings. Only super-wealthy men like Zamil, or highly educated, like Wilson Iyari can afford a separate house.

Part of the excitement of the city is due to growing political awareness. The infiltration of the ideas and words which had through the ages inspired a subject or oppressed people into demanding their freedom, has created a new mood in the city. In *Beautiful Feathers*, since this initial freedom has been achieved, the activities are intended to reshape the world and make it a better place to live in. These strivings presage a new era of increased responsibility and maturity. The councillor of *People of the City* summarizes the enthusiasm and expectations:

Politics is life. Look at it now. After these elections, life will be different. With every election things change. And so it will go on changing, all the time, and one day we'll get what we're fighting for: complete autonomy. (pp. 51-52)

Even though the political parties disagree with one another, they all promise the same things "namely, more houses, more food, more water, and more light for the people" (p. 94). In *Beautiful Feathers* which is set in the post-independence era, some of it is realised

Two years ago not one house was put in this part of the city, but now it was thriving. Lagos was indeed expanding, outwards and upwards. From the balcony she heard the sound of the machines from the neighbouring factory, rhythmic, productive. (p. 115)

One very influential innovation of the city is the powerful press. This acts as a unifying force and also as an educating medium. It brings to the people information about the most interesting events from various parts of the country; and so where there existed isolated little pockets of people who remained ignorant of one another, there is an attempt to create a common area where all can understand and sympathize with one another. The organization of the *West African Sensation* itself underscores this attempt at forging unity

Day by day thousands of copies of the *West African Sensation* rolled off the huge presses, were quickly bundled into waiting vans that immediately struck out north, east, west, covering the entire country from the central point of the city. (*People of the City*, p. 69)

These positive aspects of modern Nigeria appeal to Ekwensi, and he writes about them with an exuberance that is yet unequalled by any other Nigerian novelist. The pride of the corporal who demonstrates to Sango the efficiency of the modern police organization with its modern facilities is an infectious pride:

The corporal went to a little post near by, opened a metal box, took out a phone.

He turned to Sango. 'Why didn't you ring 999?' 'Because I saw you so near. I just wanted protection for her, that's all.'

'Hello . . . Corporal Daifu here . . . Molomo Street . . . Yes, proper street gal . . . They want to kill her with stones. Send patrol van to pick her up quick.' He winked at Sango. 'Over to you. Over.' He hung up, closed the metal box.

'Go now!'

'Thank you.' Even before Amusa Sango could turn round, the 999 van with the letters POLICE was wheeling into MOLOMO Street, and the young officers were leaping out while the vehicle was still in motion.

Amusa was pleased.

'I tol' you,' smiled the Corporal in triumph. (pp. 12-13)

This picture, however, is besmirched. These possibilities which the modern age holds out come to be perverted and distorted by the very manner in which the people of present-day Nigeria handle them. What disturbs Ekwensi is that this new freedom, these new forces have not been harnessed in a manner to yield optimum results.

Because of the lack of a reference point, of a higher morality other than that determined by individual greed, of the lack of some ultimate arbitrator in affairs between individual and individual, because of the very liberty that makes most things possible in the city, it resembles a jungle. Ekwensi's greatest indictment against the present day Nigeria, is that of a loss of character. There is completely absent that sense of planning and organization which sees things in long term perspectives, which sees how every action in the present is related to some other desirable event in the future. People seem so taken up with short term gains and pleasures that they ultimately lose the most

coveted prize. Most of the characters in his novels resemble those singled out by Matthew Arnold for condemnation in "Rugby Chapel":

Most men eddy about  
Here and there — eat and drink,  
Chatter and love and hate,  
Gather and squander, are raised  
Aloft, are hurl'd in the dust,  
Striving blindly, achieving  
Nothing . . . .

Wilson Iyari's problem, for instance, which is the theme of *Beautiful Feathers* arises through an action that he had not carefully contemplated. His marriage to Yaniya does not spring out of any compelling need of her by him as would be the case in the pattern of western civilization, nor in the family involvements that characterize the traditional. It is typical of the shoddiness in reasoning and tendency to submit to the exigencies of the present no matter how trivial:

It was very much a Lagos courtship. Their parents were too far away to interfere. No one was present to ask questions about who slept where or with whom; Wilson did not seriously think of marrying her. But one morning he went to the hospital and they handed him an official letter. He was to proceed on transfer in fourteen days' time. Casually, he showed the note to Yaniya during the lunch break. She broke into tears. She vowed that if Wilson left her she would kill herself. (p. 25)

When Yaniya becomes pregnant, again purely by accident, it becomes the basis for a marriage.

Amusa Sango's life is constantly crossed by individuals who impose themselves on him and therefore shape and direct the next stage of his life, even if temporarily. The girl, Aina, with her perennial demands for attention and money, is in a large measure responsible for Sango's failure in the city. His friend, Bayo, uses his room both for amorous escapades and for criminal transactions. The result is that Sango loses the little foothold he has in the city when his landlord, Lajide, who quite naturally objects to the presence of C.I.D. men in his house, throws him out. At this juncture Sango is forced to take stock of his position:



He was thinking generally of himself in the big city. What had he achieved? Where was he going? Was he drifting like the others, or had he a direction? Whatever that direction was, he did not feel at this moment that he was progressing along it . . . As far as money was concerned, there was little of it being put aside for the rainy day; and then there were the girls, every one with her own problems and thrice as interesting as the last. Something must have happened to his noble resolutions. (p. 58)

Jagua's lover, Freddie, never seriously thinks out the implications of his association with a woman whom he knows to be a prostitute. Filia Enu and her Hausa husband, Dan Kaybi, are oblivious of the implications and complications of their union in a country which has built up tribal hatred into a creed. In all these cases, the impression is of a type of mental laziness and atrophy of the will which succumbs easily to what appears easy and immediately satisfying.

The characters in Ekwensi's novels are mostly individuals who have thrown away the substance for the shadow. They tend to pervert everything from what is good in the service of unbridled and inordinate ambition to achieve prosperity. The landlord, Lajide, "had lived too long in the city to care about right and wrong, so long as the end was achieved" (p. 100). He squelches all moral compunctions in his dealing with his tenants in his bid to extract the last drop of profit from his investments. Nafotim and Uncle Taiwo, the new politicians, will employ any handy tactics in their election campaigns including massacres of innocent citizens and the murder of opponents. Thuggery becomes an indispensable arm of politics and young men like Rayimi stake their lives that politicians may succeed. The people whom the politicians profess to serve now become their agents or victims. The garishness of the campaigns themselves, often accompanied by high life music turns the whole affair into a picnic and a free for all soap box oratory. Often the sentiments of the mobs are diverted from the real issues by exploiting their prejudices. In an attempt to dissuade Freddie from a pending election, Jagua summarizes the features of Nigerian politics thus:

Politics not for you, Freddie. You got education. You got culture. You're a gentleman an' proud. Politics be game for dog. And in this Lagos, is a rough game. De roughest game in de whole worl'. Is smelly and dirty and you too clean an' sweet.<sup>6</sup>

In this modern Nigeria religion is subordinated to the new craze for material prosperity. Piska Dabra, with whom Filia becomes involved at one stage in her career resembles Wole Soyinka's Brother Jero who uses his popularity and gift for oratory to exploit his disciples. Rather than stabilize and ennoble men's lives as was its traditional role, religion itself becomes debased, in keeping with the distorted values of the present. It is an irony that an organization like the secret society, the Ufemfe Society, which now fills the role of religion in appearing to relieve people of their woes turns out to be an agent of the Devil, devouring those who turn to it for solace. Sango, through whose eyes the evils of the society are revealed to us, is eventually forced to adopt the tactics of the city in order to survive:

At night he stood in for other people in their own bands. His motto had become money, money, money. This was the way the people of the city realized themselves. Money. He saw the treachery, intrigue, and show of power involved. Sometimes he earned twenty shillings a night for blowing his trumpet within smelling distance of a wet and stinking drain. (p. 140)

Ekwensi's writing captures the utter moral degeneracy of present day Nigeria, especially in matters of sex. His pages are full of the men's indiscriminate quest for an impossible number of sexual adventures. A girl only has to appear where men gather and everybody desires to have her in bed. "Girls ripen quickly in the city — the men are so impatient" (*People of the City*, p. 29). The unfortunate thing about these affairs is that they are not conceived in passionate terms, nor do they generate any lasting sympathy between the persons concerned. In this, as in all other relationships, the same callousness pervades:

This girl must be treated like the others. She must be forgotten. She must not be allowed to be a bother to him. Every Sunday men met girls they had never seen

and might never see again. They took them out and amused them. Sometimes it led to a romance and that was unexpected; but more often it led nowhere. Every little affair was a gay adventure, part of the pattern of life in the city. No sensible person who worked six days a week expected anything else but relaxation from these strange encounters. (p. 7)

In spite of his eight wives, Lajide still stakes everything — money, reputation, domestic harmony — in his desire to make Beatrice the First his mistress. All the politicians feel obliged to keep a mistress or two as a way of enhancing their prestige. Even a civil servant as highly placed as Gadson Salifas compromises his safety and honour in his hobby of seducing other men's wives. There appears to be a constant need by the modern Nigerian man to demonstrate his virility to the general public.

This excessive sexuality is even more noticeable in the women. Having left the solid protectiveness of rural life, the women in Ekwensi's novels find that they can only progress through some degree of prostitution. All their actions, dressing, make-up, gait are deliberately cultivated as a means of attracting men sexually. They offer themselves to the men with the least prompting and hope that something serious may develop from the encounters. Dupeh Martins is a prototype of this new breed of woman:

This was a girl who belonged strictly to the city. Born in the city. A primary education, perhaps the first four years at secondary school; yet he knew all about Western sophistication — make-up, cinema, jazz . . . This was the kind of girl whom Sango knew would be content to walk her shoes thin in the air-conditioned atmosphere of department stores, to hang about all day in the foyer of hotels with not a penny in her handbag, rather than live in the country and marry Papa's choice. (*People of the City*, p. 29)

Ekwensi drives home this absence of any shred of sexual morality in the women in the scene where a young girl of about fourteen years of age who hawks lobsters, tries one night to gain access into Sango's room. Even, when, in an act of unaccustomed self-restraint, he sends her away with "Now, girl, go to bed. Quick. All girls of your age are lying

in their mothers' beds" and shuts the door on her, she keeps pleading to be let in. It is no wonder then that school girls frequent Iyari's pharmacy "to ask for aphrodisiacs, contraceptives and abortifacients" (p. 8). Even Nancy Oll, Jagua's young rival for Freddie's love does not escape from this malady although she is shown as more virtuous than the others. It is therefore not accidental that Ekwensi's novels almost burst with descriptions of women's physical features. The emphasis on breasts, legs, lips, wiggling hips, hair, eyes abound on every page.

The problem is that although these activities are conceived by the people concerned as isolated little escapades that need not touch their lives at a more serious level, they invariably jeopardize the life and career of those concerned. Because of his involvements with the girl, Aina, Sango almost commits murder when he is fed up with her pestering. Gadson Salifas escapes from one of his adventures, very badly mauled.

All this has the effect of disrupting the basis of any meaningful relationships and in some cases marriages are destroyed. Wilson Iyari comes from a broken home. His own home is unstable and threatens to break up too. The signs of instability are everywhere:

Lagos was rapidly becoming Nigeria's divorce centre. It was the mark of its outward sophistication that nowhere did a happy marriage really exist. There was always the other man or the other woman. Marriage had become a shame, a facade, a social show-off. Once in a while husband and wife were seen together in public. Home life had vanished. The husband went to New York, taking with him a woman to warm his bed, his wife carried her typewriter and flew with policemen to the Congo. That was independence. (p. 41)

In his latest novel, Ekwensi touches on one post independence feature of modern Nigeria — the growth of ethnic separateness which threatens to engulf everything in its flames of hatred. Ekwensi attributes this to the schemings of the politicians who "fan it up and we, the stupid ones, begin quarrelling and killing ourselves. They fan it up and still

remain friends." The press, which is established as an organ of enlightenment is now made to serve the purposes of tribal hatred dividing group against group and jeopardizing the unity and strength of the new nation.

By dwelling on the lighter aspects of modern Nigerian life, Ekwensi is dissecting its social evils, its frivolity, its lack of direction. His message is that the indiscriminating rush after new and often the most unsavoury aspects of western civilization has created a questionable and undesirable modern Nigerian culture. What this culture lacks is self discipline and foresight. Without these two, all the opportunities which are so easily recognized are bound to be dissipated.

Ekwensi may not be as accomplished an artist as Achebe and Soyinka. The weaknesses in his works are obvious even to the casual reader — the loose plots, the superficial and inconsistent characterization, his reliance on melodrama to solve intricate problems. But it is impossible to ignore him in any assessment of Nigerian literary effort. Literature is a mirror of life and no other Nigerian writer to date has succeeded as much as Ekwensi in reflecting the contemporary scene with all its complications and contradictions. Soyinka in *The Interpreters* is mostly concerned with the educated elitist minority. Achebe's *A Man of the People* dwells mainly on post-independence politics. But Ekwensi sweeps in men and women from high and low in actions that are variegated — the ministers of state as well as the prostitutes and characters from the underworld. Moreover, he transverses the country to reveal its multi-tribal nature, and demonstrates how these different individuals affect each other. Ekwensi has faced up to the problems — social, political and moral of modern Nigeria with fidelity and with candour. It is very significant that *Iska* which devotes a large section to the intricacies and agonies of tribal animosity in Nigeria appeared just before the conflicts that led to the civil war. It can therefore be claimed that in this respect Ekwensi is "the sensitive point in his community."

All this brings us back to the classic question of the role of literature in society. It is now generally agreed that in the third world "art for art's sake" is a luxury. Plato had demanded that literature be useful as well as delightful, and most apologists for literature claim this dual role — to instruct and delight. If Ekwensi's novels fail to achieve aesthetic beauty — and this is not absolute; his writing is very vigorous and his descriptions vivid and evocative — they nevertheless succeed in analysing seriously the moral and social problems which confront the Nigerian nation in its period of transition.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup>C. O. Ekwensi, *Beautiful Feathers* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, African Writers Series, 1963), p. 62. Subsequent page references are to this edition.
- <sup>2</sup>Margaret Laurence, *Long Drums and Canons* (London: Macmillan, 1968), p. 168.
- <sup>3</sup>Bruce King, ed., *Introduction to Nigerian Literature* (Lagos: Evans Brothers Limited, 1971), p. 77.
- <sup>4</sup>C. O. Ekwensi, *People of the City* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, African Writers Series, 1963), p. 20. Subsequent page references are to this edition.
- <sup>5</sup>Laurence, p. 148.
- <sup>6</sup>C. O. Ekwensi, *Jagua Nana* (London: Hutchinson, 1961), p. 103.