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NEWSLETTER ON THE BLACK EXPERIENCE

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The Black Experience

Jesse Taylor, Editor

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FROM THE EDITOR

Jesse Taylor, Editor

Appalachian State University

Leonard Harris, Book Review Editor

Purdue University

This issue of newsletter contains two articles with distinct, yet complementary analysis of African liberation venues. In the first article, Professor Jane Duran calls attention to what might be regarded as a myth about Oliver Cromwell Cox on the notion of the "Black Marxist." Duran argues (as she makes interesting use of a distinction between 'political' and 'social' groups) that Cox can be described at most, as a "weak Marxist." Professor Danysh, on the other hand, is concerned with political conditions that thwarts literary creativity. Her analysis aims to show that during a fifty-year dissipation of political suppression in East Africa, literary creativity has flourished progressively. As a kind of analogue to her position, Danysh provides a bibliography that shows growth in literary productivity along with the diminishment of political tyrannies.

ANNOUNCEMENT

The search for Editor of the *APA Newsletter on Philosophy and The Black Experience* continues. Interested persons should contact Bernard Boxill at brboxill@email.unc.edu.

ARTICLES

Oliver Cromwell Cox and Black Marxism

Jane Duran

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Oliver Cromwell Cox, American sociologist and race theoretician who was most active in the 1940's and 50's, has long been categorized under the rubric "Black Marxist."¹ Along with such thinkers as Amilcar Cabral, C.L.R. James, George Padmore, and to some extent W.E.B. DuBois and Richard Wright, Cox is often seen as belonging to that pantheon of thinkers who attempted to use Marxist theory to further analysis of the situation of the African diaspora in the New World.

If it is true that Cox is often seen in this light, some aspects of his work are puzzling, since a work such as *Caste, Class and Race* is Marxist only to a very limited degree, and in limited ways. Without advertence to his other work, such as the much-cited trilogy, it is more difficult to develop the case that Cox is a Marxist theoretician than might at first be thought.

In this paper I shall defend the thesis that the Cox of *Caste, Class and Race* is Marxist only in a weak sense, and that his socialist theorizing is not all of a piece in the sense that, say, James' is. Nevertheless, his work is intriguing, and an examination of his work remind us of the breadth and depth of twentieth century Black theory.

I

A difficulty for Black Marxists attempting to develop a theory that would be useful for those in the African diaspora has been the lack of allusion in Marx's own work to the situation of those in Africa, or those held in slavery, and the concomitant difficulties caused by the constant emphasis in the work of Marx and Engels on the importance of the proletariat. Phrasing it crudely, one might be tempted to say that it would be awkward enough to move past one area here, and it is indeed very difficult to theorize with the two obstacles facing the thinker simultaneously. Added to all of this is the fact, noted by many contemporary writers, that much of what Marx actually had to say about the Third World is overwhelmingly Eurocentric, and in some cases irrelevant to the plight of the Third World viewed in contemporary terms.²

Of the problems referred to in the preceding paragraph, perhaps the most pressing is the importance of the notion of

the proletariat in Marxist theory. It is clear that it is the proletariat that has a revolutionary role to play, and it is likewise clear that, since comparatively few Black workers have been employed in capacities of industrial labor until after the Second World War, Marxist theoreticians writing at an earlier period simply could not easily make the case that the Black worker had a revolutionary part to play. James, for one, gets around this development by trying to theorize that Black culture in itself is revolutionary.³

Thus Cox has quite a task set for himself in attempting to use Marxist theory to reply to the caste-minded sociologists of the 1940's and '50's who would have contended that Hindu society provided some kind of analog for the plight of Blacks in the United States. The extent to which Cox is able to respond to such theorists with economically-driven theory is in itself part of his response that is moved by Marxist conceptions.

The contemporary reader will encounter much to surprise as he reads *Caste* (as it will hereafter be called), especially since the Preface, for example, seems to imply that the work will be "Marxian," but at key portions in the text Cox falls short of giving the kind of positive Marxist analysis that one might ordinarily expect.⁴ In a chapter toward the end of the work entitled "The Race Problem in the United State," Cox sees little hope for the type of Negro leadership that will promote Black interests in a progressive kind of way, and actually undercuts those who might be inclined to think that such a leader is shortly to spring from the ranks. For example, he writes:

One of the most persistent laments among Negroes in the United States is that the race has no great leader. There is a sort of vague expectation that someday he will arise. But Negroes will not have a "great leader" because, in reality, they do not want him... This tentative nature of Negro solidarity presents a particularly baffling problem for the Negro leader... [J]ust at this point Negro leadership seems to be weakest.⁵

Yet this same Cox also has more than one chapter in this lengthy work that goes into some detail on the nature of the distinction between political and social classes, and how that distinction could work toward the disadvantaged in American society.

One might wonder, then, what the overall point of Cox's analysis is, given that he starts his work by telling us that it has a Marxist flavor, but given that it is also the case that much of the work seems to be dubious about the revolutionary or progressive potential of Negro citizenry, particularly in the South. Here we must indeed closely examine the notion of political class.

It must already be obvious that political and social classes are distinct phenomena. Social classes form a system of co-operating conceptual status entities; political classes, on the other hand, do not constitute a system at all, for they are antagonistic. The political class is a power group which tends to be organized for conflict; the social class is never organized, for it is a concept only. Although the political class is ordinarily weighted with persons from a special sector of the social-status gradient, it may include persons from every position... In other words, members of the political class ordinarily do not have a common social status.⁶

So, one might inquire rhetorically, what work does the concept "political class" do for Cox's theorizing that might show him a way out of what would appear to be a rather conservative position? The political class, on Cox's definition, drawn as it may very well be from a variety of social classes, can become a coalition of progressive or forward-looking persons who may themselves play a vanguard role. Thus a crucial point for Cox is that although Marx's use of the term "proletariat" would seem to preclude anyone's "joining" the proletariat, Cox's use, at least in *Caste*, is significantly different. Insofar as the "proletariat" is a political class notion, it may include the dispossessed, persons who are originally from a high bourgeois background, and so forth. As Cox later goes on to note, "[t]he idealism of political classes may override individual differences."⁷ Cox also later goes on to cite both Briefs and Sorokin in noting that, in practice Communists have regarded as a proletarian virtually anyone who has supported proletarian causes.⁸

Now Cox's overall argument against those who would attempt to provide an analysis of the place of Blacks in the South along the lines of the rigid caste structure of India makes more sense. Not only do Blacks in the South have more social class fluidity — it is apparent, as Cox notes throughout his work, that some wealthy Blacks will be well ahead of poverty-stricken whites on almost every scale⁹ — but it is entirely conceivable that they could, for political purposes, band together with a number of other individuals (including white workers normally classified as part of the "proletariat") and thus aim at progressive goals. A larger question for Cox seems to be whether he actually believes that Blacks in the South will do this.

II

In a chapter entitled "Facets of the Modern Political-Class Struggle,"¹⁰ Cox provides us with a hint about the way in which his analysis could go. There are, he indicates, labor movements and labor movements — there are unions, and there are unions. Looking back, he sees the radical labor movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the United States as having been bought off by larger, less progressive industrial organizations, such as the AFL.¹¹ But a proletarian core remains, he thinks, and this core has a potential for genuine revolutionary action. Once again, the distinction between the classical usage of the term proletariat and the use of the term to indicate a political group must be maintained. He writes:

The principal reason for the weak proletarian movement in the United States seems to lie in the strategy of a small but powerful group of workers themselves. Before the achievement of dominance of business unionism in American labor, the workers were repeatedly coming into conflict with the ruling class. Their natural condition of struggle was everywhere evident... We call the Knights of Labor a true workers' organization because it was interested in all workers. Business unionism is not interested in all workers, but only in those whose organization pays.¹²

Cox is at least theoretically interested in the possibility of a coalition across classes, and between racial groups, that might provide the impetus for radical activity. Cox is well aware of the potential of such coalitions, but the difficulty

with the text remains in ferreting out what Cox would deem to be the realistic basis for action. In a lengthy section in the chapter cited on Roosevelt and the force of the changes wrought by his administration, Cox notes that “It is a fact, however, that since the institutions of capitalism are mainly built about capitalists, the overthrow of the capitalists will, in a sense, overthrow the institutions also.”¹³ Yet Cox seems to retain only a moderate hope that radical awareness will increase to the requisite extent — in his analysis of Myrdal’s work, “a positive program” would seek to convert “the white masses to an appreciation and realization of the ruling-class function of the [dominant] beliefs and their effects as instruments in the exploitation of the white as well as of the black masses.”¹⁴

If Cox has an explanation for why it is that radical awareness and radical activity sometimes seem to be little more than dreams, it can probably be gleaned from the text as an overall belief in the cooptive nature of capitalism and in the belief that enemies of progress and democracy will attempt to fight back by any means, including pretending to be champions of progress.¹⁵ Cox realizes that the typical divide and conquer strategies of the bourgeoisie are frequently successful, and he appears to be less than hopeful about the long term chances of overcoming them, particularly given their historical entrenchedness. Nevertheless, Cox does articulate the possibility of a new vision for the masses, including Black and white workers.

III

It might be instructive at this point to make a brief comparison between the work of Cox as we have examined it, and that of C.L.R. James. In a piece called “The Revolutionary Answer to the Negro Problem in the United States,” James gives an analysis of the structure of Black American society that yields a more hopeful outcome, at least from the standpoint of radical activity, than that given by Cox.

Like other careful Marxist theorists, James was well aware of the difficulty of giving an account of the Black experience that would provide a springboard for revolutionary activity, since, as we have acknowledged, most Black workers were not technically part of the proletariat. But James has more than one response to this theoretical conundrum. On the one hand, in some of his longer pieces, James makes the analogy between a Leninist analysis of conditions in the Soviet Union that would allow for groups not industrialized to play a revolutionary role and similar conditions among Blacks in the United States. On the other hand, and perhaps more importantly, James allows for the notion that there is such a thing as a revolutionary culture, or a culture that is more susceptible to radical activity because it is at base non-bourgeois. James writes:

Let us not forget that in the Negro people, there sleep and are now awakening passions of a violence exceeding, perhaps, as far as these things can be compared, anything among the tremendous forces that capitalism has created. Anyone who knows them, who knows their history, is able to talk to them intimately, watches them at their own theaters, watches them at their dances, watches them in their churches, reads their press with a discerning eye, must recognize that although their social force may not be able to compare with the social force of a

corresponding number of organized workers, the hatred of bourgeois society and the readiness to destroy it should the opportunity present itself, rests among them to a greater degree than in any other section of the population in the United States.¹⁶

Here James takes a position that is opposed to Cox’s rather more careful one. While Cox claims that “Negroes will not have a ‘great leader’ because, in reality, they do not want him...,”¹⁷ James argues that revolutionary activity, or at least strongly non-bourgeois activity, is inherent in Black culture, and the notion of a leader does not come up.

Cox has reason for the claims that he makes — his sociological analysis is more empirical than is James’ theoretical and neo-Hegelian take on Marxist theory. Yet in one crucial area these theorists do agree; whatever it is that Black society does, the larger society will do everything in its power to try to destroy and disable.

IV

I have argued throughout this paper that we encounter a number of tensions and paradoxes when we apply the term “Marxist” to the thought of Oliver Cromwell Cox, at least insofar as it is manifested in *Caste, Class and Race*. The first part of my argument emphasized the extent to which Cox does indeed use economic categories in this work, but falls short of recognizing a revolutionary potential in the Black population of America, especially in the last chapter of the work, in which he sees little possibility of Black leadership. The second part of my argument provided some resuscitation for Cox, for we acknowledged that the most potent use of Marxist theory in the work comes from his employment of the distinction between political class and social class, and his acknowledgment that a political class can be forged across many lines, including social class lines. Although Cox does not explicitly say that the Black population could form an alliance with the white working class population to effect such a change, it is implicit in what he has written, and when we make this acknowledgment we are providing Cox with at least a minimally Marxist platform.

In the third part of my argument I contrasted Cox’s work in *Caste* with the work of C.L.R. James, particularly as it is shown in the relatively concise piece, “The Revolutionary Answer to the Negro Problem in the United States.” Here the milder and perhaps less straightforward analysis of Cox is pitted against the strong analysis of James. As we have seen, James is not left theoretically bereft by the type of social class membership the Black community of his day usually experienced — he took Black culture, in and of itself, and, in an argument reminiscent of some of Lenin’s arguments about the status of ethnic and other minorities within the Soviet Union, he showed how it is possible to think of the Black community as potentially radical.

Cox’s careful analysis is by no means without its value, for his accurate analysis merely reflected the difficulties of his time. During a period when organized labor often found itself infiltrated by those who would attempt to divert it to the right, Cox could not have felt particularly sanguine about radical alliances. The fact that he did take notice of the existence of political classes and of the work that they had achieved merits our full consideration.

Endnotes

1. Abraham and Samir, *Oliver Cromwell Cox*, New York: Morrow, 1989.
2. One thinks, for example, of the piece by Marx entitled “The British Rule in India.” Among authors currently writing, Tsenay Serequeberhan has noted the extent to which Marx is driven by a European worldview.
3. abSee James, C.L.R., “The Revolutionary Answer to the Negro Question in the United States,” in Grimshaw, ed.
4. abCox, Oliver Cromwell, *Caste, Class and Race*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1970. See p. xi of the Preface for an interesting use of the term “Marxian.”
5. *abIbid.*, pp. 572-573.
6. *abIbid.*, pp. 154-155.
7. *abIbid.*, p. 158.
8. *abIbid.*, pp.160-161.
9. abSee, for example, the chart on p. 491 in the chapter entitled “The Modern Caste School of Race Relations.”
10. *abIbid.*, pp. 174-221.
11. *abIbid.*, p. 205.
12. *abIbid.*, pp. 205-206.
13. *abIbid.*, p. 254.
14. *abIbid.*, p. 534.
15. *abIbid.*, p. 256.
16. abJames, in *op. cit.*, pp. 188-189.
17. abSee fn. 5.

“We Need All the Trees in the Forest, and Every Shrub”: Aesthetics of the Kenyan Novel Past and Present

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On June 20-25, 1971, the Literature Department of the University of Nairobi and the Writers’ Association of Kenya put on a Festival of East African Writing during which was held a Colloquium on Black Aesthetics. Personalities like Ali Mazrui, Grace Ogot, Pio Zirimu, Austin Bukonya, and Chris Wanjala were in attendance. The purpose of the colloquium was to identify the distinct nature of the East African Aesthetic, and the Black Aesthetic generally. Aesthetics have to do with concepts of beauty, and in this case, the qualities of African literature which are closely tied to issues of culture, social commitment, identity, pan-Africanism, and specific political postures. The participants were particularly anxious to champion an aesthetic which guarded against a greater influx of western cultural imperialism: “The black world has been invaded once, and it is continually being strafed with cultural missiles from the West. Is it not in order for the blacks to invent cultural missiles and anti-missile missiles too, as a measure of self-defense?”

The mood at this festival was clearly one of radical intellectualism, excitement, inspiration, and action behind words. Those were heady days. Now, exactly thirty years later, where has the East African Aesthetic arrived? Were these cultural missiles and anti-missile missiles invented, and did they hit their targets? What new roads have been taken, particularly by Kenyan aesthetics? A glance at the shelves of any Nairobi bookshop today would suggest that the Kenyan aesthetic has taken a radically different direction from that

envisioned 30 years ago. How did it get there and how do the people who remember those earlier days feel about it?

This paper contains two parts: first, a survey of the Kenyan novel based on books in print and on the shelves of representative Nairobi bookshops during the months of October 2000 and February 2001. An attempt has been made to classify the nature of these texts and analyze the trends in the overall picture created, decade by decade. The second part is an analysis of issues in Kenyan literary/aesthetic history, again focusing on the novel, as seen through the eyes of nine individuals in the fields of academia, publishing and creative writing. Interesting perspectives emerge which ruminate on the past, reveal conscious and unconscious assessments of the present, and perhaps most importantly, grapple with commitments for the future.

Survey of the Kenyan Novel

The 1960s

Not surprisingly, the Kenyan novel in print find its genesis in Ngugi wa Thiong’o and his first full-length work, *Weep Not, Child* (1964). In fact, he and Grace Ogot completely dominate the first decade of Kenyan novelistic literature, with two novels by Ngugi (*A Grain of Wheat*(1966) in addition to the above mentioned) and one by Ogot, *The Promised Land*(1966). Incidentally, Ogot competes with Flora Nwapa of Nigeria, who also published her first novel, *Efuru*, in the same year, as the first African woman novelist.

Both Ogot and Ngugi are writing serious as opposed to popular fiction. Ngugi’s is political/ideological whereas Ogot’s is sociocultural. Both also display typical characteristics of their gender aesthetic — Ngugi with politics of the public domain and Ogot with that of the private, focusing on social and familial issues.

The 1970s

Novels of the 1960s still in print and in the Kenyan bookshops, numbering only three, reflect the newness in Kenya of the genre, and contrast with those of the 1970s numbering approximately 24 still on the shelves today. Clearly, the novel boomed in the 70s. And the decade opened with a real explosion on to the scene with the first popular novel, a rather sensational one at that, Charles Mangua’s *Son of Woman*(1971). According to Wahome Mutahi, a well-known contemporary Kenyan novelist/playwright/columnist, Mangua’s book was a real inspiration in the sense that it was the Kenyan answer to the famous James Hadley novels of a racy, thrilling nature. While *Son of Woman* is not one of Mangua’s best-written novels, it nevertheless caught the notice of the African American scholar David Dorsey, who comments in his article “Prolegomena for Black Aesthetics” at the Black Aesthetics colloquium(1971) that the popular aesthetic may not be liked by intellectuals but *is* very popular and hence here to stay: “It is...fruitless for pundits to deplore a work like *Son of Woman* by Charles Mangua as un- or anti-African when a generation of young adult Africans are enthralled by it”(11).

Son of Woman(1971) thus opened the floodgates to such titles as *What a Life!*, *What a Husband!*, *The Love Root* (all by Mwangi Ruheni, 1972, 1973, 1976), *Lovers in the Sky*, and *When the Stars are Scattered* (both by Sam Kahiga, 1975, 1979). An early novel by a Kenyan woman, Rosemarie Owino, follows in the same vein with *Sugar Daddy’s Lover*(1975.)

One of Kenya's most famous novelists, Meja Mwangi, debuts with his well-known work *Kill Me Quick* (1973), closely followed by the equally well-known *Carcase for Hounds* (1974), and *Going Down River Road* (1976). It is difficult to clearly classify these works. Their style is somewhat popular and intended for a wide audience, and yet the stature of excellence brings these novels into the category of serious literature. One can however safely classify the two urban novels *Kill Me Quick* and *Going Down River Road* as social protest literature, thus more implicitly political than those of social critique, yet not as political as the ideological work of Ngugi. Mwangi's *Cockroach Dance* (1979) tends even closer to serious literature in its experimental narrative style and slow pace, though it does not necessarily rise to the same stature as the earlier works.

Mwangi Ruheni's *The Minister's Daughter* (1975) is the first to combine two strong aesthetic drives among Kenyans, for the popular form and some aspect of political content. Kenyan popular literature up till today focuses on politics in the bestseller's vein; exemplary titles include *Mayor in Prison* (Wandai, 1993) and *The Devil You Know* (Karauri, 1996). Ngugi has only one title commonly on the shelves today from the 70s: *Petals of Blood* (1977). Another serious though little-known work of this period is Muthoni Likimani's *They Shall be Chastised* (1974). By some estimations, this is the first title still on bookshop shelves which falls within the important category of a serious novel of social critique. By classifying it thus, one attempts to differentiate between the serious political/ideological work of Ngugi and the serious social protest literature of Mwangi which is not overtly political but significantly more harsh in its social criticism than the Likimani type.

Assessing the 1970s generally, one notes that the popular novel represents an overwhelming 80% of the Kenyan novelistic output. The figure of roughly 75-80% holds consistently for the past three decades. This probably has as much to do with readers' tastes as publishers' profits. The writers who make up the 20% category of serious literature in the 70s are Ngugi and Likimani quite definitely, Meja Mwangi, Ole Kulet and Dalid Mulwa, although again, it is difficult to draw a line. The great preponderance of popular literature in Kenya at this early stage is the most notable aspect of the 1970s. In addition, one notes that novels by women writers make up only approximately 10% of the titles.

The 1980s

The decade of the 1980s brings out Kenya's best-selling novel, *My Life in Crime* (1984) by John Kiriamiti. While this is by no means the first novel which deals with crime, it certainly is the first to start the craze for the category of popular crime novel. It has spawned such works as *The Bhang Syndicate* (1983), *Black Gold of Chepkube* (Geteria, 1985), *My Life with a Criminal, Son of Fate, Sinister Trophy* (all by Kiriamiti, 1989, 1994, 1999), *Life and Times of a Bank Robber* (Kimani, 1988), etc. Kiriamiti's novel partly owes its success to the fact that his story is quasi-autobiographical, was written while he was serving a thirteen year prison sentence, and came out even before he himself came out (of prison). Also, this sub-genre is related to another highly popular novel category which is the fictional and non-fictional prison novel.

The 1980s are also marked by two novels by Ngugi which were published in momentous years of Kenya's political history, more specifically, its history of political repression. *Devil on the Cross* (1982) comes out in the year of the failed Air Force coup, after which many were killed and many dozens if not hundreds were arrested. Political crackdowns after this time became the order of the day until a decade later with the advent of multi-party democracy. Ngugi's *Matigari* (1986) has a much more sensational story behind it than *Devil on the Cross*: coming out at the height of the crackdown on the clandestine Mwakenya movement (during which Wahome Mutahi among others was arrested, tortured and imprisoned), the novel itself, according to publisher Barrack Muluka, was confiscated off bookshelves by authorities, the offices of the publishers, now East African Education Publishers searched, and all materials connected to the novel destroyed.

Despite these dramatic political events however, or, indeed, probably because of them, the more tame popular novel grew in popularity and variety. The 80s saw experimentation with new subgenera of the same: the James Bond type of detective novel in the form of *Operation DXT* (David Maillu, 1986); *Mission to Gehenna* (Kang'ethe, 1989), a popular science fiction work; and Mwangi's *Weapon of Hunger* of the same year, a type of novelistic screenplay. While other works did not seem to follow in their footsteps, these novels testify to a healthy interest in innovation — although such innovation on the Kenyan scene actually imitated western aesthetics.

The late 1980s witness the advent of one of Kenya's best-known women writers, Marjorie Oludhe MacGoye. Her novel *Coming to Birth* (1987) and its follower in the same year, *Street Life*, fall within the category of social critique in the serious novel genre. MacGoye, who hails from Britain and came to the country as a missionary, subsequently marrying a Kenyan, is admired by a number of scholars, publishers and writers for her depictions of Kenyan life, mildly satiric style, and use of language, though some others see in these same aspects a British aesthetic that creates a distancing effect. Nevertheless, MacGoye has contributed prolifically to the genre of the serious novel in Kenya.

Another name worth noting in the 1980s is that of David Maillu, famed partly for a series of novels (*After 4:30, My Dear Bottle, and Unfit for Human Consumption*) deemed "morally corrupting," banned in Tanzania, out of print in Kenya, yet spoken of with affection by scholars, publishers and writers alike. These are the novels, along with some of Mangua's, which most of those interviewed for this paper confessed to reading under their desks or between classes at school. While it seems that nearly all read them, not all at the time held a high opinion of what they were apparently voraciously reading. Maillu has not confined himself to one genre however: according to one scholar, to prove to the critics that an African can write a serious novel of serious length, Maillu produced *The Broken Drum* (1991), advertised on its jacket as "the longest and greatest novel published in Africa up-to-date," numbering 1121 pages. Clearly Maillu was trying to announce, among other things, that he is not only a popular novelist, that he is a serious writer capable of producing serious fiction. While in some ways this work reads like a long popular novel, it is also full of history, culture and philosophical/social commentary — typical aesthetic

elements of the serious African novel. Maillu has actually founded his own Centre for African Aesthetics and has written across the spectrum of genres including in the areas of religion, sociology, even a handbook on advice about how to find the right marriage partner.

Yet another popular writer whose corpus stands out as unique is Henry Ole Kulet, a Maasai who writes intimately about Maasai people, Maasai culture and Maasai concerns. Ole Kulet has kept to the African aesthetic as regards content, concerning himself with African culture, community issues, moral questions etc., yet his style does not carry the artistic/experimental stamp of the serious novel. His opus, spanning the first years of the Kenyan novel, from 1972 with *Is it Possible?* to his most recent work, *Bandits of Kibi* (1999) evidences the dominance of the popular novel genre in Kenya in that his first work, a beautiful story of childhood and youth, carries all the promise of a career in the serious novel, yet *Bandits of Kibi* reveals that Ole Kulet decided to opt for the popular literature market, focusing on crime, romance and intrigue.

Another writer hitting the scene in the 80s who is still one of Kenya's most prolific writers is Yusuf Dawood, whose output spans from 1983 (*The Price of Living*) to his most recent in 2000 (*Return to Paradise*). Dawood's works have the distinguishing mark of following most closely the western popular aesthetic. While Kenyan popular novels tend to deal normally with the ordinary citizen and their romantic, social or criminal intrigues, Dawood's works add the popular western appeal of "lives of the rich and famous."

Even before MacGoye makes her debut in 1987, Patricia Wambui Ngurikie produces *I Will Be Your Substitute* in 1984, thereby launching a thus far relatively prolific career followed by *Soldier's Wife* in 1989 and *Tough Choices* in 1991, among others. Her works represent popular literature by a female author, following in the footsteps of the author of *Sugar Daddy's Lover* and leading the way for F. Genga Idowu, Monica Genja, and Wairimu Gitau. *Sugar Daddy's Lover* seems to be an exception however among Kenyan female-authored novels in its sensationalism; other Kenyan women are increasingly building a trend toward more serious, morally preoccupied works, even though aiming at the popular audience. Ngurikie seems to straddle the line between the typical male popular aesthetic and the female aesthetic witnessed in Ogot's *The Promised Land*.

Analyzing types of novels according to gender in Kenya in the 1980s, it appears that novels by male writers are about 80% popular, 20% serious, whereas females produced only 35% popular and 65% serious works.

The 1990s

The 90s show a number of interesting, even exciting trends in the Kenyan novel. Sam Kahiga's *Dedan Kimathi: The True Story* (1990) begins a new trend in the historical popular novel, particularly focusing on the Mau Mau Movement. (It is important to note, however, the popular treatment of this very serious Kenyan figure, revered by so many. One need only compare his novel to the play by Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Micere Mugo, *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, to grasp the difference between popular and serious literature.) Kahiga's work on the Mau Mau era is followed in the same vein by Mwangi Gicheru's *The Mixers* (1991), Mangua's *Kanina and I* (1994), *From Homeguard to MauMau* (1996), and the

successful new version of *Kanina and I, Kenyatta's Jiggers* (2000).

Colonial history is not the only history Kenyans have been taking a keen interest in lately: with the easing of controls on freedom of expression etc., Wahome Mutahi's *Three Days on the Cross*, about his experience of arrest and torture in 1986, cleared the way for veiled and not-so-veiled autobiographical works about torture and imprisonment suffered particularly during the Mwakenya years. For a reader unaware of Kenya's literary and political history, Wahome's novel reads with a disappointing abstractness in that it is not grounded in any African location but in an impossibly conglomerate country with character names taken from the Yoruba, the Kikuyu and others. However, anyone familiar with Kenya and Nairobi will recognize the setting and those who have heard the stories of people accused of Mwakenya activities will recognize a detailed and very accurate description of the Nyayo House torture chamber experience. Wahome states that when his work came out in 1991 people read it "under their desks" — this time desks of professionals not just students. Muluka at East African Education Publishers says they were all waiting at their offices half-expecting the police. People couldn't believe the work was not somehow clandestine, and Wahome relates that when he went to Canada for a conference around that time, some people thought perhaps he had fled the country.

This reaction was a far cry from the official fanfare that surrounded the launching in 1998 of Wanyiri Kihoro's *Never Say Die*, a detailed autobiography about the Nyayo House torture experience and subsequent imprisonment, a launch that took place at none other than Kenya's Parliament buildings and was attended by fellow Parliamentarians the likes of the Honorable James Orengo and some who spoke of their similar arrest and detention ordeals, including the Honorable Raila Odinga.

After the introduction of Mutahi's *Three Days*, the genres of fictional and autobiographical prison literature could not be stopped. Maina wa Kinyatti published his prison diaries, Koigi wa Wamwere released *A Dream of Freedom* (1997) and according to Wahome, others including the well-known MP Kiraitu Murungi are working on their autobiographies about these politically repressive, highly charged times.

An interesting aspect of this prison or prison/political literature is that while it may be non-fictional, popular literature dominates the Kenyan scene to such an extent that, for example, Benjamin Bundeh's *Birds of Kamiti* (1991), which even contains in its final chapters the entire transcript of his complicated court appeal against a murder charge, is packaged and marketed as a popular work lending the appeal of popular fiction.

Another interesting development in line with popular-fiction packaging of non-fiction is the trend in women's literature started by Esther Owuor's *My Life as a Paraplegic* (1995). One notes that the title is closely fashioned on the all-time bestseller, *My Life in Crime*. The similarity stops there however; Owuor's account is as moral as Kiriamiti's is immoral. Owuor tells the story of her life, focusing on the effects of a horrendous bus collision that left her severely injured and paralyzed for life. But the text is not only about a moving personal tragedy; it is also about her witnessing what God has done in her life, and indeed includes

a chapter on her personal Christian testimony. This is very much in line with the Kenyan moral ethics and increasingly, literary aesthetics.

Owour seems to have founded a new category in Kenya literature which could be termed, again ironically, the didactic popular novel, or more unusually, the didactic popular non-fiction. Two years after her novel there appears *Judy: A Second Chance, She Refused to Give Up*, by Judy Mbugua. *Judy* is another popular autobiography complete with pictures of her pastor and distinguished members of her Christian community. The growing evangelical movement in Kenya clearly drives this market demand, and women have found a niche in it.

The 90s also bring about an interesting milestone: Ngugi wa Thiong'o is no longer on the fictional scene. With his dropping out of the picture of contemporary fiction, so too does his category of literature: the political/ideological novel. In other words, Ngugi, the embodiment of the African literary aesthetic, the exemplar, turns out to be quite ironically the only author in Kenya of this most revered category of the African novel. Judging by his international reputation and the plethora of articles and books written about him, few can deny that he is held up at least implicitly as a standard by which others are measured, and yet no other Kenyan novelists have attempted to follow the aesthetic he laid down. This may be the case however due to reasons of political history, among others, and will be discussed below.

The author who seems to take Ngugi's place in terms of serious literature in the last decade is, quite aptly, Meja Mwangi. His two recent novels, *Striving for the Wind* (1990) and *The Last Plague* (2000) can be classified without doubt as serious literature of an international standard. Unlike the popular novelist who hardly experiments with language or narrative technique, whose aim is to produce above all an "easy read," Mwangi develops a style in *Striving for the Wind*, which he capitalizes on even more in *The Last Plague*, which carries the hallmarks of the serious writer: originality, subtlety, extreme skill and wit in language use, and brilliantly accurate portrayal of a society's spirit. Mwangi's message in both novels is quite serious, despite the heavy use of a unique style of humor.

All in all, the Kenyan novel in the last decade has blossomed into a variety of areas. For one, women's literature has been steadily rising: in the 70s, approximately one-tenth of published novels were by women. This figure rose to one-fifth in the 80s and one-fourth in the 90s. Women are writing in at least four novelistic modes: the popular novel of the traditional male aesthetic, the social critique novel of the serious literature variety, the popular novel of the female aesthetic, and the didactic popular non-fiction.

As previously mentioned, male writing has expanded into prison literature both fictional and autobiographical, has revived in the political arena, and has deepened in the area of serious literature with the works of Mwangi, Maillu, Joseph Situma and Okoth Okombo. Serious literature still remains at roughly 20%. However, while authors still prefer the western-originating popular aesthetic, Kenyan subject matter has remained homegrown: the Mau Mau phenomenon, pre-multiparty politics and oppression, evangelical Christianity and most recently, AIDS (see Adalla's *Confessions of an AIDS Victim* (1993), MacGoye's *Chira* (1997) and Mwangi's *The Last*

Plague (2000). In addition, Wahome Mutahi has tried to prove with his recent novel about the bombing of the American Embassy in Nairobi on August 8, 1998, *Doomsday* (1999), that current events can and should be made topics of popular literature.

Issues In Kenyan Literary/Aesthetic History

The Ngugi Phenomenon

Perhaps the first question one may ask concerning Kenya's novelistic history is why Ngugi's reputation seems to have dwarfed the rest of Kenyan literary output. And particularly one wishes to ask, since Ngugi is such a giant, where are his Kenyan followers? Did Ngugi spawn later generations of serious, committed writers in Kenya and if not, why not?

Most of those interviewed agree that Ngugi is simply unique in Kenya. Okoth Okombo, university lecturer and author of *The Cannibals*, describes him as "a public hero because of his politics." There have been other good, even excellent writers, but no other heroes. Henry Chakava, CEO of East African Educational Publishers, the publishing house responsible for printing the vast majority of Kenyan novels, agrees that no novelist followed Ngugi on that same level of commitment and adherence to ideology.

Some scholars point out that Ngugi's fame is partially due to the process, one may even say accidents, of canon formation. The early African novelists had a decided advantage over more recent ones. A certain courage and boldness, a degree in Britain, and a commitment to political issues brought names like Achebe, Soyinka and Ngugi to the fore in those early days and kept them there. It may not be that their works to such a degree are so qualitatively superior to other authors, but rather than the role of politics (content issues) in canon formation and the relative importance of pioneers has raised their reputations to great heights.

Effects of Political Repression

The most obvious reason Ngugi has no clear descendants among Kenyan novelists is the direct result of political repression. Ngugi's detention in 1977 due to his production of the play *I Will Marry When I Want* seems to have started the literary world's crumbling, and his self-exile in 1982 after the launching of *Devil on the Cross* coincides with the historical moment which Wanjiku Matejwa has called "the end of the world as we knew it." Just as Kenya is today in the throes of the political succession of Moi and experiencing violations of freedom of expression to a degree unprecedented in recent times, so in the late 70s the political atmosphere after Kenyatta's demise began to wither and strangle the Kenyan creative spirit. One interviewee states,

We lost contact with ourselves around 1978/79 after Kamiirithi [the venue of the open air performances of Ngugi's *I Will Marry*]. Before that, people were reading their poetry in the common rooms, composing music, singing etc.. But the policies of the ministries at the time became very repressive. They began to read politics into everything. Some plays that were published at the time that were good enough even for the schools would be banned for reasons that were not clear. School festivals, where children expressed themselves, were reduced to nothing. You were told what you must write, that it must be in praise of your country, and that it must

express peace, love and unity, [the key phrases of Moi and his party at that time].

This censorship no doubt contributed to the dormancy of Ngugi's style of politically committed literature (except for what Ngugi himself dared produce), or indeed any literature of that sort, in the decade of the 80s which was characterized by "very real fear" and at which time, many agree, authors practiced a good deal of self-censorship. As Sam Mbure, a poet, publisher and childhood friend of Ngugi, states, a number of writers must have asked themselves, "I'm burning to write, but what can I write?" He feels that popular literature filled this gap, as many wanted to write something at least. Other important figures besides Ngugi, like Micere Mugo, went into self-exile; some would say the brain drain still continues today with Imbuga gone to Rwanda. Henry Chakava reminds us that next year will be 20 years since Ngugi left and his absence has been very much felt; the encouragement he could have given young writers has irreparably changed the course of Kenyan literature.

But before the silencing of Ngugi's type in the 80s, and although Ngugi did not share his mantle of greatness with any of his contemporary novelists in the 70s, that decade in Kenya was clearly a time of tremendous literary creativity in all areas. The spirit of the 1971 University of Nairobi conference on Black Aesthetics was alive and thriving. All those interviewed, regardless of political leanings, spoke of a time when literary, scholarly, and other creative activity was funded, encouraged, and supported by the public, writers themselves, universities, NGOs and other donors as well as the government. People like Pio Zirimu, Austin Bukonya, Edward Brathwaite, Taban lo Liyong, Okot p'Bitek, John Ruganda, and so many other writers from within and outside Kenya came to Nairobi and participated in the flowering of oratory, the change in the university curriculum toward African literature, an outpouring of poetic and dramatic endeavor. Journals were funded, readings were put on, productions were staged. No one is suggesting that money was plentiful, but all agree that the enthusiasm of the time coupled with the will and ability to procure the necessary funds produced a decade of Kenyan literary history of which the majority of intellectual Kenyans are proud. From today's vantage, Ngugi may appear as the lone star of that time, especially where the novel is concerned, but looking back on Kenyans' memories, he was in brilliant company and there was enough literary activity to suit everyone's tastes.

Descendants of Ngugi: The Protest Aesthetic Metamorphosed

Although one can conclude that the 80s, with the '82 attempted coup and the Mwakenya crackdown around '86, produced fear and silence among those who may have wished to follow in Ngugi's footsteps, the 90s, some argue, have revived his subject matter, if not his form and spirit. While Mbure, acknowledging the new-found freedom of the post-1992 multi-party era, asks "have writers yet embraced that freedom to write?", Wahome Mutahi, the greatest disciple of Ngugi albeit as a metamorphosed version of the popular type, emphatically states that "since 1993 there has been a profusion of big things coming out," that there has been a return of the political. His 1991 novel *Three Days on the Cross*, about his experience in Nyayo House torture chambers, without doubt opened up the political space for the fiction

and non-fiction of writers and dissidents like Koigi wa Wamwere, Maina wa Kinyatti, and Wanyiri Kihoro.

While Koigi's *Dream of Freedom* (1997) is a novel, other works by lesser known personalities are the non-fictional accounts of repression and torture which, like a pus-filled sore, must burst out in its rawness as unvarnished truth, before a more refined version, the imaginative, fictive form, is born. Noting that it is only now that Ugandans are starting to write about the Idi Amin years, Henry Chakava suggests that there is often a "drag time" of this length before creative writers take up an important theme in their country's history. He is borne witness by the relative outpouring of Mau Mau literature in the last decade or two.

Thus, in recent years, Ngugi's "children," though they may not see themselves as such, have crawled out from underneath the rocks of repression to produce prison literature, political autobiographies, diaries of detention, and political plays. Wahome Mutahi, the well-known and well-loved columnist, reporter, satirist, playwright, novelist, and soon-to-be children's author and script writer deserves mention as someone who has utterly eschewed Ngugi's serious, didactic style but has expressed the same courageous commitment to politics in sending a message through the creative arts. After the political/literary breakthrough of *Three Days on the Cross*, Wahome once again dared the establishment by producing in 1995 his first play in Kikuyu, his mother tongue, a play with political/satirical overtones called "Mugathe Mubogo." He recounts how audiences were at first scared and would rush away the moment the play ended, or turn their heads each time the door opened, whereas now they are critical, suggesting that he is not clear or forthright enough. Indeed, a significant development on the literary/creative arts scene occurred this month when he was awarded the first prize in the Mbalamwezi Awards in theatre for his play *Jomo Kenyatta the Man*. This is further proof that in contrast to the 80s when in Wahome's words, drama suffered a big blow and engaged mainly in the recycling of love stories and comedies, the African aesthetic of emphasis on politics and commitment may be reviving on the Kenyan scene.

Kenyan Popular Literature: The Controversial, Immense Beast

For those who would be wary of a revival of political literature, who feel, as one interviewee put it, that "serious literature equals politics is a false equation," there is welcome relief in the extreme popularity in Kenya of the popular novel. But feelings about popular literature are quite mixed.

Wahome Mutahi readily agrees that he was inspired by the first popular writers and "read them (among others) voraciously," despite some of their works being banned. Henry Indangasi, professor of literature and long-time chair of the Literature Department at the University of Nairobi, admits that he enjoyed Mangua's *Son of Woman* and "is not embarrassed to teach popular literature." He regularly teaches Omondi Mak'Oloo's *Times Beyond* to first-year students and says that the book is "about love, sex, racism, and young people. It is relevant; a beautiful love story well-told. All the students buy it and enjoy it very much. It is the *only* novel which they *all* buy," — a strong statement in our cash-poor times. According to Indangasi, "What is dismissed as popular literature in Kenya has something to say about

Kenyan literature, life, tastes and values. It says something that serious literature *doesn't* say.”

Other scholars commented that when Mangua first appeared in the early 70s, and later Maillu, they were “alienated, outsiders at the time.” The ideology of popular literature is seen by some as “quite prohibitive” and “the product of cynicism and relaxation of standards on the part of publishers and booksellers.” One interviewee terms these works “pornographic art that sold like hot cakes. Some of them were short tracts you could read on the bus and practically finish before you got home.”

Okoth Okombo, a professor of linguistics and novelist in his own right who defies the popular/serious literature division, states that it is a pity that there are supposedly two kinds of literature (and one wonders if this is not only an erroneous division, but a western one). He asks,

Is literature popular because the masses love it? Or because they don't need a professor to explain it? Is obscurity the same as seriousness? Is serious literature the scholar's idea in order to justify his expertise, his place in society? This need not be. There need not be a distinction between what the people read and what scholars read. The difference could be that good literature will have several layers — a layer for the street reader and another layer for the professor.

He goes on to state that Okot p'Bitek wrote for everybody and that everyone chooses the level in his poem that they like. About his own novel *The Cannibals*, he says that “it was written for everyone who can read English. It is also about everybody. The theories and understanding of the professor and the village woman in the novel are to be perceived as equally valid.” Yet there is a distinction to be made between the “popular” literature which follows the western formula of action-packed thriller and the “popular” style of, for example Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *I Will Marry When I Want*, which was written in Kikuyu and staged to make an impact on the local population. This is the kind of literature Okombo speaks of which has deep African roots rather than western ones.

Nevertheless, the debate about western-style popular literature rages on. Mathew Buyu, long-time lecturer at Egerton University and now of the United States International University - Africa, states that, quite frankly, the generation of Kenyans born in the 70s and 80s, if asked whether they prefer to take along on holiday a novel by Sidney Sheldon or T.M. Aluko, will almost certainly choose Sheldon. According to Buyu, the ordinary reader will respond to literature for two (opposing) reasons: to exit from reality and to be graphically engaged in it. In other words, the foreign, exotic paperback and some Kenyan novels will satisfy the urge to escape, and other Kenyan novels about local life, realistically portrayed and accessibly written will draw the readers who wish for graphic engagement. Buyu states,

I would rather see 10,000 readers reading ordinary books than 50 people reading well-written books. Writers of the 60s had well-educated but few readers. Current writers are functioning much closer to readers' sensibilities. They have a much stronger constituency now. Before literature was for the

corridors of the university; now it is for the megaphone... Kenyans will find their aesthetic level.

Publishers are quick to defend popular literature, perhaps since they are the ones who agreed to “deliver the baby” in the first place and because they have found that the majority of their “offspring” fall into this category. Chakava narrates how he first worked for Heinemann, recommending novels to London for the African Writers' Series: “I would turn down some because they were not serious, didactic, were lacking commitment. But at some point I thought, ‘Must I always learn? Is this the only yardstick?’” So in 1974 he started Spear Books, the popular literature collection which EAEP, formerly Heinemann, has been publishing since. Chakava adds that, “none of the Spear Books are out of print, though they sell slowly.”

Barrack Muluka, second-in-command at EAEP, also strongly defends the popular novel's place in the literary arena: “The message [in popular literature] is brought home without being too sedulous. It should be acknowledged that not all men and women are cast in the same mold. If the overall social function of literature is to educate, why can't I also be entertained as I go about getting educated?” He argues, “Even if Maillu's work is prurient, it still has a redeeming contextual value; it still has social significance.” Muluka ends with a strong argument:

We are doing our best. School books bring in money; this is used in other areas. It takes a long time to move a serious work. It takes two years or even three to sell out. For example, Wanyiri Kihoro's *Never Say Die* (1998) has sold to date 971 copies of the 2000, so now we have broken even. And this is not to mention overhead and marketing. If these were included, it would take the sale of 1400 copies to break even. But most printers are paid within 30 days... We see ourselves as having a social role to play. Otherwise we would publish only school books. We are the middle house between the stock exchange and the cathedral.

It is abundantly clear that Kenyan readers enjoy and will buy popular literature, and thus Kenyan writers will write much more of it. But what is its quality?

Contemporary Literature Adequately Assessed?

Interviews with writers, scholars, and publishers alike suggest that, a) scholars have thus far refused to assess popular literature adequately, b) publishers assess when they publish for consumers and thereafter obviously refuse to be critical, and c) writers hold their own personal assessments and have little time to come together for agreement. Since the waters of contemporary literature are by nature murky, jumbling “the good, the bad and the ugly,” it would appear that Kenyan scholars may need to delve more deeply into the assessment of Kenyan novels of the last two decades to begin the process of canonisation for the new generation. Indangasi points out that as an external examiner, he frequently queries lecturers as to why they are still teaching mainly the same works they were taught. He insists that the tools learned in literary evaluation must be applied to fresher texts. Chakava inadvertently concurs with Indangasi by stating that people seem to love the early Ngugi (*Weep Not, Child, Grain of Wheat*, and *The River Between*) more than the later works; however,

what a publisher construes as like ability may rather be a matter of teachability. But both comments suggest that the “tried and true” are being worn threadbare at the expense of the new.

Scholars lament justifiably that there is precious little money these days for assessing literature through proper scholarship. Journals from the past have folded up due to lack of funds. However, Nigeria is a case in point: though having the same economic problems as Kenya and the same money-starved universities, there is a tradition of literary conferences and publications which does thrive however modestly. KOLA (Kenya Oral Literature Association) does exist and hold conferences, yet one asks where is its counterpart in written literature. Wanjala acknowledges that this forum is missing in Kenya, being catered for by occasional publications and meetings only. Even KOLA has made repeated attempts to schedule a conference this year but each time is disappointed due to lack of funds. Nevertheless, writers beyond the Ngugi era will receive their due only when scholars and society revive their commitment to shedding a spotlight on newer literature.

Literary Aesthetics and Structural Adjustment

Interview after interview painted a picture of the stark contrast between what used to happen in the past in Kenya’s literary scene and what happens today — precious little. It became clear that politics could not be answerable for all of the problems, and that while corruption has caused much of Kenya’s economic down slide, the World Bank, IMF and Structural Adjustment have also played their role. Some refer to the drying up of funds for literature as donor fatigue, but this is forgetting that in the 70s a good deal was accomplished in Kenya through local, not foreign funds. Wanjala speaks of the occasion in 1974 when Edward Brathwaite was invited as a guest to Nairobi by no less than the Nairobi City Council, an entity that is quite famous today for being utterly broke, terribly corrupt and completely ineffectual. Universities at that time also were able to sponsor events and publish journals. As Henry Chakava puts it, there is no question that the global economic order is affecting the writer’s world: “You hear at lunch that Standard Chartered Bank is retrenching half its staff. This means no jobs, no food, but an efficient bank. This should make the shareholders happy. But where are they? In London. Kenya becomes more impoverished.” When business is affected, there is no difference between books and banks.

Are Publishers the Priests of Literary Aesthetics?

When discussing the ills of the literary creative world, there is a great deal of finger pointing, and many fingers, obviously of scholars and writers, point at the publisher. Publishers are accused of lowering their standards of good literature, of not publishing serious literature because “it doesn’t sell,” of devoting themselves to primary and secondary school texts because they do sell, and generally, of influencing writers and readers towards what is normally popular and away from the creative products of the truly inspired and imaginative writer. Are publishers unduly influencing literary aesthetics with an eye toward profit rather than quality?

Most of those scholars having no quarrel with popular literature also have no quarrel with the publishers. An exception here is the writer: writers in a depressed economy will no doubt always have quarrels with publishers. Wahome

Mutahi remembers the days when his publisher would call him to check in with him, to suggest a new idea or ask what he’d been writing. He gives much credit to lecturers and publishers who gave him help and practical guidance, encouraging him to try this or that until he gained the confidence to become the multi-faceted writer he is today. He states, “Publishers use to inspire authors, to nurture a work. They worked with us; they commissioned and developed the writings.” He gives Henry Chakava the credit for inspiring Wahome’s bestseller, *How to be a Kenyan*. He states that this commitment has lessened; although he does add that at some publishing houses one works with the editor from beginning to end, implying that the managing director allows a certain freedom that may not have been there before.

Wanjiku Matenjwa, dissatisfied that women’s creativity finds little encouragement and support, dreamt of starting her own press, and now has formed Amka, an organization which has published some work by women and among other things hosts gatherings at which women read their works for constructive criticism and discussion. She agrees with others in the perception that publishers are not doing enough to encourage and support creative writing. Sam Mbure, who is both a creative writer and a publisher, admits that publishers do indeed publish mainly that which the Ministry of Education will recommend, and that donors also have gotten involved in partial funding in aid of state-recommended texts. For secondary schools and universities, again, the books are targeted for set books, those which teachers/lecturers will be requiring their students to buy. Clearly, this is where the money is. According to one respondent, “They are looking for materials for schools and by so doing, they are killing creativity.” Even well-published authors express the wish that publishers plow a bit more of their schooltexts-earned money into creative works.

The publisher’s argument is that they never refuse to publish any high-quality work for financial reasons. They therefore suggest that if there is a shortage of “serious literature” it is the writers who are not writing it, or are not writing it of a sufficient quality. However, Mbure cites a case at Oxford University Press in which a collection of poetry by a well-known Kenyan author was published and sold so poorly that they were forced in the end to give away copies to schools. And publishers admit, as stated earlier, that even popular literature sells slowly.

Undoubtedly, the problem of a shortage of creative, original literature hasn’t one, but many, sources. There is a vicious cycle involving cash-strapped writers, readers and publishers. And this same issue of lack of money may seem to account for the reason why the Kenyan novel is 80% popular, i.e. mostly light reading which suits the moment but will not gain an international reputation. Recently, the message was given loud and clear that there is a problem in Kenya somewhere: in 1999, no work submitted for the Jomo Kenyatta award for literature was considered up to standards and therefore the prize was not given. Henry Chakava feels that for a national prize to be successful, there should be encouragement of writing at the grassroots level so that there are provincial and regional prizes for writing which will stimulate a truly excellent crop of works for the final selection. Yet it still seems that popular literature is encouraged more than serious.

One can only conclude that Kenya's political and economic history has led it to its current literary state in which publishers do have an undue influence over the literary aesthetic, for better or for worse. According to Chakava, EAEP is a leader in the African world of publishing. This suggests that Kenyan publishers wield much power and can influence literary taste and aesthetics. The power at the moment is not in the hands of scholars due to politics and drain, nor in the hands of the informal writer/audience relationship which has also suffered deadening shocks due to political repression. And Chakava admits that in the last four or five years even the publishing industry has felt the impact of the global economic factor. But since the scholar and writer have been negatively impacted for much longer than that, there is the implication that as the strongest factor of the equation, the publishing industry is well-placed to help bring about a renaissance of the serious or experimental creative world in Kenya.

Reconciling Ideals of Aesthetic Beauty Past and Present

The presenters of the 1971 conference on Black Aesthetics had their conception of beauty which differs markedly from what we see on the bookshop shelves today. They saw ideological manifestos where we see the urban crime novel. They saw the flowering of African traditional beauty made new; we see the western ideals of beauty Africanized. If they could travel through time and space, skipping over 30 years in a flash to get a sense of contrast, would they be pleased or disappointed?

First of all, it would help if we strip away myths about the past. Canon formation tells us that Ngugi and Ogot wrote the first Kenyan in the late 60s still in print today. Barely five years later, Mangua came on the scene with *Son of Woman*, and repression or no repression, the western aesthetic, the literature lacking commitment and a message, flowered like a weed. In other words, that aesthetic was always there waiting to find expression. The colonization, and one may say brutalization, of Kenya, was so thorough, as was the cultural imperialism that came along with it, that it is no wonder a taste existed for the western, non-serious aesthetic; it had originated long before when the British brought trousers, skirts, jackets and hats, which also "sold" like hot cakes. This is why the intellectuals of the 60s were talking about "anti-missile missiles" in the first place — because of the plethora of cultural missiles which had already found their targets.

So the picture of the African aesthetic in the 1960s, which we still teach in the classroom today in fact, was not exactly accurate then as it is not now. It was the vision and taste of we the elites, the intellectuals, the idealists, who take the portion of beauty we like and see it as the whole, and dream of more such beauty to come. One of these admirable idealists is Okoth Okombo who, despite his ideals, admits that not everyone believed in this project of idealised self-definition and the need to proclaim it, as witnessed by the famous statement of Wole Soyinka that the tiger need not proclaim his tigrity.

For every reader at that time of *Weep Not Child*, there were ten readers of James Hadley's thriller novels, as there are ten today for Sidney Sheldon. So the western aesthetic has been part of the Kenyan aesthetic since the written literary

aesthetic began; the notion that the African literary aesthetic equated with the Ngugi/Achebe style is only a partial truth.

But to what extent are the Kenyan elite disappointed? Matthew Buyu, quoting the well-known remark by Taban lo Liyong some years ago that East Africa, thus Kenya, is a "literary desert" asks "Where was the forest that vanished? There are far more writers now than in the 60s and early 70s. In that era, one couldn't go beyond Ngugi, Ogot, Mwangi, and early Imbuga; and that exhausts that." He adds that today's writers are not well-known and that it was much easier then to "rule supreme." And if we consider the fact that to this day scholars and lecturers in Kenya are still concentrating on Ngugi and Imbuga, Buyu's argument that we have not given newer writers their due would not be far wrong.

As for the element of traditional African culture imbuing the style and content of Kenyan literature, Okombo, for his part, does not see that that aesthetic ideal actually came to fruition, with the exception of Okot p'Bitek's popular *Song of Lawino*. Chris Wanjala from the scholar's view and Henry Chakava from the publisher's would attest to a rather different perspective: that there was indeed a flowering of effort to collect and publish traditional literature in local languages as well as to translate such literary creations into modern form. This strand of the Kenyan aesthetic did not however have such an impact as to affect the novel greatly, which admittedly is a highly western form in the first place and thus less malleable in the hands of African stylistic techniques.

Matenjwa also comments concerning oral/traditional elements that, particularly today when African culture has become even more westernized, "if you have it, fine; if you don't, don't force it. You could borrow all and it wouldn't work." Matenjwa, like so many other Kenyan scholars/writers of her generation, sees herself differently today than in her youth in the 60s and 70s:

I was more intolerant before, but not so now. One can be too dogmatic when one is "committed." ...I had wanted to write my dissertation then on the popular writers and how they didn't live up to serious literature. But now I feel we need all the trees in the forest, and every shrub. Protest is important, but we must encourage all forms of literature.

Buyu also feels that times have changed:

As for cultural rehabilitation, the battle is being lost, undoubtedly. All that national cultural movement was very good then and is very good now, but can it be won is a different question completely. Trying to convert a child raised on color t.v. and chips is not easy. Maize can't compete with McDonalds. And even adults have double standards: they consider it politically correct to prefer African culture, but they feed the family on western values and artifacts. Also, the feminist movement has changed our view: what one worshiped as culturally correct was for the minority. In the Ngugi/Achebe era one wrote a novel with a strong male at the centre, in a largely masculine world. One can't write a book like Achebe now and expect applause.

But instead of focusing on disappointment, Kenyans are mainly looking at the positive aspects of their aesthetic, and again, facing realities about past and present:

There was a good reason then for Black Aesthetics: we spoke of Negritude, “Black is Beautiful,” and wanted to compare with the west. We felt, naively, that our moral values were superior and our cultural values as well. Now things are different; East African literature is different; it is more inward-looking. The Kenyan writer is addressing the Kenyan reader. In those early days, the 60s, Ngugi, Soyinka and Achebe were addressing former colonial masters with pride and disdain. They were describing Africa to outsiders, to American and European readers... you feel Achebe is describing Africa to outsiders as if Igbos won't read his novel. With all its weaknesses, Kenyan literature is targeted at Kenyans, first and foremost. Now we can talk to ourselves.

At the same time that Indangasi proudly states that Kenyans are addressing their own audience now, he tempers this thought with the assertion that while Kenyans write for their own, their exposure in terms of reading has become far too limited. There has not been the necessary mastery of the medium, says Indangasi, there is too much wholesale borrowing from the west. There is not the command of English associated with Achebe and Soyinka, and the originality associated with Okot and Ngugi. Muluka agrees, yet feels some blame lies with Ngugi for this:

If you are going to produce good literature, you should rub shoulders with good literature. Style subliminally comes from reading other great writers. Ngugi did not read African literature; he read Lawrence, Eliot, Conrad. Cyprian Ekwensi was most influenced by Tolstoy. So Ngugi condemns western literature, said the syllabus should be completely African, yet xenophobia is destructive. We should consider a universal human commonwealth, go beyond the color bar and parochial nationalism.

In fact, although EAEP publishes novels of East Africa generally, Chakava mentions that he doesn't see novels from Nigeria, which suggests that let alone influence from Europe or America, Africa is not adequately in touch with its own literature. The inspiration Africans could gain from exposure to each other's works could be phenomenal if the opportunity were there.

Is the Kenyan aesthetic, because it is more westernized, somehow less Kenyan now than when Ngugi wrote? Is it culturally alienated? According to Chakava: “In terms of aesthetics, we haven't lost much. Everything I read is actually Kenyan. No one is pretending. Whether in English or other languages, our literature does have a character.” And what is that character? What is the Kenyan character today? Going back to the clothes analogy, in literature as in life, Kenyans have borrowed outer forms, some of them wholesale, but maintain within, in a very intense way, their own concerns. The Kenyan novel follows closely the original western form, and due to the prevalence of the popular subgenre, the themes such as crime and intrigue are also derivative, as are various other aspects of narrative technique and style. But the subject matter, the directions these themes have taken, the variations on the “true-life motif” are Kenyan to the point that one could say the western form is merely a bottle into which is poured 100% Kenyan content, although that content is itself a complex blend of western-influenced modernity

and African tradition. Yet unadulterated traditional African aesthetics do emerge at times. We witness Owuor's *My Life as a Paraplegic* and other autobiographical novels with a highly didactic style and purpose. In other words, the African ideal that art must be useful, must teach a lesson, even quite directly, is still alive. Also, the emphasis on crime, prison, and local politics in the literature is nothing if not Kenyan: it reflects the everyday preoccupations of the citizens, as the newspapers attest.

Celebrating the Best of New Literature

There is arguably one Kenyan writer writing today who holds and richly deserves international repute, not to mention greater repute in Kenya. That author is Meja Mwangi. Although Mwangi has experimented with some literary styles and novelistic approaches which have been less successful, his best works arguably tower over the rest of Kenyan fiction, including at times and in some aspects those of Ngugi. His early works, *Kill Me Quick*, *Carcase for Hounds* and *Going Down River Road* have received much acclaim while his most recent novels, *Striving for the Wind* and *The Last Plague* exhibit unmistakable literary genius and deserve far more attention than they have received.

With the exception of one scholar who found Mwangi's work uneven and derivative, other scholars and writers interviewed had only respect and praise for him. While seeming to greatly admire Ngugi and miss “the big, heroic figure” on the scene of Kenyan literature, Okoth Okombo speaks most eloquently of Mwangi's art, even in comparison to his hero, Ngugi:

Mwangi is very receptive, very sharp in seeing the small man's tragedy in the small man's setting, though never dealing with “the big world” Ngugi dealt with. Mwangi as a writer got very close to the real situation, the “small” person's way of perceiving. Ngugi's small person was idealized. Ngugi gave him ideas he didn't understand. He worked to turn the small person into a philosopher that expressed Marxist ideas. As a keen observer of human nature, Mwangi made you feel an experience directly.

Fellow writers particularly have praise for Meja Mwangi, such as Mbure, who sees him as a great satirical writer, comfortable with his own style. Wahome also describes some of his early works as fantastic; Chakava the publisher praises him as a writer of great repute.

Towards the Future: Great Plans Underfoot

In considering the issue of literary aesthetics and its future in Kenya, one individual after another told of concerns, efforts and plans. Chris Wanjala is putting in concerted effort to start a Centre for Creative and Performing Arts at Egerton. And given the greater freedom of expression today, writers are beginning to wake up, or at least urging each other to do so. Sam Mbure, as president of the local chapter of PEN, hosted a delegation in February of the international secretariat. The government has refused to register the local chapter however, and Mbure feels that young people with more time and energy to get involved are needed, with fresh ideas and fresh names that won't draw instant political bias. Mbure was the former chair for some years in the late 80s, early 90s of WAK (Writer's Association of Kenya) until literary activities which were

branded political ousted him from an organization which today is still splintered and relatively dormant.

In the same breath that writers, publishers and scholars comment on greater freedom of expression in the last decade, they are also quick to cite evidence that the barriers are not entirely cleared. Wahome asserts that whereas the past is filled with anecdotes of government interference, today the censorship, particularly in journalism, is largely self-imposed, “Fear is institutionalized now. What will State House think? Management also has its specific interests.” This is the same fear that operates in the west, fear of losing advertisers, hence losing profits. Cues are still taken from the politicians, according to Wahome, though indirectly. Mbure comments on the recent spate of arrests and beatings in this pre-election era and comments, “we’re heading somewhere, but we’re not there yet.”

Various individuals spoke of conferences which are in the works. Mbure mentioned the new writing contest by MacMillan publishers for new unpublished writers in various categories. “This is the kind of thing we need,” he states, “Activities geared toward new works, new people.” This is precisely what Amka is doing as well, under Matejwa and associates, in inspiring new female writers, giving them space for creativity. The English Department of the Catholic University of Eastern Africa in Nairobi is instituting a diploma course in creative writing and publishing studies which it hopes to transform into a degree course. In addition, established writers are craving each other’s inspiration and input. Many lamented that Meja Mwangi is remote and commented how young writers could benefit from contact with him. Wahome spoke of disappointment that his own plays in Kikuyu have not inspired others to create similarly in their own languages; he is clearly hoping to give the inspiration that he received from others.

One exciting developments is the work Henry Chakava and others have taken up in the new National Development Council of Kenya, an NGO promoting development through reading and writing through actors in the book industry. The council consists of ten members including publishers, writers, booksellers, librarians, printers and is looking for representatives from every field including teachers, university groups, reading associations, etc. They will be organizing bookweek celebrations, writing and reading competitions, and various activities at the grassroots level. Though Chakava’s is an older and much respected name on the literary scene, he seems to have plenty of energy and time to promote Kenyan literature, seeing it for what it should be: evidence of an educated people with hope and imagination invested in their future. He says of the Kenyan creative spirit that was largely stifled in recent decades,

It’s coming back. Even in the newspapers, people are more often saying what they feel. The creativity will continue. Maybe people won’t have the funds every time to express themselves in books. But that spirit is coming back. I think when it comes back, the money will follow. I assure you.

We welcome that assurance, Mr. Chakava.

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Kenyan Novels in Print*

Early 60s

Weep Not, Child, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, 1964

Late 60s

The Promised Land, Grace Ogot, 1966
A Grain of Wheat, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, 1966

Early 1970s

Son of Woman, Charles Mangua, 1971
Is it Possible?, H. Ole Kulet, 1971
What a Life!, Mwangi Ruheni, 1972
Tail in the Mouth, Charles Mangua, 1972
To Become a Man, H. Ole Kulet, 1972
What a Husband!, Mwangi Ruheni, 1973
Future Leaders, Mwangi Ruheni, 1973
Kill Me Quick, Meja Mwangi
They Shall Be Chastised, Muthoni Likimani, 1974
Carcase for Hounds, Meja Mwangi, 1974
Sugar Daddy’s Lover, Rosemarie Owino, 1975
The Mystery Smugglers, Mwangi Ruheni, 1975
The Minister’s Daughter, Mwangi Ruheni, 1975
Lovers in the Sky, Sam Kahiga, 1975

Late 1970s

Going Down River Road, Meja Mwangi, 1976
The Love Root, Mwangi Ruheni, 1976
A Brief Assignment, Ayub Ndii, 1976
Petals of Blood, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, 1977
No Strings Attached, Yusuf Dawood, 1978
Master and Servant, David Mulwa, 1979
Bushtrackers, Meja Mwangi, 1979

Flight to Juba, Sam Kahiga, 1979
When the Stars are Scattered, Sam Kahiga, 1979
The Cockroach Dance, Mwangi, 1979

Early 1980s

A Woman Reborn, Koigi wa Wamwere, 1980
The Double Cross, M. Gicheru, 1981
Devil on the Cross, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 1982
The Price of Living, Yusuf Dawood, 1983
My Life in Crime, John Kiriamiti, 1984
I Will Be Your Substitute, Pat Wambui Ngurikie, 1984
Two in One, M. Gicheru, 1984
The Bhang Syndicate, Frank Saisi, 1983
Black Gold of Chepkube, Wanaguda Geteria, 1985
The Hunter, Ole Kulet, 1985
Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow, Y Dawood, 1985

Late 1980s

Son of Woman in Mombasa, Charles Mangua, 1986
Ayah, David Maillu, 1986
Operation DXT, David Maillu, 1986
Coming to Birth, Marjorie MacGoye, 1987
Matigari, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 1987
Street Life, Margaret MacGoye, 1987
Daughter of Maa, H. ole Kulet, 1987
The Present Moment, MacGoye, 1987
One Life Too Many, Yusuf Dawood, 1987
A Worm in the Head, C.K. Githae, 1987
Life and Times of a Bankrobber, John Kiggia Kimani, 1988
Off My Chest, Yusuf Dawood, 1988
The Operator, Chris Mwangi, 1989
Return of Shaka, Meja Mwangi, 1989
Weapon of Hunger, Meja Mwangi, 1989
My Life with a Criminal, John Kiriamiti, 1989
Mission to Gehenna, Karanja wa Kang'ethe, 1989
The Strange Bride, Grace Ogot, 1989
Soldier's Wife, Patricia Ngurikie, 1989

Early 1990s

Judy the Nun, P.M. Waweru, 1990
Dedan Kimathi: The Real Story, Sam Kahiga, 1990
Striving for the Wind, Meja Mwangi, 1990
Moran No More, Ole Kulet, 1991
Three Days on a Cross, Wahome Mutahi, 1991
Times Beyond, Omondi Mak'Oloo, 1991
Broken Drum, David Maillu, 1991
The Mixers, Mwangi Gicheru, 1991
Water Under the Bridge, Yusuf Dawood, 1991
Tough Choices, Patricia Ngurikie, 1991
Jail Bugs, Wahome Mutahi, 1992
Shrine of Tears, Francis Imbuga, 1993
Paradise Farm, Sam Kahiga, 1993
Lady in Chains, F. Genga Idowu, 1993
Confessions of an AIDS Victim, Caroline Adalla, 1993
Nice People, W. Geteria, 1993

Mayor in Prison, K Wandai, 1993
The River and the Source, Margaret Ogola, 1994
Son of Fate, John Kiriamiti, 1994
Homing In, Marjorie Oludhe MacGoye, 1994
Kanina and I, Charles Mangua, 1994
Prison is not a Holiday Camp, John Kiggia Kimani, 1994
Honorable Criminals, Ambayisi Namale, 1994
Comrade Inmate, C. Githae, 1994

Late 1990s

The Cannibals, Okoth Okombo, 1995
My Life as a Paraplegic, Esther Owuor, 1995
The Herdsman's Daughter, Bernard Chahilu, 1995
Sunrise at Midnight, O. Wa Munga, 1996
The Girl is Mine, David Karanja, 1996
From Homeguard to Mau Mau, 1996
Links of a Chain, Monica Genja, 1996
The Devil You Know, M.A. Karauri, 1996
Together We'll Start a New Life, Wairimu Gitau, 1996
Chira, Marjorie MacGoye, 1997
My Heart on Trial, F. Genga Idowu, 1997
Painful Tears, Wairimu Kibugi, 1997
Judy: A Second Chance, She Refused to Give Up, Judy Mbugua, 1997
My Mother's Confession, Wairimu Gitau, 1997
A Dream of Freedom, Koigi wa Wamwere, 1997
Beyond the Culture Barrier, Wairimu Gitau, 1998
Where Do We Belong?, Mandy Byardal Louis, 1998
Never Say Die, Wanyiri Kihoro, 1998
The Love Birds, James Kinyanjui Ngubiah, 1998
Mpuonzi's Dream, Joseph Situma, 1999
Bandits of Kibi, H. ole Kulet, 1999
Daughter of State, Magaga Alot, 1999
Sinister Trophy, John Kiriamiti, 1999
Waiting for Darkness, Hanson Wachira, 1999
Doomsday, Wahome Mutahi, 1999
The Year 2000
Return to Paradise, Yusuf Dawood, 2000
Kenyatta's Jiggers, Charles Mangua, 2000
The Last Plague, Meja Mwangi, 2000

*The above list represents approximately 98% of the Kenyan novels on the shelves of Textbook Centre, Kijabe Street and the University of Nairobi Bookshop between the months of October, 2000 and February, 2001.