Renaissance, creativity and the refractive aesthetics of African literature

Lekan Oyegoke[1]

Abstract

"Renaissance" has come up for scrutiny in African political and literary discourse in recent times, sown, as it appears to have been, as a discursive seed in a mutant twenty first century chronological and topographical setting. The exciting paradox of the play of presence and absence in a controversial nursery bed of connotative and denotative instabilities makes this renascent linguistic seed simultaneously dud and viable. The historicity of the term as a specific archaic centenary experience in certain parts of the world makes it potentially semantically dynamic. Its suggestion of a resurgence of interest in some areas of cultural life renders it suspect or simply ontologically unviable. Renaissance then morphs appropriately into yet another signifier and linguistic counter and, as sign, is permanently detached from verifiable signified in a postmodern construct. Cultural creativity in Africa as elsewhere is expectedly an activity of civility, a vocation of nobility, but which in many parts continues to be savaged ever so tirelessly by tyranny and crass insensitivity. Nevertheless, humane artistry in the wider socio-cultural sphere outmatches the political elite's tendency to dissipation. The notional prism of critical mediation in the transformation from conventional to radical, owing to the twentieth century revolutionary insights of modern linguistics, has turned opaque with a refractive aesthetic regimens of a new kind of licence that is named "theory" and is viewed with increasing suspicion in some quarters as a supplant of age-old "poetic licence". Further supplants have presented at fundamental levels in the relationships which subtend between cultural components that are informed and inscribed by different notions of "African literature". This article attempts a reflection, using the trope of a prism, on some conflictive renascent ideas – positive and negative – in the aesthetic conundrum of signifier/signified in African literature.

Keywords: renaissance; refractive; aesthetic; licence; African literature

[1] Professor of Literary Theory, University of Botswana
E-mail: Julius.Oyegoke@mopipi.ub.bw

Introduction

The multi-disciplinary trajectory of postmodernism and post-postmodernism, also known as poststructuralism and post-poststructuralism, and whatever their volatile and evanescent conceptual successors, encourages recourse to an elementary principle of physics to explain a few tropes of the discussion. The quest for evasive signifieds must be tied in starting to resilient lexicography in its perpetual grapple with the unstable, bewildering linguistic interstices of signifier/signified and other binaries in differential opposition. It appears that the concept of refraction-in-action (to refract) from which the qualifier "refractive" is derived is helped by how the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* attempts to explain it: "(of water, air, glass, etc.) to make light change direction when it goes through at an angle: Light is refracted when passed through a prism." The result of passing light through a prism is prismatic colours which *The Chambers Dictionary* says are: "the seven colours into which a ray of white light is refracted by a prism, that is red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo and violet."

The present essay proposes that aesthetics in the humanities can serve as a "discursive prism" through which concepts may pass with endpoint variability and results that are in a constant state of flux while lacking in the literal mass or solidity of glass. The notional angle of entry into an ideational mass of aesthetics by certain concepts and terms will determine the type and scope of refraction of literary and other outcomes. While aesthetics as prism-without-tangible-mass is a feature of form as opposed to content, it is, as Russian Formalism avers, not detachable from content: both content and form are like two sides of the same sheet of paper.

On the predisposition of aesthetics as a concept to change, Jonathan Culler observes pertinently:

> But what of art and literature in this post-human world?
> Strangely, an interest in the post-human may have contributed to the revival of aesthetics, which have been pushed aside by literary and cultural theory of the late 20th century. The reasons for the eclipse of aesthetics are not hard to understand. Traditional aesthetic concepts, such as artistic genius, the autonomy and universality of art, and its inherent spiritual value, were inextricably tied (to) a particular conception of the subject that major strains of [Marxism, psychoanalysis, structuralism, poststructuralism] were engaged in combating. The triumph of theory and the widespread assumption that the concepts of aesthetics belonged to an outmoded elitist universalizing of art left open a space – a vacuum of sorts – that permitted, and even seemed to demand, a return of aesthetic issues in a new guise. (*Literary Theory*, p. 130)

In the present discussion "aesthetics" is imbued with conceptual elasticity such that it is able to accommodate optimally the semantic potential of referentiality and suggestibility in line with the amorphous and variable characteristic which Culler outlines. Its stretched canvas of possibilities will include the orthodox, radical formalist and historicist, theorist, among other concepts.

"Renaissance" is conventionally semantically attached to an elusive signified that is in turn linked to another signifier: "rebirth", which is shown to be shaky and subject to the dizzying vagaries of the differential opposition inherent in the systemic relationship of

signifier and signified in a conceptual formulation begun by Saussurean linguistics. Of the shifting renascent original in European history, M. H. Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham caution appositely:

> Many attempts have been made to define "the Renaissance" in a brief statement, as though a single essence underlay the complex features of the intellectual and cultural life of a great variety of European countries over several hundred years. It has, for example, been described as the birth of the modern world out of the ashes of the Dark Ages; as the discovery of the world and the discovery of man; and as the era of the emergence of untrammelled individualism in life, thought, religion, and art. Recently, some historians, finding that attributes similar to these were present in various people and places in the Middle Ages, and also that many elements long held to be medieval survived into the Renaissance, have denied that the Renaissance ever existed. This sceptical opinion serves as a reminder that history is a continuous process, and that "periods" are not intrinsic in history, but are invented by historians. Nonetheless, the division of the temporal continuum into named segments is an all but indispensable convenience in discussing history. (*Glossary*, p. 338)

The kind of concise record of revisionary history which *A Glossary of Literary Terms* offers is useful to our discussion. The spirited lexicographic explanation tries to delineate the time-frame and annotate some of the general features of the period mostly in terms of actual and presumed accomplishments; for example, the revival of Graeko-Roman learning and the invention of printing on paper from movable type with the telling caveat: "(for which Johan Gutenberg of Mainz, Germany, is usually given credit, although the Chinese had developed a similar mode of printing several centuries earlier)". There was the radical twist in understanding of biblical religious doctrine which shifted the emphasis of Christian spiritual soteriological experience from institutional to personal/private apprehension and appropriation that translated into major religious reforms triggered by what was deemed a heretical submission by Martin Luther (1483-1546). European knowledge of the world expanded jarringly when in 1492 Christopher Columbus unexpectedly encountered the landmass and native inhabitants of the Americas (so subsequently named) and the associated islands, with far-reaching commercial and literary consequences for England especially. On the effect of the Copernican theory which made the sun and not the earth, unlike as previously (of Greek astronomer Ptolemy 2nd century AD) the centre of the planetary system *Glossary* says: "Investigations have not borne out the earlier assumption by historians that the world picture of Copernicus and of the scientists who followed him (sometimes referred to as the new philosophy) delivered an immediate and profound shock to the theological and secular beliefs of thinking people." But the Copernican suggestion helped inject a suitable philosophical impetus for increased scientific enquiry that "helped constitute the climate of eighteenth-century opinion known as the Enlightenment" (pp. 338-341).

"Creativity" as a signifier together with its rotatory signified seems to have adopted the humanities as a natural habitat being a feature of the imaginative faculty, in associative relationships with language, literature, music, painting, sculpture, and photography, which counterpart concept since the Enlightenment appears well-nigh to have been totally hi-jacked by science and technology, in particular in the ICT era of the current age of the computer. It would appear though that with characteristic determination the humanities are embarked on a (seemingly futile) last-ditch battle to recover and restore the integrity of the beleaguered signifier. Also to the point; another signifier: "renaissance" seems increasingly in the process of being co-opted on behalf of "creativity" as an important ally in the said ideational fight-back in Africa in cultural anthropology and literature – two compatible collaborative prismatic platforms.

"African literature" is a label let loose in major part in consequence of European global political and economic adventurism that was in play for some time – the intellectual justification of which was formulated during the so-called European Renaissance and paradoxically at once galvanised and discredited starting in the European Enlightenment, as is well discussed by scholars. Literature is experience-given-linguistic-expression, as is commonly acknowledged; but as "African literature" neither specificity of experience nor specificity of expression is ascribable to the tag. Therefore, in this essay the label "African literature" like several of the other signifiers in the discussion may only serve as a semantic floater that denies attachment to a specifiable signified/concept.

African Renascent Antecedents

Louis Montrose has famously described new historicism as "a reciprocal concern with the historicity of texts and the textuality of history" – in this essay (if there is one) new historicism offers up itself as a suitable prismatic angle of incidence of discursive light into and through aesthetics. According to which formulation the history of Africa or any other part of the world features as an unstable fixture that is entangled with a myriad of intertextual subjectivities. It follows that the textuality of the Renaissance, as noted earlier, is both a given and a subject of debate from the viewpoint of claims to chronological veracity and textual factualness. The implication which follows for the present discursive exercise is that the present discussion lays no claim whatsoever to discursive inviolability. Hence, from a manifestly subjective starting point it seems necessary to look at the blatant subjectivity of a recent contribution to archaeology and history.

In its introduction, a book titled *Asian Origins of African Culture: Asian Migrations through Africa to the Americas* sets down its revisionary agenda and negates its own objective in one breath through a peculiar kind of textual and historical parody:

> In this work the transfer of culture and traditions from Asia, including South East Asia, through Africa and across the Atlantic Ocean west into the Americas will be presented, although not exhaustively since there is a paucity of source material in some areas and is too extensive in others for such a presentation here … In Africa, the situation, since the retreat of the European powers and the plethora of independent nations that resulted in the mid-20th century is very different. Through the former colonial empires these people became aware of the rest of the world and comparisons must have come as a shock. The misguided attempts to try to catch up with the rest of the world in one or two generations, so epitomised by the regime of Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana, led to catastrophe for many of these people from which they still have not fully recovered. The need for the people of Sub-Saharan Africa to feel equal to the rest of the world has led to the misrepresentation of historical records where present day archaeologists are pressured into declaring, or are at least contributing even if unwillingly to a politically correct, increasing misappropriation of the past that pervades most of the histories presented since the mid-20th century. (p. 6)

The book is manifestly a voluminous tour de force in oversimplification, overgeneralisation and distortionary pranks in attempts at a reification of archaeology. The obvious fallacy of deriving conclusions from faulty premises apart, the author shows himself as beholden to misbegotten condescension and other blindfolds. Kwame Nkrumah was perhaps the best known African Pan-Africanist of the twentieth century and couldn't by this orientation be deemed in a hurry to catch up with the "rest of the world" (which rest of the world?). As for the naïve and simplistic propositions: "these people became aware of the rest of the world" and the "need for the people of Sub-Saharan Africa to feel equal to the rest of the world", it

ought to be clear to any but a jaundiced amateur historian the basic historical point that prior to European "discoveries" of the major (and minor) rivers and mountains, for example, of the African landmass these landmarks and natural features of the topography were not only known but used by the Africans long, long before the arrival/visit and sensational expeditions by Europeans and others to Africa.

Both the title and the introduction of the book betray the motive of its author as an ill-concealed attempt to whitewash and orientalise a historical account of the African continent, which narrative down the centuries had been susceptible to rampaging visits and spurious inscription from occidental and oriental sources. Main-stock revisionary history hasn't denied that there were occidental and oriental contacts with the continent but is saying – as the writer of the novel *Things Fall Apart*, Chinua Achebe, has maintained – that the African past has not been one long night of savagery, nor had the African cultural setting been a vast quiescent unscripted tabula rasa indigently awaiting European and Asian inscription. The attempt by *Asian Origins* to footnote Africa in foregrounding overblown Asian contributions to the African cultural space and experience renders the book suspect; more so, because the author admits insufficiency of evidence at the start.

It would be more rewarding at this juncture to turn attention to a fictional discounting of the flippant supposition that Africa had been inordinately ambitious to take on the rest of the world, going back a few centuries to the seventeenth of Aphra Behn, a pioneering woman writer of realist prose fiction in *Oroonoko, or The Royal Slave*: an illustration of the subterfuge and guile that were prevalent during the historical experience designated Renaissance:

> The Prince, having drunk hard of punch and several sorts of wine, as did all the rest (for great care was taken they should want nothing of that part of the entertainment), was very merry, and in great admiration of the ship, for he had never been in one before; so that he was curious of beholding every place where he decently might descend. The rest, no less curious, who were not quite overcome with drinking, rambled at their pleasure fore and aft, as their fancies guided 'em. So that the captain, who had well laid his design before, gave the word, and seized on all his guests; they clapping great irons suddenly on the Prince, when he was leaped down in the hold to view that part of the vessel, and locking him fast down, secured him. The same treachery was used to all the rest; and all in one instant, in several places of the ship, were lashed fast in irons, and betrayed to slavery. That great design over, they set all hands to work to hoise sail; and with as treacherous and fair a wind, they made from the shore with this innocent and glorious prize, who thought of nothing less than such an entertainment.
>
> Some have commended this act as brave in the captain; but I will spare my sense of it, and leave it to my reader to judge as he pleases. (*Norton Anthology*, p. 2201)

The intrusive narrator's commentary in the above passage in respect of the signifier "brave" should seem instructive: as signifiers go, ideas of bravery can fluctuate elusively. As is well-known, the success of the trans-Atlantic slave trade was dependent on a collaborative input by African aristocratic despots and their traitorous subjects, on the one hand, and European marauders and adventurers, on the other hand, as Steven Spielberg's epic, in part historical film *Amistad* engagingly illustrates. Still, Walter Rodney's insightful argument in *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* that Europe's incursion into the African terrain fundamentally deflected African history off course cannot be dismissed out of hand. It is arguable and has been much done frequently that interference in one by one or another power is what national history has entailed more often than not; yet, the political, economic, cultural, and other

fallout of centuries of forcible intervention in the African socio-cultural space has occasioned the attempt by post-colonial Africa to recover a renaissance in the hope of stemming some out of a welter of negative consequences of colonialism.

One not so positive index of the fallout manifests at the level of cultural expression: a non-descript variety of creative writing with a tag "African literature" is part of the legacy of colonial experience in Africa. Closely allied to this is the misshapen identity and stultification of literatures of indigenous language expression and the linguistic mediums of their expression. Related to that is the largely unbeneficial political, economic, and other, climate engendered by arbitrarily drawn geo-political boundaries which have tremulously survived formal colonialism that on a perpetual basis – with only a few exceptions in the continent – stifles ability to attain consensus on "national" issues of moment. Such that in the absence of consensus it becomes virtually impossible to have statesmen and women in power and at the helm of affairs nationally – apart from the few exceptions – but mostly virtually only a succession perennially of insensitive potentates and purblind despots, accidental products of history all apparently and by deduction in line with Rodney's central concern, as already noted. The very encirclement of extant colonial boundaries in a post-colonial setting negates many an otherwise positive value that would have been transferable from a previous indigenous era and former experience and been favoured by the group from which it originated (for example, the modest achievements of pre-independence peoples of south-west Nigeria up to 1960 – the year of independence from Britain). Unity of purpose, as time has since shown, is aggravated rather than helped in a post-colonial African geographical and political setting.

The potential renascent ideals and models of good governance and dedication to communal weal of the distant past would appear then to have been effectively lost and buried in the mists of time largely by a so-called accident of history. The historical models latterly unearthed by such twentieth century philosophies as Negritude and other renascence-prone African historiographical proclivities seem well-nigh disqualified, as is well-studied, by being susceptible to self-contradictory romanticism and idealism and lacking in pragmatic value.

Travails of Creativity

The historicity of African contribution to knowledge admits of its ontological possibility and significance despite that there have been desperate efforts aimed at its denial by apologists of racialist philosophies and policies of the European Renaissance and Enlightenment, as is well-studied: apropos, exponents of "the Great Chain of Being", Darwinism, various shades of fascism on world-war scale manifestations. Creativity has a positive legacy in Africa: as is well-known in fine arts, Pablo Picasso's cubism is indebted to African creative artistry; apart from knowledge and expertise in processing batik in textile design, and the making and use of the talking drum in musical instrumentation, not to mention production in traditional architecture and metallurgy, and the epic contributions of the African griot of the oral traditions which are well documented by folklore scholars the likes of S. A. Babalola, Masizi Kunene, Isidore Okpewho, in a growing list. As for the latter aspect about the griot, it is perhaps unavoidable to scour the oral traditions for experiences that are kin to and reminiscent of the renascent in Africa.

Scholars of folklore in Africa affirm that the oral bard and praise singer was a regular fixture of the royal palace there to fulfil the office of titivating the ego of the king and his chiefs in return for some financial and material up-keep and other related favours. A concert of poetic praise recitation and creative instrumentation has over time bred a mind-set that has leap-frogged pre-colonial and post-colonial time scales and appears disconcertingly extant in post-independence era political dispensations. African successors to departing European

colonial administrators have within the context of modern governments and dictatorships shown themselves in large measure as literally addicted to praise-singing of a variety that is frequently sheer flattery. The predilection to false praise – a throw-up from the past, as has been suggested – by modern African rulers who disdain public opinion receives satirical barbs regularly in the dramaturgy of such renowned playwrights as Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka, award-winning prolific dramatist Femi Osofisan, polyglot and indigenous-language-wordsmith Akinwumi Ishola, etc.; in the silken lyrical lines of poets the likes of prize-winners Niyi Osundare, Odia Ofeimun; in the exciting increasingly experimentalist prose of sundry novelists such as much-charged *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* by Ayi Kwei Armah; allegorical *Anthills of the Savannah* by Chinua Achebe; rumbustious *Wizard of the Crow* by Ngugi wa Thiong'o, in a growing long list whose publication appears unfazed by inclement economic, political and socio-cultural circumstances.

The unholy union of undeserved praise and despotism has bred state terrorism that targets not only journalists (such as Dele Giwa, parcel-bombed; Ogaga Ifowodo, Kunle Ajibade, Christine Anyanwu, imprisoned without charge or with trumped up charges, humiliated and brutalised) but also increasingly poets, dramatists and novelists. In many parts of post-independence Africa, journalists, poets, dramatists, novelists and other social critics are routinely arrested, imprisoned without trial, exiled or killed (Mapanje 2002: xxi). The terror associated with white apartheid machinery and visited on non-white populations (mainly black African) (Steve Biko killed, Dennis Brutus shot in the back and exiled; and countless others humiliated and brutalised) is matched and sometimes outdone by post-colonial tyrannical state machinery in a blatant display of black-on-black violence. The vicious use of state power by rulers to crush the voice of dissent and opposition frequently in unabashed disregard for the rule of law in the land is, as already mentioned, symptomatic of a mind-set weaned on the sour milk of false praise, which condition is cynically averse to the converse form of praise of any type, including constructive criticism. Soyinka is a well-known example of a writer who for some of his adult life was a victim of the outrageous ways of post-independence political dictatorships as recorded in his writings such as *A Shuttle in the Crypt*, *The Man Died*.

In his Introduction to the thought-provoking anthology *Gathering Seaweed: African Prison Writing* the renowned Malawian lyrical poet and frequently victim of state terror himself Jack Mapanje (2002) observes appositely:

> *Gathering Seaweed* assembles stories of incarceration which African politicians today would prefer to bury; perhaps for their convenience; perhaps in their wish to please their neo-colonial metropolitan banks; perhaps under the pretext that such horrors must not be mentioned in the name of atonement and reconciliation. *Gathering Seaweed* suggests the pertinent question why the African struggle against European imperialism, colonialism and neo-colonialism turned sour; why African leaders seem to have copied only the brutality, corrupt practices and selfish individualism from their colonial masters. The implication is that African leaders are becoming progressively intolerant of constructive criticism from their own people. This anthology should, therefore, be waved as a warning banner to present and future African political leadership, for, through their writings, the dissidents in this volume refuse to be erased from memory and to be made invisible by the autocratic regimes that imprisoned them. Each writer inimitably contributes to the sad tale of intolerance, oppression, imprisonment, torture and the barbaric politics of the countries from which the writings emanate. (Mapanje, 2002: xiv)

Post-colonial state antagonism to creativity and the creative input of journalists, singers, poets, dramatists, novelists, in particular, and other social critics, in modern Africa is baffling because it is carried out in violation of fundamental human rights that, ironically, were initially summoned by some of its perpetrators for jump-starting the process of "decolonisation" that led to flag independence in many parts of Africa, the latest entry into the club of independent-states-of-Africa being a fractious South Sudan in a long line of feuding post-independence republics and nation-states such as Angola, Mozambique, Burundi, Congo, Cameroon, Ivory Coast, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Lesotho, Rwanda, Somalia, Sudan, Uganda, Nigeria, Zimbabwe. It is also in flagrant abuse of democratic ideals which a lot of African countries pay lip-service to in misguided aspiration to economic and political progress – it is all right not to expend energy and resources wastefully trying to reinvent the wheel, as the cliché, but a serious omission to have a (democratic) model and leave out the spirit that moves the structure: much like having a motor-vehicle without an input of fuel to run it.

Rule of Law

A shard of historical light through a notional aesthetic prism in a slippery search for renascent socio-cultural ideals refracts into a supposition that if Europe had not precipitated the scramble for Africa and the eventual 1885 Berlin partitioning of Africa, and Europe had not by so doing underdeveloped Africa – according to Rodney's thesis – then there would be socio-linguistic polities with a different understanding of and attitude to the concept of the rule of law, a cornerstone of the principles of democracy. The full spectrum of multi-fangled interpretation of the concept of the rule of law (pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial) may be found in the continent from east to west and north to south of Africa.

Book after book on Africa shows a fond attachment to ritual practice and spirituality – which is not the preserve of the African continent but is common to all humanity from east to west and north to south of the globe. There is also a pattern of autocracy in several of the indigenous language cultures of Africa that is not again a peculiarity of the continent: the intensity of autocratic regime, as is well visited in literature, has varied from age to age and from place to place: Babylonian, Pharaohnic, Roman, British (William Shakespeare's *The Tempest,* for example) Benin, Oyo (Ola Rotimi's *Ovoranwen Nogbaisi*; Soyinka's *Death, and the King's Horseman*). The renaissance advent of the industrial revolution and the emergence of the bourgeoisie in corrosion of aristocratic monopoly and domination of (economic and political) power and which development had packaged together with it some malignant consequences on the commonality (Dickens Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities, Hard Times*).

While the socio-linguistic milieu illustrated by the sable lyrical dramatic construct in *Death, and the King's Horseman* seems beholden inexorably to pre-colonial aristocratic autocratic tradition, the socio-linguistic milieu illustrated in the pacey prose narrative *Things Fall Apart* is one with a greater inclination, in the allegiance to tradition, to pre-colonial democratic ideals of governance. Still, imbedded in both indigenous systems are carefully considered measures installed to curtail a descent to excess in the use perhaps also, misuse, of power on the part of royalty and other would-be autocrats (in both examples there is some disrespect for the sanctity of human life, mostly of the young and women, as is well studied). In both instances there is a manifest willingness, even eagerness, on the part of the subjects or polity to respect tradition (and, by extension, the rule of law) perhaps because of the unmistakeable component of duress (both spiritual and temporal) in the entire arrangement. In the foregoing examples, these classics, the play and the novel, speak directly mostly to the pre-colonial Yoruba experience and the Igbo experience, respectively.

Coercive measures would appear to be a main ingredient in the propping up of undemocratic structures in all ages and cultures. Access to violence in one way or another as its master confers power and unleashes terror on the supposed underlings, as history has shown time and again, until the fear is overcome by the victim of violence one way or another as Lauretta G. Ngcobo illustrates in her novel *Cross of Gold* which in many ways is in interesting intertextual dialogue with Franz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*. The close connection between fear, angst and violence is also the fictional concern of the engaging prose narrative titled *Violence* by Festus Iyayi, and *God's Bits of Wood* by Sembene Ousmane which ends with a song from "Legend of Goumba" on a paradoxical note:

> From one sun to another,
> The combat lasted,
> And fighting together, blood-covered,
> They transfixed their enemies.
> But happy is the man who does battle without hatred. (p. 248)

In his Preface to the first edition of the scholarly ground-breaking historiography of *The Black Jacobins* (James, 1938) which examines epochal historical developments whose ontological foundations were laid in the years between 1789 and 1815, C. L. R. James's reference to the ambivalence of fear in the existential conditions of both captivity and liberation/revolution is relevant to a search for extant renascent (and post-renaissance) ideals:

> The defeat of Bonaparte's expedition in 1803 resulted in the establishment of the Negro state of Haiti which has lasted to this day.
> The revolt is the only successful slave revolt in history, and the odds it had to overcome is evidence of the magnitude of the interests that were involved. The transformation of slaves, trembling in hundreds before a single white man, into a people able to organize themselves and defeat the most powerful European nations of their day, is one of the great epics of revolutionary struggle and achievement.
> (p. xviii)

The democratic ideal of respect for the rule of law by everyone regardless of position on the basis of fundamental human rights and equality of all human beings reverses the direction of flow of funk and channels it back up the superstructure to the seat of power: according to which novel orientation the post-independence elite wielders of political power (in khaki or mufti) in a so-called democratic structure in many a country of Africa (and much of the Caribbean, as it has turned out) become the new victims of fear who demonstrate it through disrespect for the rule of law, disregard for public opinion, and a mindless penchant for impunity.

Renascent *Botho* model

A notional aesthetic prismatic compass enables a sighting of an ideal that is extant and located in the cultural historiography and terrain of the southern part of the continent named Southern Africa Development Community (SADC). It is a socio-cultural concept and ideal named Botho which has in fifty years amplified into a positive economic, educational and political index in the annals of history respecting the Republic of Botswana. Writing under the title "Botswana", Rebecca Lekoko comments on Botho in connection with advocacy for a special variety of adult education in Botswana:

> This principle is aptly summarized in Botswana through the Setswana concept of Botho (respect for each other) (Republic of Botswana, Presidential Task Force, 1997). Applied to learning, Botho suggests learning contexts that respect people's

> experiences and ways of learning. Thus, 'Each one, teach one' is a concrete foundation on which to craft a framework for older adult learning in Botswana. (Lekoko 2016: 51)

Botho is shown in the quotation as adaptable, extendable and practicable, an ideological principle that is amenable, practically, to every facet of life. It enjoys widespread recognition and support of the community at large. Equally importantly, as a pragmatic principle, it enjoys official recognition and backing as suggested by its definition and inclusion in official reports as a significant referent and ideological propellant of peace, good governance, political stability and economic progress in the land.

As is well documented and justifiably celebrated, in just half a century, Botswana has climbed up from the nadir of economic privation, globally, to a respectable middle income economic bracket of nations: on the wings of prudent management of resources, fiscal discipline, and, crucially, manifest respect for the rule of law. With admirable consistency, in that amount of time, Botswana has produced statesmen at the helm of affairs and become a veritable model of visionary and progressive leadership for the rest of sub-Saharan Africa.

Going by these revealing prismatic aesthetic presentations, M. B. M. Avoseh's conclusion and recommendation that Botho as a positive pragmatic ideology is an exportable commodity does not seem exaggerated or misplaced as he argues lucidly in his interesting study of Botho with the title: "Botho: Botswana's Indigenous Power for Humanizing the 'Vuvuzelas' of Globalisation". The deduction should seem inescapable that the historiography of sub-Saharan Africa by one obvious example is not void of workable renascent ideals and models. The spirit of Botho, co-opting the Bogosi and Kgotla systems of indigenous governance, drives a modern base and superstructure with considerable promise of durability; while elsewhere in the continent local equivalents of Botswana's Botho have been well-nigh smothered to death, as it were, in a self-subversive thicket of negative colonial and post-colonial outcomes.

Conclusion

The foregoing is commentary that is part empirical and (in large) part speculative. The focal point is the quizzical signifiers which enable a teasing out of a few fresh perspectives on referents that are deceptively self-evident connotatively and denotatively – the beleaguered concepts of renaissance and aesthetics, especially – using the prism from physics as a trope that propels the reflection. It follows that a refractive aesthetics of African literature reveals that historicised signifiers such as renaissance, creativity, Africa, Europe, occident, orient, seem basically textually ambivalent. A prismatic view of African history, cultures, languages, literatures, unveils dancing signifiers around which cavort a bewildering mass of undecideable signifieds or concepts.

A historicist textuality of renaissance experience of whatever description unveils a rotatory semantic core from which subtend pluralist suggestions: void of a fixed historical centre, the signifier in its flexibility may be hitched randomly and be shown to be applicable positively or negatively to any group experience. Out of the un-fixity and mass of unstable values has emerged a salutary spirit, a socio-cultural principle, a traditional praxis which has quite successfully worked a modern (postmodern) African democracy in half a century of political independence as exemplified by the experience of Botswana.

As illustrated in African writing and the study based on it, the sub-text that Africa is a vast quiescent unscripted tabula rasa awaiting occidental and oriental inscription seems untenable. While a few negative traits such as inordinate taste for false praise have survived

the colonial experience, more positive renascent creative ideals such as the equivalents of Botho in many parts of Africa have been refracted by historical circumstances, straitjacketed and literally muzzled to death in a post-colonial dispensation.

References

Abrams M. H.& Harpham G. G. (2012). *A Glossary of Literary Terms,* 10. Wadsworth: Centage Learning.

Avoseh, M. B. M. (2014). Botho: Botswana's indigenous power for humanizing the 'vuvuzelas' of globalization. Proceedings of the *International Pre-Conference of the Commission for International Adult Education [CIAE] of the AAACE 63rd Annual Conference,* Charleston, South Carolina, (24-31).

Behn, A. (2006). Oroonoko, or the royal slave. In S. Greenblatt. (dd.), *The Norton Anthology of English Literature,* 8 (1), 2183-2226. New York, London: W. W. Norton & Co.

Culler, J. (1997, 2011). *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Dickens, C. (1859). *A Tale of Two Cities*. London: Chapman and Hall.

Dickens (1854). *Hard Times*. London: Bradbury and Evans.

Graeme, R. K. (2010). *Asian Origins of African Culture: Asian Migrations through Africa to the Americas.* London: Yelsraek Publishing.

Hayden, L. K. (1975). The man died- Prison notes of Wole Soyinka: A recorder and a visionary. *CLA Journal*, 18(4), 542-552.

James, C. L. R. (1938, 1963, 1980). *The Black Jacobins*: *Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo revolution*. London: Penguin.

Lekoko, R. (2016). Botswana. In B. Findsen & M.Formosa. (Eds.) *International Perspectives on Older Adult Education: Research, Policies and Practice*. 47-57. Heidelberg, New York, Dordrecht, London: Springer International Publishing Switzerland.

Mapanje, J. (2002). *Gathering Seaweed*: *African Prison Writing*. London: Heinemann.

Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English, 8th Edition. (2010) Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Rodney, W. (1973). *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. London: Bogle-L'Ouverture.

Sembene, O. (1970). *God's Bits of Wood*. London: Heinemann.

The Chambers Dictionary, 13th Edition. (2014). London: Chambers Harrap Publishers LTD.