

Awaiting The Beautiful Ones

Wole Soyinka

Lest we lose hope entirely, we must never cease to remind ourselves of the miracle of South Africa. Or indeed of lesser zones of optimism, such as the termination of the civil war in Mozambique, a conclusion that might even appear to have been divinely ordered in its timing. That timing enabled a now united nation to cope with the worst flood disaster ever experienced by an African nation within living memory. A flood of epic biblical proportions, no less. Drought, yes — the continent was accustomed to this — but flood, nothing quite like this had ever been visited upon the continent. It was as if the flood was sent to remind warring African nations that there is one potent enemy always lurking round the corner, toward whose control all sensible nations should conserve their forces — Nature. First, a plague of droughts and famine, next the Flood — are we headed for *the fire next time*? This deluge may not have produced a Noah's Ark, but the poignant image that went round the world — one that will remain engraved on many minds till death — that image of the trapped mother who gave birth in a tree, such a portent may be read as a glimmer of potential redemption. It is a picture that should be hung on the office walls of all African political and national leaders, spurring them to reassess their understanding of the purpose of social organization to which all existing resources should be directed — Is it toward the nurturing of life? Or its repudiation in the cause of ego and the desperate consolidation of power?

And there are other spaces of relief — the swift termination of the incipient tyranny of General Guei in Ivory Coast being the most recent, and the most uplifting, since it is one of those rare instances of a successful people's uprising, spontaneous but also, alas, exacting in its toll. And there is the apparent end of the war between the two Congos, the termination of the Eritrean-Ethiopian war, albeit with a most unsatisfactory ending. The dramatic yet tawdry end to the brutal dictatorship of Sani Abacha in Nigeria was another — indeed the ohso- belated resolve of the Organisation of African Unity to tolerate no more military coups must be reckoned as yet another step on the hard road to optimism. Nor must we forget the collaborative effort now being undertaken to wage war against AIDS — again much much belated, but nonetheless a hint of a new seriousness that offers a glimmer of hope that the present proliferation of ghost towns and villages, wasted by this appalling scourge, may at least be gradually arrested.

However, the title of Ayi Kwei Armah's novel of the late sixties, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, continues to dominate our awareness of African realities. As if from a corrective, indeed combative, mood to that pessimism, yet another of his fictional works — *Two Thousand Seasons* — narrates a utopia of the past to which the visionary in Ayi Kwei Armah has resorted as a societal idyll for the future, in short, as the path toward a Renaissance of the continent of the black race. This dream of a Renaissance, I have said over and over again, is as old as the history of decolonization, and I mention Ayi Kwei Armah's other book only as a reflection of that dream, a work of fiction that consciously sets out to map a combative project of social reconstruction, based on a carefully conjured, selective past. It is unique in that respect within the corpus of African literature.

This isolated work — isolated in its genre of utopian or, simply, romanticized reconstruction — remains a reference point for the passion that consumed most writers in the sixties and seventies, writers who saw their mission as one of invocation of a past glory, idyll, or model as a means of reconstituting a continent from within. Other novelists, such as Ahmadou Kourouma, Syl Cheney-Coker, Maryse Conde of Guadeloupe do invoke similar histories, but their works evince no interest in

proposing them, however selectively, as pointers for the future. They are not used to evoke thoughts of a possible Renaissance. *Two Thousand Seasons*, admittedly rather uneven and sometimes undeveloped in its writing — certainly less accomplished than *The Beautiful Ones* — thus remains our most deliberate, overtly fictional manifesto. What is contained within its rather idealistic pages sums up the social agitation in the breast of most writers — the clear vision of a Renaissance for a continent that has known, in contemporary times, nothing but retrogression. There are of course other novels with a similar mission — Ousmane Sembene's *God's Bits of Wood* is one, and I believe one could describe my own *Season of Anomie* as another. Ayi Kwei Armah's work however does set out, far more self-consciously than the others, to be read as a social manifesto, one that is centered — so early in postcolonial literature — on the liberating principle of democracy, stridently articulated, contemptuously — and even violently — deposing all protagonists of alternative social systems. Therein lie some of its weaknesses as a work of literature however — its unabashed propagandist fervor — but its extract, that democratic and communalistic vision of societal relationships, remains a dream to which one occasionally looks backwards wistfully, as one monstrosity of power after another overtakes the benighted people of a continent.

It was of course a period that was deeply taken with the romance of ideology, of a certain Utopia within grasp, if only the colonial entity could slash the umbilical cord that still attached it to inhuman, exploitative philosophies such as — capitalism. Sacrifices must therefore be accepted, especially a loss of personal fulfillment and individual assertiveness. Even the ability to see and pronounce critically was to be curtailed in favor of the common good, the vision of pan-Africanism or indeed of universal brotherhood. Capitalism was evil, socialism good. Leadership was equated with liberation, opposition or criticism of leadership with neocolonial indoctrination. It would take a while for most writers to begin to recognize that while a change of baton had indeed taken place, with a corresponding change of skin, there really had been no change of heart. By then, of course, power was consolidated. The Cold War had selected and anointed its surrogates on the African continent and their mission was not service to land and people but self-perpetuation and the prodigal exhibitionism that accompanies delusions of grandeur. For the masses of the people, however, it was poverty, social stagnation, and a loss of confidence in their own creative powers, in their innate ability to imaginatively reproduce their existence.

That crisis of poverty and underdevelopment on the African continent cannot be divorced from a distrust, indeed dismissal of cultural antecedents, another casualty of ideological conflicts. This dismissal, or attenuation, of past accumulation of experience resulted in the transplantation of alien developmental strategies that often ended up eroding the traditional economic foundations of society. There is no shortage of African nations whose developmental woes are directly traceable to the negative impact of external values on their cultural usages, the result of new sociopolitical ideas, economic paradigms, and even external cultural norms that come camouflaged in seductive packages, including ideology. Such societies become cultural and developmental pastiches of others, poor cousins and ineffectual mimics. Their normal strategies for the anticipation of, compensation for, and survival in spite of natural disasters are eroded with their cultures. They develop, in fact, a new culture — one of mimicry and dependency. They become helpless, impotent when confronted by the vagaries of nature or disruption of accustomed trading patterns. They especially cannot adapt in times of civil strife.

The psychopathic Marxist regime of Mengistu's Ethiopia is one example. The history of droughts and famines, and the poverty of management strategies, did not commence with that regime, we know, but the consequences were exacerbated most horrendously, owing to the centralist ideology of the Ethiopian Marxist government and its ill-digested, unanalytical collectivization policies. That regime compounded the routine of feudal neglect of the former emperor Haile Selassie, destroyed what was left of the traditional structures of rural society, forced villages into regimented, artificial communi-

ties, and thus severed the organic bonds between the cultures of the peoples and their productive strategies. The recent war between Ethiopia and Eritrea has of course relegated to the background the urgency of restitching these broken cultural tissues, of re-creating and reinforcing communities that once survived through an osmotic relationship with Nature, even at its most meager.

Nyerere's Tanzania, during the earlier period of immediate postindependence, was not notably more successful than Ethiopia, but the failure of the economic policies of that nation's socialist experiment did not remotely approach the magnitude of the human disaster that repeatedly afflicted Ethiopia during the same period, and was echoed during the most recent round of mass displacement and starvation. Quite apart from the obvious fact that Tanzania never experiences the severity of drought that seems natural to Ethiopia and Eritrea, the fact is that Nyerere at least attempted to build on the cultural actualities of the peoples that made up Tanzania when he launched his program of *Ujamaa*. It was unfortunate that he did not fully trust that system of self-development and localized economic management and thus preferred to impose on the resourceful intelligence of his peoples, yet again, a textbook economic paradigm from other lands. This only resulted in vitiating the proven efficacy of an ancient, organic process. The creation of new, artificial communities was a disaster, bringing much hardship to his peoples, now deprived of a communally cohering system of productivity that once enabled them to cope with the unexpected. At least, however, Nyerere possessed an unaccustomed leadership integrity and dignity to acknowledge the failure of his well-intentioned experiment.

Most current, and of immediate concern to the rest of the continent, is the regression of Tanzania's neighbor Zimbabwe into a land of fear engendered by state thuggery, whose predictable consequence is the collapse of economic structures and a slow strangulation of civic life. Here, once again, we are confronted by that perennial phenomenon of the African leader who simply cannot bear to be parted from power even in his dotage. One should be forgiven for imagining that surely, especially in that region, after the dismal lesson of Hastings Banda, the temptation to act out those words of egregious arrogance and folly — *l'état c'est moi* — would have diminished. The contrary is what we are certainly witnessing in the conduct of our once revered revolutionary and liberation warrior Robert Mugabe. Playing the race card with a cynical crudeness, the real victims of his ambition are millions of Zimbabweans who desire change, an opportunity for change, and are entitled to it as equal partners in the struggle for liberation.

Let us not, however, lose sight of some fundamental issues that must be held pertinent to a once settler-colony like Zimbabwe, where a grossly disproportionate few control the largest and richest swaths of farmland in the nation. Abdul Nasser in his time was compelled to tackle that issue head-on, dispossessing the feudal oligarchy and reinvesting the land among the fellahin. The struggle of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua against a landowning monopoly composed of a few select families is equally historic. Some of the greatest uprisings and consequent civil wars in Mexico have centered squarely on the ownership of land, even right down to contemporary times, with the revolt of the neo-Zapatistas. There is therefore nothing extraordinary or blameworthy in any moves to execute a policy that aims for a more egalitarian apportionment of land and its resources. The question that must be put to Robert Mugabe, however, is this: Just what have you been doing as head of a virtual one-party government in nearly a quarter of a century? Is there no orderly, structured alternative to the unleashing of so-called war veterans on farmowners, their families, and — a majority of the affected who are, however, mostly neglected in Western reporting — African farmhands and managers? That last especially, the farmworkers. In the history of takeover of factories, I have yet to learn of armies of peasants or university lecturers being mobilized to take over the ownership and operations of such factories — no, it is logically the workers themselves. They may be expected to lock out the owners and turn the factory into a cooperative, sometimes retaining the former operatives in management or technical positions in order to ensure continuity in efficiency and productivity. Even

Stalin, in his mad race to collectivize land and eliminate all those conveniently designated kulaks, did not send veterans of Russia's revolutionary wars to take over the land. Not that his results were any better, but he appeared at least to have given some thought to structural transfers, which is something totally absent from Mugabe's methodology — if one could call it that, being a violent, chaotic process in response to an ancient history of dispossession, and for the declared intent of the restoration of land justice.

Crude and opportunistic as was Idi Amin's expulsion of Asian businessmen and women from Uganda, Robert Mugabe's political adventurism in his dying days is only another reminder — as if any were needed — that Ayi Kwei Armah's "beautiful ones" are indeed yet to be born, that even when the star of revolutionary beauty appears to have hovered over their nativity, it is extinguished in their maturity, and only the ashes of a spent meteor are left to smother the land in their dotage. We are left to wonder how long the pattern of retrogression must continue to determine the emergence of a beleaguered continent. Stung and humiliated by the clear knowledge that the last elections in Zimbabwe constituted a victory for the opposition — never mind that a vicious campaign of intimidation, murder, and other dismal forms of state terror had succeeded in providing his party a numerical majority — the aging lion has resorted to the most blatant, time-dishonored methods of African dictators who fail to understand that a people must be led in dignity, not dragged on their knees along the pathway to social transformation. Resignations and dismissals of judges have been manipulated at a speed unprecedented in the history of Zimbabwe's judiciary, so that that institution is now packed with Mugabe's creatures, guaranteed to do his bidding and overturn constitutional modes of redress. Free expression has become hazardous, as writers and journalists skeeter around increasingly ill-defined parameters of toleration that recall the darkest days of Idi Amin's Uganda. In vain, his own peers, his brother heads of state in neighboring countries, and with similar revolutionary credentials, attempt to call Fuhrer Mugabe to order — no, he is too far gone on the route to self-apotheosization, indifferent to the price that African nations and peoples continue to pay when forced along this cul-de-sac. A messy end-game is in store for that unlucky nation, the enthronement of brute force as the force of law, and even the possibility of a civil war.

But the opposition remains unbowed, and this gives hope for the future of democracy, not only in that country but to others who watch this dismal, violent saga in sadness and frustration, relating these events to any signs of potential danger within their own countries, and drawing the appropriate lessons for constant vigilance and preparedness. Such apprehensive observers make comparisons also with other nations that have gone through baptisms of fire, such as my own Nigeria, where the once guaranteed assumption of impunity by even military dictators is being subjected to lacerating searchlights, with their explicit warnings to others for the future. Of course, it is not yet over, not even for the Nigerian nation. Some of these generals, these ex-dictators, have yet to understand that their world is gone. Completely shattered. Summoned to appear before Nigeria's version of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission — named the Oputa Commission on Human Rights Abuses — they insist on clinging to a concept of the immunity of power, both in and out of office. They are caught in a time-warp where they remain oblivious to the fact that such notions were dramatically shattered with the detention of Pinochet in a foreign land, followed by a trial in his own country. Ignored by these Nigerian generals is the even more humiliating status reversal for the once all-powerful Milosevic, the gloating practitioner of ethnic cleansing, who is now standing trial for crimes against humanity.

What the foregoing serves to remind us of is that element that has always defined power — alienation. Alienation from the real world, and a solipsistic immersion in a wished-for world that is totally circumscribed by the limitations of their intelligence. In the Nigerian instance especially, any of these ex-dictators, exercising a modicum of intelligence, observing the processes of the Oputa panel's in-

investigation into abuses of human rights, would immediately realize that they are exposed to very little actual danger from the consequences of their conduct in power. None of them stands the remotest hazard in the nature of the Nemesis that eventually overtook a Pinochet or a Milosevic. In one case, the crime he is accused of having masterminded would be absolutely unprovable — even his most strident accusers privately acknowledge this. For other charge sheets prepared for all these miscreants in power, an appearance, an explication, a plea of extenuating circumstances, and an appeal to the people to forgive and forget past errors — and the odds are on the people's inclination toward reconciliation. The worst of them, to whom a hand of reconciliation would have been unthinkable, is mercifully dead. But now these survivors stand a very real danger of humiliating arrests, and even criminal or civil prosecutions. Personally, I find myself praying that they maintain their acts of defiance to the end, since the panel, having made its stand sternly clear after repeated defiance by the generals, would have no option but to issue warrants of arrest for them. I have already spent blissful hours picturing them in handcuffs, or being caught in violent scenes as a result of sporadic attempts to subject them to citizens' arrests in the midst of one of their social functions, even in those parts of the country that they consider personal bastions of immunity. Somewhere along the murky trajectories of their stay in office, we can only conjecture that they came across the antiquated notion of "the king can do no wrong," forgetting the numerous kings and queens whose ends have fatally given the lie to that notion.

The title of Ayi Kwei Armah's novel, by the way, was taken from an inscription on that ubiquitous conveyance that is variously known in Africa as the *trotro*, *mammy-wagon*, *bolekaja*, etc., inscriptions that have formed the subject of not a few monographs on culture and social mores, as well as coffee-table catalogues. These inscriptions are often taken from proverbs, expressions of traditional wisdoms, sound-bites from the most unlikely sources, wrenched from their original contexts — which may vary from the Bible, Shakespeare, or the Qur'an to Indian or kung-fu films, or even a bit of commercial jingle heard on television and coopted for its pithy sound. Qur'anic inscriptions are also to be found in the Arabic, some with translations, others without. The eclectic appropriation of shorthand quotations and aphorisms for contemporary realities, anxieties, aspirations, and even as a record of events, is very much a feature of popular culture that extends beyond these mobile murals — which is what they are when accompanied by artwork of equally eclectic images, sometimes incongruous, sometimes quite apposite as pictorial illustrations. This process extends into the world of musical lyrics and, of course, popular theater, and functions much in the same way as the works of more sophisticated writers who operate in modern modes of expression or adaptations of the old. I often think that a compulsory exercise for leaders should take the form of a staggered ride through the length and breadth of the country in one of these mammy-wagons, that is, changing transportation every fifty miles or so. Not only would they acquire a very real lesson in "how the other side lives" but they might begin to understand that these crude inscriptions are the very definition of the existential reality and worldviews of their companions in those rickety and tumultuous, often fatal contraptions. They would experience the environment over which they preside as "the other side" does, with all the bumps, corrugations, filth, real-life commerce, raucousness, uncertainties, real-time tragedies, and petty triumphs, but above all a resilience that often is the sole surviving element as society itself collapses. They would experience not only "how the other side lives," but how it dies.

Since these leaders are unlikely to accept this therapeutic, even heuristic exercise for the understanding and management of power, perhaps they should simply be compelled to memorize as many of the inscriptions as their brains can accommodate, or else simply recite from a pocketbook of these selections, and meditate on one inscription every day before or after their morning prayers. Maybe even replace their prayers and other spiritual invocations — which appear to have taken the African continent nowhere anyway — with a meditation on a select few, indeed, perhaps just one per day so as not to place them under any mental strain. *No Telephone line to Heaven. Chop small, no quench*

or its variant — *Chop small, quench small; Chop big, quench big. The Young shall Grow. The big leaf; falling, cannot dislodge the smaller. Monkey dey work, baboon dey chop. Allah dey! No Condition is Permanent...* ah yes, that especially — *No Condition is Permanent*. You can debate, analyze, reify, or fetishize democracy as long and as elaborately as you like but, place your average citizen in a motor park with lorries filled with dozens of these inscriptions, ask that worker or peasant to point out any single item that accurately defines democracy for him, and the odds are that he will point at that lorry bearing the inscription: *No Condition is Permanent*.

But suppose even this simple reorientation offering is rejected? What other proposals can we offer these leaders toward reconciling the need for their selffulfillment with the need of the rest of humanity — which is also that of self-fulfillment? The marriage of these two interests is what takes us on the route to that elusive goal called democracy and, having begun this discourse on the platform of literature and the arts, it is in that very direction to which I now turn in exhuming once again my original contribution to this thorny problem. I seize the occasional opportunity to air it, since no one has yet had the courage, or simply the enterprising spirit, to put it to the test. With the retrogressive eruption of the antidemocratic psyche in leadership, such as we witnessed recently in General Guei and, even more alarmingly, in the unfinished business of Zimbabwe, how do we bring a terminal point to this repetitive cycle that continues to lay waste our resources and set back nations in the course of development, sometimes by entire generations?

The last time I spoke on the platform of Documenta — this was in Kassel in 1997 — I explored the many pathways and byways of Ritual, that accommodating mode of rebirth, restitution, exorcism, rehabilitation, rites of passage, etc., etc. — but made no attempt to relate it to contemporary socio-political phenomena. Here now is my chance to extend the portals of Ritual toward this critical life-and-death direction.

A Ritual of Power

Now, please pay close attention as I may appear about to shift gears, but I promise you we shall remain firmly on the same terrain. This offering from the Ritualistic arena grows on me all the time, and its presentation, always with newly thought-up variations, has become a ritual in itself whenever yet another power-besotted leader opts to short-circuit our nascent democracies. It also serves to anticipate the question that is often thrown at me and takes the form of: *What do you propose, in practical form? How do you resolve this issue of Power and Freedom, of tyranny and democracy?* There is one obvious answer, which I shall not even discuss, as it will arm my eternal adversaries with the easy accusation of advocating violent resistance which, as everyone knows, is very, very immoral. I mean, I would never dream of advocating such a solution! My unexceptionable answer is therefore derived from my acknowledged field, which is the theatrical. In addition, the new version of this ritual embraces the miracle of modern technology but, first, I must situate this offering accurately — well, as accurately as the analysis of our survivalist political archetypes can be — and clarify the premises on which the ritual proposition has been devised.

My original premise, at the inception of this ritual several years ago, was simply this: that the average dictator, in any culture, is propelled by an incurable death-wish. This was how the idea for my political ritual first took root but, I have since changed my mind. That premise has shifted somewhat and so, naturally, has the ritual format. Mortified by my earlier error, I now make bold to say, with absolute self-assurance, that I have really hit it accurately this time, indeed, that it cannot be faulted by any new analysis of the psychopathology of your representative dictator.

Let us understand quite clearly why my new premise makes sense over and above any other. It requires an understanding of what these men of power really lust after — apart from power, that is. We know all about power already, but then, having killed, tortured, and raped to obtain that power, what makes them desperate to remain — at whatever cost — *terminally* within power? To claim that power is an end in itself simply does not satisfy — there has to be something beyond it, something of great sublimity that eludes the ordinary mind. Thanks, however, to several inspirational sources, I finally stumbled on the answer. The most important of these — I may mention in passing — is the endless cycle of the funeral traditions of the Yoruba, and in particular the *egungun*, that is, the ancestral masquerade.

Earlier, I made what might have sounded a hubristic claim — that my proposal cannot be challenged because it is based on a penetration of the mystery of what lies beyond the lust for power. This implies that the discovery remains in itself unassailable. Let us therefore put that claim to the test by asking the following question: What is it, of all the gratifications open to all the controls that power exercises, what is the one thing that power cannot guarantee to its custodian and monopolist? Wealth? Unlimited access. Sex? Ask and it shall be given. Pomp? Circumstance? Domination? All implicit in the condition of power. Adulation, deification ... the list is endless. Only one experience in the province of power remains inaccessible to the holder and that one experience is — let us prolong the suspense no longer — it is to be a live participant at one's own apotheosis; in short, to be a beneficiary of one's own funeral which, in this instance, is nothing less than the funerary ultimate that any mortal can dream of — a state funeral!

Here now are details of our project: Under the supervision of an architect of his choosing, we would construct for each dictator a mausoleum of his dreams. A professional ceremonial or theater director would be engaged to plan, with each, his fantasy funeral. Rehearsals would be conducted with lowered flags, orchestras, horse drawn or motorized carriage — some love the rhythm of those metal-shod hooves, etc., etc., which motorcades cannot provide. Professional mourners and praise-singers would be engaged. Our hero would be free to sleep from time to time in his mausoleum, just to get the feel of it, he would try it for size, savor the color schemes, order alterations, re-award the contract as often as he likes and collect the kickbacks himself— in short, enjoy a unique privilege, one that very few of us — just the occasional crank or two here and there I think — ever experience in our lives. Even I have never undergone this experience, though of course I have been privileged to read and even listen to the broadcast version of my obituary. In contrast to most mortals, our living hero can supervise the writing and personally rehearse the orator for his funeral eulogies. Indeed, he can deliver and record his own oration. He can choose to immortalize his mortality in — virtual reality! He can beam all or any aspect of his obsequies onto vast holographic fields and experience his lavishly decorated coffin being solemnly lowered into a vault of flawless marble, stainless steel, glass, titanium, polished wood, or whatever material he has chosen for his mausoleum. All this he can experience, every year — and even oftener, in its recorded version — in the privacy and safety of his bunker. The populace, I am certain, would require little persuasion to take on a role that anticipates the demise of their tyrant, even if it requires that they put on the composure and weeds of bereavement every year. We propose, in other words, for all our peoples who are afflicted by this pestilence of the sit-tight dictator, a National Day of Internment.

This is necessarily a sketchy — and rudimentary — version of a most elaborate scenario whose details I must preserve for the moment. In another place, I acknowledge the numerous sources of the inspiration for this idea — from traditional cultures to ministers of religion — so that it may not be simply dismissed as some hare-brained notion dreamt up by a delirious dramatist. Needless to say, there are details of this ritual that must be kept secret, just as there are details of any ritual process that can only be revealed to initiates. Also, for fear of plagiarists and copyright bandits, I must pre-

serve for now, details of the translation of this scheme into virtual reality — it opens up such limitless prospects! Dictators do love toys and gadgets — the more technologically illiterate, the more obsessive their attachment — thus it should not be too difficult to seduce them into the technological gratification that is a side-product of exploiting such a medium. A ritual of passage into the ancestral world in virtual reality, with all the emotions of pomp and circumstance, of obsequious mourning by a million population at the touch of a button? What flesh-and-blood dictator could resist such painless apotheosis time and time and time again! Even Christ found himself restricted to only one — and a very simple — resurrection.

To the anticipated question therefore — What practical proposal do I have for this much abused African body that it may preserve itself in democracy, and be free of the boil of dictatorship? — after a lifetime of struggling against this plague, cauterizing it in one limb only to have it erupt in another, I have finally come up with this one unassailable solution: from one end of the continent to the other, let us have — a National Day of Internment!

Wole Soyinka. Awaiting The Beautiful Ones. In: Okwui Enwezor, Carlos Basualdo, Ute Meta Bauer, Susanne Ghez, Sarat Maharaj, Mark Nash, Octavio Zaya (ed.): Democracy Unrealized. Documenta11_Platform1. Hatje Cantz Verlag, Ostfildern-Ruit. 2002, pp. 366-375.