

These motives are: "to preserve a disappearing world, to describe African milieu for outside readers and to describe a representative case of a peculiarly African experience".<sup>7</sup>

Several books are cited to show the persistent trend in African writing. These books range from Birago Diop's *Tales of Amadou Koumba*, Kayira's *I Will Try* to almost all political autobiographies written by African politicians of the century. More space is given to Kenyan and Nigerian authors, and for reading in Nigerian Politics and in the modern history of that country, the author recommends these political autobiographers.

In this chapter also, the author explains to his non-African audience the basis of his choice of African literature to illustrate his theory. First, (according to Olney) the primary aim of a non-African reader who picks up *any* book written by an African is to learn about Africans and their mode of life from a participant observer of that life. Secondly, this mode of life which the reader is interested in, is best represented in autobiographies of private individuals such as the writer himself or an entire group of people epitomized in one man.

Although the author admits that there is an intimacy between culture and literature, he is nonetheless of the opinion that this intimacy is more pronounced in African than Western autobiography. But this is underestimating the role of culture in Western literature. Because anyone reading the novels of Dickens and Hardy or Balzac in any language translation would recognize them as nothing other than European if not English and French respectively. What distinguishes John Stuart Mill's Westernness from Boubou Hama's Africanness, Olney says, is that the latter is "very consciously African and African through and through, while the former supposedly could not be considered Western through and through. Yet Olney-states that "Mill is even excessively western" when considered in relation to African autobiographers.<sup>8</sup>

The chapter, and in fact the greater portion of the book is full of contradictory statements which not only confuse the amateur reader but constitute a very weak point in Olney's theory and approach. He nevertheless makes quite a number of correct observations in this chapter regarding human relationships in Africa, concept of time, ancestral worship and other stereotyped African characteristics found in socio-anthropological books on Africa.

He closes the chapter with an oversimplified grouping of African literature into three categories, viz: "the mythic (James Ngugi), the fabulous (Camara Laye), and the proverbial (Chinua Achebe). African literature (being thus like African life everywhere) is an incarnational literature." Statements like the above are not only misleading and dangerous but they kill rather than rouse the curiosity and interest of the non-specialist audience. For there is no incentive for reading other authors since they would merely be repeating what their three representatives have already said.

7 Ibid., p. 27.

8 Olney, *Tell Me Africa*, p. 52.

9 Ibid., p. 77.

In chapter two, which is entitled "Children of Gikuyu and Mumbi", the author analyzes in great detail Jomo Kenyatta's *Facing Mount Kenya*. His summary of the book is very good and his analysis of it fits well into his theory of learning of a people through the autobiography of one of their members. To fully illustrate his point that African authors talk around the same subject, he also examines, in the light of *Facing Mount Kenya*, Charity Waciuma's *Daughter of Mumbi*, Mugo Gatheru's *Child of Two Worlds*, Muga Gicaru's *Land of Sunshine*, Josiah Mwangi Kariuki, *Mau Mau Detainee* and other books on Mau Mau. Ngugi's works are cited with special emphasis on *Weep Not Child* and *The River Between*. Both books received good coverages but are analyzed in a way to show that their author is not saying anything different from what Kenyatta and other Kenyan ethnographers have said. After examining these books written by Kenyans, Olney concludes that "A-Gikuyu autobiography and Mu-Gikuyu autobiography, are the same thing because, in the Gikuyu practice of autobiography, the bio or bios must be taken as referring to a communal life embracing both the living and the dead, and the self 'auto' is virtually synonymous with, and could be replaced by Gikuyu."<sup>10</sup>

One can see here again the danger of excessive generalization which leaves no room for the amateur reader to try his hands at other *literatures* from Kenya.

Chapter three is entitled "Ces Pays Lointains" and deals exclusively with the works of Laye Camara. By choosing the *Dark Chyld*, the author for the first time in *Tell Me Africa* uses a true autobiographical novel to illustrate his theory. Both *Dark Child* and *Radiance of the King* are given good summaries and interesting interpretations. But in these interpretations Olney's theory collapses as a move is made from collective individuality to private personal experience presented in symbolic terms. He concedes however that "*Dark child* describes the separation of the individual from the body and from the life of the community",<sup>11</sup> while *Radiance of the King* signifies for Camara Laye a return to that organic state of being from which the individual was seduced by a foreign education in *Dark Child*.<sup>12</sup>

Contrary to his assertion that the life of one African is a mirror reflecting other such lives, the experience of Camera's heroes do not reflect the lives of other Africans at least not the experience of Clarence in Azania, nor that of Fatoma in *Dream of Africa*. Another doubtful statement he makes is that one could not tell Camara's tribal origin from his novels. If the author is serious in this assumption, one wonders why he bothered to read *Dark Child* at all since his special approach aims at learning about a people through the autobiography of one of their members. There was no need to include the novels of Camara in his study since they would be there to contradict his theory. In fact, that *Radiance of the King* is at all included in this series

10. Olney, *Tell Me Africa*, p. 86.

11 Ibid., p. 146.

12 Ibid., p. 150.

of African autobiographies shows the author's lack of apprehension of the various themes in African literature in general and Camara's intention in *Radiance of the King* in particular. And in his desperate effort to find a place for *Radiance of the King* in his theory, Olney ends up confusing his amateur readers, who all along, have been led to seeing each personage in African literature, invariably re-enacting the life of one giant Africa individual. But suddenly the author tells them that the Africa of *Radiance of the King* is a different one—"a psychological, a philosophical Africa existing in the spirits and bodies, in the minds and souls of men."<sup>13</sup> Of course this is a plausible interpretation as long as the book is treated on its own merit and not being pigeonholed into a fixed theory in which no line is drawn between true autobiography and pure fiction.

Chapter four bears a misleading title—"love, sex and procreation" which has very little to do with the content. Here we get a run-down of Ibo autobiographers starting from the controversial Olaudah Equiano\* to the novels of Chinua Achebe. The chapter contains a rich bibliography of books on Ibo people, their iron personality and their customs. As in his study on the children of Gikuyu and Mumbi, the author has a number of convincing incidents to show that the life style of the Ibo is repetitive from generation to generation. Nevertheless he runs into trouble in Achebe's later novels set in modern Nigeria. He admits that the personal and group unity "of *Things Fall Apart* has given way to cultural schizophrenia of *No Longer at Ease*" and that the 'schizophrenic society' of *No Longer at Ease* cannot and does not represent the Ibo society alone. Again in *A Man of the People* Olney's approach collapses because in this particular book Achebe has gone beyond the Ibo society to look at the entire political set up in modern Nigeria. The hero Odili is no more Ibo than he is Hausa, Yoruba, Efik or any other frustrated young educated African who is dissatisfied with the corrupt politics and moral decay of modern African countries.

To end the chapter, a fairly accurate observation is made of the Ibo family structure, the essence of marriage in that society as in other societies in Africa.

Chapter five, entitled "Pornography, Philosophy and African History" uses Laye Camara, Cheik Hamidou Kane and Yambo Ouologuem as representative writers from Francophone Africa. Incidentally these writers differ in their trend from Anglophone writers in that, by Olney's definition, they all are mystics and philosophers. . . Camara is a nature mystic, Kane is a religious mystic and Ouologuem is sensual mystic.<sup>14</sup>

What distinguishes these writers from their Anglophone counterparts ac-

\* It has not been proved beyond doubt that Olaudah Equiano was Ibo. All we have is speculation based on a few suspicious Ibo sounding words such as Ah-affoe for Ibo Afo, Embrenche for Ibo Mburichi Eboe for Ibo and Equiano for the Ibo Ekwauanu or Ekweano. See *Equiano's Travels* ed. Paul Edward, Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., London 1967.

13 Olney, *Tell Me Africa*, p. 152.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 209.

ording to Olney's observation is that they are not tribalistic in their novels, that is, they are not pre-occupied with showing off their tribal customs and traditions. As far as the author's understanding of this trio goes, "it is of comparatively little consequence that Camara is Malinké or that he is from Guinée, that Yambo Ouologuem is Dagon or that he is from Mali, that Cheik Hamidou Kane is Peul or that he is from Senegal. . . they all concentrate their search for meaning on the question of what it is to be black or what is to be African."<sup>15</sup>

Any student or specialist of African literature will not disagree more with Olney's understanding of Camara's novels, of Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure* and Ouologuem's *Bound to Violence*. Because the issue of the black man questioning his state of being Black does not arise here or in any other African novel for that matter. At the moment African writers are dealing with concrete issues such as the coming of the whiteman and all the evils therefrom. Unlike their Black American brothers the African writers do not spend their time pondering over their skin colour and blaming it for their misfortunes. There is no doubt the African has been economically enslaved and culturally despised by the western world but his being once colonized has nothing to do with genetic or racial origins. Even the Negritude movement which Olney touches on slightly, was not really concerned with propagating the Afro-American slogan 'Black is Beautiful! The aim as Senghor puts it is to re-establish 'Negro' African values and civilization. Since it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the various themes treated by Olney's Francophone trio, suffice it to say that he has completely misunderstood the.

Another gross error which he commits is to cite Ouologuem *Bound To Violence* as a representative autobiography of the African continent. He says that the book "performs an act of symbolic autobiography not like Achebe for a specific group of Africans . . . but for black Africans in general."<sup>16</sup> This obviously means that the story of Nakem Zuiko is that of all Africa since Ouologuem claims that his aim is to correct the distorted image of the continent as presented by other writers. Olney is quite outspoken in his praise and admiration of Ouologuem just as majority of western readers are. To them, the image of Africa presented in African novels is too beautiful to be true, besides, it totally contradicts their ideas of primitive Africa perpetuated over the ages. But here comes an 'objective' Ouologuem, who not only corroborates their fantastic stories of savagery but replaces the all too glorious picture with "a valid portrait based on a revision of history and a redefinition of personality."<sup>17</sup>

After giving the summary of Ouologuem's book, the author concludes: "Thus *Le Devoir de Violence* presents to me, something that we might take in a figurative sense, for a reconstituted and epic autobiography of Africa

15 Olney, p. 205.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 209.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 210.

and her people".<sup>18</sup> Figurative sense or not, nothing can be further from the truth than the above quotation because Ouologuem's 'epic' of Nakem Zuiko cannot in any way be interpreted as a representative of "Africa and her people". It is quite apparent that Olney and the entire western patrons of Ouologuem have not bothered and may never bother to find out the real motive behind the writing of *Le Devoir de Violence*, viz: a deliberate attempt on the part of the author to commercialize on the western bourgeois craze for the exotic. And to ensure his success Ouologuem dished out a falsely exotic story which corroborates the image which his western audience has of Africa. Indeed Ouologuem succeeded with his *Prix Renaudot* but his fraudulent success turned into a notorious scandal of inauthenticity and plagiarism as soon as the 'peculiarity of his style' (as Olney likes to see it) was discovered. That Olney is a great admirer of Ouologuem is very evident, for he overlooks the controversy over the authenticity of *Le Devoir de Violence* and sees the glaring evidence of plagiarism in the book merely as providing "another instance of the oddity and inexplicability of his writing practice".<sup>19</sup>

Holding up a book like Ouologuem's as a good and objective source of information on Africa and her people is as bad as praising those that find no fault with old Africa. Because neither Ouologuem who poses as the corrector of distorted image nor the glorifiers and 'distorters' of image have a balanced view.

The last chapter—politics, creativity and exile—is devoted to South African writers. Here Olney's approach works out well once more, for one sees here a repetition of pattern of experiences of the writers. And these experiences seem to be typical of other Black Africans in the Union of South Africa. There is not much of analysis of the individual works as such, rather we get a straight forward summary of each work and the extent to which it reflects the life of the people of South Africa. The author observes that the situation in South Africa does not provide for creative work and that very soon the writers will run out of themes.

The book ends with a little section which the author called "Anti-Conclusion". Here, various issues are touched on, such as the role of the writer in the nation, the problem of foreign language in African literature, dual audience and the new trend of looking at the disintegrating societies instead of lamenting past glories.

On the whole, Olney has tried very hard in his approach to African literature. He has made quite a number of good points and observations in his analysis of such books that help to illustrate his theory of learning about a people through the autobiography of one of their members.

Apart from the non-African amateur audience for whom the book is written, others like socio-anthropologists will also find the book quite useful in that the work of going through many novels to get information on the custom and habits of a people has been done in *Tell Me Africa*.

18 Olney, *Tell Me Africa*, p. 210.  
19 Ibid., p. 234.

His commendable effort notwithstanding, Olney falls into the same trap as other 'Interpreters' of Africa who always treat Her as a problem child, as something very different and demanding in approach. This attitude of ever trying to "work out something for Africa" calls forth such statements as "African literature requires and rewards an 'approach'—a way of getting into it and of feeling out its special qualities".<sup>20</sup> Western intellectuals and western readers would do well, in order to 'follow the African mind' to apply themselves to that literature which gives, with all possible inwardness an accurate image of Africa and a faithful reflection of the African mind".<sup>21</sup> What comes out of this attitude and search for 'approach' for things African is a lack of objectivity or at best stereotyping.

And the question which the reviewer of *Tell Me Africa*, asks is, when will any critic, African or non-African take up an African literary work and look at it on its merits, for what it is worth as a creative work of art, without the looming shadow of mother Africh in the foreground?

20 *Tell Me Africa*, p. VII.  
21 Ibid., p. 5.