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The Democratic Transition in Africa
and the Anglophone Writer

Paul Tiyambe Zeleza

Résumé
Ces dernières années les thèmes de liberté et démocratie ont remplacé ceux de développement et de construction de la nation et ils dominent les discours de politiques et d'études africaines. La majorité des analyses, celles qui diagnostiquent la nature de la crise africaine de gouvernement ainsi que celles qui prescrivent des solutions, ont tendance à être d'orientation politique et économique. L'article déclare que les discussions morales et culturelles de la crise et les rectifications apportées n'ont pas reçu l'attention qu'elle méritent. Plus particulièrement, il établit que les écrivains ont sondé les tourments des sociétés africaines modernes plus profondément que n'ont pu le faire les intellectuels. En fait, les écrivains ont été les premiers à noter que le potentiel émancipatoire d'indépendance avait été exagéré, et cela bien avant que les politologues n'aient découvert "la crise" africaine. Cet article explore les raisons derrière ce phénomène et suggère de permettre aux écrivains de s'exprimer de façon plus libre dans les discussions actuelles sur la démocratie et l'avenir de l'Afrique, car l'enjeu n'est pas seulement de concevoir de nouvelles structures politiques. Il est aussi de créer un nouvel ordre culturel et moral.

Introduction
In September 1993, I attended a conference on Malawi's 1964 Cabinet Crisis, a watershed event in the country's post-colonial history, at the Centre for Southern African Studies, University of York in England. Unusual in its composition, organisation, and objectives, this conference brought together academics, writers, politicians, and religious leaders, both Malawian and non-Malawian. No formal papers were presented. Instead, we examined the contemporary archival records and interrogated the memories of the participants and observers of the period. It was a serious, open, and sometimes
painful enquiry, aimed at reexamining and correcting the historical record, pondering the present, and divining the future. The conference was made possible by the reemergence of democratic forces in Malawi.

As is common at conferences, some of the most exciting deliberations took place in the corridors and bars. On a couple of occasions, the writers among us, myself and the poets David Rubadiri, Felix Mnthali, Lupenga Mphande, and Jack Mapanje, and the critic Hangson-Mpalive Msisya, sat late into the night, discussing and celebrating the process of political renewal in our beloved homeland, from which we had been exiled for varying lengths of time. We were celebrating, to quote the renowned Nigerian critic Abiola Irele, the unmasking of the crisis of political legitimacy in post-colonial Africa, the rupturing of an oppressive system, due to “a profound movement of the collective consciousness” (1992, 302). Indeed, we were celebrating, as Chinua Achebe (1992, 349) would put it, humanity in our country, in our continent—a humanity that has, in the past five centuries, faced and triumphed against the evils of slavery and the obscenities of colonialism, and is now confronting the consequent deformities of the post-colonial order.

But the older ones among us had of course gone through this before, in the early 1960s, during the first wind of change, the first transition to independence, to democracy. And so our celebration was tempered by caution and some trepidation. Indeed, we were only too aware of the potential pitfalls: there was the aborted transition in Kenya, Babangida’s farcical manoeuvres in Nigeria, not to mention the descent from tyranny into anarchy in Somalia, and the resumption of a murderous civil war after the elections in Angola.

Lurking beneath the celebratory reflections were also concerns about our role as writers in the unfolding drama, in the emerging new dispensation. Tyranny had created us, imprisoned and exiled many of us, enraged our consciences, and nourished our imaginations. It had given us the moral inspiration to write, the themes to write about, and often determined the languages, forms, and styles of our writing, as well as our audiences and production outlets. Now we were about to be orphaned from this tyranny. We were being challenged to recreate ourselves, our messages, imaginations, and practices.

These, then, are the issues I would like to address. What has led to the current transition to democracy in Africa? What is the content of these struggles and the likely trajectory of this democracy? What role have artists, especially writers, played in the struggles for democratisation? What does the cultural politics of democratisation entail? Most of the analyses, both those diagnosing the nature of the African crisis and prescribing solutions, tend to be political and economic in orientation. The cultural and moral dimensions of the crisis and its rectification have not received the attention they deserve. Writers, however, this article will argue, have probed into the tormented state of
the modern world more deeply than academics have been able. Thus, writers should have a greater voice in discourses about democracy and Africa's future.

The article is divided into two parts. It begins by outlining the conventional debate among social scientists on the causation and trajectory of the democratisation project in contemporary Africa. Then, it examines the creative writers' critique of post-colonial Africa, and the argument is made that Africa's democratic regeneration goes beyond the politics of multipartyism or the economics of development. It is also about cultural and moral renewal.

Prospero and Caliban

In the last few years a new "wind of change" has been blowing across Africa with breathtaking intensity. At the beginning of 1990, the majority of African governments were dictatorships. According to the classification of Freedom House, out of the fifty-two states it rated at the end of 1989, thirty-four were "not free," fifteen were "partly free," and only three were "free," that is, democratic (Diamond 1993, 3). By mid-1993, the ranks of the "democratic" states, to use the classification of the African Governance Program at the Carter Center, had swelled, and those of the "authoritarian" ones had fallen sharply. In its latest bulletin on Africa's fifty-four states, the Center lists fifteen as democratic; another fifteen as pursuing a "moderate" transition to democracy and nine an "ambiguous" transition; seven as enjoying "directed democracy"; four as authoritarian; and another four are characterised by "contested sovereignty," that is, civil war. 1

These changes parallel, in their quantitative scope and qualitative dimension, those that occurred at the turn of the 1960s when the majority of African colonies gained their independence. Africans, in fact, link the two and call the current processes of, and pressures for, change a "second independence" or "second liberation." Needless to say, there have been defeats, disappointments, and disasters. For example, in Algeria the movement towards democracy was snuffed by a military coup against the impending victory of the Islamic Salvation Front (Entelis 1992; Tahi 1992; Hermida 1992). Kleptocratic dictatorships still desperately cling to power in Zaire, Togo, and many other countries. And we all know about the Hobbesian nightmare of Liberia (Fleischman 1993; Huband 1993), not to mention Angola and Somalia.

These apparent abortions of democracy, no less than the seemingly successful births, point to a period of profound crisis and change, when the fundamental institutional arrangements of contemporary African states and societies were being questioned. How has this state of affairs come about? What are the factors behind this new "wind of change," this "second independence"? In answering these questions, we can better decipher the social
composition and content of the current democratic project as well as its possible trajectories.

One of the most popular explanations attributes the growth of democratic movements in Africa to external forces, especially the demonstration effect of the Eastern European revolutions of 1989, as well as pressures from Western governments and the liberalising dynamics of structural adjustment (Shaw 1993; Zeleza 1994a). The Eastern European revolutions undoubtedly helped the struggles for democracy in Africa. The end of the Cold War and superpower rivalry over the continent, in the felicitous phrase of President Museveni of Uganda, “orphaned” African dictators, who could no longer expect their godfathers in Washington or Moscow to run to their aid when they cried wolf in the face of internal struggles for reform (Mamdani 1990, 25). The subsequent collapse of the Soviet empire, Mahmood Mamdani has argued, “made it far more difficult for Western governments to explain away pressure for internal reform – either to people at home or to Africans – as a Trojan horse for ‘Soviet subversion’” (1992, 312).

Thus, the end of the Cold War opened up domestic spaces for democratic politics in many African countries. But the consequences were disastrous for a few countries, especially the formerly strategic “client” states, such as Angola, Zaire, and Somalia. Abandoned by their former superpower godfathers, Angola slid into a ferocious civil war (Funkel 1993; Pereira 1993; Simpson 1993; Hamill 1994; Shiner 1994), Zaire into anarchy (Komisar 1992), and Somalia collapsed (Samatar 1992; Omaar 1993; Weil 1993; Makinda 1993; Doyle 1993).

The demonstration effect of the Eastern European revolutions should not, however, be exaggerated. As Ali Mazrui has stated, “the age of political acquiescence in Africa was coming to an end well before the world ever heard much about Mikhail Gorbachev” (1990, 10–11), a point echoed by Colin Legum, a seasoned observer of the African scene. It has been argued that the Soweto eruptions and the West Bank “intifadah” had a far greater resonance and more immediate impact on the growth of the reform movements in sub-Saharan and North Africa respectively. This is to suggest that the “‘demonstration effects’ have also been evident from within Africa” (Diamond 1993, 4).

Similarly, the impact of western pressure has not always been examined with the care it deserves. It is true that western governments and donor agencies, including the mighty World Bank, IMF, and government aid agencies such as the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), have exerted pressure for democratisation. The question is why have they embraced the democratic project now, and not before? And what type of democracy?

Democratisation has increasingly come to be used as a condition for
economic assistance. And so the "economic conditionality" of structural adjustment became tied to the "political conditionality" of "good governance" (World Bank 1989). Structural adjustment programmes have generally involved devaluation of national currencies, drastic reduction in state expenditure, privatisation of state-owned enterprises, and liberalisation of the trade regime (Zeleza 1989b).

It all seemed so radical, so new, this marriage of economic "perestroika" and political "glasnost." But it evoked the defensive and reformist language of late colonialism. Moreover, playing the West's Prospero to Africa's Caliban in democratic discourse recalled the imperialist historiography of "planned decolonisation," which denied the role played by African nationalism in the decolonisation drama (Lee 1967; Morris 1980; Morris et al. 1980; Gifford and Louis 1982; Kirk-Greene 1979; Zeleza 1986a) and reflected the West's post-cold war triumphalism.

But this forced marriage between structural adjustment and democratisation was built on a fundamental contradiction. Structural adjustment required more, not less, state coercion, for it entailed the implementation of very unpopular programmes that were bound to be resisted (Hutchful 1988). It would be easy to accuse western governments, therefore, of hypocrisy. After all, they once actively supported and defended Africa's ruthless kleptocrats, the Mobutus and the Mois, the Bandas and the Bothas. Indeed, even in the 1990s, their rhetoric of opposition to these dictatorships did not always match their action, as some of us suspected and found out.

Hypocrisy is, however, too crude and slippery a term to capture the historical forces that have forced western governments and donors to champion democracy in Africa, even if only to neutralise and coopt the reform movements, as Samir Amin (1990) has argued. The fact remains that these governments and donors, to quote Thandika Mkandawire, "have been shaken by the realisation that the regimes they have thus far backed are on shaky grounds. To curry favour with the new movements, [they] have had to make sharp turns in their policies" (1992, 10).

Its colonial pedigree aside, the language of "good governance" resonated with the anti-corruption campaigns of the African reform movements themselves (Harsch 1993) and that of the Economic Commission for Africa, the most eloquent institutional voice against the World Bank-IMF version of structural adjustment in the continent (ECA 1987, 1988, 1989). But the World Bank's "tropicalised democracy," as Mkandawire (1992, 15) ridicules it, which limits accountability to an anti-corruption drive, and equates democracy with efficient management, is a poor substitute for the broader democracy advocated by the ECA and many reform movements in Africa.

I argue, therefore, "that the processes of democratisation in Africa have been aided less by the liberal rhetoric of western governments and donor
agencies than by their iron fisted policies of structural adjustment, whose implementation has entailed extreme state coercion and massive retrenchment, which have provoked widespread popular resistance" (Zeleza 1992, 26). Far more positive has been the influence of social movements in western countries. Western triumphalism hides the fact that democracy in these countries is not "complete," that the "dominant historical mode of politics," in Wamba-dia-Wamba's (1992, 2) terminology, is in crisis. Beneath the comfortable exterior of John Kenneth Galbraith's (1992) "culture of contentment" lies profound political alienation.

The western social movements have, in fact, risen partly in response to the limits, some would say crisis, of liberal democracy. They are organised around struggles for feminist, gay, civil and community rights, and for the environment, among other issues. These movements have helped extend the boundaries of participatory democracy and empowerment and put these issues on the international agenda. It can be argued that western governments' and agencies' concern with democracy in Africa reflects the growth and pressures exerted by these movements (Hutchful 1992).

Thus, the democratic transition in Africa is not, and cannot be, simply a turnkey project imported from the West, nor an imitation of the Eastern European anti-communist revolutions. It has its own history. But Africa does not live in splendid isolation. The process of democratisation in the continent has been, and will continue to be, affected by international events. It is occurring in the context of simultaneous, multiple, and contradictory transitions in the global order, characterised by the end of the cold war and the growth of multilateralism, as well as by an international civil society, globalisation and regionalisation of the capitalist economy, and the re-emergence of nationalist, ethnic, and sectarian solidarities and chauvinisms.

The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born

Only a few years ago, it was almost an article of faith in Africanist circles that civil society in Africa was fragile, crimped either by primordial allegiances, parochial schisms, and narrow patron-client loyalties, or by the post-colonial state, which was characterised variously as "overdeveloped" (Saul 1974), "anarchic" (Shaw 1982), "weak," and lacking in institutionalisation (Jackson and Rosberg 1982a, 1982b), economically "irrational" (Bates 1983), "decadent" (Young and Turner 1985), "incomplete" (Graf 1988), "non-hegemonic" (Fatton 1989), and "corporatist" (Nyang'oro and Shaw 1989). Goran Hyden's (1980) thesis of the "uncaptured peasantry" seemed to confirm that Africans preferred the "exit" option to pursuing democratic struggles in the political arena dominated by the state, leading to the emergence of what J.A. Ayoade (1988) and Barry Riddell (1992) have characterised as "states without citizens."
So fascinated did some scholars become with the "exit" or "withdrawal" of key social forces within civil society, that they did not even think structural adjustment would provoke serious political upheaval [Bienen and Gersovits 1986]. Part of the problem was conceptual, the tendency by political scientists whether from the Hegelian or Gramscian traditions, to see state-society boundaries in absolute or binary terms, as opposed, rather than intepenetrating, structural arrangements, social and moral spaces [Mersha 1990; Lemarchand 1992]. Despite the current struggles, this fascination with the politics of "exit," which is based on a sharp and simplistic state-society dichotomy, still finds adherents [Fatton 1990].

In hindsight, these analyses, like most analyses of the Soviet empire that assumed its somnolent permanence, appear naive. Many African scholars, including myself, did not anticipate that the changes that have engulfed Africa in the last few years would come so soon. My excuse is that I am a historian, not a social scientist who studies the present or tries to crystal-gaze into the future! But to some, these changes did not come completely by surprise. Mkandawire (1992, 4) has noted that in the 1980s, while Africanist scholars were busy bemoaning or applauding the "exit" of peasants and other exploited social classes, "African social scientists moved in a different direction, casting attention more towards the study of social movements and democracy" [see also Nyong'o 1987; Mamdani, Mkandawire and Wamba-Dia-Wamba 1988]. Mamdani notes warily: "the same circles who used to argue only yesterday that democracy was at best a developmental luxury, today uphold democracy as a developmental necessity!" (1992a) 8.

Long before these African social scientists had discovered social movements in the 1980s, African writers, almost from the dawn of independence, knew that the masses were dissatisfied and hungry for meaningful change. The rhetoric of nation-building and development could not fool Ousmane Sembene's ([1960] 1986) restive workers, Ngugi Wa Thiongo's (1967) militant peasants, Bessie Head's (1969, 1971) rural exploited women, and Buchi Emecheta's (1979) urban working class women. Achebe (1963, 1966) and Ayi Kwei Armah (1968) showed the economic and cultural hollowness of modernisation, before African and Africanist scholars discovered from the 1970s, through the lenses of dependency theory imported from Latin America, that the venerated god had no clothes. And writers as diverse as Alex La Guma (1972), from the dungeons of apartheid to Ama Ata Aidoo (1972, 1979) from the faded Black Star, had been bemoaning exploitation and celebrating the struggles for liberation by oppressed social classes, peoples, and women, long before academics, variously inspired by Marxist, feminist, and other radical ideologies, began systematically investigating and championing equality and empowerment.

Thus, the social forces behind Africa's present struggles for democracy have been consistently chronicled, dissected, and applauded in African liter-
ture in the last three decades. At the heart of the drive for democratisation lies the fact that the post-colonial state and its ruling elite have lost legitimacy, as Peter Abrahams (1956) predicted they would in *A Wreath for Udomo*, before Frantz Fanon (1961) wrote his angry, prophetic, and influential critique of nationalism and the post-colonial order, *The Wretched of the Earth*. The reasons for this and dimensions of the loss are many and varied. They are political, economic, social, cultural, and moral. It is now hard to remember the euphoria that greeted independence, which was won after long, difficult, and sometimes protracted, guerrilla struggles. Independence, it was believed, signalled the end of Africa’s exploitation and humiliation and marked the beginning of a new era, the emergence of what Kwame Nkrumah (1964, 1965) called the “African personality” onto the world stage.

We now know, as many writers warned, that the hopes of a new beginning and the beliefs that independence would mark a revolutionary conjuncture in Africa were illusory. The weight of Africa’s pre-colonial and colonial pasts was heavier than most realised or cared to admit in the intoxicating moment of independence. It cannot be overemphasised that “contradictions within African societies were not transcended but given new complications by the impact of colonialism” (Irele 1992, 297). Far from consolidating the harmonising “us” versus “them” rhetoric of nationalist discourse, independence gave the centrifugal forces of the fragile “territorial nation” room to dance. And praying at the altar of developmentalism, of modernisation in the western image, Africa’s post-independence rulers had no time for the blessings of Africa’s own gods and cultures.

The fact that the nationalists inherited, in Basil Davidson’s (1973, 94) memorable metaphor, an independence “dish” that “was old and cracked and little fit for any further use,” hardly helped. “Worse than that,” he continues, “it was not an empty dish. For it carried the junk and jumble of a century of colonial muddle and ‘make do’ and this the new . . . ministers had to accept along with the dish itself. What shone upon its supposedly golden surface was not the reflection of new ideas and ways of liberation, but the shadows of old ideas and ways of servitude.”

The nationalists, in other words, inherited the colonial leviathan with all its authoritarian tentacles. The failure to trim these tentacles reflected both the class interests of the new rulers and the weaknesses of the anti-colonial movements, and these countries’ continued vulnerability to hostile international forces. I note elsewhere:

The institutional reflexes of the colonial state were authoritarian because the state was an external imposition constructed through force, and it was an agency for the penetration of the capitalist mode of production and the guarantor of its development over the articulated corpses of indigenous modes of production (Zeleza 1989b, 42).
The intensification of statism in nationalist discourse after independence was accentuated by the underdeveloped nature of the indigenous capitalist class and the weak material base of the new rulers. The state became their instrument of accumulation and corruption their salvation. As the Nigerian novelist, Festus Iyayi (1986, 31), has put it, being located in the neo-colonies themselves, the aspiring indigenous capitalists had no colonies or peripheries to loot or plunder, so they depended upon exclusively internal sources of monetary capital.

Besides, during the struggles for independence, politics was “essentially referred to the state principle,” that is, politics was seen as the state, and the state was politics (Wamba-dia-Wamba 1992, 11). The equation of politics with the state was rooted in the homogenising ambitions of nationalist ideology and the nature of the reforms implemented in the twilight years of colonial rule. The political monopolies of the one-party state and military rule were incubated in nationalist ideas that posited the independence struggle in essentialist and exclusivist terms. After independence, now that the dreaded colonialists, the “them,” had apparently gone, it was time for the “us,” the “people,” to build and develop the nation. Pursuit of separate class, social, cultural, or gender interests, could be dismissed as “sectional” and, therefore, delegitimised. 10

The political reductionism of nationalist discourse was facilitated by the fact that the reforms introduced towards the end of colonial rule “undid the ties between political and social movements” (Mamdani 1992a, 314). The social movements, such as trade unions and peasant, women’s, social welfare, and religious organisations, increasingly lost their autonomy, for they were required to obtain legal recognition before they could be allowed to operate. The result was that “accountability to membership became secondary to the organisation’s accountability to the authorities.” As the social movements atrophied, the “political movements that once articulated a broad social vision were gradually reshaped by their leaders into vote-gathering machines” (Mamdani 1992a, 314). Thus, the “disintegration” of the links between political and social movements, or what some have referred to as the “class alliance” of the independence movement (Nyong’o 1992), was already evident at independence. After independence, the compromised autonomy of the social movements and the statism of nationalist discourse deepened, thanks to the new imperative of development. Developmentalism was, in fact, not new. It was an ideology of late colonialism. Even as radical an ideology as ujamaa had its antecedents in this discourse (Feierman 1990).

The post-colonial leaders worshipped at the altar of economic development. Developmentalism became their raison d’etre and Achilles heel. The post-colonial state’s rationality rested in promoting and sustaining accumulation for the aspiring indigenous bourgeoisie as well as the ever-present
imperialist predators. Its legitimacy lay in providing more schools, hospitals, better jobs, and all those sinecures of colonial privilege to the expectant masses. Thus, after independence, the state in Africa was under enormous pressure to mediate the often conflicting interests of national capital, international capital, and the exploited classes.

It was a juggler’s nightmare, but at first the leviathan appeared capable of balancing the conflicting demands. Lest we forget, in these days of “Afropessimism,” the puny economic and social infrastructures left by colonialism were greatly expanded. Especially remarkable was the growth of education. For the Sub-Saharan region, excluding South Africa, enrolments in primary schools rose from fourteen million in 1960 to fifty-two million in 1988, in secondary schools from one to eleven million, and in universities from 56,000 to 580,000 (Landell-Mills 1992, 554). Health facilities increased and nutrition levels improved. Life expectancy rose and death rates fell. All this led not only to the rapid growth of population, but also to significant changes in population distribution and social differentiation. Urbanisation grew, and so did the working and middle classes.\(^1\)

But the multiple contradictions and frustrations of the neo-colonial order, with its trappings of independence built on limited sovereignty, political posturing without economic power, and Africanisation without genuine indigenisation began taking their toll. State intervention in the organisation of the economic, social, cultural, and political processes intensified as the contradictions deepened and became more open. In the immortal words of a Lesotho chief: “We,” he said, “have two problems – rats and the government!”\(^2\)

The economic crisis that gripped many African countries from the mid to late 1970s knocked the pedestals of rationality and legitimacy from under the feet of the post-colonial state. The economic, social, and political dimensions of the crisis are too depressingly familiar to be recounted here.\(^3\) The SAPs implemented in the 1980s, even the World Bank and IMF now grudgingly concede, only made matters worse.\(^4\) They led to losses of the post-independence gains in welfare, the erosion of populist programmes, and “compromised the state as the bastion of national sovereignty and ... raised the question as to whom the state is accountable,” — the local society or external forces, such as the World Bank and the IMF (Mkandawire 1992, 7).

As a result of, and in response to, these crises, the post-colonial state assumed a progressively more precarious and repressive character. By the 1980s most African leaders had squandered all legitimacy bestowed on them by the nationalist victories of the 1950s and early 1960s. They could deliver neither economic development nor political stability, let alone social justice or freedom. Anti-authoritarian and anti-statist movements and discourses grew.

Various social movements began flexing their muscles in both urban and
rural areas. In the urban areas, the most visible included trade unions, student movements, and professional associations, while in the rural areas, a wide variety of peasant movements sprang up [Isaacman 1990]. Many of the social movements, especially the religious and women's movements, straddled village and city. The transmission of messages of popular discontent was facilitated by the spread of mass communications, including the growth of alternative media, both open and clandestine, local and foreign, and Africa's dense networks of oral communication [Diamond 1993, 4; Landell-Mills 1992, 552-53; Martin, 1992].

The reform movements were, therefore, numerous and varied in their agendas. They were organised around the idioms of class, ethnicity, religion, and gender. The classes seeking redress were the over-exploited peasantry, underpaid workers, the restive middle classes, and out-of-power politicians itching to get back into office. Also in line for democratic incorporation were marginalised or oppressed ethnic, national, and communal groups. Women, too, have been seeking empowerment, arguing, in the words of Ama Ata Aidoo, that men's political monopoly has lasted long enough. "If they alone could save us," she writes, "they would have done so by now. But instead every decade brings us grimmer realities. It is high time African women moved into center stage" [1992, 325].

Devil on the Cross

African writers were among the first to note that the emancipatory potential of independence had been overestimated. Indeed, while many historians and social scientists were busy celebrating the achievements of nationalism or devising models of nation-building and development, African writers had already discovered that the post-colonial emperor was naked [Wastberg 1968]. The failure of independence became the overriding theme of African literature in the 1960s. Already in the 1950s, writers such as Peter Abrahams (1956) were warning against exaggerated expectations, indeed, predicting that disillusionment would follow independence.

Potential disillusionment turned into actual disenchantment in Achebe's (1966) *A Man of the People* and Wole Soyinka's (1965) *The Interpreters*, then into despair in Armah's (1968, 1970, 1972) bitter trilogy, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born, Fragments*, and *Why Are We So Blest*, and in Kofi Awoonor's (1971) *This Earth, My Brother*. In the 1970s, Ngugi Wa Thiongo (1977; 1982) channelled the by now deafening critique of the moral bankruptcy of Africa's post-colonial ruling elite into a furious commitment towards their overthrow in *Petals of Blood* and *Devil on the Cross*. Thus, the post-colonial novels in Africa, as Kwame Appiah states, "are novels of delegitimation: rejecting the Western imperium, it is true, but also rejecting the nationalist project of the postcolonial national bourgeoisie" [1992, 152].
Thus, literature in independent Africa was as deeply political as it had been during the colonial period. The reason for this is simple: the barbarities of colonial and post-colonial rule were too great to allow African writers the indulgence of posing the small questions of post-modernist literature. As the British critic, Peter Lewis, recently put it, to many of African writers, “the post-modernist preoccupations of many leading Western writers, indulging in parody and pastiche and playing with words and forms, must seem the nadir of aesthetic decadence” (1992, 76).

Needless to say, not all this literature was good. Commenting on Heinemann’s African Writers Series, Soyinka, Africa’s first Nobel laureate in literature, has stated: “the series, of course, was very uneven; quite a large portion of it was total dross, but a fair amount, quite a good amount was excellent literature . . . it occurred to me that the series was adopting a policy of anything goes because it’s African and therefore must be published” (Wilkinson 1992, 94).

This view has been echoed in a recent London Magazine review of my novel, Smouldering Charcoal, in which Michael Kelly contends:

African writing in English has had its wooden, poorly written, ranting, tedious, pretentious exemplars. The African Writers series has at times seemed to be imitating the United Nations’ policy of national representation for its own sake (1993, 144).

Mercifully, he had nothing but good things to say about my novel.

Some African writers and critics are, in fact, uncomfortable with what they regard as the excessive politicisation of African literature. They insist that the writer’s responsibility is strictly to the perfection of his/her craft. The Nigerian critic, Dan Izevbaye (1977), for example, has long hoped for the development of a literature with a “suppressed social reference” so that non-sociological criticism can advance. This call for technical and formalistic criticism is supported by many “Africanist” critics and vigorously opposed by the “Nationalists,” as Jeyifo (1990, 37) calls them, who tend to claim, “’natural’ proprietary rights in the criticism of African literature” and emphasise “extra-literary” or “non-literary” evaluative criteria rooted in anthropological and sociological paradigms. African literary criticism, of course, transcends the “Africanist-Nationalist” divide, for there are also Marxist and feminist critical perspectives (Gugelberger 1985; Owomoyela 1992; Fran 1984; Jones, et al. 1987; Davies and Graves 1986; Davies and Fido 1993; Williams 1992).

The polarised “sociological” and “literary” readings of African literature have arisen, because this literature is consumed through a critical treadmill based on European literary traditions with their pseudouniversalism, whereby local European customs are elevated to parables of the human
condition, while the evocation of local African customs amounts to mere ethnography. Often in Western universities, African novels are regarded more as academic travelogues, used in social science courses as windows into the African social and cultural worlds, than as literary pieces. This devaluation of African literary texts reflects the wider devaluation of African experiences and ideas and resonates with the Eurocentric discourses on democracy discussed above and the well-known neo-colonialist discourses on development. In short, the ideology that assumes that the omnipotent World Bank and IMF, as opposed to Africans, should structure African "democracy" and "development" is the same one that values western literature as "art" and African literature for its "politics" and "ethnographic" insights.

The question, therefore, is not one of whether or not African literature is political, for all literature is political, but what type of politics it expresses. The intensity, and sometimes ugliness, of the African literary debates, indicate that this literature articulates the politics of liberation, politics that challenges all earlier legitimating narratives in the "name of the ethical universal; in the name of humanism" (Appiah 1992, 155), rather than the post-modernist politics of reactionary impotence, whose delegitimation of past narratives is an end in itself.

African literature produced since independence has been political in two senses. First, the theme of resistance has featured prominently. Indeed, it has been a literature of resistance par excellence. The finest of this literature, argues Jeyifo (1992, 354), presents "a sophisticated testamentary tradition that taps the deepest democratic aspirations of the continent and its peoples." "The manifest concern," Irele (1990a, xiv) believes, "of the writers to speak of the immediate issues of social life, to narrate the tensions that traverse their world – to relate their imaginative expression to their particular universe of experience in all its existential concreteness . . . leave[s] the African critic with hardly any choice but to give precedence to the powerful referential thrust of our literature".

African literature has also been political in the way it has been received by both Africa's dictatorial regimes and popular audiences. As is well known, "a great number of African writers have had their works banned by these regimes, many have been jailed for long terms, and not a few have been killed or hounded into involuntary exile" (Jeyifo 1992, 353). The list of prominent African writers who have suffered detention or been forced into exile is a long and depressing one. From South Africa are Alex La Guma, Dennis Brutus, Breyten Breytenbach, Bessie Head, and Njabulo Ndebele. Across the Zambezi, in my own homeland, are Felix Mnthali and Jack Mapanje. Kenya has its Micere Mugos and Ngugi wa Thiong'os, Somalia its Nurridin Farahs, Egypt its Nawal el-Saadawis, and Nigeria its Festus Iyayis and Wole Soyinkas.
This is as good a measure as any of the seriousness with which African literature is taken by African regimes. Achebe (1992, 349) recounts an encounter with a Swedish writer at a conference, who said to him and his colleagues: "'You fellows are lucky. Your governments put you in prison. Here in Sweden nobody pays any attention to us no matter what we write.' We," Achebe says sarcastically, "apologised profusely to him for our undeserved luck!" The political marginalisation of the arts in the West might be seen as the price European artists have paid for insisting, since the nineteenth century, on "an intrinsic view of art: art for art's sake" (Schipper 1990, 62).

African audiences also take African literature seriously. As is the case in most repressive societies, literature and art become a set of coded messages of protest, resistance, and affirmation, relished privately and collectively by brutalised souls refusing to be numbed into total submission. Ngugi tells the story of how, when his novel, Devil on the Cross, and the play, I Will Marry When I Want, for which he had been jailed, were first published in 1980, he and the publishers planned to issue, 

... only a few thousand copies of each, hoping to sell them over a period of two, three, four or more years. But in fact the first editions of each of these works were snapped up within two or three weeks of publication. ... Now the reception of the novel and the play was really fantastic because they – particularly the novel – were read in buses, in matatus, ordinary taxis; they were read in homes; workers grouped together during the lunch hour or whenever they had their own time to rest and would get one of their literate members to read for them. So in fact the novel was appropriated by the people and made part and parcel of their oral tradition (Wilkinson 1992, 129).

Writing in independent Africa, therefore, has been a deadly serious business. What is often at stake is not merely the possible ridicule of self-righteous critics, but the vengeful wrath of nervous, tyrannical regimes. Consequently, creative writing becomes not merely a bohemian indulgence, a celebration of the exhilarating powers of the human imagination, but a passionate interrogation of the deformed and tortured psyche of modern society. Contrary to widespread misconceptions outside of Africa, most African writers primarily write for their people, and not to titillate western curiosity. Unfortunately, the very tyrannies they criticise and ridicule sometimes make it difficult for them to be read at home.

One conclusion we can draw from all this is that African writers, by calling, choice, and circumstance, have been in the forefront of democratic discourse in Africa, probably longer and more consistently than any other group of intellectual workers. It is clear that this has something to do do with the question of audience. Unlike the social scientists with their hermetic discourses, which are often impenetrable to disciplinary outsiders, creative
writers produce for a public audience. They tend, therefore, to engage the contested public issues, concerns, and visions in a way that academics do not. The creative imagination, moreover, is not encumbered by the strict discursive structures of the academic enterprise.

Like the disappointed masses, it did not take long for African writers to begin lamenting and vigorously protesting the abortion of the first transition to independence. Their deep sense of betrayal was, ironically, a reflection of their class position and ambiguous relationship to the ruling elite. With few exceptions, most of the African writers writing in the European languages, who I have been discussing in this presentation, belonged to the elite or national bourgeoisie, the very class that assumed control of state power. They articulated the same nationalist discourse. In fact, they took it to its logical conclusion. They believed passionately in the unity and strength of the independence struggle, in the emancipatory power of independence. They also hoped independence would lead to the regeneration of African cultures long scarred by European slavery, colonisation, and racism.

Many of them tried to commit Amilcar Cabral’s (1969) class suicide, not simply because they misread Fanon or were ideologically confused, as Neil Lazarus (1990) has argued in his fascinating study. There was, in addition, a compelling aesthetic reason. These writers, schooled in western literary traditions, were anxious to forge a distinctive voice for themselves by tapping into the rich artistic reservoirs of their cultures. In this sense, they sought to commit not only class suicide, but also cultural suicide and rebirth, to strip their artistic imaginations of western influences. Many found salvation in the enchanting, haunting, and enigmatic myths, folktales, poetry, drama, and epics of oral tradition.

Oral tradition seduced even those, especially among the English-speaking writers, who were violently opposed to the negritudist affirmation and romanticisation of Africa’s supposed idyllic and undynamic primordialities. 22 African poetry shed European idioms and western literary influences and acquired the indigenous accents and rhythms of oral tradition (Okpewho 1988; Ojaide 1992). African theatre reinvigorated itself by incorporating and reconstructing the oral genres, forms, and conventions (Jones 1978; Etherton 1982; Barber 1987; James 1990; Wilkinson 1992). 23 Novelists soon followed suit. They included the old masters, such as Ayi Kwe Armah, whose vision lost its bitter defeatism in the warm, creative ambience of orature that infuses his last two novels, Two Thousand Seasons and The Healers (Okpewho 1983; Lazarus 1992, Chapter 6), and Ngugi, whose devastating attack on modern Kenya found a new intensity in the magic realism of Devil on the Cross (Stratton 1983). Many of the writers who emerged on the literary scene in the 1980s also drew on African mythology and orality, from Chenjerai Hove (1989) in his acclaimed, deeply poetic first novel, Bones, to...

All too often, literary critics and many African writers themselves see the reappropriation of the genre of oral narrative as a return to authenticity, for it is believed that Africa is ontologically oral, while writing is European. "Orality and writing are seen not only as exclusive domains but as successive moments" (Julien 1992, 21). These essentialist binaries are historically false, for as Albert Gerald (1981) and Harold Scheub (1985) have shown, writing existed in Sub-Saharan Africa, that Africanists' Africa, long before the arrival of the first Europeans. The Ethiopians, for example, were writing before the English had learnt the Roman alphabet. Thus, oral and written forms have coexisted and enriched each other for a long time. The apparent reappropriation of oral genres is not, Eileen Julien has keenly observed, simply a "search for authenticity," but accountability, "a desire to bridge a gap . . . between two populaces, one rich, the other poor, one literate, the other oral" (1992, 158).

Along with building the aesthetic bridges, African writers moved away from the elitist preoccupation with the existential angst of intellectuals and other members of the political elite, and began chronicling the tribulations and celebrating the lives and struggles of ordinary people. The growth in African women's writing expanded and deepened the scope of African literature, for new worlds of experience were opened up – the ironic joys of motherhood in Flora Nwapa's (1966) *Efuru* and Emecheta's (1979) *The Joys of Motherhood*, the feminist impulses and visions of Aidoo's (1972, 1979) *No Sweetness Here* and *Our Sister Killjoy*, and Mariama Ba's (1981) *So Long a Letter*, and the searing tales of struggle in Head's (1974) *A Question of Power*, and Nawal el Saadawi's (1983) *Woman at Point Zero*.

The self-glorification of the writer "as teacher," as Achebe (1977) once put it, or as "the voice of vision in his own time," according to Soyinka (Wastberg 1968, 21), gave way to Ngugi Wa Thiongo's (1981) humble injunction that "African writers must be with the people."  

Thus, since independence African writers, far more than the professional academics, have exhibited a commitment to the political cause of the "masses" and cultural regeneration. While the latter were busy importing theoretical models from the western and eastern blocs, African writers were delving deeper into the African condition. For one thing, the writers could not effectively borrow European sensibility and settings, in the same way that their academic counterparts could borrow theories manufactured in Europe and use African settings as empirical fodder. It is significant that
western literary movements, such as postmodernism, have not found the same resonance among African writers that western paradigms have among academics. Indeed, sometimes African academics seem to judge their sophistication by their capacity to dabble in the terminologies of each intellectual fad that emerges from the intellectual factories of the West. In short, the internal orientation of African writing in inspiration, focus, and audience, contrasts markedly with the dependency of African scholarship on external discourses, as the philosopher Paulin Hountondji (1990), has noted (also see Mkandawire 1989; Zeleza 1992).

This triple commitment to the "masses" at the political and cultural levels and in terms of audience, made, I would argue, many African writers from the early 1960s painfully aware of the disjuncture between the promises and realities of independence. They felt deeply betrayed by the neo-colonial tyrannies and kleptocracies. This sense of betrayal was real but mistaken. If the African ruling elite were guilty at all, this guilt was in a betrayal of the illusory dreams of nationalist discourse, and not the concrete interests of their class position.

Ironically, this failure, or perhaps unwillingness, to separate the rhetoric of nationalist political mobilisation and the imperatives of capitalist class accumulation may be what enabled many African writers to offer such powerful indictments of the post-colonial order, and be among the carriers of the democratic discourse forged in the crucible of the struggles for the first independence to this moment, when history seems to be offering us a second chance.

Conclusion: Smouldering Charcoal

At the end of my novel, the narrator, Catherine, says with defiant simplicity: "The future has begun." But has it? And what kind of future? What type of democracy is going to emerge out of this current transition? Will it be possible to create a social democracy, one in which both the political and economic domains are based on democratic principles, as Samir Amin (1990, 6) and Bade Onimode (1992) would advocate. Or is it going to be, as Ibbo Mandaza (1990) and Archie Mafeje (1992) suspect, a "compradorial democracy," whatever that means. Or will "multipartyism" triumph without genuine pluralism, as Mamdani (1992a, 313), Wamba-dia-Wamba (1992, 22-23), and Claude Ake fear (1993, 240)? Or will it all blow up, and yesterday's despised tyrannies turn into tomorrow's ghastly anarchies, as Aristide Zolberg (1992) warns? Will new authoritarianisms, perhaps of the Islamic "fundamentalist" kind, emerge out of the wreckage, as Legum (1992, 205) and Paul Henze (1992) caution? Or, perhaps might "the fears of further descent into hell . . . create opportunities for more egalitarian, popular, and representative systems of governance," as Robert Fatton (1990, 456) hopes.
These are all difficult questions, weighty trepidations. The simple answer is that we do not know what the future will bring. Crystal-gazing is an art best left to soothsayers. It is hard enough to comprehend the present. The last thing we need at this moment is more Afro-pessimism. But we should also avoid exaggerated hope. All one can say, with any reasonable degree of confidence, is that Africa's transitions to democracy will take many forms and directions. Certainly, the future does not belong to democratic models imported from outside, but to those rooted in African traditions. By traditions, I do not mean a return to some mythical "indigenous roots" suggested by George Ayittey (1991, 1992, 216-17), or to Maxwell Owusu's (1992) pristine village democracy. This is the mystical language of nationalist discourse, of Afrocentric essentialism. 26

I refer to traditions of struggle, not false harmonies, traditions that celebrate Africa's diversities, rather than its imaginary uniformities. Governance must be culturally rooted in the current proliferation and richness of associational life, and promote what Basil Davidson and Barry Munslow (1990, 11) call "the increasing decentralisations of power and the increasing regionalisations of power," or in Ngugi Wa Thiongo's (1993, xvii) words, moving centres "between nations and within nations." Pluralism has to mean far more than periodic electoral contests. I believe the struggles we are witnessing in Africa today are not simply for reforms in the mode of governance or economic development. They are also aimed at the cultural and moral regeneration of our societies.

Therefore, the value of creative work and reflection, deciphering and probing the cultural and moral conditions of our existence in our numerous and diverse countries and communities, affirming our humanity and our possibilities, is inestimable. This undertaking goes beyond the discourse of academic and analytical projects with their objectivist ambitions. As purveyors of the animating powers of the human imagination, but at the same time beholden to publics wider than the exclusive circles of academia, and confronted by the obscenities of material deprivation, cultural confusion, and moral decadence, African writers have used, and will continue to use, their critical consciousness to provoke the consciences of their societies and the world at large. They are thrust into this position by the vocation of creative writing and the weight of African history. They constitute a mirror of what their societies are, and can, and perhaps ought to be.

Thus, as I reflect on the meetings I had with my colleagues, in York, England, I realise our tasks are larger than chronicling the political ravages of postcolonial tyranny and the challenges of democratic rebirth, for our responsibility as writers is to imagine and understand the human possibilities from the vantage point of our specific histories and locations in contemporary Africa. We cannot, therefore, afford the indulgence of blind hope or
despair. We require sober reflection and renewed commitment to the recreation of our humanity. And that is a profoundly cultural and moral issue that goes beyond conventional academic analyses and discourses.

Notes
1. For a definition of these terms, see Africa Demos 3, no. 2: 19.
2. See the excellent papers in Review of African Political Economy (Special Issue on Africa in a New World Order), no. 50. Many lament Africa's marginalisation following the end of the Cold War. The declining economic and strategic importance of Africa to the United States, for example, though, may have been exaggerated, according to Volman (1993).
3. He states categorically (Legum 1992, 205) that the collapse of communism “was not what has driven Africa to pursue a new political direction. The Second Liberation, in fact, preceded the changes heralded by glasnost and grew out of local experience.”
4. Both Mazrui (1990) and Mamdani (1992) seem to agree on this point.
5. He contends that Africa’s “second liberation” may be traced to two crucial events – the release of Nelson Mandela in February 1990 and the convening of a national conference in Benin that stripped President Mathieu Kerekou of effective power.
7. For an earlier analysis of the “exit” and “voice” options, see Hirschman (1970).
8. In 1990, Mamdani (1990a) took the Africanist political science establishment in the US to task for its simplistic analyses and capping to American foreign policy in pushing for ill-conceived “political conditionality” as a way of bringing democracy to Africa. For an outraged Africanist’s response, see Hyden (1990).
9. There are still apologists who deny that the crisis of the post-colonial state has anything to do with the nature of the colonial state itself. See Austin (1992).
10. This language was used, for example, to delegitimise workers’ autonomy and incorporate trade unions into state apparatuses. See Zeleza (1986a).
11. Africa’s population grew by 2.4 times between 1960 and 1991, from 280 to 672 million, while life expectancy rose from 37.5 in the mid-1950s to 55 years in 1990, which is still below the world average of 66 years. The urban population rose from 52 million in 1960, or 18 percent of the total in 1952, to 220 million, or 33% in 1991. These statistics are culled from World Resources Institute et al. (1989), Encyclopedia Britannica (1993), World Bank (1992).
12. Quoted in Ayittey (1992, 216), who notes that in the early 1980s, there were more than 3,000 state enterprises in Africa, many of which, he contends, echoing the World Bank line, were inefficient.
14. The publication of Sub-Saharan Africa: From Crisis to Sustainable Growth, by the
World Bank in 1989, signalled grudging recognition that SAPs, as traditionally conceived, were not having the desired effect. Ironically, earlier in 1989, the Bank and the UNDP published a report, *Africa's Adjustment and Growth in the 1980s* [World Bank and UNDP 1989], lauding the success of SAPs. See my trenchant review of this report (Zeleza 1993b). Stein and Nafziger (1991) have dismissed the shift in the former study as more “rhetorical” than “real.” Also see Parfit (1990).

15. For a historiographical overview of the literature on women’s history and movements, see Zeleza (1994b).

16. Ake (1993) makes the same point and tries to argue that Africa’s democracy has to be unique. Unfortunately, this “uniqueness” is not predicated on the specific and concrete nature of these struggles but on facile, anthropologised “socio-cultural realities” of Africa.

17. Here the term “postcolonial” is used strictly in the sense of the period after independence, not in the context of the concept of “postcoloniality.” The concept of “postcolonial literature” is problematic in the way it privileges colonialism in world history and telescopes crucial geopolitical distinctions into invisibility, as McClintock (1992), Shohat (1992), and others have observed.

18. He adds: “if the series had been run by African intellectuals I would suggest that at least a one-third of what was published would never have been published. . . .”

19. The most well-known, and in some circles notorious, statement of the “nationalist” or Afrocentric position is Chinweizu and Madubuike (1980).

20. Irele’s (1990b) case for the existence of “the African imagination” is, however, not compelling.

21. This comes out quite clearly in the interviews in Egejuru (1980) with African writers, who were all asked who they write for. They reply that they write primarily for their communities, countries, and Africans in general. The writers are: Leopold Sedar Senghor, the father of negritude; Chinua Achebe, the doyen of modern African writing in English; Ousmane Sembene, the great Senegalese “social realist” writer as he calls himself; Mohammed Dib, the most prolific writer of North Africa; Camara Laye, Guinea’s most famous writer; Cheik Hamidou Kane from Senegal, whose reputation rests on one published book, *Ambigious Adventure* [London: Heinemann, 1965], one of the great classics of African literature; Ezekiel Mphahlele, the grand old man of South African letters; Pathe Giagne, a less well-known figure; and Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Kenya’s and, indeed, East Africa’s leading writer.

22. Interestingly to Leopold Senghor, one of the architects of the negritude movement, there was no contradiction between negritude and “francophonie,” according to Kesteloot (1990); also see Kennedy (1989).

23. This is evident in the interviews with African playwrights, such as Wole Soyinka, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Micere Mugo, and Mohammed ben Abdallah in Wilkinson (1992); and with the Tanzanian playwright, Penina Muhando, in James (1990). Also, see Jones (1978), Etherton (1982) and Barber (1987).

24. Of course, not all younger writers use oral tradition. For example, Zimbabwe’s Tsitsi Dangarembga, author of the fine novel, *Nervous Conditions* [London: Women’s Press, 1988], laments: “I personally do not have a fund of our cultural tradition or oral history to draw from.” See her interview in Wilkinson (1992, 191).

25. There are, of course, some writers who believe writers are a special breed. For example, the Nigerian poet, Odia Ofeimun, is “still quite married to [the] Shelleyan position that writers are actually unacknowledged legislators,” while the South African poet, Mazisi Kunene, says he is “chosen.” See interviews with the two writers in Wilkinson (1992, 67, 144).

26. For a thoughtful critique of the essentialism of Afrocentricity, see Appiah (1992).
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