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Ernest N. Emenyonu, ed. *Goatskin Bags and Wisdom: New Critical Perspectives on African Literature.* Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2000. xx + 393 pp. $79.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-86543-671-8.

Reviewed by Stephen Belcher

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Beginning in 1980 and continuing for the next ten years, Ernest Emenyonu organized a series of conferences on African literature sponsored by the English Department of the University of Calabar. The present volume commemorates that series of conferences, through twenty-eight papers (excluding the editor's introduction) by a variety of authors, solicited to mark the tenth anniversary of the conference. *Goatskin Bags and Wisdom* thus constitutes a collection of papers on African literature, written by African critics and deriving from an African setting: the description surely represents a claim to authenticity, at the least, and legitimates its perspectives by its origins. Readers may regret, however, that some of the most interesting papers or presentations from the conference series have not made it into this collection: the editor mentions addresses delivered by Ama Ata Aidoo, by Bessie Head, by Ngugi wa Thiongo (who used this conference in 1982 as the occasion on which to announce that he had ceased writing in English, p. xiv) but which are not included in the section entitled 'Our Writers Speak.' The conference is also memorialized by the series of annual volumes published by Heinemann. In the past decade, the conference series has lapsed, although there are strong hopes of reviving it for the year 2002.[1]

The sub-title's claims are somewhat broader than the substance of the book, and a more accurate description might be 'critical perspectives on Nigerian literature,' for in fact almost no non-Nigerian author is treated at any length. African literature in languages other than English is barely visible. At the same time, one of the merits of the volume is that it introduces a number of new critical voices. A quick search through the MLA bibliography (admittedly an imperfect instrument, but at least standardized) suggests that this volume provides the first publication for approximately half the authors. Their work will encounter two distinct categories of readers: a first community of students of literature within Nigeria (at least, one hopes as questions of book distribution and publication locale are central problems in the study and criticism of African literature, and there is little assurance this volume will be properly distributed within Nigeria), and a second, probably larger, group based in the United States and engaged in the academic study of literature. These two categories will have somewhat different responses to this work.

Following the editor's introduction, the book is divided into sections: 'Theories and Aesthetics'; 'Sources and Influences'; 'Case Studies' (the longest section); 'Poetics'; and 'Our Writers Speak', ending with an epilogue by the editor on 'Nationalism and the Creative Talent'. Of these, the most satisfying (for an outside reader) is prob-

ably the section on 'Case Studies,' which affords descriptive introductions to the works of little-known Nigerian authors. B.E.C. Oguzie's several contributions might be said to anchor this theme, with one essay treating Ifeoma Okoye's novel, *Men Without Ears*, another on Chukwuemeka Ike's *The Potter's Wheel* and *Expo '77*, and later an interview with Chukwuemeka Ike. Ike is also represented in a lengthy essay under the rubric 'Our Writers Speak'; in this essay the author reviews the various responses to his novels (the most telling comment is a complaint about the dominance of Heinemann's *African Writers Series* in the market, p. 338, and the relative obscurity of other publishers such as Fontana).

Some of the other essays in the 'Case Studies' section are less satisfying. Sophie Ogwude chooses to criticize Isidore Okpewho's novel *The Victims* because she finds it ethnographically inaccurate and an untrue representation of her conception of Nigerian life (pp. 173-181). This response does raise one of the perennial dilemmas of African literature: its non-literary function as social description, as social or political criticism, as historical representation as anything except fiction. But in this case, the tone of the criticism suggests simply that Ogwude is failing to accept the novel as a novel and to accord Okpewho the liberties which a writer should be allowed to take. Another essay, by Ada Azodo, works ponderously through Achebe's *The Man of the People* in terms of its novelistic construction (pp. 203-231); the exercise seems redundant given the recognized expertise of Achebe.

This reader found the section on 'Sources and Influences' somewhat disappointing. The short section features three essays, one on 'Nigerian Literature and Oral Tradition,' by J. O. J Nwachukwu-Agbada (pp. 67-89), another on "Tradition, Rotimi, and His Audience" by Sam Ukala (pp. 91-104), and one by S. K. Okleme on "R.E. Obeng's *Eighteenpence*: A Critical Study." Tradition is an amorphous concept in these essays; it denotes whatever the authors find convenient at the moment of writing, but offers little in the way of external referents to anchor the reader. This difficulty occurs frequently in connection with this particular term, but that is exactly why scholars should attempt to connect their usage with some definable external reference. Discussions of poetic diction would have benefitted from some connection with the excellent work done from the 1960s on to present oral poetry (largely Yoruba) in print: the work of S. A. Babalola on *The Form and Content of Yoruba Ijala* (Oxford, 1968), the works of Wande Abimbola on the poetry of Ifa (including a number published in Yoruba), or Bade Ajuwon's *Funeral Dirges of Yoruba Hunters*. Discussions of folktales have a considerable literature to draw on, not to mention well-established methodologies and reference works such as Thompson's *Motif-Index of Folk-literature* or the Aarne-Thompson *Types of the Folktale*.

The section on 'Theories and Aesthetics' begins with a relatively solid essay by Charles Nnolim, reviewing 'Trends in the Criticism of African Literature.' The essay's core is an assessment of the impact of the 1980 volume, *Towards the Decolonization of African Literature*, and its focus is clearly and intentionally on African perspectives on literature; non- African critics receive relatively little attention, except for a discussion of controversies surrounding statements by Bernth Lindfors.[2] The essays on feminist literary studies by Anthonia Akpabo Ekpa and Theodora Akach Ezeigbo do not break new ground so much as they restate very familiar themes: the discomfort of African feminists with the tenor of much of the ideology of the Euro-centered discipline, the need to adapt ideas and perspectives to the African context, and some concrete suggestions on how to do so. The section as a whole does not address the central questions raised by Nnolim in the course of his essay: '... What constitutes African literature and its definition; on the "newness" of African literature on the world scene; the problems of the appropriate language for its propagation (European or indigenous); on who constitutes the audience of that literature....' (p. 9). Discussion of these questions requires a far broader and more comparative perspective than is evidenced by most of the critics represented in this volume. There are, besides, other questions arising from the geography and history behind the collection that are only obliquely addressed: has Nigeria come to terms with the civil war, and the strong association of literary talent with the losing side? The book expresses a nationalistic outlook, without endorsing the national government of Nigeria (for understandable reasons: the essays dedicated to Ken Saro-Wiwa are a tacit criticism of that government).

It will be clear from this rapid survey of the book's contents that it does have weaknesses. Some of these are explicable in external terms: the relative poverty of institutional resources such as libraries and research support in African institutions of higher education. Others stem from what might be called an unacknowledged geographic centeredness on Calabar and eastern Nigeria, which has defined much of the contents of the book. The book is in many regards the vehicle of a regional pride, but this fact is obscured by the wider dichotomy posited between non-African and African readers and critics, a dichotomy which is really something of a straw man

given the contents of the volume. The book is evidence for regional literary strength, and in fact would be more revolutionary if it had proclaimed itself as such.

Here, however, we enter the realm of marketing and public relations. The book will undoubtedly sell more copies in the United States through the continental claim expressed in its title (the American market for studies of African literature has not matured sufficiently for a local focus to ensure sales), although the response may well then be disappointment at the lack of continental representation and coverage, and in some cases dismay at the level and tone of critical interpretation offered. In Nigeria, however, the book may rightfully claim a place and an audience, and there it deserves to inspire its own polemics on the nature and orientation of Nigerian literature.

Notes

[1]. I am indebted to Prof. Emenyonu for clarifying the background on the conference and the genesis of this volume. The annual papers, published by Heinemann-Nigeria, include the titles *Black Culture and Black Consciousness in Literature*, *Literature and National Consciousness*, *Critical Theory and African Literature*, and *Literature and Black Aesthetics*.

2. I would take issue with Nnolim's construction of some of the earlier criticism of African literature, such as Gerald Moore's *Seven African Writers*, as showing a fascination with the 'quaint nature of the content of books' and even more with 'our ability to put pen to paper.' The critics, after all, were not responsible for the ignorance of the public they addressed, and deserve some credit for trying to correct that ignorance.

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