The Okyeame as Subject: African Autobiography

This course will explore African culture through autobiography. The texts consist of chronological life histories and of selected, contextualized memoirs, e.g., by writers of aristocratic birth and those of peasant birth; by individuals accomplished in the arts and others in the sciences; by Nobel laureates and by political leaders; by women and by men. Each narrative provides an intimate acquaintance with the traditions, aspirations, challenges, and strategies from the writer’s own society. Collectively they provide the skeleton of a usefully subjective narrative of modern African history. The depicted lives include an 18th-century enslaved Nigerian child, who, ultimately, as a free man, would become a respected abolitionist; the U.S.-educated leader of Africa’s first nation to gain independence from colonialism; the passionate Kenyan crusader for the preservation of Africa’s environment as the source of its self-development; and the physically and morally courageous exemplar of the battle that overthrew South African apartheid.

In some respects the very concept of “African autobiography” might seem to be oxymoronic. In the oral tradition of African societies certainly histories of famous individuals—men, usually—are narrated by trained historians (called variously okyeame or griot). Inasmuch as such narrations are intended to entertain as well as to inspire and to instruct, the form of the recitations might legitimately contain editorializing, embellishment, and other stylistic and linguistic attributes that make for a memorable performance of the subject’s life story. Further, the cultural definition—indeed, the very name—of any individual resides, to a great degree, in the connectedness of that individual to family, lineage, clan, etc. Hence, the contemporary autobiography—a narrative of an African’s life, articulated soberly by that subject—reflects Africans’ adaptation of the borrowed written genre for narrating the individual’s life for its own value. However, characteristic of the published autobiographies/memoirs by Africans is their contextualization in the social, cultural, and political identities of the writers, with the result that the self-testimony is written as a contribution to a larger narrative of their group, however defined. The African autobiographical voice, though performing as a solo, performs in a
complementary relationship to the larger chorus. It is the *okyeame* speaking/writing his/her own story as it illumines the bigger narrative of his/her group.

**Texts for the course will be the following, in likely order of their consideration:**

1. Olaudah Equiano (Nigeria)

   *Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself* (1789), chapter 1.

   Equiano, an Ibo of present-day Nigeria, begins his narrative of captivity, enslavement, self-emancipation, and activism for the abolition of slavery with the depiction of his West African village life. Addressing his work to a British readership, Equiano deploys the British discourse of social organization to illuminate relevant institutions from his native society.

2. Kwame Nkrumah (Ghana)


   The leader of Ghana’s independence, and the nation’s first president, contextualizes his life within the evolution of the Ghanaian State. From his education and early political awareness through his activism and leadership, Nkrumah connects his own trajectory to that of the Gold Coast and to independent Ghana.

   N.B. Reading this work early in the semester should benefit the students in their understanding of contemporary Ghanaian history.

   Supplemental field trip to Nkrumah’s birthplace, in Nkroful, including the site of the prophecy of his destiny.

3. Kwame Anthony Appiah (Ghana)

   *In My Father’s House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (1992), Chapters 8, 9, and “Epilogue.”

   Into the closing chapters of his study of philosophy in the African cultural context Professor Appiah incorporates the example of the influential Asante royalty, which is his own family lineage.

   Supplemental field trip to the Palace of the Asantehene (Asante king) in Kumasi.

4. Wole Soyinka (Nigeria)

   *Ake: The Years of Childhood* (1981)
The first of three memoirs (excluding the prison notebook) by Soyinka, *Ake* opens up the child’s view of the institutions of Christianity, Western education, and British colonialism as they meet Yoruba life. The narrative power of the Nobel Laureate for Literature capitalizes upon the irony of the precocious child’s innocent perspective (aged three to eleven) on the tug-of-war between the Yoruba and Western socio-cultural forces. As always with Soyinka, the politics and the ethics of Nigerian aspirations are at the base of his presentation of his country.

5. Ngugi wa Thion’o (Kenya)
   The novelist narrates the saga of Kenya’s people under British colonial domination during the time of his boyhood, particularly, from the 1940s until Independence in 1963.

6. Wangari Maathai (Kenya)
   *Unbowed* (2006)
   When asked by a Western journalist “Is there any good news coming out of Africa?” Nobel Peace Laureate Wangari Maathai responded, “Yes, there’s me,” referring to her galvanizing activism in the cause of environmental justice. Maathai’s autobiography appropriately chronicles her struggles from rural Kenya, through her U.S. education as a scientist, and her environmental activism, including in the Kenyan Parliament. Organizing communities, especially women’s groups, into tree-planting cooperatives that became the Green Belt Movement; facing down threats from businessmen and corrupt politician; suffering public repudiation because of her gender, Maathai has written her autobiography for the expressed purpose of demonstrating to Africans their responsibility to the conservation their continent particularly in the face of accelerated urban development.
   Supplemental film: *Femmes aux yeux ouverts* (interviews with African women on their initiatives and activism in numerous spheres of Development)

7. Mamphela Ramphele (South Africa)
   *Across Boundaries* (1995)
   Ramphele chose to study medicine mainly for the independence and self-determination it allowed a woman, in comparison with other professions, as she saw them. Becoming actively involved in the ANC during her studies at medical school, Ramphele’s trajectory
would take her into the front lines of the anti-apartheid struggle, and kicking down doors that had been closed to Blacks.

Supplemental film:  *You Have Struck a Rock* (on the participation of African women from all social classes in the anti-apartheid struggle)

8. Nelson Mandela (South Africa)
   *Long Walk to Freedom* (1994)
   Reared in the Xhosa tradition to become a leader, his life is the ANC and the uncompromised struggle for a democratic South Africa.
   Supplemental film:  *Mandela: Son of Africa, Father of a Nation*

9. Buchi Emecheta (Nigeria)
   *Head Above Water* (1986), chapters 1-2,
   Novelist Emecheta wrote this autobiographical work after having successfully published a two novel sequence that presents this content, i.e., her life, in fictionalized form (*Second-Class Citizen* and *In the Ditch*). The early chapters narrate her gender-disadvantaged childhood in an Ibo village in Eastern Nigeria, which precedes her marriage and ultimate departure to join her husband in London. The writing of the autobiography, after the successful publication of the fictionalized oppressed life, denotes a move by Emecheta toward a more subjectively authoritative approach to gender issues in African society.

10. Toyin Falola (Nigeria)
    This renowned historian delights in extolling the marvels of his boyhood in Ibadan of the 1950s and ‘60s, while also sensing the “encroaching” influences of Western culture on Nigerian life. Falola carefully explains Yoruba cultural phenomena, as a basis of a complete philosophical and moral existence.

    Supplemental film:  *Thunderbolt* (Love story between an Ibo and Yoruba, arguably a Nigerian re-telling of *Othello*)

Since the number of texts is greater than could be handled in one course, the last two and possibly one of the excerpted texts would not be included in the common readings. They would
either be assigned for group oral presentations or otherwise accommodated for a final exam or paper.

**Treatment of the texts will include the following topics:**

1. **Concepts of “family”: social and biological factors**
   Toyin Falola, in *A Mouth Sweeter than Salt*, refers often to his “mothers”; Nelson Mandela, in *Long Walk to Freedom* tells of being given over by his father to the care of a mentor to educate him; Kwame Appiah’s paternal family lineage, as told in *In My Father’s House*, placed him in consideration for the succession to the Asante royal stool. Questions of the child’s perceptions of his/her relationships to family; of the responsibilities of adult family members to children; “brothers”, “sisters”, etc.

2. **Identity in a larger social-cultural-political context**
   What, if any, significance do concepts such as “Yoruba”, “Ibo,” “Gikuyu,” “Asante,” “Xhosa,” “Zulu,” etc. hold for individuals? How are they manifested in their day-to-day lives e.g., in the language they speak at home or, more importantly, when *not* at home but among others of the same ethnicity or “mother tongue”? How are they politically significant, especially in the era of Independence movements and nation-building? What do we make of the generous use of proverbs in the autobiographical narratives of some of our writers?

3. **What are the sources of the writer’s education?** What do they say about “‘formal education”? Are there any noteworthy

4. **How does gender impact the writer’s experience?**
   With texts from a male and a female writer each from three countries (Nigeria, Kenya, and South Africa) we can identify some factors in the narratives that, to some degree, at least, are relevant to gender.

5. **What are the influences behind the writer’s political activism, where relevant?** What forms do their different versions of activism take? In which spheres of national or international activity do they operate?

Since more than half of the writers considered in the course have been internationally visible because of political activism
All of the subjects/writers of the autobiographies taken up in this course were born, raised, and educated under British colonialism* (or South African apartheid). Some of the texts—Soyinka, Ngugi, Equiano, Falola—are essentially childhood memoirs. The other autobiographies, after beginning with a couple of chapters on early life, focus on their lives as historically conscious stakeholders in the aspirations of their colony or self-governing nation, respectively. Examples are Nkrumah’s leadership of the Gold Coast colony toward an independent Ghana; or the challenges to independent Kenya’s government engendered by Maathai’s community development projects; or the “before-and-after” of the apartheid struggle, as presented by Ramphele and Mandela.

The childhood memoirs provide the most concentrated sources of cultural life, with attention to the values and perspectives reflected in the family’s and community’s way of life before—but also in spite of—the encounter with Western culture that accompanied colonization. Referentially extending many generations into the past, these childhood memoirs are laced with both nostalgia and a contemporaneous sensitivity to the encounters with alien cultural forces. In the mature autobiographies the cultural ramifications that accompanied or resulted from colonialism are treated within the narrative of the historical developments, e.g. the impact of colonial rule on the institution of chieftaincy or other forms of traditional governance. To buttress the study of the cultural underpinnings presented in the narratives a visiting lecture from an anthropologist would provide examples of specific phenomena, such as explanations of matrilineage/patrilineage, for our understanding of family relationships; or the cosmological connection between a people and their land, influencing the reaction to land alienation and “resettlement,” especially in the settler colonies of South Africa and Kenya.

For a historical foundation behind the life stories a brief prefatory lecture will place the specific autobiographical subject into his/her national context. My lectures would give some general overview of the colonization of Africa, e.g., Berlin Conference of 1884; the aspects of African

* The absence of texts from former French or Portuguese colonials in this syllabus is due to the non-existence of relevant autobiographies, as far as my research could conclude. Definitely, no English versions of autobiographical writings from those areas exist. Excerpts will be presented from Manthia Diawara’s In Search of Africa, which analyzes his recollections on a return trip to his childhood home of Guinea.
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societies most impacted by colonialism and Western civilization; and some of the major issues/movements/events of the 20th century, e.g., the impact of the two World Wars on African colonials, and the trajectory toward Independence, after WWII. We will take a bit closer look at the operation of British colonialism in West Africa in general, for our Ghana and Nigeria texts, and in Southern and East Africa, primarily for their profiles as settler colonies. For these regional profiles of West Africa and East Africa under colonialism, and of Southern Africa under apartheid, the expertise of a guest historian will be solicited.

Through the films and site visits many of the issues raised in the readings and lectures will be given more concrete form, e.g., the Nigerian narrative film Thunderbolt presents nagging stereotypes between ethnic groups; Femmes aux yeux ouverts (presents the cultural contexts from in which women’s activism is forged; the Mandela film demonstrates the training/rearing of a future leader born of royal blood.

Assignments:
Reading of the texts would be assigned at a rate of one (book-length text) for every two weeks, with the two three excerpted readings inserted among the relevant readings. Discussion of the texts would be based around these topics as well as other smaller topics specifically relevant to particular autobiographies. Three 5-page papers would be assigned, approximately one after every two texts. The final project would be a term paper.