


African Literatures and Border Issues

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Abstract: In his article "African Literatures and Border Issues" Chimdi Maduagwu posits that borders or boundaries are constructions which have social and symbolic implications and that they are also relevant in a variety of social processes versus class stratification. Modern Africa is a political construction from European colonialism and what we have today as countries of Africa were closely knit nation states (which colonialists identified as tribes) who had their distinct features. However, the advent of colonialism tore into the original nation state structure based on given ethnic relationships and in its place constructed sovereign states or countries, which only considered proximity or geographical relationships. Moduagwu examines the possibility of reconciling the severance in relationships and argues that it is possible to achieve either reunification or reintegration of the fragments of Africa by consolidating matters which unite and overcoming divisions.

Chimdi MADUAGWU

African Literatures and Border Issues

Boundaries, borders, and lines of demarcation exist at two major levels of human interaction: the visible and the invisible as suggested by Michèle Lamont's and Virág Molnár's concepts of social and symbolic boundaries respectively (1). The visible or the social is the physical or geographical boundary, which African literatures capture through the artistic technique of setting. According to Lamont and Molnár, they "are objectified forms of social differences manifested in unequal access to and unequal distribution of resources (material and non-material) and social opportunities. They are also revealed in stable behavioral patterns of association, as manifested in connubiality and commensality" (1; on the problematics of gender in Black African literature — another "other" — see Akujobi <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1706>>; Hungwe and Hungwe <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1460>>). In other words, the social borders are all lines of demarcation which serve social purposes and can be concretized. They are visible to the senses, especially the senses of sight and touch. The invisible or the symbolic, on the other hand, are the non-physical boundaries and borders depicted in literature as themes, attitudes of characters, and atmosphere (as setting). Borders and boundaries highlight definitions by drawing lines, strong and remarkable lines between entities, objects, peoples, concepts, states, etc. They show contrasting qualities, although sometimes they also indicate complementary qualities. John Borneman views borders as conveying a sense of inherent duality and promoting a "process of mirror imaging" (17): borders show that there is an "other" and this engenders a sense of difference. Further, there are at least two concepts and entities which have distinguishing features. But in contrast to this view of borders and boundaries, Geoffrey C. Bowker and Susan Leigh Star understand borders as interfaces facilitating knowledge production and suggest that there are conceptual boundaries capable of exploring how interrelated sets of categories — i.e., systems of classification — come to be delineated and how borders become means of communication as opposed to division and thus essential to the circulation of knowledge and information across social worlds (5).

Borders and boundaries are useful when considered in the direction of relationships between concepts and contexts, as well as classes and groups at the social and symbolic levels. All these would have cultural, social, psychological, geographical, economic, and aesthetic implications. Various internal and external issues generated concepts which in turn continue to lacerate Africa and thus the construction of borders across types and groups appears to be predominant in Africa. For instance, there are obvious borders between ethnic and tribal groups, occupational and economic groups, groups with similar social interests, religious groups, cults and cultural groups, etc. All these, according to Lamont and Molnár, may generate new theoretical insights about a whole range of general social processes present across a wide variety of apparently unrelated phenomena such as boundary-work, boundary crossings, boundaries shifting, and the territorialization, politicization, relocation, and institutionalization of boundaries. While I do not claim that I am about to embark on a grand synthesis of border issues in relation to Africa through an analysis of African literatures, I venture to looking at the possibility of uniting the present fragments by recommending a cross border consideration and the strengthening of issues which unite (on related issues I discuss, see also *African Literatures and Cultures* <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss1/>>).

Both social and symbolic projections of boundaries have functional ways of highlighting "otherness" or differences. At the physical level, this shows in landscapes, locales, persons, and groups of persons, while at the non-physical level "otherness" is manifested in actions, attitudes, and manners of people, i.e., protagonists characters in literature. The physical and non-physical are different in appearance: while the former is concrete like brick walls, mountains, hills, seas, lakes, rivers, valleys, etc. and can thus appeal directly to human senses with which the human being interacts with external world, the later is more or less abstract like thought, imagination, race, language, ethnicity, belief systems, culture, etc. and appeals to the deep feelings of the human being. While the former can be determined rationally, the later is emotionally discerned. Further, the former can be erected or demolished at times and within terms agreed upon by persons or

people concerned resulting in "boundary shift" or "border elimination," the latter like all emotional issues is more difficult to grapple with because elements of "otherness" are buried deep inside the consciousness and psyche of the persons or peoples concerned. African literatures have made and are capable of making contributions to boundary issues: the continent's peoples have passed through some peculiar experiences all the way from a supposed savage and barbarian culture through the first contacts with foreigners which resulted in both trans-Saharan and trans-Atlantic slave trades, then colonialism and therein struggles for independence and the subsequent political/constitutional independence of African states to the post-independent dependence of African states and current struggles for economic independence. At every point of these unique African experiences, a number of issues have generated lines and divides in form of boundaries.

All human endeavors and activities are governed by a special form of human development where there is transparency and mutual understanding of codes of life especially in relation to interpersonal and group relationships. These also include thoughts and impressions of physical or social and non-physical or symbolic boundaries both at the interpersonal and group levels. There has always been the natural tendency by Africans — by all humans — to identify and guide what belongs to them to protect what they consider theirs. For instance, families, kindred clans, and ethnic groups were identified with special physical and non-physical traits from stature, special "tribal marks," complexion, manners, occupations, socio-cultural practices to the languages they spoke, residential space they occupied and farm lands they tilled etc. Often, different folks appropriated natural phenomena as authentic landmarks, which provided reasonable boundaries at the physical level. The most prominent natural occurrences which enhanced boundary erections were rivers and seas, hills and mountains, forests and trees, valleys and caves, etc. Although these natural boundaries appear integral to human existence, they predate human life in areas where they are found and all myths of creation attest to this.

In *The River Between* Wa Thiong'o Ngũgĩ draws upon oral tradition (myth) to demonstrate the preexistence of physical structures or social boundaries. From his visions, it is obvious that natural phenomena existed before they would eventually become instruments which transcend physical structures and initiate significations of a deep divide between groups at both physical and emotional levels: "The two ridges lay side by side. One was Kamenno, the other was Makuyu. Between them was a valley. It was called the valley of life. Behind Kamenno and Makuyu were many more valleys and ridges, lying without any discernible plan. They were like many sleeping lions which never woke. They just slept the deep sleep of their creator" (4). For Ngũgĩ, the landscapes (settings in his novel *The River Between*) were there before the foundation of life or settlement of humans. The same natural phenomena were later to be appropriated by humans. The Ridges, Kamenno and Makuyu, become places of habitation and the valley between them is made to serve as a tool for demarcation or borderline and this means physical boundary. Being separated by the valley, two ridges mark out two distinct communities. In turn, the communities construct their personal definitions based on some existing and emerging disparate socio-cultural elements. Although the physical essence or object of demarcation is natural and clear, the deeper symbolic or non-physical considerations eventually become the tough determiners of the separateness. The elements — which bring about division in the socio-cultural lives of the communities setting of Ngũgĩ's novel — draw mainly upon religion, which in turn shapes all other activities. So religion becomes the major source of "symbolic boundary" in the novel. Two religions, Christianity and the traditional worship of the Gikuyu people constitute the two practices in the setting of the novel and that guide their spiritual strength. Based on the physical demarcation, the people create this formidable boundary. It is insinuated in the story that the two ridges were rivals. In other words, before the arrival of external influences they looked for advantages over each other. Such advantages would help one party gain ascendancy over the other. Christianity arrives in time to the supposed advantage of one ridge over the other. It is an alien religion, introduced much later in the socio-cultural life of the people, but it puts pressure on the entire culture as it claims to be the only true and pure religion. It insists that it provides the only way to salvation of the souls of humans and as it is practiced in the settings it avoids contact with non-practitioners because such contacts may violate the purity of converts.

This new development creates a deep gulf in the Kamenno and Makuyu communities which hitherto existed with few disparities and more tolerance. The story suggests that human beings appropriate natural phenomena and build some elements of differences around them. What ordinarily would have been physical boundaries have been expanded in terms of meaning and significance to symbolic levels. The two distinct ridges become symbols of Christianity and Traditionalism. They cease to be just physical erections and turn into deeply emotional and symbolic constructions. Inhabitants of one of the ridges now see themselves as different from those of the other. Their differences are no more perceived in terms of physical looks, languages, food, or other cultural activities which are easily identifiable at the physical level because they are all Blacks and ethnic Africans, but in their beliefs. Their inner convictions of life mark them as not belonging together. Other writers broach the issue of religion in border determination from some other perspectives. The mythic consciousness of Wole Soyinka in his poem collection *Idanre*, in his novel *The Interpreters*, and in a number of his plays establishes a functional relationship between deities and human beings, but maintains a "boundary" and this is another approach to boundary issues. Soyinka is a mythic symbolist and uses deities to symbolize a class of human beings who wield power and authority over others. The deities live in the Idanre hills — a unique natural landscape akin to the classical Greek mount Olympus — and it is the abode of gods. Like their ancient Greek counterparts (see Hamilton 4), Soyinka's Yoruba deities also appear to have been created by human beings. The different environments in which they dwell suggest there is a boundary between them and human beings. However, if Soyinka's symbolism is stretched out, Idanre deities represent the all-powerful and domineering human beings who occupy the upper echelon of the societies, i.e., the powers that be (see Moduagwu 511). Thus, while at the symbolic level we are faced with a case of a boundary between deities and human beings, the literal reality is a functional boundary between human beings (of a lower kind) and human beings (of another, higher kind) in the same society. In other words, strong beliefs supported by some perceived supernatural forces reinforce boundaries.

African writers who consciously or unconsciously engage literature in addressing boundary issues speak of the validity of their own experiences (culture) and thus they write with a flavor of anthropology and social history. According to Elleke Boehmer "they cast their meaning across a wide textual spectrum, producing anthropological studies, social history and journalism as well as poetry and fiction to promote their cause" (100). A general look at their works reveal that they have common experiences and thus seem to project the same messages, all of which are anthropological and historical or one may say cultural. For over two-hundred years, Africa has been under various forms of exploitation by European and later other developed nations of the world. Particularly, European activities in Africa have left deep and painful "marks" on the entire continent and her people. The most gruesome and traumatic experience has been the trans-Atlantic slave trade whereby all Africa came under this human ordeal. Although Africa had earlier battled with the incursion of Arabs who were slave dealers, the magnitude of trans-Atlantic experience made a mockery of the Arabs' Saharan adventure: "IN THE EVERLASTING MEMORY / OF OUR ANGUISHED ANCESTORS / May those who died rest in peace / May those who returned find their roots / May humanity never again perpetrate / Such injustice against humanity / We, the living, vow to uphold this" (Inscription at Elmina Castle).

The slave trade created the biggest gulf among Africans by uprooting and carting away hundreds of thousands of Africans to distant places of the U.S., the West Indies, and Europe. The present generation of diaspora Africans is separated from the rest of Africans at home, both at the physical and non-physical levels. While the physical gulf is obvious, the non-physical is often not easy to identify. Many writers have laid bare the problems of boundaries which came about as a result of this and have also, through creative literature, proffered solutions to such problems. In her play *The Dilemma of a Ghost*, Ama Ata Aidoo highlights the gulf between Africans outside Africa and those within the continent. The hero (or anti-hero) of the play, Ato Yawson, a full-bred African, migrates willingly to the U.S. to acquire Western education. While there, he marries Eulalie Rush, an African American only by identification (race and color). This co-operation is achieved outside Africa and when they return home to Africa, it is discovered that Eulalie is unable to integrate into society and she represents a symbol of disintegrated Africa. At the same time, Eulalie's values are

at par with Indigenous African values. For instance respect for elders, the position of the wife as subservient to her husband, unequivocal submission of the wife to both her direct husband and the members of her husband's family and most of all, child bearing, are no serious issues for the African American, while they are the utmost determinant of womanhood for the Indigenous African woman. Eulalie is to learn indigenous values and cross the boundary created by slavery hundreds of years before her generation in a marriage with Ato.

Other writers like Tchicaya Utamsi and Bode Sowande have drawn upon the theme of slavery in relation to boundaries in and among Africans. Utamsi, perhaps the most bitter of the writers in relation to slavery and exploitation of Africans by the West, makes it obvious that the boundaries created by slavery and colonialism will be difficult to demolish. However, attempts towards the demolition of the boundaries could begin with a collective resolve of all Africans to follow the steps Aimée Césaire: this return is not a physical exodus as some Black Jamaican Africanists would advocate, but consists of believing in Africa and the African tradition. Utamsi projects African religion what outsiders refer to as heathenism: asked what he wished most, he replied "to be a heathen in the heathen reincarnation of the world" (3). In other words, to be truly African, he needs to pull down the boundary between Africans like him and other diaspora Blacks. The slave trade (and perhaps other trades) opened the door for a deep, but dubious interaction between Europe and Africa and this interaction resulted in slavery and colonialism. Both, hand in hand, resulted in complete disintegration of Africa. The first permanent settlement of foreigners at the Cape was established by the Dutch in 1652 and later many European countries settled Africa with their cultures and ways of life because Africa held multiple economic promises for them. They imposed their cultures on Africa, divided and laid ownership of the various African nations without giving consideration to their individual qualities and thus physical boundaries became artificial in Africa and this is sustained to date to a large extent.

As a result of slavery and colonialism and disintegrating affect they created, Africa assumed an appearance of the ad hoc and was considered along the lines of the continent's usefulness to contending European powers. There was a partitioning which resulted in the establishment of areas of colonial influences and these areas became fragments of the hitherto whole entities. Cultural affiliations were unsettled subsequently and new units emerged, but without cohesion. Boundaries automatically came up breaking ethnic groups up and randomly placing them in new geo-political formats. Native Africans were given new orientations in the direction of the ideologies of their "colonial masters." For instance, the Yoruba nation became fractured and her fragments are in present day Nigeria, Togo, Benin: the first received British orientation while the last two were submitted to French culture and similarly the Hausa and Fulani in Nigeria, Niger, Chad, Cameroon etc. Rather than be bound by their ethnic lineages, they eventually submitted to the new colonial arrangement of supposed city-states and nations and to new colonial languages and White culture. The greatest negative impact of the partitioning of Africa is the disintegration of cultural affiliations on the one hand and its attempt to force into uncomfortable mergers, distinct, and autonomous, but closely related cultures on the other hand. Westerners did not understand the thin and cooperating lines which marked out and decorated the diverse African peoples and cultures before their arrival, so they assumed that Africa was one large "village" made up of insensitive beings who could dominated and "cultured."

Colonialism in Africa was, in this case, different from that in other areas especially with regard to other colonized territories "to give shape to an everyday reality in resistance to images of the beautiful and the normal transmitted by colonial literature" (Boehmer 109). The reverse is the case in Africa whose writers struggle to reconstruct the original image of Africa distorted by colonialism and to bring about a reintegration of the fragments of the fractured mother Africa. However, like Aboriginal Australians, Africans need to reinvent their cultural art and create literary forms for authentic African expressions and this would help to pull forces together in fighting a common course. African writing thus has to assume the uphill tasks of bringing all Africans together and dismantling negative representations and sustaining themes. Early African writers faced these challenges: Césaire, Senghor, Diop, and others approached the challenges from cultural perspectives developing and pursuing the literary philosophy of *négritude*. They excavated the rich cultural treasures of Africa and used that as a rallying point for all Blacks inadvertently confirming

what unites in the universally acknowledged beauty, nobility, and permanence of it means to be Black. Gerald Moore observes that Jean Paul Sartre noted as he studied the emergence of Franco-phone African literature that "the African writer is already exiled from himself that he feels this need to declare himself. So he begins with an exile, a double exile ... of his heart ... the exile of his body offers a magnificent image" (xvii). The series of exiles identified by Sartre indicate lines or divides which translate into boundaries. These boundaries within are reflected externally also. However, the works, in question, generally depict Blacks and Africa as blissful and exotic and the continent's images have been distorted and fragmented by prejudiced colonial writers.

In addition to exponents of *négritude* whose works parade themes which express unity of Africa through cultural pride, other African writers have produced works which are spiced with African culture and tradition capable of healing the fractures and reintegrating the splinters. These writers consciously or unconsciously domesticate literature as a medium that can project what unites and overcomes what divide. Chinua Achebe and Ngũgĩ are prominent in this second category. Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* presents a relatively straightforward and unprejudiced picture and image of a typical African locale. There are virtually no indications of serious cultural and geographical divides in the setting of the novel. I posit that Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* traverse the entirety of Igbo African tradition in symbolic terms and show that traditional Africa represents a complete human system with definite social patterns, economic structure, a political frame that includes democratic justice, and religious worship (see also Njeng <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1328>>).

Of particular significance in terms of examples of African unity is in *Arrow of God* where Achebe narrates how eight clans decide to come together to found a god, Ulu, who will be their protector and a symbol of unity among them. This religious bond affects the totality of their lives. The reverence for and worship of Ulu translate into reverence for all social norms and values associated with Ulu and hence the people. Ulu determines the seasons (planting and harvest), rites and observances, leadership hierarchy, dispensation of justice as well as punishments for offences. The unity and bliss under Ulu continues until fractured by the forces of colonialism and Christianity. These forces introduce diversities to the hitherto holistic society governed by a belief in Ulu. Christianity pushes forward another god, British colonialism projects another pattern of social interaction, and the Western adventurers come forward with new ideas about commerce. All these new trends create divides as they exist side-by-side with Indigenous practices. Achebe's works of cultural and anthropological flavors have largely been accepted as authentic pictures of Africa, thus demonstrating how creative literature can consolidate through its thematic preoccupation and it is capable of highlighting and eradicating lines and divides which exist at the symbolic level. It is so because these initial endeavors to reintegrate fragments of battered African cultures and to reshape them for public consumption serve as a pillar of unity especially during the colonial period.

In respect of their colonial experience, one major point of unity amongst Africans is "moving away from colonial definitions, transgressing the boundaries of colonial discourse ... borrowing, taking over, or appropriating the ideological, linguistic, and textual forms of the colonial power." (Boehmer 105-06). Early writers achieved a movement away from colonial definitions: not just Achebe, but several other writers like Senghor, Soyinka, Ngũgĩ, Aidoo, Utamsi, etc., in ways to challenge colonial positions on Africa's history, cultures, and traditions. While in the process of redefinition, they also appropriated both linguistic and textual forms of the colonial power and this was achieved through education whereby imperialism inadvertently yields to poetic justice to a certain degree. It provides the necessary infrastructure — education — for articulation of self-representation by its subjects. Through this, subjects are able to encourage themselves unto unity and to resist freedom from the obnoxious grips of colonial cruelty. Writers like Peter Abrahams (*Tell Freedom: Memories of Africa*), Achebe (*No Longer at Ease*), Ngũgĩ (*Weep Not, Child, The River Between*) etc., depict this. In their works characters like Lee (*Tell Freedom*), Njoroge (*Weep Not, Child*), Waiyaki (*The River Between*), Obi Okonkwo (*No Longer at Ease*) all pass through peculiar traumas and their anguish emanates from colonial subjugation. However, this is punctuated by a glimmer of hope, hope given substance by the possible acquisition of education and modern skills by few Natives. Lee goes to school and eventually becomes a writer who volunteers information on the actual condition of Africans under colonial (apartheid) South Africa. Both Njoroge and Waiyaki

battle through difficulties and while at school, they seek ways of reintegration among Africans who have been forcefully separated by colonialism. Obi Okonkwo is sponsored to go and acquire education for community development, but he decides to channel his experience towards overcoming what divides as he attempts to consolidate a relationship with Elsie who belongs to another class (untouchables).

Colonial education, more than anything else, introduces complications to boundary issues in Africa. On one hand, it imposes on Africa new foreign languages like English, French, Portuguese, Spanish, etc., which create boundaries, but on the other hand these new languages become veritable instruments for boundary crossing because they eventually gain ascendancy over native African languages and are used across many communities today. Through acquired colonial languages there have been cross-cultural exchanges and agreements and these have also largely been made possible by creative literature. Achebe's novels *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* may have unearthed and explained the culture and tradition of Igbo people of eastern Nigeria more than any systematic study in anthropology, sociology, philosophy, religion, or history could do. Creative literature has literally demolished the partitions between diverse African cultural groups by making details of norms and forms obtainable in one culture available to others. African literature has played and is still playing a major role in identifying and consolidating what unites as its contribution to border issues and Pan-Africanism. In an emotional story, in *The River Between* Ngũgĩ presents how literature can consolidate unity. He creates a set of young characters and pitches them against an older set: all caught in the web of colonialism and its strong element Christian religion — which has introduced a big gulf among people of similar origin — the young characters Waiyaki, Nyambura, and Muthoni somehow discover that they belong to a new generation that needs to distinguish itself from the previous generation of their parents. In order to do so, they need to initiate new ideas and concepts, which can address functionally the problems of their generation. While they appreciate the features of the generation of their parents, the strong emotional attachments involved, and are not willing to betray them, they realize that the standards of that generation are incapable of providing adequate solutions to the fresh challenges and problems of the new generation.

Waiyaki finds himself in the camp of traditionalists, while Muthoni and Nyambura are in the opposite camp of the Christians. The boundary between them is a valley. However, they meet because both of them have tasted Western education provided by the Christians and in a dramatic development the need for a close relationship between the two disparate ridges that the young people represent arises when Muthoni, a daughter of the Christian leader Joshua decides to attain tribal purity by registering for the ritual of initiation against the faith and belief that her father acquired and transferred to her. Unfortunately, her bid to return to tribal purity becomes sacrificial and she loses her life. The loss draws Waiyaki and Nyambura close into a firm conjugal relationship with a strength that erases the lines and that divides the opposing ridges. So Muthoni's selfless act constructs a bridge across the valley and this is reinforced by her sister, Nyambura, and friend Waiyaki, showing that what divides can be overcome and what unites can be consolidated.

Ngũgĩ's characters in *The River Between* can be contrasted with Achebe's characters in both *Arrow of God* and *No Longer at Ease*. In *Arrow of God*, a gulf is created, again by the new religion, Christianity. The new religion acquires converts and adherents who develop a new community of believers with distinct social behavior. They are exposed to Western education and lifestyle and because they must obey the commandments of Christianity, they clash with traditional values. At the end of the novel when Ezeulu, the custodian of traditional culture is taken away by the European administrators and as a result is unable to eat the sacred yams which in turn prevents him from announcing the date for the new yam festival at the appropriate time, the gulf between the Christians and the traditionalists become prominent. There are no characters like Waiyaki and Nyambura who could initiate a reconciliatory move between the two opposing sects by harnessing the things that unite and playing down the things that divide. This results in the destruction of Ezeulu and his deity, Ulu.

In *No Longer at ease*, Obi and Clara are two major modern characters who first meet outside Africa and again reunite when they return to Africa. Obi is shocked to discover that he is unable to marry Clara because of some lines of division between them. They belong to different sects within

the same tradition. Unlike Waiyaki, Obi and Clara are less equipped to address the nagging boundary problem before them with a combination of native wisdom and acquired modern knowledge and they fail to effect positive changes. They thus symbolize the group of Africans who, at the point of realizing the importance of unity in their generation, betray it, while Waiyaki, Muthoni, and Nyambura represent those who act otherwise and in a positive direction.

In conclusion, the actions, reactions, and inactions of above-discussed characters in African literatures illuminate the two opposite approaches presented by border issues. And I sum this up by referring to Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* in which Obi's weak action and Clara's inaction are incapable of confronting and overcoming what divides while in Ngũgĩ's *The River Between* Muthoni's action, Waiyaki's reaction, and Nyambura's inaction still supports and provides a rounded joint attack on what divides in order to emphasize unity: they succeed in redefining purity and togetherness. Their action, reaction, and inaction sum up to project a realistic self-discovery and functional reintegration of values which are capable of sustaining a new Africa of diverse values both inherent and acquired yet without lines and divides.

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