

## The Fiction of African Autobiography

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### Abstract

This essay, a theoretical, critical and textual one, attempts to “dissect” the lie, the fiction of African autobiography through an examination of a number of African autobiographies from West Africa, East Africa and Southern Africa. Of particular interest in this essay is the attempt to explore the fiction of memory in each autobiography in the endeavour to situate African autobiography within the context of re-created beauty that does not bring exact copies of itself into being/reality. Resources of orality and what they engender in each autobiography are evaluated to underscore the myth of truthful memory in (African) autobiography in the act/art of (African) autobiography.

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All those who are familiar with autobiography are aware that it belongs to the world of imagination and to the world of facts. Another way of putting this is that in autobiography, the world of imagination and the world of facts co-exist in a kind of imaginative continuum which requires that the autobiographer, whatever his concern or goal, recreates reality and fiction at the same time. This facet epitomizes autobiography as an intriguing subject and enterprise regardless of what type of autobiography it is. Of course, the critical establishment recognizes this fact of autobiography, and its protean, chameleonic, heterogeneous, treacherous nature. In an engaging essay entitled “The Style of African Autobiography” Tony E. Afejuku argues that because of this characteristic of autobiography, any autobiographer is at liberty to write as he or she pleases; for to “write an autobiography requires a variety of styles and forms, and that the autobiographer has to choose his or her own style or form” (Afejuku 212). But whatever style or form the autobiographer employs in his or her tale of self-revelation, one fact that is certain and which always will be certain is the role of memory in the telling of the autobiographer’s tale.

Memory inspires the autobiographical impulse. A Canadian autobiographical writer, W.O. Mitchell, capsulizes his father as follows: “I remembered, remembered, remembered, remembering him” (166). This he says in the attempt to recreate his father’s image. He was engaging in an act of memory which involved illusion, or, better stated, memory’s fiction – which the African autobiographer (or autobiographical writer and critic) also dwells on. Mitchell has also informed us in his (quasi-)autobiography that: “Every bit is the truth but the whole thing is a creative leap/lie” (150). What this indicates, by inference, is that all autobiography (or any autobiographical act, including his) is fiction. Theoretically and practically speaking, what Mitchell had so stated is applicable to the African autobiography and autobiographer, who uses his past to make visible, real and instantaneous the present, or perhaps what is yet to come, the future, that is, to an observant reader and a broad reading

public. His past is only the springboard, the starting point, of his memory, of his fiction, that is to say, of his autobiography that utilizes memory as a technique.

Clearly, to appreciate the role of memory in autobiography cannot but compel us to explore the fiction of memory in autobiography - which is also part of the subject of William L. Howarth's influential essay aptly entitled "Some Principles of Autobiography" (84-114) wherein he argues, among other things, for the essence of memory as a genre in autobiography, distinct from imagination as a principle in the writing or creation of autobiography. In the present essay, there is the attempt to explore the fiction of memory in each African autobiography studied in the endeavour to situate African autobiography within the context of recreated beauty that does not bring exact copies of itself into being/reality. In the Nigerian Wole Soyinka's *Ake: The Years of Childhood*, the Guinean Camara Laye's *The African Child*, the Kenyan Ngugi Wa Thiongo's *Dreams in a Time of War* and Jomo Kenyatta's *Facing Mount Kenya*, the Zimbabwean Lawrence Vambe's *An Ill-fated People*, the South African Naboth Mokgathe's *The Autobiography of an Unknown South African* and Nelson Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom*, the resources of orality are evaluated to underscore the myth of truthful memory in African autobiography – in the act/art of African autobiography.

In Wole Soyinka's *Ake* and Camara Laye's *The African Child*, for example, we perceive right from the opening pages especially, what can be rightly called the autobiographer's memory of tales that live in the memories of persons who orally narrated them, who recited them to the gifted writers, the autobiographers, who appropriated them in their autobiographies to give substance to their narratives of self-revelation, and to underline their truthfulness, their factuality, in the context and cultural life or belief of their people. In *Ake*, the tale of the "ghommid," that is, of what the Yoruba call "oro" (a wood sprite which is also believed to live in the ground") (7) is recalled eagerly, excitedly, to convey this idea. Of course, the "oro" tale was narrated, recited to the child by his mother. In his adult-moment of writing Soyinka resorted to the living memory of his mother who told him (and his siblings) the relishing, stupendous tale of their Uncle, Sanya, who was an *oro*. Clearly, Soyinka adroitly employs the *oro* tale of Uncle Sanya (as given by his mother aforesaid) to convey the effect the unusual reality being recalled has on his "living" childhood memory and on his autobiography.

As we are told in the autobiography, Uncle Sanya and Soyinka's mother (and her other young relatives) always ventured into the woods at night, in the day-time and early dusk to hunt for snails but it was Uncle Sanya, one of Soyinka's mother's brothers, who always conversed with beings of the other world, that is, with *oro*:

Mother told us that on this occasion she and Uncle Sanya had been picking mushrooms, separated by only a few clumps of bushes. She could hear his movements quite clearly indeed they took the precaution of staying very close together. Suddenly, she said, she heard Sanya's voice talking animatedly with someone. After listening for some time she called out his name but he did not respond. There was no voice apart from his, yet he appeared to be chatting in friendly, excited tones with some other person. So she peeped through the bushes and there was Uncle seated on the ground chattering away to no one that she could see. She tried to penetrate the surrounding bushes with her gaze but the woods

remained empty except for the two of them. And then her eyes came to rest on his basket.

It was something she had observed before, she said. It was the same, no matter how many of the children in the household went to gather snails, berries or whatever. Sanya would spend most of the time playing and climbing rocks and trees. And yet whenever they prepared to return home, his basket was always fuller than the others. This time was no different. She came closer, startling our Uncle who snapped off his chatter and pretended to be hunting snails in the undergrowth. (10)

Again,

Mother said that she was frightened. The basket was filled to the brim, impossibly bursting. She was discouraged, so she picked up her near empty basket and insisted that they return home at once. She led the way but after some distance, when she looked back, Sanya appeared to be trying to follow her but was being prevented, as if he was being held back by invisible hands. From time to time he would snatch towards his arm and snap.

‘Leave me alone. Can’t you see I have to go home? I said I have to go.

She broke into a run and Sanya did the same. They ran all the way home. (10)

This is nothing short, as hinted before, of a stupendous tale in which we are told that human beings and non-human beings mingle with one another to drive home the point that in the Yoruba world-view human-beings and non-human actors co-exist in a world in an environment of boundary-less boundaries. The tale illustrates the kindness of the supernatural beings that interact with human-beings (and their non-human counterparts) from time to time, but these non-human characters can always be angry and vicious if offended in any way as reported in the autobiography. As stupendous as the tale may be, Soyinka utilizes it to glorify it as an authentic African autobiography that conveys aspects of the cultural life/belief of his Yoruba people side by side his personal story of childhood that seemingly contains fragments of fiction. The real stupendousness of Soyinka’s oral, hear-say tale in respect of the *oro* narrative is conveyed thus:

That evening, Sanya took ill. He broke into a sweat, tossed on his mat all night and muttered to himself. By the following day the house-hold was thoroughly frightened. His forehead was burning to the touch and no one could get a coherent word out of him. Finally, an elderly woman, one of J.J.’s converts, turned up at the house on a routine visit. When she learnt of Sanya’s condition, she nodded wisely and acted like one who knew exactly what to do. Having first found out what things he last did before his illness, she summoned my mother and questioned her. She told her everything while the old woman kept on nodding with understanding. Then she gave instructions:

I want a basket of *agidi*, containing 50 wraps. Then prepare some *ekuru* in a large bowl. Make sure the *ekuru* stew is prepared with plenty of locust bean and crayfish. It must smell as possible. (10)

The listed items were for an “appeasement, a *saara*” (an offering, food shared out as offering”) (10) “for some offended spirits” (10). When everything was prepared to specification, the old woman took it upon herself to take the offering and to Sanya’s sick room plus a pot of cold water and cups, locked the door on him and ordered everybody away (11). What happened thereafter was hugely astounding to the household:

[.....] mother and the other children were able to glue their eyes to the doors and windows, even if they could not see the invalid himself. Uncle Sanya sounded as if he was no longer alone. They heard him saying things like.

“Behave yourself, there is enough for everybody. All right you take this, have an extra wrap... Open your mouth.... Here... you don’t have to fight over that bit, here’s another piece of crayfish.... Behave, I said....’

And they would hear what sounded like the slapping of wrists, a scrape of dishes on the ground or water slapping into a cup.

When the woman judged it was time, which was well after dusk, she went and opened the door. There was Sanya fast asleep but, this time, very peacefully. She touched his forehead and appeared to be satisfied by the change. The household who had crowded in with her had no interest in Sanya however. All they could see, with astonished faces, were the scattered leaves of 50 wraps of *agidi*, with the contents gone, a large empty dish which was earlier filled with *ekuru*, and a water-pot nearly empty. (11)

In narrating the *oro* tale of Uncle Sanya Soyinka resorts to the mode of magic realism in which reality and dream co-exist not solely in the autobiographer’s mythic imagination but also in the world-view of the autobiographer’s Yoruba people who believe that *probabilities* and *plausibilities* often happen from strange occurrences. Several other reported events in Soyinka’s autobiography are curious acts of memory which illustrate his autobiographical process of recreation, an act/art that will always cause readers problems of interpretation – unless his “anatomy” of aims, purposes, to borrow Francis R. Hart’s manner of expression (Qtd. in William L Howarth 85), is fully or sensitively analysed.

Camara Laye is an admirable master of magic realism which is the over-riding strategic mode that runs through his autobiography. As in Soyinka’s, memory plays a domineering role in Laye’s recollection and recreation of events beginning from when he was five or six years old:

I was a little boy playing around my father’s hut. How old would I have been at that time? I cannot remember exactly. I must have been very young: five, may be six years old. My mother was in the workshop with my father, and I could just hear their familiar voices [...]. Suddenly I stopped playing, my whole attention fixed on

a snake that was creeping round the hut [...] I thrust this reed into the reptile's mouth. The snake did not try to get away: he was beginning to enjoy our little game: he was swallowing the reed, he was devouring it, I thought as if it were some delicious prey, his eyes glittering with voluptuous bliss [...]

I was laughing. I had not the slightest fear, and now I know that the snake would not have hesitated much longer before burying his fangs if at that moment I had not come out of the workshop. The apprentice shouted to my father, and almost at once I felt myself lifted off my feet [...] I began to weep [...]

A little later, when I had calmed down a little [...] my mother solemnly warned me never to play such a game again; I promised, although I could not know where the danger lay. (1 – 2)

The captivating lyricism of the above-quoted recollection cannot escape our notice. But the appealing element of memory, which is a significant element of orality in it, is our prime interest of focus. What Laye records and appropriates as an adult narrator and raconteur of an innocent childhood experience of his as a five or six years old, is a recitation, a second hand reportage or narrative of a near fatal happening. It is one aspect that his parents, without presumption, narrated to him, although he tries to hoodwink us into thinking or believing that he is the sole rememberer and author of the recollected event. We affirm this through his act of not giving us his definite age at that point in time. What we see on display is what rightly we can call Laye's triple memory in the African rhetorical act of autobiographical recreation: his parents' collective memory, his own faint/slight childhood memory and his own adult memory as a narrator and raconteur. Through the last named he re-enters his past as depicted in the quoted event which is an undeniable fiction oiled by magic realism. At this point in time the child could not distinguish between a mythic snake – in fact, the mythic black snake, protector of his father's household, which is visible in the progression of the autobiography and a fatal non-mythic one depicted in the passage. Clearly, the mythical black snake is the mythical symbol of the household's ancestor that forever continues the communal link between the dead and the living. In the consciousness of Laye's father's Malinke household the familiar black snake is a perceptually living memory which Laye the raconteur employs in the autobiography to give it its magic mode. In this wise, it needs re-stating: *The African Child* and *Ake* are obvious mirror of the African autobiographical tradition.

Through their acts of memory the other autobiographers also give stamp to their autobiographical art. But they do not employ memory as creatively as Soyinka or Laye does. Ngugi, for instance, although a creative, literary artist as Soyinka and Laye, does not give the impression that his childhood autobiography, what he in fact calls "a childhood memoir," is a narrative in which we see a child engaging us as a child through his "memory" of childhood.

Ngugi's *Dreams in a Time of War* is an autobiographical enterprise in which we see an adult narrator re-dreaming his dreams of his growing up years, in which he presents dreams that enable him to dwell on his and other persons' "dark times" (vii) in colonial Kenya of pains for Kenyans. As explicitly and rightly stated on the blurb, this is a narrative "about the influence of stories, story-telling and story-tellers" (back page) hence it is a memoir that carries the memories of the memoirist and those of other persons who obviously lack the oratorical gift to

recreate their memories in written words. In his recreation of the dreams he presents, Ngugi does not resort, to borrow Paul Starkey's term, in another context, to "verbal jugglery" (35). Ngugi's autobiographical memory, unlike Soyinka's and Laye's, lacks elaborate idealization and embellishment of language and of description. His autobiographical memory is that of admirable simplicity and directness. His idiom is deliberate since it explicitly conveys a variety of impressions, one of which is that Ngugi's is not a fabricated narrative. His ability to write with a creative simplicity and frankness gives his narrative the stamp of orality, for simplicity and directness belong to the tradition of the family, or, more precisely, of oral art.

But Ngugi's expertly designed simple and direct style does not debar us from noting the fiction in the memory that creates the narrative. Ngugi's simple and direct memory is too simple and too direct to be a true reflection of his autobiographical act. Not every dream, every recollection in life is as unvarnished as Ngugi tends to make it in his autobiographical recollection of childhood: "But why does one recall some events and characters vividly and others not at all? How is the mind able to select what it buries deep in the memory and what it allows to float on the surface? (67). The questions Ngugi poses are rhetorical ones to create the dilemma that faces him as an autobiographer of plain and unvarnished reflection and as an autobiography at the same time of deep reflection buried in the sub-conscious. He tries to distinguish between the fiction, that is, the untruthfulness, of the mind that makes it not absolutely possible for him to set down exactly what memory pops up. This is in contrast to his awareness of vivid recollection of events and characters that are readily on the surface, that is, the shallow part, of his adult mind which he describes or relates without linguistic incongruences.

If Ngugi's statement is examined further the distinction may be made between memory time, which is psychological time that is personal and subjective, and physical time which is "surface-mind" time that floats on the surface of memory which is impersonal and objective time, to borrow Hans Meyerhoff's idea in another context (4-5; 12-13). Impersonal and objective time makes it possible for Ngugi to recall "some events and characters vividly" while personal and subjective time which is deep and difficult to rescue from long ago memory makes it possible for him to give the shape that he has given to his autobiography.

It is necessary here to draw attention to a significant common characteristic of Soyinka's, Laye's and Ngugi's narratives. As creative, literary artists, they expertly acknowledge their love for their respective environments. William L. Howarth informs us thus: "If everything in life serves the artist, then he will value his native soil as highly as his personal talent" (104). The memory of each autobiographer glorifies his earthly shores, be it Ake (in Nigeria), Tindican or Kouroussa (in Guinea), or Kwangugi or Ngamba or Limuru (in Kenya). Each autobiographer's memory of the woods in Ake, the rice farms in Tindican, the landscape in Kwangugi bedazzles the reader positively without qualms. The recollected picture of each and every scenery that is captured may not have been done in exact terms, that is, as exactly as it was to the autobiographer in times past, but the purpose of the recollection serves well the charm and vitality that engender it.

In Naboth Mokgatle's, Nelson Mandela's, Jomo Kenyatta's and Lawrence Vambe's autobiographies the strategy each autobiographer adopts is that of the chronological narrator of events – who more or less follows the African traditional mode of once upon a time.



Each of these chroniclers of events, each of these tellers of tales pertaining to their respective countries, is not a literary artist as Soyinka, Laye and Ngugi are. Thus we do not expect each one's narrative, autobiographical act, to be similar or nearly similar to how Soyinka's Laye's or Ngugi's is. Because of this chronological performance and style, because each one employs his memory chronologically, we can call each one's autobiography *chronobiography* of self and of other fellows, a term I adopt here without critical or theoretical squeamishness.

Each one writes as he does because his purpose is to explain his country to the world that does not know it as it should. Of course, it is also the story of the *chronobiographer* who in the manner of his presentation seems to be at "cross purpose," again to appropriate Howarth's term (110), with the genre of memory. In writing an autobiography, creative memory cannot but play a crucial role but in Mokgatle's, Mandela's, Kenyatta's and Vambe's autobiographies this is not exactly the case.. In each of them, so much is made of resources outside the province of literary memory. Texts, written materials outside the domain of the autobiographer's creative recollection, are utilized to give credence to the factuality of the tales told.

In each case – minus Mandela's – chronological structure takes the form of entitled chapters (in Mandela's it takes the form of divisions that run into entitled eleven parts) that convey details of facts not fully engendered by memory. But this premeditated chronologically structured form underlines the fiction in the given details of facts. Autobiography, of whatever kind, is not (and can never always) be a chronologically structured recollection that can record facts exactly as they were at the time of the recollected/recorded events or happenings from whatever sources, written or un-written. This is a puzzling autobiographical twist with its paradoxes and contradictions.

A *chronobiographer* – who can be an ethnographer as Kenyatta was, or an historian, cultural or otherwise, as Vambe was – thrives on collections of materials from diverse sources (for example, from folklore), but the stories he tells, whether of himself or of his community/country and people exist, live in rustic, traditional life, not on a researcher's paper or in sounds of his tapes; and when a *chronobiographer* jots or scribbles them down without being able to recreate the atmosphere in which they flourish he has given us a mutilated truth which is fiction. His is the cultural, historical and social memory of his people, which includes himself. But how true is this memory? Or how true are the diverse details/materials which he combines to constitute a collective memory for us to espouse? These questions deserve to be answered pertinently because a response to them will give further substance to this observer's contention in this essay.

Lawrence Vambe tends to offer the best sample, the best example, of premeditated *chronobiographical* structure. The Heinemann editor of Vambe's book says as follows:

For centuries the history of Rhodesia, or Zimbabwe as her own people called their country and still do, was an oral tradition handed down from generation to generation: it is rich chronicle of migration, empire-building and trading in a flourishing civilization – until the arrival of Cecil Rhodes' pioneers in 1890. Vambe remembers hearing as a child first-hand accounts of the great rebellion in 1896. Western civilization began to destroy the tribes and forced labour disrupted a life-

pattern of centuries. The early memories of the author convey the vestiges of what must have been a rapidly dying tribal society and the quality of life as it had been in old Zimbabwe. Anecdotes of his own family life, faced with a church both tyrannical and benign, and a state system totally insensitive to most of its citizens, make immediate the baffling and humiliating experience of being an African in Rhodesia. (Back cover)

As Tony E. Afejuku stated in his essay, in *Research in African Literatures*,

This quotation illustrates the narrative's thematic focus that is linked closely with the scope of historical coverage. The scope of historical coverage entails the record and interpretation of past events, an assertion of Va Shawasha value and a rejection of European domination and European social systems. The assertion of VaShawasha values involves, among other things, a yearning to go back to the root of Vashawasha history and custom, an assertion of the freedom and unity of the VaShawasha people and of their common origin, and an attempt to reintroduce a noble and truly VaShawasha society (500).

Vambe's thematic focus guides the structural pattern of the book. But it is a structural pattern defined by the author's memory, that is, the memory of self, and the memories of others, which he merges with his to define his people's collective memory. But the integrated memory needs to be authenticated. For this reason "Vambe uses the technique of the historian not necessarily to reinforce his thematic concern but instead to give the immediate impression that the narrative is authentic history that owes its existence and shape to the author's gifts as rememberer and chronicler and as compiler and researcher" (Afejuku 514). Thus Vambe's narrative depends on both "fictive" oral sources and on non-written sources that underline the fictional and non-fictional quality of his *chronobiography*.

Kenyatta's *Facing Mount Kenya*, Mokgatle's *The Autobiography of An Unknown South African*, Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom*, in varying degrees, are like Vambe's narrative. They were written and were expected to be read as autobiographies that provide information about the autobiographer, about their societies and about their times. They seek to preserve and re-live the past through the act/art of memory and of written, historical documentation that owes its origin to received tradition. But as Ray Pascal informs us, "Remembering is itself a creative act, and the recording and ordering of memories [are] even more so" (182). Thus by adhering to the structure they adopt, by adhering strictly to the structure of chronological ordering of events, these autobiographers reveal, without realizing it, the structure of truth that is lacking in each autobiography. What each autobiographer presents as a work, as a narrative of a faithful *rememberer*, is not truly so. What each author also wishes us to see as a narrative of truth, as a compelling narrative of truth, is not correctly, and totally so. It is instead a myth of recreated beauty of ideas, of thoughts, of information, of enlightenment about their respective societies, times and epochs. To realize this to fruition, each one, in varying degrees, has incorporated social commentary, cultural, political, legal and religious problems and concerns, an examination of marital and familial questions, and those of love and fidelity. The



events of each plot have been given semi-autobiographical characteristics and colourations, which transform to *chronobiographical* forms and art as the narrative progresses in longitudes and latitudes and widens in scope and dimension. This remark does not need further clarification.

At this point I wish to end this essay on this note: our picture of the cited narratives indicates that African autobiography from whichever angle we look at it is fiction. It is not and cannot be a completely true and accurate account of whatever it recalls or claims or pretends to recall through whatever mode (or trope) of recollection. The truthful memory it espouses in whatever guise is a myth and will remain a myth – a myth of recreated beauty of ideas, of thoughts, of events, of information, of enlightenment of self-knowledge, of experiences. But a significant revelation of the myth of truthful memory of African Autobiography is this: African autobiography does not fail as autobiography because of its author's inventive imagination or memory - Soyinka's, Laye's, Ngugi's; or, because of its author's evaluative, chronological memory - Vambe's, Kenyatta's, Mokgatle's, Mandela's; the fiction in African autobiography lies at the same time in its author's inventive memory and in its creator's chronological memory. African autobiography's untruth is evident in the art of its author and creator. Who disputed or disputes this should no longer dispute it.

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