A brief background and history of African literatures

Africa has a long and complex literary history. Indeed, to suggest that one historical account can represent all of the literatures, across time, from all of the regions of Africa is misleading. Deciding when African literature first appears, or when the tradition begins, are questions that are ultimately unanswerable, and determining which literary forms originate in Africa and which are borrowed from elsewhere are issues over which literary critics continue to debate. Nevertheless, scholars of African literatures have put forth a general historical overview that allows readers, listeners, and students to gain a sense of the literary history of Africa.

Oral Literatures

Oral literatures have flourished in Africa for many centuries and take a variety of forms including, in addition to the folk tales found in this lesson, myths, epics, funeral dirges, praise poems, and proverbs. Myths, according to Oyekan Owomoyela, usually "explain the interrelationships of all things that exist, and provide for the group and its members a necessary sense of their place in relation to their environment and the forces that order events on earth" (2). Epics are elaborate literary forms, usually performed only by experts on special occasions. They often recount the heroic exploits of ancestors. Examples of epics include the Mwindo epic and the epic of Sundjata. Versions of both of these epics have been transcribed and published in book form and may be available through public or university libraries. Dirges, chanted during funeral ceremonies, lament the departed, praise his/her memory, and ask for his/her protection. Praise poems are "epithets called out in reference to an object (a person, a town, an animal, a disease, and so on) in celebration of its outstanding qualities and achievements" (Owomoyela 14). Praise poems have a variety of applications and functions. Professional groups often create poems exclusive to them. Prominent chiefs might appoint a professional performer to compile their praise poems and perform them on special occasions. Professional performers of praise poems might also travel from place to place and perform for families or individuals for alms or a small fee. The following is quoted from a praise poem to Shaka, the Zulu warrior and king:

Shaka went and erected temporary huts
Between the Nsuze and the Thukela,
In the country of Nyanya son of Manzawane;
He ate up Mantondo son of Tazi,
He felt him tasteless and spat him out,
He devoured Sihayo.
He who came dancing on the hillside of the Phuthiles,
And he overcame Msikazi among the Ndimoshes.
He met a long line of hah-de-dahs [ibis birds]
When he was going to destroy the foolish Pondos;
Shaka did not raid herds of cattle,
He raided herds of buck. (qtd. in Owomoyela 15)

Most well known of the African oral forms is probably the proverb, a short witty or ironic statement, metaphorical in its formulation, that aims to communicate a response to a particular situation, to offer advice, or to be persuasive. The proverb is often employed as a rhetorical device, presenting its speaker as the holder of cultural knowledge or authority. Yet, as much as the proverb looks back to an African culture as its origin and source of authority, it creates that African culture each time it is spoken and used to make sense of immediate problems and occasions.
One final point: oral literary forms must not be conceptualized as simply pre-colonial, ancient, or traditional. Oral literary forms, such as folktales and praise-songs, flourish in contemporary Africa. For example, performances of oral tales are featured on radio, television, and in films. Oral literatures are performed and created by women and men, and many African written literary expressions incorporate the forms and tropes of oral literatures.

**Literacy in Africa**

A discussion of written African literatures raises a number of complicated and complex problems and questions that only can be briefly sketched out here. The first problem concerns the small readership for African literatures in Africa. Over 50% of Africa's population is illiterate, and hence many Africans cannot access written literatures. The scarcity of books available, the cost of those books, and the scarcity of publishing houses in Africa exacerbate this already critical situation. Despite this, publishing houses do exist in Africa, and in countries such as Ghana and Zimbabwe, African publishers have produced and sold many impressive works by African authors, many of which are written in African languages.

Many of the works identified by teachers and researchers in North America and Europe as African literature, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, for example, are texts published by presses outside of Africa. Some of these works are not even available to African readers. Likewise, what an American teacher might recognize as an African novel might be very different from the locally produced, popular novels that are sold to and read exclusively by people living in Africa.

Scholars have identified three waves of literacy in Africa. The first occurred in Ethiopia where written works have been discovered that appeared before the earliest literatures in the Celtic and Germanic languages of Western Europe (Gerard 47). The second wave of literacy moved across Africa with the spread of Islam. Soon after the emergence of Islam in the seventh century, its believers established themselves in North Africa through a series of jihads, or holy wars. In the eleventh and twelfth centuries, Islam was carried into the kingdom of Ghana. The religion continued to move eastward through the nineteenth century (Owomoyela 23).

Remnants of narrative poetry in Swahili have been recovered from as early as the eighteenth century. The poems, in epic form, describe the life of Mohammed and his exploits against Christians. In West Africa, manuscripts in Arabic verse have been dated to the fourteenth century. Several literatures, known as ajami, written in the Arabic script for non-Arabic languages have been discovered from the eighteenth century. The literatures were written in Fulani (West Africa), Hausa (northern Nigeria), and Wolof (Senegal).

The encounter with Europe through trade relationships, missionary activities, and colonialism propelled the third wave of literacy in Africa. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, literary activity in the British colonies was conducted almost entirely in vernacular languages. Missionaries found it more useful to translate the Bible into local languages than to teach English to large numbers of Africans. This resulted in the production of hymns, morality tales, and other literatures in African languages concerned with propagating Christian values and morals. The first of these "Christian-inspired African writings" emerged in South Africa (Owomoyela 28). Thomas Mofolo studied theology at the Bible School of the Paris Evangelical Mission at Morija (in present-day Lesotho). He worked as a teacher and clerk and was a proofreader for the Morija Printing Press. The Press published his novel, *Moeti Oa Bochabella (The Traveler of the East)* as a serial in the newspaper *Leselinyana* in 1906. The novel reveals the influence of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, and tells the story of Fekesi, who, tired of all of the sinfulness he sees around him, tries to find a perfect kingdom to the East. West African writers, such
as Chief Fagunwa who wrote in Yoruba, produced similar works in African languages. Writers also recorded proverbs, praise-poems, and other pieces of oral literature during this period.

**Negritude**

Although Africans had been writing in Portuguese as early as 1850 and a few volumes of African writing in English and French had been published, an explosion of African writing in European languages occurred in the mid-twentieth century. In the 1930s, black intellectuals from French colonies living in Paris initiated a literary movement called Negritude. Negritude emerged out of "a sudden grasp of racial identity and of cultural values" (Gerard 51) and an awareness "of the wide discrepancies which existed between the promise of the French system of assimilation and the reality" (Owomoyela 37). The movement's founders looked to Africa to rediscover and rehabilitate the African values that had been erased by French cultural superiority. Negritude writers wrote poetry in French in which they presented African traditions and cultures as antithetical, but equal, to European culture. Out of this philosophical/literary movement came the creation of *Presence Africaine* by Alioune Diop in 1947. The journal, according to its founder, was an endeavor "to help define African originality and to hasten its introduction into the modern world" (Owomoyela 39). Other Negritude authors include Leopold Senghor, Aimé Cesaire, and Leon Damas. Below is an excerpt from Senghor's poem "Prayer to Masks":

Masks! Masks!
Black mask red mask, you white-and-black masks
Masks of the four points from which the Spirit blows
In silence I salute you!
Nor you the least, Lion-headed Ancestor
You guard this place forbidden to all laughter of women, to all smiles that fade
You distill this air of eternity in which I breathe the air of my Fathers.
Masks of unmasked faces, stripped of the masks of illness and the lines of age
You who have fashioned this portrait, this my face bent over the later of white paper
In your own image, hear me! (Owomoyela 42).

In the mid-60s, Nigeria replaced French West Africa as the largest producer and consumer of African literature, and literary production in English surpassed that in French. Large numbers of talented writers in Francophone Africa came to occupy important political and diplomatic posts and gave up creative writing. Furthermore, the tenets of Negritude seemed far less relevant after independence and as newly independent nations found themselves facing civil wars, military coups and corruption (Gerard 53).

The vastness in size and population of Nigeria gave it an advantage over smaller countries. In the 1950s, a large readership made up of clerks and small traders and a steadily increasing number of high schools students developed in Nigeria, and this readership enabled the emergence of Onitsha market literatures. Ibadan college, founded in 1957, produced some of the writers that came to the forefront in the 60s. East Africa followed West Africa, and in the 60s, Makerere College became a productive center for East African literature. By the mid-70s, after the coup that brought General Idi Amin to power in Uganda, Kenya became the literary center in East Africa.
An African Literary Tradition

The written literatures, novels, plays, and poems in the 1950s and 60s have been described as literatures of testimony. (See Kenneth W. Harrow's *Thresholds of Change* in African Literature, Portsmouth and London: Heinemann and James Curry, 1994.) Novels such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *A Grain of Wheat*, Wole Soyinka's *The Interpreters*, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, and Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* are a few of the novels that might be described as literatures of testimony. These works, in part, attempt to respond to derogatory representations of, and myths about, African culture. Frequently written in the first person, literatures of testimony are concerned with representing African reality and valorizing African culture.

The following generation of African authors produced literatures in European languages that have been described as literatures of revolt. These texts move away from the project of recuperating and reconstructing an African past and focus on responding to, and revolting against, colonialism, neocolonialism, and corruption. These literatures are more concerned with the present realities of African life, and often represent the past negatively. As Harrow explains, "…instead of a past, a family, and a cultural background being reconstructed in positive terms, exemplary of African culture, the past is often viewed negatively, as something from which the protagonist has to escape" (84). Mariama Ba's *Une si longue lettre* (*So Long a Letter*), Birgo Diop's *L'Aventure Ambigue* (*Ambiguous Adventure*), and Peter Abrahams' *Tell Freedom* exemplify these literatures.

The final group into which one can organize African authors is post-revolt writers. These writers move away from the use of realism and aim to develop new discourses and literary styles. They often focus on oppressive African regimes and employ an ironic style. The work of Sony Labou Tansi, Henri Lopes, Yambo Ouloguem, and Ahmadou Kourouma illustrate the style and content of post-revolt literatures.

Women and African Literature

African women, although receiving less notice from scholars and historians, have been producing literature alongside African men. Women oral artists and performers continue to create oral literatures, and a few examples of these texts have been included in this lesson. In the early years of the twentieth century, African women such as Lillith Kakaza, who wrote in Xhosa, Victoria Swaartboo, who wrote in Xhosa, and Violet Dube working in Zulu produced works of literature in African languages. Adelaide Casely-Hayford, born in Sierra Leone, educated in England and Germany, and married to the well-known lawyer Joseph Casely-Hayford represents the first generation of women writing in European languages. Her short story "Mista Courifer," published in 1961, examines the collision between African and Western cultures. These women, from elite backgrounds and educated in colonial schools, began writing at about the time many of their countries gained independence. They include Mabel Dove Danquah, from the Gold Coast, Grace Ogot and Noni Jabavu of Kenya, and Flora Nwapa of Nigeria. Since the 1970s, African women have written a wide array of works that have been well received by readers and teachers of African literature. A few of these include Ama Ata Aidoo, Buchi Emecheta, Bessie Head, Mariama Ba, Miriam Tlali, Nafissatou Dialo, Aminata Sow Fall, Zulu Sofola, Fatima Dike, Rebeka Njau and Micere Mugo.