

The citification of Creole

Akin Adesokan

Patrick Chamoiseau, *TEXACO*, (from the French and Creole by Rose-Myriam Rejouis and Val Vinokuror); Pantheon Books, New York. 1997, 361pp.

TOWARD the end of *Texaco*, the enigmatic novel by the Martinican writer Patrick Chamoiseau, the narrator Marie-Sophie Laborieux recalls how she came to write her notebooks. She is being interviewed by the Word Scratcher who is in fact a mask for Chamoiseau, the author. She says: 'I was forced to accommodate myself to my scant mastery of the tongue of France. My painstaking sentences seemed like epitaphs. Something else: writing for me was done in the French language, not Creole. *How to bring in my so Creole Esternome?*'

There is a parallel between this disarming reality and Chamoiseau's (pronounced shar-mar-soo) own experience recalled in his memoirs *School Days*. The unnamed 'black boy' thinks in Creole and translates his thought to French before speaking. Then the teacher corrects the student's statement by dictating to him the same thoughts in a French made in France, not in Martinique. It is an all-too-common dilemma for writers forced to negotiate through an international language which does not fully convey their experience, not as much for any inadequacy in that language as for the fact that the experience has yielded its own language, in *Texaco*'s case Martinican Creole.

Martinique is a former French colony in the Caribbean, and before that it was an island, together with Guadeloupe, dotted with plantations where slaves worked. France was noted for its policy of assimilation in its colonies across the globe - the policy of making French men and women out of the colonials. Naturally, one would expect the tongue of France to be the official and informal language. As it turned out, Creole, a language as mosaic as the Martinican reality - forged from Caribbean, African, Levantine, Spanish, French experiences - got the upper hand in the day-to-day life of the people of the island which the author seeks to transform into lit-

erature.

To a great extent this dilemma over language is inseparable from the story of *Texaco*. It is hard to determine where, in all the multivoicedness of the novel, the linear story lies. Looking for someone (the blackman of the Doum) in the hope of collecting his secrets, the Word Scratcher crashes into *Texaco*. It is a poor neighbourhood in Fort-de-France and as the name suggests, used to be occupied by the oil company. (As Marie-Sophie later tells the Word Scratcher, the company has 'picked up its bowels, carted off its reservoirs, taken apart its tankers' sucking pipes and left'). The encounter with the place strikes a luminous moment in the Word Scratcher who gets introduced to the founder of *Texaco*, Marie-Sophie Laborieux, otherwise called the source. He records her recollections in notebooks, and later introduces a tape recorder. She supplies him with her numerous notebooks and other scraps of paper. From the meetings the stuff of the novel gathers solidity. It is made up of excerpts from Marie-Sophie's notebooks recording her father's (Esternome) stories, the Word Scratcher's transcriptions of the interviews, his letters to the source, and the urban planner's notes to the Word Scratcher.

Laborieux's father, a slave, was freed-affranchised by his master and told by a Mentoh (an earlier old man of the Doum) who was himself black, 'to take with utmost urgency what the bekés (whitemen, descendants of the established planters) had not taken; the hills, the southern drylands, the misty heights, the depths of the ravines, and the besiege those places that they had created' city. The sum of existence in Martinique, from the hills around Saint-Pierre and Fort-Royal to Fort-de-France, is the attempts to capture the city, to move from the slave plantation and its history of oppression, into the civilisation of the metropolis promised by the abolition of April 1848.

>>

Esternome Laborieux (whose first name was given, naturally, by his master, whose last name came from an office clerk who thought the attempt to explain the origin of Esternome 'laborious') drifts from place to unsettling place, finding love and losing it, finally has a daughter by a blind old slave, Idomenee Carmelite Lapidaille. The child who grows up as Marie-Sophie, founder of Texaco is the Word Scratcher's source and narrator of the novel.

When Esternome succumbs to old age, his daughter continues with the quest to 'take the city'. Living in Martinique has few other meanings. If the poor (and the not-so-rich) must see another day, they need another space to pass the night. They find the space in which Texaco oil used to be, and put

they first settled in Saint-Pierre, after the abolition. Marie-Sophie tells the Word Scratcher that Texaco was budding in that magical word. She is aging when the Word Scratcher meets her, her eyes have shed many rivers. Though childless, she has had her mad season and in her last years continues to lament: 'the blood flows away with some life in it...'

But she keeps looking at the world in a good light. That's her strength.

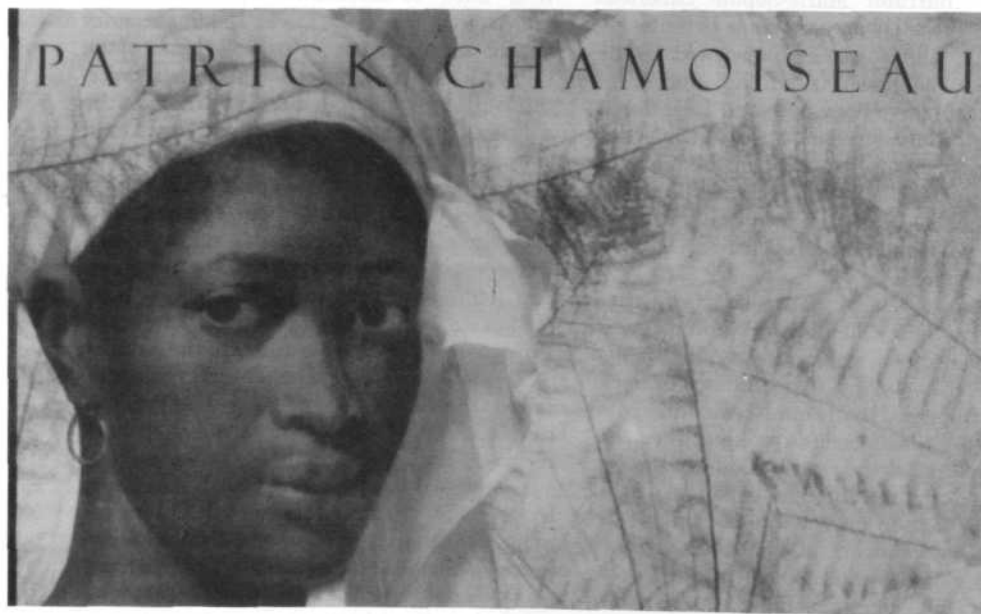
In her time, as in her father's time, things have not changed: time continues to bid its time. A frustration so deep the only way to cope with it is through the resources of language, also steeped in silence. This is the Martinique which gave rise to Aime Cesaire's *Notebooks of a Return to the Native Land*, 'the grand poetic war of Negritude' (Cesaire ap-

pears in the novel as mayor of Fort-de-France), it is the Martinique of Frantz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*. But the extent to which Texaco from these two texts is the extent to which literature goes to transform human experience.

Chamoiseau's fidelity to Creole reality is borne out in the book's exquisite language. As shown in his exchange with Ti-Cirique (the Haitian Francophile who acts as Marie-Sophie's literary mentor) epigrammatised at the beginning of this novel with several

epigrams, footnotes, a glossary, an afterword by the translators and an explanatory last chapter, he privileges Creole French over and above the universal Mulatto French. His writing is accused of lacking grandeur and humanity, attributes which in Ti-Cirique's view, are impossible without the text being steeped in metropolitan French. His reply: 'Dear Master, literature in a place that breathes is to be taken alive.' Chamoiseau and two other Martinican scholars have prepared a dictionary of French Creole, with a seminal essay arguing for its validity and approached by the Academie de Francais. The rub is that both essay and dictionary are written in standard French.

There is concern for naming in *Texaco* but the politics, unlike in Toni Morrison's novels,



up their tenements. Trying to dislodge them frequently brings the CRS (Compaigne Republicaine De Securite - pronounced *seyaress*). When the Christ, an urban planner comes to 'renovate' Texaco (meaning to 'race' it, in his scientific language) he is stoned, then brought before Marie-Sophie who seizes the presence of a government official to tell the story of the instant city.

For all its plotlessness, Texaco strikes the reader as full of life, the joyous spirit of the affirmation of life. Out of nothing but raw will comes the story of one woman who rallies others - Marie-Clemence, Sonore, Carolina Danta, Julot the Mangy, Ti-Cirique, etc - to defend that piece of earth. *Nouteka* was the term Esternome used to evoke the sense of place he and the others felt when

only manages to whistle through the jumble of voices. The christening of Laborieux recalls Macon Dead, Milkman, Stamps Paid, but the difference in the political undertone parallels not just the different artistic temperaments of the two novelists but also that between the colonial experiences in France and the United States. An illiterate man pronounces Jean-Raphael as An-Afarel, and one can easily dismiss this as a result of blissful ignorance. In Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, Doctor



Patrick Chamoiseau

Street was deliberately renamed Not Doctor Street, because the doctor in question was not recognised by the white establishment.

Very often the reader is reminded that Esternome is incoherent about the meaning of freedom; even the Word Scratcher laments Marie-Sophie's perniskety narration. This points a finger at the undependability of memory, but the remaining four fingers point to the intractability of Martinique's oppressive history. Despite the multivoicedness there is a heavy silence at the heart of the novel. This is best repre-

sented by the last of the Mentohs, Papa Tolone, the old blackman of the Doum. Silence is the mark of the Mentoh, Derek Walcott's 'patrician of the New World' who incarnates the attributes of an ancestor: equanimity, quiet, distrust of revolt.

The story of *Texaco* is orally told. It is clear, from the very structure of the narration, that someone who has been told an incoherent story is recapitulating, stressing its orality. One thing follows the other: since it is to be

a narrated story, it has to be partly in Creole. In each of the three generations of narration - Esternome, Marie-Sophie and the Word Scratcher, there are several stumblings. The Word Scratcher suffers the most, stumbling "into that uncrossable barrier which separates the spoken word from the writing to be done, which distinguishes the writing done from the word lost."

Lucky diver that he is, the Word Scratcher emerges, drenched in the waters of harsh history, his teeth glistening with a pearl: *Texaco*.

Akin Adesokan is a novelist who lives in Lagos

African studies companion

Ranti Osunfowora

Hans M. Zell & Cecile Lomer, (eds) **THE AFRICAN STUDIES COMPANION: A RESOURCE GUIDE AND DIRECTORY**, (Second Revised edition) Hans Zell Publishers, Oxford, 1997, 276pp.

ALTHOUGH the second revised edition of *The African Studies Companion: A Resource Guide and Directory* is broad in scope and coverage, it will be more useful for Africanist scholars, researchers and information specialists based in Europe and America than their colleagues based in Africa. Nonetheless, the compilation has potentials which if exploited can lead to the development of the information service delivery in Africa.

The aims of this new edition of the Com-

panion have remained the same as the first edition published in 1989. According to its compilers, it is intended as a desktop companion and working tool providing quick and easy access to a wide range of relevant information to scholars, teachers, students and others involved in any aspect of African Studies. It is also expected to be valuable for African reference and collection/development librarians.

To ensure the achievement of these laudable aims, the companion has brought to-

>>>