

The literature is astonishing, the quality is astonishingly high. And Martin's position in all of this is special" (p.310).

The distinguished multitude in the section titled "Martin Carter's Impact and Influence Upon Younger Writers" is an eloquent testimony to the power of Carter's poetry, the reach of his voice, and the enduring resonance of his vision. In prose and poetry, members of the younger generation touched by Carter's fire, pour out their appreciation in toasts and tributes: John Agard, Grace Nichols, David Dabydeen, Merle Collins, Fred D'Aguiar, Linton Kwesi Johnson, E.A. Markham, Sasenarine Persaud, Mark McWatt, Kendel Hippolyte, Karen King-Aribisala, etc. In one packed, explosive page, Dabydeen narrates the story of the marginalization of Caribbean literature and history in the United Kingdom until the 1980's, how he was introduced to Carter's work through a young English student, and how that encounter became part of his "journey of discovery" (p.335). Reading Persaud's piece, we are made thoughtfully aware of the need for a closer study of the affinity between Carter and Rabindranath Tagore, the great Indian poet.

The section on "Obituaries" continues the outpouring of tributes, this time from a

posthumous perspective, with Eusi Kwayana, Ian Macdonald, Mervyn Morris, Vanda Radzik, and Ken Ramchand sounding the last trumpet for the poet who "binds together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society..." (p.374).

All are involved is a difficult book to review. Its contents are so packed, so vital, the statements so well made that paraphrasing them becomes an act of egregious violence. Here is Martin Carter, that "gifted, paradoxical man" (p.45), that "friendly, dream-ful, dangerous man" (p.370), analyzed, extolled, lavished with the recognition which eluded him in life because of the politics of his poetry, and the poignant truth and moral force of that politics. This book demonstrates how wrong we were to have neglected Carter's voice, how diminished. *All Are Involved* is a treasure so empowering, a tribute we pay through Martin Carter to all that is human in us. It is a most enduring legacy. **GBS**

'Homeland' of The Mind

BY EBENEZER OBADARE

AFTER twenty-seven years in jail, a man has every good reason to be a different person, with the exception of Nelson Mandela who emerged from behind bars with his treasure of magnanimity hardly depleted; hence Albert Camus' memorable statement still rings with a certain truism — prison overhauls. So does exile, as Diawara confesses: "Exile transforms a man forever." Here, the kinship between the experiences of exile and the penitentiary is unmistakable. Both involve a degree of spatial disconnection, spiritual translocation and mental anxiety. To be an exile is to be torn off, mostly without choice, from the land of one's progeny. It is to find oneself im-prisoned within a strange spatio-temporal universe. "There is no greater sorrow on earth than the loss of one's native land", says Euripides.

Exile fosters experiences that produce a variety of attitudes: from the wary pessimism of the cynic, to the restless inquisitiveness of the academic: how is the land that one left behind doing? What has happened to its political institutions? Has the land's culture

stagnated or flourished? For the exile, these are questions to which satisfactory answers are quite difficult.

Matters tend to get worse when the land that you left behind is a portion of Africa, the continent which seems to revel in the identity of being the Sick Man of the World. The image of Africa that the (Western) media projects is not the kind to assuage one's worries, and so after thirty-two years, Manthia Diawara, a Professor of Comparative Literature and Film at the New York University decides to find out the truth about the country he was banished from in the teeth of nationalist/Communist fever. This was to be a heart-rending, if not unhappy encounter. To be away for more than three decades from the only place that one can confidently call his own is no easy experience, emotionally speaking. Diawara was carrying a painful sore, and "the only cure I had to seek" lay in Sidime Laye, a childhood friend. In between the tortuous

**Manthia Diawara,
IN SEARCH OF
AFRICA, Harvard
University Press,
Massachusetts, 1998,
288 pp.**

>>>



Military and aggressive campaigns have, more than anything else, defined African post-colony from its outset.

search for a 'lost' childhood friend, and the gathering of material for a documentary on the Sekou Toure era in Guinea. Diawara discovers a country that has changed so much, and is still easily recognizable.

Sidime Laye is the physical metaphor for a search that was to prove eventful, the reality from which Diawara had been separated for decades, and the object of several bouts of fantasy whose eventual discovery leads to profound shock on the part of the 'discoverer'. Yet, his (Laye's) innate values, despite transformations, win the belated admiration of Diawara.

In relating Sidime Laye, a friend remembered solely in connection with puerile innocence, to Africa, one is not only stating the obvious but equally describing the narrative technique used by the author to take the reader along his odyssey. Thus, by the time Sidime was 'discovered', Africa, so to say, had been explored from a rainbow of perspectives. In the same vein, the emotion generated by the initial re-encounter with Sidime (shock, even disappointment) is similar to that felt on re-sighting Africa. It takes some time to get accustomed to the nature of changes taking place inside the continent.

When Diawara and his father were expelled from Guinea in January 1964, the country was then undergoing serious transformations. Earlier, in 1958, Guinea had called the bluff of France, its erstwhile colonial master, and opted to fend for itself as a newly independent country. No doubt, the extrication from France was a very popular decision, but the young social formation clearly lacked the economic wherewithal to fund its self-declared autarchy. The mass of the people had been mobilized on the platform of Marxist ideology, but it was discovered after four

years that mere rhetoric was incapable of catering to their needs. What took place afterwards was truly egregious but sadly by no means unprecedented: the regime of Ahmed Sekou Toure, just like that of Macias Nguema in Equatorial Guinea and sundry other African regimes which suddenly discovered the limits of ideology, needed a scapegoat to explain away an obvious failure of imagination. That was the immediate background to the wave of xenophobia which broke out in Guinea, leading to the mass deportation of non-nationals. Diawara and his family were caught up in this unfortunate incident and had to leave for Mali from where he eventually left for the United States.

With the 'despicable' foreigners out of the way, the expectation that the economy would respond with a bounce did not happen, and following the logic already established by historical precedence, the Guinean revolution turned upon itself. While the Hanging Bridge and Camp Boiro in Conakry which Diawara describes with evident contempt might be peculiarly Guinean nomenclatures, as embodiments of state intolerance to opposition, they have preceding models in the Gulag Archipelago, the Central Prison in Bangui, and other locations where self-aggrandizing despots had, so forlornly, sought to incarnate the very idea of dissent. If it is in the nature of revolutions to devour their own people, then the Guinean case followed the form to its limit. In this regard, the very lamentable example of Diallo Telli, reportedly hounded to his death by a jealous Sekou Toure, is a grim reminder of the sad fate that befell Trotsky in the early days of the former Soviet Union.

Despite this being the case, it is curious that throughout the entire narrative, Diawara manages to shield the same Sekou Toure from critical appraisal. The general attitude of the author may be shifty and ambivalent at times, but the worrying admiration for the former Guinean dictator is hardly disguised and maintained throughout the book. What could be responsible for this? Is it a case of willful purblindness, or simply the refusal of the exile to abandon the vestiges of a vanishing icon? Whatever the correct explanation may be, it is obvious that in so many respects, Diawara is reluctant to do away with the Africa of his imagination. This theme, interestingly, demands an address.

The story of the search for Sidime Laye is interspersed with "Situations", four chapters of apparently heavier stuff in which the author essays to grapple with "blackness and modernity and my own place and role

in shaping them". Philosophically speaking, "Situations" address the same theme of re-discovery set out in the search for Sidime Laye. Here, a variety of interconnected issues, ranging from modernism to Afro-pessimism, African art, music, culture and globalization are dissected with supreme subtlety and nuance. Diawara understands what the historical and contemporary intellectual concerns are regarding the African continent, and he sets about his task with the ability of a skillful raconteur, successfully drawing the necessary linkages between these scholarly discourses and the unfolding problems that tracking down an old friend was turning out to be. What emerges, then, is a book that is simultaneously analytic and descriptive, with a narrative tenor inevitably wavering between dispassionate analysis and moral preachments.

In as much as Diawara is sympathetic toward the realities that he tries to understand, the fact is that he has been too removed from them to see beyond what the Western media has fossilized into truths about the continent. In part, this is arguably what leads him to make many glib but hardly substantiable statements about the continent. For example, his understanding of the ethnic or tribal factor in African politics is weak and undeveloped. Consider the following statement for instance: "That afternoon in Conakry, as I walked away from the drums and the celebration, I felt the power of ethnic difference over racial and national unity in West Africa. Race and nationality are still modern concepts for us. We know ourselves more as members of blacksmith clans, warrior clans, religious or shamanist clans than as black people" (p.36).

Three things immediately come to mind in respect of the preceding statement. First, this is certainly not a very correct description of the state of affairs in the sub-region or the continent as a whole at the present moment. Second, it is equally doubtful whether one can, as the author has done, reach a definitive conclusion about realities in the West-African sub-region on the basis of a singular experience. Third, Diawara touches on two important themes — ethnicity and modernity — which deserve further expatiation. Incidentally, these are two issues that he himself devotes a reasonable number of pages to. Let us examine ethnicity first.

Ethnicity has enjoyed copious scholarly attention in the growing literature on the African post-colonial socio-political processes. But ever since it made its first appearance, discourses of its impact on the social system have been more rancorous than consensual. A sizeable number of scholars consider its effect to be certainly deleterious.

This perspective has become even more popular in the period following the disintegration of the Soviet empire when the African continent has been convulsed by the reality of ethnically induced violence. The growing sensationalism of the media has even made it virtually impossible to separate the wheat of fact from the chaff of virtual speculation. Yet, certain critical questions demand urgent answers: for one, beyond its recurrent demonization, what, if any, are the salutary impacts of ethnicity on the social process? Is ethnicity necessarily to blame for the myriad conflicts currently wracking the continent? Or, to paraphrase Philippa Atkinson, what is ethnic conflicts, or our own explanations of them? Whatever may be the answers to these critical questions, one thing seems certain, and here again one can draw on Atkinson's insight that: "Media concentration on primordial ethnic identity as a cause of war, with its apparent manifestations in savagery and even cannibalism, helps to obscure critical political and economic factors driving the violence." Proper attention to some of these emergent issues would have elevated Diawara's analysis from the level of mere parroting. There is a problem of ethnicity in Africa (and everywhere of course), but thanks to precipitate analyses, it is one of generalization rather than astute engagement.

The other not totally unrelated issue is that of modernity. My thinking is that the problem here, at least from the perspective of Diawara's book, is that of definition. Modernity, apart from being poorly defined, is easily conflated with development. To illustrate, at least two divergent senses of modernity are implied in the following statements: first, "One of the prices we have paid for *our modernization* is that we would rather deal directly with white people than with one another" (p.28). Second, "the motivation behind this return to the past may be found in their (Afrocentrists') unwillingness to concede *African peoples' backward attitude toward modernity*; which, if not challenged by an assumption of blacks' anterior superiority, they think will be interpreted as inferiority to white people." In several other references, the notion of modernity is deployed even more vaguely. While in one instance, independence is blamed for having "jump-started *our true modernization*", in another, the ultimate aim of the militarization option canvassed by Wright and fervently supported by the author is defined as "draft(ing) Africans into the *modern world*" (emphasis added). Surely, the manner in which the idea of modernity/modernization has been used leaves a lot to be desired. Is modernity something that

>>

<<

Africans are aspiring to or that which they are violently opposed to? Is it with us or ahead of us? Are we in the "modern" era in the sense suggested by the idea of "jump-starting our true modernization", or is it something far beyond our collective apprehension in the sense implied by the idea of "Africans' backward attitude toward modernity"? Is modernity the same thing as modernization? And what, if any, are the essential differences between being modern and being European? Do they mean the same thing? Finally, is one possible without the other?

When Diawara finally discovers Sidime Laye, he is shocked to find such a grim turn for the "worse". Sidime Laye has not become a spark of Western culture like himself, gone too were those childhood dreams of following in the footsteps of Diallo Telli, the Guinean former Secretary General of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) who had captured the imagination of the young Sidime. In the period following the deportation of the Diawara family from Guinea, Sidime's too had come under official hammer for the innocent misdemeanour of a wood carver uncle. Ultimately, both indigene (Sidime) and foreigner (Diawara) had been haunted down by the same paranoid Communist regime, an instructive summary of the predatory predilections in the hands of the post-colonial African state. While Diawara had seized the chance of geographic exile, Sidime had embarked on a mental one, carving masks (a new face of Africa?) in the solitude of his atelier. Still, both continued to be troubled by and engaged with unfolding realities on the continent. While it is difficult to say who represents or portrays Africa better between the two, the artist or the intellectual, there is absolutely no doubt that Sidime trusts his art to "carve a way out of the ineptitude of the twentieth century and Sekou Toure's revolution".

In the end, the solutions proposed by Diawara to the socio-political crisis in Africa only betray his level of detachment from the African condition itself. First, the idea of revolutionary violence. Here, Williams Sassine's passionate argument that "The only solution is violence. You must break everything... We need an apocalypse to clean everything" virtually summarises the attitude of Diawara too. The pertinent question here is: what then follows after apocalypse? In any case, the author's experience with the Sekou Toure regime has clearly shown the limits of such an approach to Africa's crisis of governance. All too often, a creeping dictatorship masquerading as

benign messianism has been the recurrent panacea in this regard. Unfortunately, this is the kind of condition that Diawara unwittingly prepares the ground for with his final recommendation. He deserves to be quoted at some length: "To avoid coups d'état and arbitrary abuses of state power, we need a single regional army that reports to a central council elected by the people. We need a single security system in the region, in addition to local police, not only for the prevention of interstate crime, but also to prevent abuses of power and violations of human rights in any state." While the workability of his proposal is very much in doubt, Diawara does not even tell us how such a grand vision might be realized.

In Search of Africa is rich in insights, and Manthia Diawara is easily at his best when he weaves the tales and oral traditions of his "native Guinea" into the fabric of his narrative. In this, he is more like those encyclopedic griots whose art, skill and memory he shows admiration for.

Did Diawara eventually locate the object of his search? In this regard, the last word must be conceded to the author himself. "It is clear to me now that my Guinea is different from Sidime Laye's. His is where things went wrong, where dreams were betrayed, and where people were trapped in constant fear. Mine still bears the patina of innocence, beauty, and exuberance." Once again, he is right. GBS