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Introduction, and: Who am I? Fact and Fiction in African First Person Narrative

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INTRODUCTION

Mineke Schipper

Research in the field of literature in general and of African literature in particular has been extended to a considerable degree since the 1960s. Literature is now more generally considered in the larger context of its functioning within a communication process. Thus many publications now study the text in its different aspects and relationships with author, reader, and their respective social and cultural context. This is indeed quite a recent development.

For a long time adherents of New Criticism have conceived of the task of studying literature exclusively as the interpretation and evaluation of the individual text. Of course, critical attention focused on the text as such is of great importance, but the study of literature includes much more than that.

Notwithstanding all the textual interpretations that have been produced throughout the world, very little progress has yet been made in understanding the phenomenon of literature as such and the way it functions. Jonathan Culler goes so far as to state that "the most important and insidious legacy of New Criticism is the widespread and unquestioning acceptance of the notion that the critic's job is to interpret literary works."[1]

In the study of African literature, texts have often been used as historical, sociological, or anthropological documents which inform us about village life, colonization, the position of women, political or social change, and so on. Questions regarding the inherent differences between "reality" and fiction or between literature as an art form versus other sources and documents have mostly been left open. In what way does literature (if it does) differ from other texts and means of communication?

In 1981 Culler concluded, in his essay "Beyond Interpretation," that the principle of interpretation as *the* task of the critic "is so strong an unexamined postulate of American criticism that it subsumes and neutralizes the most forceful and intelligent acts of revolt" (p. 11). A number of critics in Europe had gone "beyond interpretation" a little earlier. Reacting against the positivist heritage of collecting facts about sources and origins of the literary work, Russian Formalists before the 1920s and Czech structuralists in the 1930s started, on the basis of a large number of analyzed literary works, to make statements about what Roman Jakobson called the phenomenon of *literarity* which makes literary texts different from other texts. These scholars studied all sorts of literary devices, such as the effect of estrangement and the role of prescriptions and traditions.

It was much later, in 1966, that the Russian Formalists first be-

came known in Western Europe, thanks to Tzvetan Todorov's translation of a number of their essays in *Théorie de la littérature. Textes des Formalistes russes*.

The structural story analysis as applied by Vladimir Propp to the fairy tale, too, did not become known in Europe and the United States until the 1960s. In France, Propp's theory became the basis of the structural story analysis as developed by, among others, Greimas, Bremond, Denise Paulme, and Roland Barthes. The narratological theory of Gérard Genette provided new insights into a number of aspects of the narrative text. The Russian Formalists have, justifiably, been called the founders of new approaches in the field of literary study.

The structuralists paid much attention to the literary text as a message in the verbal communication process. This idea has been further developed in the 1970s by semiotics (the theory of signs). Without going into details, one may say that in general the study of literature has learned from semiotic research to view literature as a particular form of the exchange of meaning between communicating individuals. The study of literature should, among other things, make us understand when and why literary texts have a meaning for readers. It is clear that texts have no universal and eternal value for all the inhabitants of our globe because the texts result from a large number of choices made by individual authors on the basis of their respective historical, social, and cultural contexts and their personal experiences and creativity. If an author and reader have nothing in common, the communication fails. Author and reader should share at least part of the codes of the text. Codes are the rules on the basis of which meaning can be attached to phenomena. Such codes are, for instance, the rules of a genre: on the basis of prescriptions within his or her literary tradition, the author writes an epic, a novel, a dirge, or a praise poem. The reader or auditor has, first of all, to know the language in which the text is recited or written. One is then able to establish the denotation, that is, the literal meaning of the words, but that is not enough. In a literary text one has to take into account all sorts of connotations: besides knowledge of the language, we need supplementary knowledge to detect the specific meaning of the text, which is based on connotations resulting from the text's literary traditions or the breaking of these traditions, the historical context, and so forth. Connotative codes are derived from conventions; for example, the use of masks has a particular meaning in the theatrical forms of the people who created them. The masks are part of the code of that theater, a code one has to know in

order to participate in the communication process of the masked performance. An outsider will be unable to share the deeper meaning of the performance without being given further information about the connotative code of this theater. According to Umberto Eco,

> the codes, insofar as they are accepted by a society, set up a "cultural" world which is neither actual nor possible in the ontological sense; its existence is linked to a cultural order, which is the way in which a society thinks, speaks and, while speaking, explains the "purport" of its thinking and speaking that a society develops, expands or collapses, even when dealing with "impossible" worlds (i.e. aesthetic texts, ideological statements), a theory of codes is very much concerned with the format of such "cultural" worlds, and faces the basis problem of how *to touch* contents.[2]

The literary text as a sign in the semiotic sense should be conceived as a complex unity in which a denotative and a connotative system are intertwined. Connotative literary meanings result from specific devices, for example, formal effects such as alliterations, metaphors, quotations, clichés and historical, social, and cultural elements. It all functions in the communication process between author and addressee, if the codes are common to both.

Different cultural backgrounds may lead to very different interpretations of the same text. For instance, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* has been commented upon positively by most British critics and quite negatively by an African, Chinua Achebe. It would also be quite interesting to undertake a comparative analysis of the critical comments on V. S. Naipaul from cultural backgrounds as different as African, Caribbean, and Western. In the aforementioned framework of the communication process, the relations between author, text, reader, and cultural background all find their place.

In comparative literature, too, the communicational approach has meant an enlargement of the field of research. Instead of transmitting fixed values from the conventional Eurocentric literary standards à la Wellek and Warren, serious scholars now study comparatively the very conditions and conventions which lead to the fact that texts are perceived as literary only under certain circumstances. At the same time, the personal, individual evaluation of the texts has also become an object of research. In the past the personal, evaluative judgment of African texts, for example, has

often been given from a quite limited Western perspective and often even without the critic's being aware of his Eurocentrism.

The advantage of such new approaches and methods in comparative literature is that enough breadth of outlook is thus given to study the most divergent communication situations as they occur more and more frequently in the global field of literature, functioning in different social groups, times, and cultures. Within this broad framework, oral literature, which has so often been relegated as a changeling to anthropology or sociology, can finally get all the literary attention it deserves.

In studying African literature, one may certainly profit from the substantial progress and the refinement of tools by literary theorists. On the other hand, these theoretical scholars continually need critical comments from the specialists of the literatures from different continents and cultures. Checking the former's theoretical results, the latter decides to accept, reject, or adapt these according to his previous and precious experience with a group of texts from a particular cultural and social background.

In the following papers some aspects of this dialectical process are presented. Clive Wake shows that the interpretative approach continues to contribute to our knowledge of African texts. Sunday Anozie explores how the analyses of African poetry can benefit from linguistic theory. Alain Ricard places new emphasis on certain neglected aspects of theater research. In my paper I have applied some of the new narratological findings to African first-person narrative.

Those who study African literature are becoming increasingly aware of the profit that can be gained from the harvests reaped by scholars of literary theory and by specialists of other—Asian, Caribbean, Latin American, Arab, or Western—literatures. In my opinion one should test the tools at hand and feel free to discard those which prove useless or have become obsolete. In turn, our own tools, findings, and experience may be enriching for scholars of other literatures. Exchanges on all levels are stimulating and fruitful for those engaged in the study of literature. As an African proverb says, "The centipede's legs are strengthened by a hundred rings."

NOTES

1. Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), p. 5.
2. Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (London: Macmillan, 1977), p. 61 ff.

"WHO AM I?": FACT AND FICTION IN AFRICAN FIRST-PERSON NARRATIVE

Mineke Schipper

Every day all sorts of narratives are presented to us, orally or in written form, be it comic strips, cartoons, jokes, newspaper articles, letters, tales, or autobiographies. Some of these genres seem to adhere to a particular narrative form. Normally, "the news" on radio or television is presented "neutrally," in the third person, while letters and diaries are typical first-person genres.

First-person narrative does not necessarily coincide with autobiographical forms of expression. The authors may prefer to "neutralize" their personal autobiographical information by means of a third-person presentation or even by presenting it as a fictional text. However, real autobiographies that are presented as such are generally written in the first person: the subject and object of the narratives are the authors who "tell" and reveal themselves to others, or who wish to bring order into their own past and ultimately wish to explore themselves. There may also be other reasons for autobiographical writing.[1]

These days, a growing number of studies on the autobiography are appearing, at least in Europe, and they all seem to agree about the origin of the autobiographical genre, confirming one after the other that the autobiography is a "purely European literary genre," a "creation of Western culture."[2] The English author Stuart Bates goes so far as to put it this way: the autobiography manifests itself mainly in Europe and in the European sphere of influence—just like syphilis. Or to quote Gusdorf: "If others than Europeans write an autobiography, then it is because they have been annexed by a mentality which was not theirs."[3]

Of course, it is not easy to determine what should be defined as "the European mentality." However, one might try to find out whether first-person narrative in general and autobiography in particular is present in the literatures of other cultures. Not much research has been done in this field as yet. An exception is Milena Doleželová's *The Chinese Novel at the Turn of the Century*. She points out that obvious changes due to Western influences are to be found in Chinese literature. The tendency toward subjectivization had already been developed to some degree since the seventeenth century. "Instead of editing various previous sources into sagas exemplifying Chinese history and accepted ideology, novelists began to relate their individual experiences and views drawn from personal observation of society or their own private lives."[4] The author emphasizes that the first-person personal narrative mode—that is, the narrative in which the "telling I" is at the same time the

main character—is undoubtedly an innovation in the history of Chinese vernacular fiction, and she mentions Wu Woyao's *Strange Events* as the first occurrence of first-person narrative in *baihua* literature. Wu Woyao was an author who had read many Western novels and who always advocated the reading of foreign literature. According to Doleželová, the appearance of the first-person personal narrative in the East is especially significant in comparison with Western literature "where first person narrative has been well established since classical Greece."[5] She then comes to the conclusion that the autobiographical first-person narrative as a distinctive genre in Japanese literature had a relatively late start as well. The first examples "caused a sensation in Japanese circles because the hero was patently a self-portrait of the author and because the real-life models of the other characters were readily identifiable."[6] The first Japanese autobiographical first-person narrative was published in 1890. In China these new forms manifested themselves around the turn of the century.

It has often been argued that the change from third-person to first-person narrative form is not a question of pure formality but indeed affects the text structure. Depending on the readers' norms, it may underline the authenticity of the story, or it may be used to reinforce the illusion of reality, as a realistic device in the first-person fictional narrative. However that may be, the first-person narrative in which the narrator is also the hero attests to a considerable dose of individualism, as it concentrates more on the narrator's personality and its growth than on the group to which he or she belongs. In Chinese fiction it represented a fundamental development which took some time: "it was only in the twenties and thirties of this century that the process leading to the full variety and artistic maturity of first person narrative was accomplished."[7] This change in literary history was a product—as it always is—of the marriage between inside traditions and outside influences: elements from the introspective and lyrical tradition of first-person narrative and the extroverted and social-minded tradition from vernacular fiction were combined with the deeper psychological description from the Western and Japanese first-person novel.[8]

I have dwelt a little longer on this Oriental development to show how interesting it might be to do comparative intercultural research in other directions than the already well-trod Europe/Africa paths.

My specific intention here is to discuss the first-person narrative form, its main genres and various techniques, as they are used in African literature. Not all the genres I deal with are fictional: the

autobiography, for instance, is not or at least is supposed not to be fictional.

If we look first of all at the oral tradition, we could say that all oral literature is told in the first person, since, inevitably, the narrator presents his or her story to the audience which is present right there. It is important to distinguish clearly between the *real author*, who presents the "text" orally or in print, and the *narrator*, who belongs to the text as a narrative transaction. At the other end of the communication line, there are the *narratee* and the *real reader*. The narratee "is the agent which is at the very least implicitly addressed by the narrator. A narratee of this kind is always implied, even when the narrator becomes his own narratee."[9] An example of the latter is the diary novel. This is schematized in figure 1.

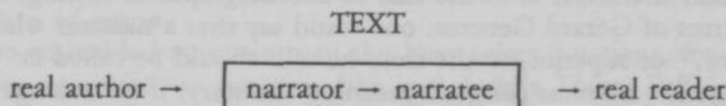

Fig. 1

We can even go a step further and say that the real author is always a first-person "agent," whether announcing orally, "I am going to tell you . . ." or, silently, in the written form, transmitting his text in book form as a gesture, "I am herewith presenting you my story. . . ." In both cases the text (the "message") can be presented either in the first or in the third person or, although that is much less common, in the second person. I propose that we leave the oral or written "I am going to present you my story" outside the literary texts we are to study here.[10]

The "frontiers" of the oral text are often marked by means of special formulas or expressions which emphasize the real beginning of the narrative: "Here comes my story"; "Once, long ago"; "How did it happen?"; and so forth. The same is true of the end: "This was the story of hare and leopard" or "This is the end, not of me but of my story."[11]

The first-person presentation by the author is normally lacking in written narrative because the beginning and end of the printed texts make themselves clear without further notice. Thus the written text starts, hierarchically speaking, on the next level, the textual narrative level. The author's explicit "here comes my story" is

felt as superfluous and is therefore omitted, but formally the "I" of the author lies behind every text. A distinction should be made between this "I" and the introduction of "the author" as a literary device *within* the text by writers, as for instance Fagunwa does when he presents his stories in *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons*: he starts his first chapter under the heading "The Author Meets Akara-Ogun." The latter is presented as the narrator-hero of the story, who dictates it to "the author": "When he had spoken thus I hurried to fetch my writing things, brought them over to my table, settled myself in comfort, and let the stranger know that I was now prepared for his tale. And he began in the words that follow to tell me the story of his life."[12]

In the text itself, the real author should not be confused with the narrator, although they may be synonymous and coincide with the main character, as in the case of autobiographical writing. In the terms of Gérard Genette, one could say that a narrator who is "above," or superior, to the story he tells should be called an "extradiegetic" narrator (*diegesis* meaning the story) if he belongs only to the narrative level and does not participate in the story as a character. He is to be called an "intradiegetic" narrator if he also participates in the presented story as a character.[13] This is the case with "the Author" in Fagunwa's *Forest of a Thousand Daemons*: the narrator-character tells how he starts writing down Akara-Ogun's adventures. These adventures are told to him by Akara-Ogun, who is himself the hero on the next level. Thus we find a narrator-character's presentation of a whole series of embedded stories in which the second narrator is the main character. At the end of each chapter, the narrator of the first level "takes over" again and switches back to the frame of the first-level narrative (see fig. 2).

TEXT

I *First Narrative Level*	II *Second Narrative Level*	I *First Narrative Level*
"the Author" tells about meeting Akara-Ogun who introduces II	Akara-Ogun's (= hero's) adventures	"the Author" becomes narrator again: back to the "embedding" first level

Figure 2. Illustration of narrator-character in Fagunwa's *Forest of a Thousand Daemons*

There are different types of narrators. The narrator is a device, a construction which is there to serve the specific needs of narration in a particular text. The first-person narrative can be presented in such different forms as a letter, an epistolary novel, a real or a fictional diary, an autobiography, and many mixed or in-between forms. The narrator is an agent of the text who can be identical with the real author (as in the autobiography, for instance) or fictional.

The hierarchy of narrative levels can be used by the author in various ways. In the case of Fagunwa's book, it is clear that the use of the first narrator serves as a narrative framework only to present the character who is going to tell another (= the main) story consisting of the series of adventures. The latter is an inner narrative which is subordinate to the first-level narrative in which it is embedded. The function of the embedded narrative in this case is a *function of action*.

The embedded narrative may also have other functions, for example, *an explicative function*, like in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (p. 72), answering a question of the first level by telling a second story on a "lower" level ("hypodiegetic") embedded by the first one: Okonkwo suffers from mosquitoes whining around his ears, and he suddenly remembers the story his mother once told him about why Mosquito always attacks Ear.[14] In the beginning of *Aké*, Wole Soyinka described the parsonage and the Canon's square white building as "a bulwark against the menace and the siege of the wood spirits. Its rear wall demarcated their territory, stopped them from taking liberties with the world of humans."[15] This is followed by further allusions to spirits, ghosts, and ghommids together with references to the Bible. He then fits in his mother's experiences with spirits and demons by means of an embedded explicative narrative in which Wild Christian is the narrator and the young Wole and his sister are the audience. It is an explicative inserted story about the mixture of Christian and African beliefs in his mother's faith.

The third function an embedded narrative can have is *thematic*: "the relations established between the hypodiegetic and the diegetic level are those of analogy, i.e. similarity and contrast."[16] A good example of the thematic use of embedded narrative is to be found in Mariama Bâ's *Une si longue lettre*. In the main narrative level of this epistolary novel, another story is embedded, likewise in the form of a letter. Besides this formal analogy (and many thematic analogical elements), there is also a contrastive point vis-à-vis the main theme: the friend, Aïssatou, to whom the heroine ad-

dresses her long letter, divorced when her husband took a second wife, while the main character, Ramatoulaye, has swallowed her disappointment and accepted her husband's second marriage and his subsequent behavior. The narrator-heroine quotes the whole letter in which her friend tells her husband she wants to leave him. The thematic analogy gives an extra dimension to the main (Ramatoulaye's) story. The latter, who is the first narrator in the book, in this passage yields the act of narration to a character (i.e., her friend Aïssatou) who presents, on the hypodiegetic level, her narrative to another addressee (= the narratee): Mawdo, her husband. The thematic parallel—the effects on a first wife of a husband's taking a second wife—in this "mirror story" is reversed by an opposite reaction: divorce in the embedded story versus acceptance in the main narrative.[17] Of course, the transition from one level to the other is not always as clearly indicated as in the above examples.

"Who Speaks?" and "Who Sees?"

First-person narrators can take different positions with regard to the narrated events: (1) they can tell stories in which they are or have been the hero/heroine; (2) they can tell stories in which they mainly figure as observers; (3) they can tell stories which have been transmitted to them by someone else in an oral or written form and which they are merely "presenting literally" on paper now.

In the first case, the "I" has a central position on the first level, as a narrator, and also on the second level, the level of the story itself where the "I" acts and is presented as the main character. In this case first-person narrators tell and observe; they express themselves and recall their past experiences, as in Tutuola's *Palm-Wine Drinkard* or his *Feather Woman of the Jungle*.[18] An example of the second category is *The Poor Christ of Bomba*: in his diary Denis observes the Reverend Father Dumont, who is the main character in this diary novel, although we also get to know Denis himself as an important character through his comments and reflections. One example of the third category is Fagunwa's aforementioned book; a second example could be Ferdinand Oyono's *Houseboy*. In Fagunwa's case, the main story has been transmitted orally to the first narrator on the extradiegetic level, while in the second case the first narrator functions as the translator and "editor" of the received manuscript.[19]

In the field of narratology, it is useful to raise two questions concerning the relation between narrator and character, namely,

Who speaks? and Who sees? In terms of concepts, a distinction is to be made between *narration* and *focalization*. The narrator tells the story but at the same time the events and situations are presented from a specific perspective, a point of view, which is not always necessarily the narrator's. For instance, in the scene in which Denis tells about the Father's quarrel with the chief whom he wants to forbid to dance, the focalization shifts from the Chief to the Father, while the narrator remains the same, that is, Denis in his diary:

> The chief himself was still glaring murderously at the Father, but they gripped him tight. The Father looked back at the chief with a sort of amused pity, quite free of dislike. (p. 55)

In most studies about perspective or point of view,[20] narration and focalization have often been used confusingly, as is demonstrated convincingly by Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan (who uses the word "agent" instead of "character"):

> Obviously, a person (and, by analogy, a narrative agent) is capable of both speaking and seeing and even of doing things at the same time—a state of affairs which facilitates the confusion between the two activities. Moreover, it is almost impossible to speak without betraying some personal "point of view," if only through the very language used. But a person (and, by analogy, a narrative agent) is also capable of undertaking to tell what another person sees or has seen. Thus, speaking and seeing, narration and focalization, may, but need not, be attributed to the same agent. The distinction between the two activities is a theoretical necessity, and only on its basis can the interrelations between them be studied with precision.[21]

The focalization can shift from one character to another and is therefore an important device in its contribution to the effect a character may have on the reader. If we are not aware of it, we are easily manipulated in our opinions, as Eleanor Wachtel stresses with regard to contemporary Kenyan autobiographical novels:

> As in nearly all third-world countries, most of the Kenyan novelists are men. Their central characters are preponderantly males. Further, the male viewpoint is underlined not only by

> the many characterizations of young men, but by the literary device of the first person protagonist. . . . This is quite natural to the relatively inexperienced author who would tend to be somewhat autobiographical anyway. At the same time, however, it is also more intimate, personal, and hence, more explicitly male in outlook and tone. . . . This device creates a rapport between author and reader and enlists the latter's sympathy. It does not allow for another point of view. . . . Women are necessarily "the other." In Kenya, this male-focused lens on life is an accurate reflection of society. It is consistent with a society where men are the primary decision-makers.[22]

Although narration and focalization can coincide in first-person narrative, they can also be separate, as they often clearly are in first-person retrospective narratives. I give an example of both. In Mariama Bâ's novel, the following quotation shows how narration and focalization coincide (attributed to the same "agent," to use Rimmon-Kenan's term):

> Modou Fall is indeed dead, Aissatou. The uninterrupted procession of men and women who have "learned" of it, the wails and tears all around me, confirm his death. This condition of extreme tension sharpens my sufferings and continues till the following day, the day of interment. (p.3)

In *Aké* the difference between narrator and character-focalizer is clear in the following lines:

> I lay on the mat pretending to be still asleep. It had become a morning pastime, watching him exercise by the window. A chart was pinned to the wall, next to the mirror. Essay did his best to imitate the white gymnast. . . . There was a precise fusslessness even in the most strenuous movements. In . . . Out . . . In . . . Out . . . breathing deeply. He bent over, touched his toes, slewed from one side to the other, rotated his body on its axis. He opened his hands and clenched them, raising one arm after the other as if invisible weights were suspended from them. Sweat prickles emerged in agreed order, joined together in disciplined rivulets. Finally, he picked up the towel—the session was over. (p. 77)

In *Aké* it is the (author-)narrator, the older Wole, who tells, but it is

the (author-)character, the younger Wole, who sees, who focalizes his father's actions. Focalization has a subject and an object: the focalizer is the agent whose perception leads the presentation; the focalized object is (the selection of) what the focalizer perceives.[23] Focalization is not purely perceptive as in the *Aké* example; it is also psychological (cognitive and emotive) and ideological. All these aspects may harmonize or belong to different focalizers. An example of the psychological aspect is to be found in the following quotation from *Aké*, where the reactions the young Wole felt after his little sister's death are recounted by the narrator so many years later:

> Suddenly, it all broke up within me. A force from nowhere pressed me against the bed and I howled. As I was picked up I struggled against my father's soothing voice, tears all over me. I was sucked into a place of loss whose cause or definition remained elusive. I did not comprehend it yet. (p. 98)

The ideological facet of the focalization, or the norms of the text, consists in the evaluation of events and characters. It can be presented "through a single dominant perspective, that of the narrator-focalizer." The latter's ideology is then considered as "authoritative." In the first-person retrospective narrative, one often finds the latter's view as superior to the narrator-character's earlier views recalled by the older "I," many years afterward. If other norm systems are presented as well, they are generally evaluated in comparison with the narrator-focalizer's ideological authority.[24] In the following example several ideological viewpoints are presented, but the main perspective throughout the text is the narrator's, who imposes himself at the end:

> After dinner the Father set to work with the catechist. I followed the interrogation as long as I could, then went to bed. Zacharia exasperated me again with his uninvited interventions. For instance, the Father asked the catechist this question: "Why is it, do you think, that so many backslide from the true religion? Why did they come to Mass in the first place?" The catechist answered: "My Father, at that time we were poor. Well, doesn't the Kingdom of Heaven belong to the poor? So there's nothing surprising in many of them running then to the true God. But nowadays, as you know yourself, Father, they are making pots of money by selling their

> cocoa to the Greeks; they are all rich. Now, isn't it easier for a camel to pass through a needle's eye than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of . . . ? But just then Zacharia blurted out, interrupting the wise words of the catechist: "Get away with you! That's not the truth of the matter at all. I tell you just how it is, Father. The first of us who ran to your religion, came to it as a sort of . . . revelation. Yes, that's it, a revelation; a school where they could learn your secret, the secret of your power, of your aeroplanes and railways . . . in a word, the secret of your mystery. Instead of that, you began talking to them of God, of the soul, of eternal life, and so forth. Do you really suppose they didn't know those things already, long before you came? So of course, they decided that you were hiding something. Later, they saw that if they had money they could get plenty of things for themselves—gramophones and cars, and perhaps even aeroplanes one day. Well, then! They are turning from religion and running elsewhere, after money, no less. That's the truth of it, Father. As for the rest, it's all make-believe. . . ." And speaking in this fashion, he put on an important air. I was boiling with indignation when I heard this illiterate gabble, this "bla-bla-bla. . . ." I was hot with anger. I would gladly have slapped his silly face. But the Father listened to him with great attention. (pp. 29–30)

Thanks to the author's irony, this assertive ideological main perspective is, after all, effectively undermined. The norms of the text may be presented through statements by the narrator and/or one or more characters; norms can also be implicitly given with events and behavior as they are narrated and perceived by narrator or characters. The device of shifting the focalization among the different characters or from narrator to character always affects the meaning of a text. When the focalization shifts regularly in the text, we may get a rather broad idea of the various aspects of a conflict or problem. This technique may produce the suggestion of the narrator's neutrality vis-à-vis the various characters and their relations: this is often the case in the realistic novel. The way the focalization is handled definitely contributes to the effect a character (and in fact the whole text) has on the reader, for example, we are more inclined to share views or to sympathize with a character when the story is presented mainly from his or her particular view, feeling, ideology. The fact that in *The Poor Christ of Bomba* the missionary's servant Denis is the first-person narrator as well as the

main focalizer in the text results in a specific view and colored information.

Different First-Person Genres

Without pretending to give a complete and detailed inventory of the various first-person narrative forms to be found in African prose, I will try to present a brief description of the main genres as they are mentioned in figure 3.

FIRST-PERSON NARRATIVE

FACTUAL	FICTIONAL
a. Diary	a. Diary novel
b. Letters	b. Epistolary novel
c. Autobiography	c. First-person memoir novel

Fig. 3

In African literature many first-person narratives are presented as autobiographical. The construction is often that of the older "I" who looks back to his/her earlier life and who, usually years later, narrates what he/she remembers from the past. Many texts of this kind deal with the theme of colonialism, for instance, in *Cette Afrique-là*, the old Mômha tells his experiences which, in a foreword, the author, Ikelle-Matiba, authenticates as "real events." Mômha was born before the colonial occupation of his country, Cameroon, by the Germans, and in this book he presents his life and "cette Afrique-là que nous ne verrons plus."[25]

Before giving a brief description and some examples of the aforementioned genres, I should like to look more closely at the opposition between "facts" and "fiction" as it has been used here. This point always raises more questions than can be answered. Sometimes authors pretend to speak the truth while in fact they are telling lies or producing fantasies. Others pretend to be writing fiction while they are telling the story of their own life. Of course, some of the facts are verifiable, notably when authors refer to concrete places and well-known events. However, thoughts, dreams, feelings, and beliefs are never controllable. Some scholars have pointed out that autobiographies should contain only historical, biographical material about the authors, while others claim that autobiographers should have the right to see and express themselves as subjectively as they please. In all this confusion, the real autobiographical narrative must meet one overall minimum requirement, that is, the ***autobiographical pact*** as it has been de-

fined by Philippe Lejeune: in his view the autobiography is a retrospective narrative in prose told by an existing person about his or her own existence, when his/her personal life is emphasized and particularly the story of his/her own personality. From that definition we may deduce the following: (1) the form is a prose narrative; (2) the subject is the life story (the growth of the personality); (3) author and narrator are identical; and (4) author and main character are identical and the story is retrospectively told.[26]

The "pact" is realized when the reader gets the guarantee from the text that the author, narrator, and main character are one and the same person. This is a formal, verifiable criterion on the basis of which one can determine whether a given text is autobiographical or not. For the rest, it is seldom possible to establish exactly to what degree invented or untrue elements have been introduced into the autobiographical text. Taking this pact as our starting point, let us now look at the different genres, on the factual and the fictional side. I will briefly deal with each corresponding pair on the comparative level.

Diary and Diary Novel

In Western literature the diary has only been regarded as a literary genre since well-known writers, such as André Gide, began to publish their diaries. In Africa very few diaries have been published as yet. Like the autobiography, the diary respects the pact: author = narrator = character. The time aspect distinguishes the diary from the autobiography most clearly, although the contrast is sometimes less extreme than one might think at first sight. In the autobiography, as we have seen, the story of the author's life is told, at a much later moment in life. Conversely the diary follows the events very closely. Nevertheless, the diary is not very often kept conscientiously by day: it covers recent events, thoughts, feelings which are still there, fresh in memory.

The difference in time between the experiences and the moment of writing, in the diary and the autobiography respectively, has certain consequences. In the diary there is much uncertainty or even confusion about the question how things will go on, what will happen next: the author is as ignorant of the future as the reader. In the autobiography, however, the author looks back from the perspective of knowing what happened next and how life has gone on since. Both perspectives have advantages and disadvantages. The autobiographer's looking back allows him/her to introduce lines and structures which he/she alone is able to see (or con-

struct) from his/her later perspective. This is not possible at all in the diary: in the intimacy of day-by-day writing, the elements of the narrative cannot be structured. Even if many things happen in the author's life, their storytelling value is parceled out by the diary principle, which does not allow an overall view of the course of events. Or, in the words of Béatrice Didier:

> Pour que l'histoire d'une vie soit possible, il faut justement le recul historique. C'est la distance entre le temps du récit et le temps de l'événement qui permet à l'écrivain de créer après coup une unité à son aventure; l'au-jour-le-jour ne peut pas avoir de structure.[27]

Well-known examples of published diaries in African literature are Amadi's *Sunset in Biafra* and Ngugi's *Detained*. The same applies to them as to the diary as a literary phenomenon in Europe: when their diaries were published, both authors were already known to large numbers of readers, Amadi as a novelist and Ngugi as a novelist and playwright.

Their diaries are quite different in intention, although they both deal with tragic events. Amadi gives his book the subtitle *A Civil War Diary*, and in a foreword he emphasizes that he is not reflecting the views of the Federal Military Government of Nigeria but that his opinions are strictly personal: "This is not a story of the war; it is an intimate, personal story for its own sake." In his *Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary*, Ngugi puts it otherwise:

> I have . . . tried to discuss detention not as a personal affair between me and a few individuals, but as a social, political and historical phenomenon. I have tried to see it in the context of the historical attempts, from colonial times to the present, by a foreign imperialist bourgeoisie, in alliance with its local Kenyan representatives, to turn Kenyans into slaves, and of the historical struggles of Kenyan people against economic, political and cultural slavery.[28]

Both writers follow the events very closely, and they do not know that they will suvive and be free in the end. As writers, they are interested in literature, and in their diaries they both insert other literary texts. Amadi, for instance, quotes among other texts an Ibo song (p. 59), a Shakespearean love poem (p. 117), Keats's "Ode to the Nightingale," Shelley's "Ode to the Night" (p. 118); but he also quotes other sorts of texts, for example, from the

minutes of the Advisory Committee "charged with the restoration of normalcy" (p. 155 ff.) at the end of the war.

Ngugi too quotes a number of literary as well as other texts, ranging from Kwame Nkrumah's autobiography (p. 6) to Dennis Brutus's *Letters to Martha*; he also quotes Shakespeare (p. 9) and Margery Perham's diaries (1920–30) (p. 30), and so forth. The effect of such quotations on a literary text in general and on autobiographical works in particular still needs to be much more carefully examined in European as well as in African literature.[29]

As far as the *diary novel* is concerned, it has some advantages for writers: the very form allows them to hold back information from narrator and reader, although they themselves know what they want their narrator/main character to become, in the course of the story. Of course, the autobiographical pact does not exist here, since author ≠ narrator = main character. As in the real diary, the narrator in the diary novel has no or very little distance from the events he records in his notes. In Europe the diary novel came into existence near the end of the eighteenth century, with a few rare earlier exceptions. Well-known examples in African literature are Ferdinand Oyono's *Houseboy* and Beti's *Poor Christ of Bomba*. *Houseboy* is presented "hypodiegetically" as a second level in the hierarchy of the narrative: the first pages of the book are told by the first narrator—in the first-person presentation—who explains how he got the two notebooks containing this diary written by another author whose name was Toundi Joseph. We get to know how this Toundi, dying, entrusts him with the manuscript written in Ewondo. This first narrator ends his (first-level) introduction to the second and main part of the text (i.e., the diary notebooks) as follows:

> I opened the packet. Inside there were two worn exercise books, a toothbrush, a stub of pencil and a large native comb made of ivory. That was how I came to read Toundi's diary. It was written in Ewondo which is one of the main languages of the Cameroons. In the translation which I have made and which you are about to read, I have tried to keep the richness of the original language without letting it get in the way of the story itself. (p. 8)

In this article I cannot go into the details of this interesting novel or of the diary novel in general. I will just mention briefly a few points which are typical of this novel form, as distinct from the other first-person genres. The narrator of the diary novel is his/her

own (fictional) narratee. They address themselves, talk to themselves, ask questions, express their thoughts to themselves, as in the following lines:

> For the first time Madame had a visit from her lover while her husband was here. M. Moreau at the Residence; my stomach was uneasy all the evening and now I am furious with myself. How can I get rid of this ridiculous sentimentality which makes me suffer over matters which have nothing whatever to do with me? (p. 82)

The diary is divided into two "exercise books." Very few dates are marked. In the beginning, it is "August" (p. 11); another time indication is "After the funeral" (p. 23). In the Second Exercise Book, allusions to "real" time do not occur, except for one, that is, "Second night at the police camp" (p. 132). The fact that dates are not mentioned underlines that such official time indications are of little importance to the narrator/main character, who in his social context has learned to follow the time of sun, moon, seasons rather than to respect the European calendar as his white boss does.[30]

Typical for the diary novel, as well as for the epistolary novel, is the lack of distance between the time of narration and the narrated events. This distance is considerable in first-person adventure stories like Tutuola's and Fagunwa's and in first-person novels like Camara Laye's *L'enfant noir*. In the "factual" diary as well as in the fictional, the narrator knows no more than the reader how the subsequent events will take place. The narrator-hero writes down events and experiences in proportion as he lives them. The reader becomes aware of this nearby situation through many indications. In *Houseboy*, for instance, Toundi notes down immediately what he has experienced that day or the previous night, as the following quotations show:

> At midday I watched my master from the kitchen window [p. 26]. Last night the location had a visit from Gullet, the Chief of Police [p. 28]. My master is off into the bush again this morning [p. 86]. I was arrested this morning. I am writing this sitting on bruised buttocks in the house of the chief native constable [p. 120].

The narrator uses various tenses: present, past, future. The narrator /main character presents, interprets, and participates in the events;

it is clearly a personal narrator like the one in the aforementioned adventure stories by Tutuola. Through the naive perspective of Toundi, a boy from the Cameroonian countryside—whom the author uses as narrator-focalizer—the mentality and manners of the colonial whites are presented in all their oddness. Thanks to this "close-following" first-person presentation, the immediate contrast between the African and the European world pervades the whole text, and the diary novel form, as such, is certainly quite appropriate, as Oyono's book shows so clearly.

Letters and the Epistolary Novel

Up till now very few "collected letters" by African authors have been published. I mention here Ngugi's letters from prison, which constitute the second section of his *Detained*. This second part consists of a compilation of letters he sent to his wife, to the Security Officer of Detained and Restricted Persons, the Minister of Home Affairs, the Chairman of Detainees' Review Tribunal. All these letters relate to his imprisonment, although in different ways: they do not form a coherent structure as the epistolary novel does. Ngugi just adds these letters to his prison diary as an appendix of documents to show aspects of the Kenyan reality as he has experienced it.

Another example of "factual" letters is Zamenga Batukazanga's book *Lettres d'Amérique*: traveling to the United States, this Zairian author writes letters to his son at home, in which he describes his impressions of the New World and in which he especially links his own Africa to the "Africa" elements he encounters in the United States, as, for example, when he tells about his visit to the home of Alex Haley, the author of *Roots*. The book is full of anecdotes, but there are also reflections on differences and similarities between people.[31] As stated, the epistolary novel resembles the diary novel in the absence of time distance between the moment of narration and the actual events: here too the narrator/main character who writes the letters knows no more than the reader what is going to happen next.

The letter-writing novel form as a particular genre of first-person narrative is no longer as popular in Europe as it was in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It is supposed to have its origin mainly in posthumously published authentic letters, such as the famous letters Madame de Sévigné wrote to her daughter in France in the seventeenth century. Little by little, the letter-writing culture disappeared, being replaced by the telephone as a medium of

communication in the Western world. In Africa the telephone is still less generally available, and the letter is a much used means of communication with which the letter novel could link quite naturally, but it is not very widely practiced yet.

Theoretically, a distinction can be made between books with one and more letter writers as narrator-character in epistolary fiction, on one hand, and books containing letters written by one author-character to one or more addressees, on the other. African literature, however, has not (yet?) produced many epistolary novels, and the few that exist mostly concern one fictional letter writer-narrator writing to one or sometimes two different addressees. It is striking that the genre is almost nonexistent in anglophone literature: all my examples are, therefore, taken from texts by francophone writers. Epistolary novels have been written by, among others, Bernard Dadié from Ivory Coast, who in his *Un nègre à Paris* adopts the same attitude as Montesquieu did in *Les lettres persanes*, that of the naive outsider observing "the Others," their customs and behavior. Dadié's book consists of one long letter signed by the narrator/main character in which he describes his Parisian experiences and observations to a friend in Africa. Other epistolary fiction is to be found in one of Sembène Ousmane's short stories, entitled "Lettres de France." Henri Lopès's novel *Sans Tam-tam* consists of five letters written by a certain Gatsé followed by one last letter—as an epilogue—written by the addresee to the publisher. Both narrators are fictional, as is stressed in the "avertissement" which precedes the letters:

> De ce qui va suivre, seul le pays est vrai: le mien. Le peuple aussi. Mais j'ai laissé ce dernier dans l'ombre, craignant de mal transmettre son message sacré et de dénaturer sa voix. Pour le reste, tout est fruit d'une imagination fantaisiste: le lieu, les personnages, les situations, leurs pensées, sentiments et paroles. Si d'aventure ils coïncidaient avec un vécu réel, je jure que ce serait pur hasard.[32]

Such statements are not exceptional in African novels in general. The fictional character of the novel is already formally clear from the lack of the pact: here, the author ≠ narrator = main character Forewords like the above one, however, in fact strengthen the suggestion that there are indeed more "facts" in this novel than fiction and that the author wants to protect himself from possible consequences of the publication of his book.

The best-known epistolary novel is Mariama Bâ's *Une si longue*

lettre, which was awarded the first Noma Prize for African literature. It is a good example of the most outspoken characteristic of the epistolary novel, notably the very personal character of this narrative form. This personal character is due to the fact that the narrator addresses the narratee directly and continually, this narratee being a concrete fictional character mentioned in the text. In *So Long a Letter*, the female letter writer Ramatoulaye addresses one long letter to her old friend Aïssatou, and as readers we get acquainted with both when the former, at the time of the death and the funeral of her husband, confides her thoughts, memories, experiences to the latter.

Although it is presented in letter form, the first paragraph shows that it is very close to the diary, at least in the narrator's intention: she wants to share not only her present sorrows with her friend but also their common memories of the past:

> Dear Aissatou,
>
> I have received your letter. By way of reply, I am beginning this diary, my prop in my distress. Our long association has taught me that confiding in others allays pain.
>
> Your presence in my life is by no means fortuitous. Our grandmothers in their compounds were separated by a fence and would exchange messages daily. Our mothers used to argue over who would look after our uncles and aunts. As for us, we wore our wrappers and sandals on the same stony road to the koranic school; we buried our milk teeth in the same holes and begged our fairy godmothers to restore them to us, more splendid than before. If over the years, and passing through the realities of life, dreams die, I still keep intact my memories, the salt of remembrance. I conjure you up. The past is reborn, along with its procession of emotions. . . .
>
> Modou is dead. How am I to tell you? (pp. 1–2)

This presentation serves at the same time as a motivation for the writing of the letter. It also shows the closeness of the diary and epistolary forms with regard to the handling of time referred to above: the time of the story and time of the narration are sometimes so close as to almost coincide. The letter-writing first-person narrator in both genres can permit herself not only to tell what she has lived quite recently, but also to express what she feels, sees, or thinks at the moment of writing. This is very significant in Mariama Bâ's book. An example:

> I take a deep breath.
>
> I've related at one go your story as well as mine, I've said the essential, for pain, even when it's past, leaves the same marks on the individual when recalled. Your disappointment was mine, as my rejection was yours. Forgive me once again if I have reopened your wound. Mine continues to bleed. (p. 55)

While writing to her friend, she recalls, too, common memories from the distant past, from childhood and adolescence. In the whole of this book, memories do indeed play a quite important role, which is not always the case in the epistolary novel. In general, both diary novel and letter novel deal with a short and recent period from the life of the narrator; rarely is a whole life told retrospectively as in the case of Ramatoulaye by means of long flashbacks; thanks to her flowering memories at the moment of her husband's death, we get all this information about her earlier life. At the same time, we receive information about recent events and about the present. In that sense, the book forms a sort of bridge between the diary novel and the retrospective first-person novel in which the narrator-hero recalls his life from the beginning until adulthood or old age. The difference between the two is that in *So Long a Letter* (as well as in the epistolary novel in general) the narratee occupies an important place because she is addressed directly, for instance, when the narrator reminds her friend of how she decided to divorce her husband: "And you left. You had the surprising courage to take your life into your own hands. You rented a house and set up home there. And instead of looking backwards, you looked resolutely to the future" (p. 32). This presence of the narratee sometimes leads to a "narrative dialogue," a common device in the epistolary novel. A real dialogue is not possible, since the addressee is not on the spot. Therefore, the friend's answers are given indirectly, and we get to know Aïssatou as a character through the narrator's memories, questions, and comments.

> Why aren't your sons coming with you? Ah, their studies—So, then, will I see you tomorrow in a tailored suit or a long dress? I've taken a bet with Daba: tailored suit. Used to living far away, you will want—again, I have taken a bet with Daba—table, plate, chair, fork.
>
> More convenient, you will say. But I will not let you have your way. I will spread out a mat. On it there will be the big, steaming bowl into which you will have to accept that other hands dip.

> Beneath the shell that has hardened you over the years, beneath your sceptical pout, your easy carriage, perhaps I will feel you vibrate. I would so much like to hear you check or encourage my eagerness, just as before, and, as before, to see you take part in the search for a new way. (p. 89)

There have been numerous discussions about the advantages and the disadvantages of the epistolary novel form: disadvantages such as the implausibility, the risk of annoying repetitions and prolixities due to the letter-writing method as such. The advantages are obvious too, as Ian Watt made clear with regard to the works of Richardson; in his view

> the major advantage, of course, is that letters are the most direct material evidence for the inner life of their writers that exist. Even more than the memoir they are, to repeat Flaubert's phrase, "*le réel écrit*," and their reality is one which reveals the subjective and private orientations of the writer both towards the recipient and the people discussed, as well as the writer's own inner being.[33]

The epistolary novel is still little practiced in Africa, and its particular characteristics in African literature as a whole have hardly been studied as yet.

Autobiography and the Memoir Novel

The autobiography is sometimes considered as a completely different genre from memoirs, but in practice this distinction is hardly possible, since it is made on the basis of "verifiable facts" as characteristic for the memoirs and "the growth of the personality" of the author in the case of the autobiography. Or, in other terms, the memoirs supposedly deal with external events, and the autobiography, with the development of the author's personality. It is usually a matter of emphasis: memorialists may be tempted to become autobiographers and to express their thoughts and feelings and their personal growth and, on the other hand, autobiographers may feel the need to tell about the VIPs they have met or the political events which marked their country and which they have lived through or helped shape. An example of more emphasis on events than on personal elements is certainly Oginga Odinga's *Not Yet Uhuru*, although it is presented as "an autobiography," he gives the following introductory comment on his book:

> I have told frankly the story of my life and political activity, admitting my mistakes and miscalculations, and trying to write about the early days without too much hindsight—though this might be difficult for anyone to shed completely. I have tried to show that there have been consistent threads running through our struggle from the early days until the present.[34]

In this book the anecdotal is intertwined with well-known events from Kenyan history, and less attention is paid to the very personal aspects of the author's life.

The emphasis on authenticity in the autobiography and the striving for the illusion of authenticity in the fictional first-person narrative genres is very much in vogue in African literature. A well-known device to guarantee the illusion of reality is that of the fictional editor who happens to lay hands on letters or a diary, Henri Lopès's *Sans Tam-tam* and Oyono's *Houseboy*, respectively, being cases in point.

Parallel to the realist "autobiographical" fiction, there are the first-person fictional adventures of the marvelous genre. Tutuola's adventure stories are good examples: no facts, only fiction, and everything is plausible and believable; the natural and the supernatural are linked without any problem. The narrator-main character tells his own adventures from the past, but this sort of narrative is quite the opposite of the memoir novel which tries to convince us of its authenticity. In such a realist fictional memoir novel, a whole life is presented from early childhood to old age by a first-person narrator who is at the same time the main character who is looking back as far as his/her memory reaches. It covers quite a long period of time if it is fully developed, as in Jean Ikellé-Matiba's *Cette Afrique-là*, in which the whole life of Frantz Mômbha is told by himself in the first person: it cannot be called an autobiography, since the author's name is not the same as that of the narrator and main character.

It is clear that the autobiographical form is much used in fiction as a sort of certificate of reality. The only formal point of reference we have is the presence or absence of the autobiographical pact as mentioned above. This pact does not apply to the fictional genres dealt with because there the name of the author is not the same as that of the narrator-hero. For the real autobiography in its coventional form, the subject is the growth of the author's personality from early childhood to adulthood, and it must be told retrospectively from a comparatively long distance in time. In the

latter sense, it is clearly distinct from the epistolary and diary genres. A number of questions arise here: what about autobiographers who only narrate a short period? According to Philippe Lejeune, one writes one's autobiography only once in a lifetime.[35] Why should that be? Writers are completely free from whatever prescriptions or proscriptions literary traditions seek to dictate, although most of them respect at least quite a number of these. In order to distinguish the genres on some formal points, I have made the following chart:

FIRST-PERSON NARRATIVE PROSE

	Narrator = main character[36]	Author = narrator	Whole life told	Fiction
Letters	+ / −	+	−	−
Epistle novel	+ / −	−	−	+
Diary	+ / −	+	−	−
Diary novel	+ / −	−	−	+
Autobiography	+	+	+ / −	−
Memoir novel	+	−	+ / −	+

Fig. 4

For the purpose of analyzing first-person narratives more thoroughly, the following questions and criteria might be of some help in distinguishing and determining the genres and their possible mixtures.

1. Is *the autobiographical pact* concluded between author and reader? In agreement with Philippe Lejeune's definition, I mentioned four points concerning this pact. These do not apply to the same degree to all the genres of the first person with which I have been dealing. Are there other indications in the text or possibly also outside the text (e.g., interviews with the author) about the "factual" or fictional character of the text? Is verification possible? Are there many or few unverifiable matters dealt with in the text (feelings, beliefs, thoughts, dreams, etc.)? Does the author confirm

that he/she speaks the truth and nothing but the truth, or does he/she on the contrary confirm that the whole story has been invented? Of course, in both cases, the opposite of what is said may be true. The question of "truth" in fiction will always be a complicated matter. The author's own conception of truth can sometimes be construed from statements in the text.

2. Selection of *the time period dealt with*: are some days/months /years/a whole life recalled? Is the selection motivated? Is there a chronological or a thematic order? How relevant is what is left out for the ultimate meaning of the text? Is time otherwise dealt with when the author talks about his childhood or his adolescence, for example, from youth to adulthood with a growing consciousness of one's own identity, or, conversely, from confidence to uncertainty? Which are the main narratological devices regarding the time factor, for example, anticipation and flashbacks in relation to the story moment, the interrelationship between past, present, and future in the text as a whole?

3. What are the relations between *narration and focalization*? Is it always the "older I," that is, the narrator, who focalizes the past events, or is it the "younger I" who observes, or do they tend to merge into one? The answer to this question has consequences for the interpretation of the text; for example, the author may have the idea that past and present are inseparable in his/her mind and that he/she is unable to look at the past through the younger narrator's eyes. Or, on the contrary, the author may want to present the past as something completely detached from the present and may therefore use the younger "I" as focalizer, while the older "I" who is the narrator tells the past events. It is also possible that the narrator makes a problem of recollecting as such. In African autobiographical texts, this is quite an exception, while in recent European autobiographical literature such texts quite often focus on the very impossibility of autobiographical writing.

4. Does the text contain an explicit *motivation*, explaining why it was written? Above, such motivations were to be found in some of the mentioned texts: the narrator in *So Long a Letter* answers her friend's letter as a "prop in distress" (p. 1). If it is not explicitly formulated in the text, there are sometimes indirect indications in the text or in other sources such as interviews and letters.

5. The *reader* can be addressed directly in the text, in general as an unspecified category. There is sometimes a specific fictional character whom the narrator addresses in person, like Aïssatou, the narratee in *So Long a Letter*. Narrators may also address themselves, as in the diary or diary novel.

6. *Quotations and references*: these may be borrowed from literary or other texts, from different genres, by the author himself/herself, or from other sources. The question one could ask is what effect do they have on the meaning of the concerned text.

7. What is the *relation between the author and his/her society*? Is a harmonious image produced, or is the author critical of his/her society? It is also possible that the older narrators looking back are highly critical of themselves and their behavior in the past and conclude in retrospect that they fit better into their society now that they have found their identity and have said "yes" to their society. More often there are conflicts between authors and their society, like the political controversies between Oginga Odinga or Ngugi and the authorities in Kenya. The image the author or (if author $\neq$ narrator main character) the narrator presents of himself/herself and the image society has formed of him/her may be quite different: if so, the "I" will try to prove that he/she is right and that the others are wrong; the book then becomes a sort of apology.

8. *How is the story presented*: in short fragments or long chapters or in just one long piece? In what mode: assertively? Or hesitantly, with many adverbs, verbs, and auxiliaries which express doubts or questions? Or just by stating firmly without any problem? What is the effect of the use of direct, indirect, or free indirect speech?

In the above I have discussed some aspects of different first-person narrative genres as they are practiced in African literature—although some genres are less popular than others as we have seen. In Western literature the intense preoccupation with the self has led to what Christopher Lasch called *The Culture of Narcissism*, in which "the convention of a fictionalized narrator has been abandoned in most experimental writing. The author now speaks in his own voice, but warns the reader that his version of the truth is not to be trusted."[37] It then becomes a sort of a parody in which the author no longer wants to be taken seriously—if one is to believe Lasch, who therefore sees confessional writing "degenerate into anti-confession" (p. 54). This is certainly not (yet) true in the case of African autobiographical first-person narrative.

It might be interesting to compare African first-person narrative forms with similar genres in Asian or Latin-American literature, with regard to this particular point. Is the responsibility of the writer and the function of literature in society there taken more seriously than in the contemporary Western world, where art for art's sake is looked on with less suspicion than commitment in literature?

With regard to Chinese literature, Doleželová stated that

> the first-person narrator's experience is combined with the search for his own identity in a world wider than his private universe. The basic question "Who am I?" obsessive in Western fiction, is in China overshadowed by the query "Who am I in my society?"[38]

This question is also a central one in African literature where the search for identity is an important theme and quite often molded in the first-person narrative form. I am convinced that more systematic intercultural research in the field of literature will throw new light on the mysteries of the phenomenon of the first-person narrative and hence, perhaps, on the eternal human Who-am-I? question.

NOTES

1. See, e.g., William C. Spengemann, *The Forms of Autobiography: Episodes in the History of a Genre* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), and Georges May, *L'autobiographie* (Paris: P.U.F., 1979).

2. Bernd Neumann, *Identität und Rollenzwang: Zur Theorie der Autobiographie* (Frankfurt: Athenaeum, 1970), p. 109.

3. Stuart Bates, quoted by May, p. 17 (my translation), and G. Gusdorf, "De l'autobiographie initiatique à l'autobiographie genre littéraire," *Revue de l'histoire littéraire de la France* (1975), pp. 957–94.

4. Milena Doleželová-Velingerová, ed., *The Chinese Novel at the Turn of the Century* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980), p. 15.

5. Ibid., "Narrative Modes in Late Qing Novels," p. 66.

6. Ibid., p. 70.

7. Ibid., p. 72.

8. Ibid., pp. 71–72.

9. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (London and New York: Methuen, 1983), pp. 8–9.

10. More research needs to be done with regard to the comparison of differences in oral and written presentations of texts. Still I agree with Rimmon-Kenan (p. 89) that "the empirical process of communication between author and reader is less relevant to the poetics of narrative fiction than its counterpart in the text."

11. Cf. Roland Colin, *Les contes noirs de l'Ouest Africain* (Paris:

Présence Africaine, 1957), p. 84, and Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Literature in Africa* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), pp. 380–81.

12. D. O. Fagunwa, *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons*, trans. Wole Soyinka (London: Nelson [1968], 1982), pp. 8–9.

13. Gérard Genette, *Figures III* (Paris: Seuil, 1972). In English translation: *Narrative Discourse* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980). Genette combines theory and description in his analysis of possible narrative systems with the application of his theoretical considerations to Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*. Rimmon-Kenan, op. cit., gives a practical and clear introduction to the new approaches of narrative fiction, in which she also discusses Genette's theories.

14. Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett Publications, 1959), p. 72.

15. Wole Soyinka, *Aké: The Years of Childhood* (London: Rex Collings, 1981), p. 2.

16. Cf. Rimmon-Kenan, p. 91 ff.

17. Mariama Bâ, *Une si longue lettre* (Dakar: Nouvelles Editions Africaines, 1979). The English translation (by Modupé Bodé-Thomas), *So Long a Letter* (London: Heinemann, 1981), has been used here.

18. Amos Tutuola, *The Palm-Wine Drinkard and His Dead Palm-Wine Tapster in the Deads' Town* (London: Faber & Faber, 1952), and idem, *Feather Woman of the Jungle* (London: Faber & Faber, 1962). See also my "Perspective narrative et récit africain à la première personne" in the collection of papers I edited for the African Studies Centre in Leiden: *Text and Context: Methodological Explorations in the Field of African Literatures* (1977), pp. 113–34.

19. Mongo Beti, *Le pauvre Christ de Bomba* (Paris: Laffont, 1956); the English translation (by Gerald Moore), *The Poor Christ of Bomba* (London: Heinemann, 1971), has been used here. Ferdinand Oyono, *Une vie de boy* (Paris: Julliard, 1956); the English translation (by John Reed), (London: Heinemann, 1966), has been used here.

20. Norman Friedman, "Point of View in Fiction: The Development of a Critical Concept," *PMLA*, 70 (1955), 1160–84; Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961); Bertil Romberg, *Studies in the Narrative Technique of the First-Person Novel* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1962)—among others—have not seen the difference between narration and focalization as Genette observed it in his *Figures III* (cf. n. 13) for the first time.

21. Rimmon-Kenan, p. 72.

22. Eleanor Wachtel, "The Mother and the Whore: Image and Stereotype of African Women," *Umoja*, 1, no. 2, p. 42.

23. Cf. Rimmon-Kenan, p. 74, and Mieke Bal, *Narratologie: Essais sur la signification narrative dans quatre romans modernes* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1977), p. 33 ff.

24. Cf. Rimmon-Kenan, p. 82.

25. Jean Ikellé-Matiba, *Cette Afrique-là* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1963), p. 13.

26. Philippe Lejeune, *Le pacte autobiographique* (Paris: Seuil, 1975), pp. 13–46.

27. Béatrice Didier, *Le journal intime* (Paris: P.U.F., 1976).

28. Elechi Amadi, *Sunset in Biafra: A Civil War Diary* (London: Heinemann, 1973), and Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary* (London: Heinemann, 1981), p. xi.

29. Cf. Neumann, op. cit.

30. Cf. Emmanuel Obiechina, *Culture, Tradition, and Society in the West African Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), pp. 122–39.

31. Zamenga Batukezanga, *Lettres d'Amérique* (Kinshasa: Editions Zabat, 1983).

32. Bernard Dadié, *Un nègre à Paris* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1959), and Henri Lopès, *Sans Tam-tam* (Yaoundé: Editions CLE, 1977), p. 5.

33. Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding* (Harmondsworth: Pelican Books [1957], 1974), p. 217.

34. Oginga Odinga, *Not Yet Uhuru: An Autobiography* (London: Heinemann [1967], 1974), p. xii.

35. Lejeune, op. cit.

36. If the narrator is one of the characters, he/she is not necessarily the main character in letters, epistolary novel, diary, or diary novel: one could write about others more than about oneself in these genres. However, this is not possible in the autobiography and the memoir novel because the writing about oneself is inherent in both.

37. Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: Warner Books, 1979), p. 53.

38. Doleželová, p. 73.