

# Encyclopedia of African Literature

Edited by  
Simon Gikandi



# ENCYCLOPEDIA OF AFRICAN LITERATURE

Edited by Simon Gikandi

江苏工业学院图书馆  
藏书章

First published 2003  
by Routledge  
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE  
Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada  
by Routledge

29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001  
*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group*

© 2003 Routledge  
Typeset in Baskerville by Taylor & Francis Books Ltd  
Printed and bound in Great Britain by  
TJ International Ltd, Padstow, Cornwall

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*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data*  
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library  
*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data*  
Encyclopedia of African literature / edited by Simon Gikandi.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. African literature—Encyclopedias. I. Gikandi, Simon.

PL8010 .E63 2002

809'.896'03—dc21

2002072757

ISBN 0-415-23019-5

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# Introduction

## Overview

African literature has been defined by several dominant threads and accompanying paradoxes. In both its oral and written forms it has a long history rooted in the continent's famous storytelling and performance traditions, and its classical civilizations are as old as that of any other geographic region of the world. The linguistic traditions of Africa are ancient, dating back to the Egypt of the pharaohs, the Carthage of the Romans, the Sudanese empires, the Eastern Christian traditions of Ethiopia, the kingdoms of the Lakes region and southern Africa, and the Islamic heritage of West and Eastern Africa. Yet it is only in twentieth century, especially its last half, that African literature became an institutionalized subject of study and debate in the institutions of education and interpretation. Thus, African literature has the sense of being simultaneously old, almost timeless in its themes and forms, and new, the latest addition to global literary culture. Written and oral literature in Africa is now associated with the continent's drive for freedom from foreign domination and the search for a common identity. Yet the most powerful and compelling literary texts are associated with some of the most catastrophic events in the history of the continent, most notably slavery and colonialism. The first African writers in the European languages in the eighteenth century were slaves, or former slaves, who turned to writing to assert their own humanity, reclaim the memories lost in the process of enslavement, or affirm their new identities in the enslaving cultures. At the same time, the foundations of a modern African literature were laid by the process of colonization. In fact, it was the institutions of colonialism, most

notably Christianity, the school, and later the university, which enabled the production of what are now the dominant forms of African literature.

It is, of course, true that forms of creative expression developed in Africa outside the orbit of colonialism and that the continent's living heritage of oral literature bears witness to this autonomous tradition; it is also true that literatures in ancient African languages such as Arabic and Ge'ez emerged outside the tutelage of colonialism. However, it was during the high colonial period in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that written literature spread across the continent and became an important ingredient of its cultural geography. The major periods of African literary history have been associated with the colonial encounter and its aftermath. Still, this association between colonialism and the production of African literature calls attention to an irony that has to be considered one of the key features of the continent's literary history: while the majority of African writers were the products of colonial institutions, they turned to writing to oppose colonialism, especially its political, cultural, and social programs and practices, or to question the central claims in its doctrine of rule and conquest. It is not accidental that the most significant period in the history of African literature, the first half of the twentieth century, was also the great age of African nationalism in both the continent and its diaspora. African literature seemed to reach its high point with the two decades of decolonization, the 1950s and 1960s, when the majority of African countries became independent of their European colonizers. Literature celebrated the coming into being of the new African nation and the assertion of a new culture and identity.

By the late 1960s, it was apparent that the narrative of independence was not the utopian moment many writers and intellectuals had anticipated and celebrated. Contrary to expectations, decolonization did not represent a radical break with the colonial past; rather, the institutions of colonialism seemed to persist and thrive and to become Africanized. Intellectuals and writers unhappy with the continued domination of African countries by Western political and economical interests conceived literature to represent the crisis of decolonization and to imagine ways out of it. In effect, amidst what later came to be known, in the 1980s and 1990s, as the crisis of postcoloniality, creative writing and other forms of cultural expression continued to bear witness to the changing nature of African societies and cultures in the age of globalization. If literature has become important to the study of Africa's history and culture in a variety of disciplines ranging from anthropology to natural science, it is because it constitutes an indelible record of the continent's long past, its complicated present, and its future possibilities.

In calling attention to the dominant threads and paradoxes of African literature, there is always the danger that the diversity of the continent and its complicated history will be subsumed by the desire for a larger narrative of culture and society. It is perhaps the case that one of the lasting legacies of the association between literature and cultural self-assertion is the emergence and consolidation of a master narrative of African literature. But beneath this larger story, the cultural geography of African literature is defined by multiple traditions and contexts. The fact is that while it is easier to talk about a unified literature, creativity on the continent takes place in hundreds of languages, draws on thousands of diverse ethnic, national, and regional traditions; Africa is a continent of many countries, religions, politics, and styles. The *Encyclopedia of African Literature* is intended to capture these diverse traditions while at the same time recognizing the things they share in common.

### **Purpose and structure of the encyclopedia**

The *Encyclopedia of African Literature* is a large-scale work of over 350,000 words covering important

aspects of African literature produced in all the major languages. It contains almost 700 entries on the major historical and cultural issues concerning the study of African literature, the theoretical and critical issues that have affected its interpretation, and the movements and institutions that have governed its development as a field of scholarship. Because the work is intended to be the most comprehensive reference work on African literature to date, it focuses as much on established writers and their texts as on newer and lesser-known writers. The purpose of the encyclopedia is to provide a comprehensive body of knowledge on African literature from the earliest times to the present. The intention is to produce a work that will be both an essential resource for teaching and an invaluable companion to independent study, a reliable source of facts and features on African literature, and a solid guide for further study.

African literature has become a major ingredient of scholarship and teaching on Africa across the disciplines. It is regularly used in courses in non-literary disciplines such as history, anthropology, sociology, and even environmental studies and the health sciences. The encyclopedia will hence be an important reference work for students of African literature and non-specialists in other disciplines. This point was kept in mind in the writing of the general and individual entries. While there have been numerous reference works on African literature in the last thirty years, the goal of the encyclopedia is to produce an accurate and up-to-date compendium of knowledge on literary culture on the continent. The information contained in the entries is hence the latest on authors, texts, and contexts. While the information presented in the entries is based on established facts, it is also presented with an awareness of changing practices in literary and cultural scholarship, of theoretical developments in African literature, and of the significance of local traditions, contexts, writers, and movements on global literary studies. It is the aim of the encyclopedia to provide local knowledge about African literature but within the context of regional and global knowledge.

The greatest period of literary production in Africa has been in the twentieth century and, for this reason, the majority of entries in the encyclopedia will be from this phase. Nevertheless, the

encyclopedia aims to reach back in time to account for the significance of earlier periods of writing and oral literature, eras that constitute an important background to modern African literature. Wherever possible, overview entries are intended to establish vital connections between traditions of literary production in Africa across time and space. In addition to specific topics, writers, and histories, the encyclopedia includes entries on major literary movements such as negritude and pan-Africanism, key regional literary traditions, literatures in major African languages, and institutions of literary production such as newspapers and publishing houses. The encyclopedia is being published at a time when there is a rethinking or re-evaluation of knowledge about Africa and in the context of dramatic changes in the nature of the disciplines, institutions, and technologies of representation that have shaped the study of the continent in the past. For this reason, entries on general themes and major authors have striven to be sensitive to the historical context in which African literature has been produced, of changing debates about its interpretation, and its relation to international intellectual movements such as Marxism and feminism, structuralism and poststructuralism, postmodernism and postcolonialism. The encyclopedia contains extensive biographical references to African writers with information about their professional lives, wherever available, and brief descriptions of their major works and primary themes and the significance of their contribution to African literature. Entries, which range in length from a few lines to around 3,000 words, have been organized alphabetically for general ease of access. The entries are self-contained but they have been extensively cross-referenced. Suggestions for further reading are included at the end of most entries.

## Readership

The encyclopedia is intended to be a starting point for the wider exploration of African literature and not an end in itself. For this reason, it has been targeted at readers who are either discovering African literature for the first time or who are seeking facts on topics, writers, and movements. The encyclopedia has been conceived as an aid to the study of African literature, the source of highly

differentiated contextual information through which a variety of users can supplement or initiate work in African literature. The structure and organization of the encyclopedia and the suggestions for further reading which follow most entries are designed to be of optimum use to potential users, including students in other disciplines who are seeking a new way of thinking about African questions, or teachers of African studies who are increasingly required to teach outside their own areas of specialization. The encyclopedia is also directed at general readers who may have an interest in African studies and those who see African literature as an important point of entry into the complex histories of the continent.

## Criteria for selection

From its conception, one of the challenges facing the editor of this encyclopedia was the range of criteria to be used in the selection of entries, given the extensive cultural geography of Africa and its complex literary and linguistic traditions. Faced with the difficulties of containing African literature in one volume, previous editors of reference works have tended either to limit themselves to one linguistic tradition (Arabic, English, and French) or to divide the continent into North and sub-Saharan Africa. Each of these choices has tended to create a false sense of African literary history and cultural geography, ignoring the fact that, in spite of real geographic and linguistic divisions, writers have been in conversation with one another across boundaries and traditions. For this reason, this encyclopedia has sought to encompass many literary traditions in one volume. Since Routledge has already published a two-volume *Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature*, one with an obvious focus on the ancient and classical traditions, the editor decided to concentrate on Arabic literature in the modern period. Readers seeking information on older literary genres are advised to refer to the *Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature*.

In the end, not all the goals and ambitions of this project were fulfilled. While it was our goal to include biographical entries on almost all writers on the continent, African literature is such an extensive and continuously expanding field that some writers may have fallen through the cracks. In addition,

Africa produces new writers every year and our efforts to keep up with new developments have not always been successful. While we have striven to include the most accurate details about writers' lives and careers, information was not always available or accessible as the project went to press. Sometimes there were significant transformations even as the project went to press. Some significant writers such as Léopold Sédar Senghor, Francis Bebey, and Mongo Beti died just as the project was about to go to press, and we could not trace the death dates of a few writers who, judging from their

birth dates, are obviously dead. One of the most significant achievements of this project was the attention paid to writers in African languages who have often been neglected in previous reference works. We have included entries on major African language literatures and authors, but we are also aware that some linguistic traditions are not represented here. This omission has nothing to do with lack of space or any sense of canonicity or significance; it simply reflects our inability to find specialists working in those traditions.

## Acknowledgements

A project of this size and magnitude is impossible without the editorial, intellectual, and practical help of a large number of people and I would like to take this opportunity to thank the following for their invaluable help. First, there is the editorial team at Routledge in London: Fiona Cairns came up with the idea for this project and was responsible for its conception and commission; as the managing editor of the project, Stephanie Rogers guided me at every stage of the project, maintaining an extensive database and communicating with contributors, in sometimes difficult circumstances, with professionalism and care; Alfred Symons shepherded the project through production; and, as copy-editor, Liz Jones turned what appeared to be a mass of fragments in cyberspace into a coherent whole. The associate editors of this project provided invaluable advice regarding their areas of expertise: without the help of Aida Bamia I would have been lost in the field of Arabic literature; Eileen Julien and Ken Harrow helped me avoid errors of fact and omission in the fields of Francophone literature; Isabel Hofmeyr and Ntongela Masilela were superb guides in expanding the range and knowledge of the different literatures of Southern Africa. In addition, Ntongela took on the task of writing several crucial entries late in the project. At the beginning of this project I set out to use the most

diverse range of contributors, convinced that the best perspective of the continent's culture could best be provided by scholars spread out across the various continents in which African literature is read and taught. I would like to thank our contributors, especially those who live and work in Africa, for bringing their range of scholarship and reference to this work. I would also like to thank former and current graduate students at the University of Michigan who eagerly undertook the task of writing entries, sometimes at short notice: Apollo Amoko, Magali Compan, Neil Doshi, Rachel Gabara, Susan Gorman, Meredith Martin, Khaled Al Masri, Katarzyna (Kashia) Pieprzak, and Deborah Starr. Susan Gorman also helped with the translation of some entries from French to English. As usual, Meredith Martin provided me with exemplary research assistance. Funding in the form of a sabbatical and research funds was provided by the University of Michigan through the College of Literature Art and Sciences (LSA), the Rackham School of Graduate Studies, the Robert Hayden Collegiate Professorship, the Department of English and the Program in Comparative Literature. Finally, while individual contributors are responsible for their entries, I am solely responsible for any errors and omissions in the overall project.



# Contents

Editorial team	vi	<b>Entries A–Z</b>	1
List of contributors	vii		
Introduction	xi	Index	587
Acknowledgements	xv		



## Aba, Nouredine

b. 1921, Sétif, Algeria; d. 1996, Paris, France

playwright and poet

The Algerian-born Nouredine Aba has written numerous plays and poems on a variety of political topics: post-independence corruption and political repression, the Algerian revolution, the plight of Palestinians and the Middle East conflict, Nazi Germany (inspired by his presence as a journalist at the Nuremberg trials), and French colonial rule. In addition, he has frequently examined the fate and experience of individual relationships in the midst of political upheaval. In *Gazelle après minuit* (Gazelle after Midnight) (1979) and *Gazelle au petit matin* (Gazelle in the Early Morning) (1978), for example, the *fait divers* of a young couple discovered dead at the moment of independence serves as the inspiration for sequences of love poems. In his plays, he often makes use of political farce, and his poems frequently draw on thickly layered references to history. His short stories, however, draw on the tradition of Arabic tales such as those found in the *Arabian Nights*. Using figures such as a sultan to represent arbitrary post-independence rule, they are therefore more allegorical in their relation to politics. Two of these short stories were adapted from his children's books.

## Further reading

Aba, N. (1979) *Gazelle après minuit* (Gazelle after Midnight), Paris: Minuit.

JARROD HAYES

## Abbas, Ferhat

b. 1899, Taher, Algeria; d. 1985, Algiers, Algeria

politician and essayist

Ferhat Abbas's political activities began before World War II. His *Manifesto of the Algerian People* was the basis of several nationalist organizations. At the beginning of the revolution, Abbas favored an Algerian republic within a French federation that would give Algerians equal rights as citizens, but once it became clear that such a solution was unworkable, he joined the National Liberation Front (FLN), for which he frequently presented a diplomatic face abroad. He served as president of the provisional government and was the first president of the National Assembly. Abbas's essays, not strictly history yet much more than autobiography, draw on his experiences to analyze the various stages of Algeria's political evolution in the twentieth century. His first books analyze the inequities and hypocrisy of French colonial rule, and subsequent books take on the revolution itself and the subsequent betrayal of its ideals. Though he was treated as an assimilationist or sell-out by more radical nationalists, by the end of the twentieth century some had begun to re-evaluate

his early condemnations of the FLN's fratricidal tendencies and of the dangers of a one-party state.

### Further reading

Stora, Benjamin and Daoud, Zakya (1995) *Ferhat Abbas: une utopie algérienne* (Ferhat Abbas: An Algerian Utopia), Paris: Denoël.

JARROD HAYES

## Abbé Gubennya (Abe Gubañña/Gubagna)

b. 1933/4, Ethiopia; d. 1980, Ethiopia  
poet, novelist, and short story writer

Abbé Gubennya was one of Ethiopia's most popular authors. He attended church school and then government schools for twelve years. He worked as a journalist and in the Ministry of Health before turning to writing full time. In his works, he expressed sympathy for the underdog and fought oppression and backwardness, prescribing simple remedies. His works were particularly attractive to young readers. He could use fanciful methods, as in *Aliwelledim* (I Refuse to be Born) (1962/3), told by a fetus that does not want to enter a corrupt society. For this and later books he was imprisoned. He published more than twenty books in Amharic and two in English. He also wrote essays, poems, short stories, and novels, particularly including *And lennatu* (His Mother's Only Son) (1968/9), about Emperor Tēwodros II. But he was perhaps best known as a writer of short stories, many of them collected in *Yereggefu abeboch* (Fallen Flowers) (1971/2), and poems. He met much adversity under Hayle-Sillasé, and welcomed the Marxist revolution of 1974 but was soon disillusioned.

### Further reading

Molvaer, R.K. (1997) *Black Lions*, Lawrenceville, New Jersey: Red Sea Press.

REIDULF MOLVAER

## ʿAbd al-Majīd, Ibrahīm

b. 1946, Alexandria, Egypt

novelist

Born in Alexandria, the Egyptian novelist and short story writer Ibrahīm ʿAbd al-Majīd has published nine novels and four collections of short stories. He studied philosophy at Alexandria University, then in 1974 moved to Cairo, where he currently lives. His fiction ranges from the stylistically direct and carefully plotted to the lyrical and incoherently structured. *Lailat al-ʿIshq wa al-Dam* (The Night of Love and Blood) (1983), a novella, illustrates the attempts of a female character, Wardah, to enjoy a fulfilling life by highlighting her sexual emancipation in a masculine society. *The Other Place* (1996) (*al-Baldah al-Ukhraʾ*) (1991) portrays the struggles of nationally and religiously diverse workers in Saudi Arabia in the 1970s, and criticizes the materialistic and socially corrupt generation that emerged after the discovery of oil. His most popular novel, *No One Sleeps in Alexandria* (1999) (*Lā Ahad Yānām fī al-Iskandariyah*, 1996), explores the rapidly changing social, cultural, and political conditions in Alexandria during World War II. Among other aspects, the novel traces the gradual loss of the cosmopolitan character of the city, and records Muslim and Coptic joint resistance to German and Italian military attacks. In *Tūyūr al-ʿAnbar* (The Birds of Ambergris) (2000), ʿAbd al-Majīd presents a panoramic image of Alexandria after the 1952 revolution, focusing on the grim fate of Egyptian intellectuals under Nasser's regime.

### Further reading

Al-Rāʿī, ʿAlī (2000) *al-Rivāyah fī Nihayat Qarn* (The Novel at the End of a Century), Cairo: Dār al-Mustaqbal al-ʿArabī.

KHALED AL MASRI