

# CHARACTERISTICS OF ABSURDIST AFRICAN LITERATURE: TABAN LO LIYONG'S *FIXIONS*— A STUDY IN THE ABSURD

F. Odun Balogun

The absurd, both as an element of satire and as a style in its own right, has always been manifest in African literature both oral and written. However, in an effort to redirect the focus of African literature and criticism from eurocentricism to a literature and criticism informed by African aesthetics, vocal African critics like Chinweizu, Jemie, and Madubuike have persistently condemned the encouragement of modernist tendencies in African writing (1980: 239): "If African literature is not to become a transplanted fossil of European literature, it needs to burst out of the straightjacket of anglomodernist poetry and of the 'well made novel'." Their advice to African critics is that the latter must "liberate themselves from their mesmerization with Europe and its critical canons" (p. 302) and must stop encouraging "the manufacture of a still, pale, anemic, academic poetry, slavishly imitative of 20th-century European modernism, with its weak preciousness, ostentatious erudition, and dunghill piles of esoterica and obscure allusions, all totally cut off from the vital nourishment of our African traditions. . . ." (p. 3).<sup>1</sup>

The antagonism of these critics toward modernism appears to be based on a seemingly incontrovertible evidence (Chinweizu, 1973: 8):

There was a specific burden of tradition that Western modernism reacted against in its revolt. But however familiar we may be with all that; however familiar we may be with that tradition or with the various modernist revolts against it (Symbolism, Dadaism, Surrealism, Futurism, etc.) they are not part of our history. They do not belong to our past. . . .

Lewis Nkosi's view on the matter, however, appears to me to be closer to the truth (1981: 54):

. . . it is fairly obvious that a "modernist" movement is now taking shape in Africa which may create links with modernist movements in other parts of the world, chiefly in Europe, in North and South America. Nevertheless, to see what is now occurring in African fiction merely as an extension of a development occurring somewhere else is seriously to misjudge the nature of the African phenomenon, its roots and its ideological compulsions. For one thing the modernist movement in Africa faces both ways at once; it faces forward to the latest innovations in fiction as well as backward to the roots of

---

*African Studies Review*, vol. 27, no. 1, March 1984.

African tradition. Indeed, some of the experiments being carried out in African fiction owe nothing to European and American examples, but achieve their queer effects by returning us to African traditional sources and by exploiting certain properties of native language.<sup>2</sup>

Modernism indisputably exists in African art but its historical causation, philosophical orientation, and stylistic characteristics are not the same as those of Western modernism. We are, for instance, familiar with the Western literature of the absurd, the purpose of which is to depict man as "a bewildered being in an incomprehensible universe" (Holman, 1980: 3). For the absurdist in the West, man sees no purpose in life and is "bewildered" because he has been "cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots," and as a result, he "is lost" and "all his actions [have] become senseless, absurd, useless" (Esslin, 1969: 5). In 1942 Albert Camus, one of the chief theorists and practitioners of the tradition, "was calmly putting the question why, since life had lost all meaning, man should not seek escape in suicide" (Esslin, 1969: 5). Camus was indeed a major voice seeking a solution to absurdity but it is significant that suicide was an answer he once seriously considered.

The root of the existential agony of the philosophers of the absurd lies in the spiritual depression existing at the time in the Euro-American world, a depression brought about by the lessons of history. By the forties, Western man had come to the realization that he was not advancing in civilization, but was actually getting more and more barbaric, more and more destructive, more and more incapable of learning from history. The numerous European wars had not taught him the way to avoid the First World War nor had the latter provided him with the wisdom for preventing Hitler and the incalculable carnage of the Second World War. The economic depressions he could not prevent further undermined his faith in himself and in addition worsened his standard of living. With his faith in himself eroded, Western man inevitably was plunged into an agonizing spiritual crisis characterized by pessimism and despair. This was the mood that gave rise to the literature of the absurd in Europe and America. The poetic, dramatic and fictional manifestations of this literature are evident in the works of its most distinguished representatives: Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Arthur Adamov, Jean Genet, Edward Albee, Joseph Heller, Thomas Pynchon, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., John Barth, Harold Pinter, and others.

Contemporary African literature of the absurd, on the other hand, is undoubtedly a manifestation of the world-wide malaise dominating all spheres of modern life. The general dissatisfaction with politics as it is run the world over, the arms race which continues to produce sophisticated weapons with over-kill capacities, the world-wide economic depression which daily erodes the quality of life, and the calm with which the world receives news of mounting crimes and violence are the factors which have combined to produce the pessimistic, cynical man of today for whom the absurd is an indisputable reality. These are also the factors that inspire absurdist literature. The malaise may not be as intense in Africa as in Europe and America, but that perhaps in part explains why there are not as many absurdist artists in Africa as in Europe and America.

Apart from this general malaise, however, the African of today is a product of a specific historical and racial experience molded by slavery, colonization, and neo-colonialism. The African had expected that with Independence and blackman ruling blackman the quality of life would change drastically for the better. Expectations might have been naive, even utopian, but that is the reason

dissatisfaction with post-Independence reality is more intense. Since Independence Nigeria has tried parliamentary, military and republican systems of government and, in the process, has experienced over four successful and attempted military coups d'état and a civil war. The high level of misgovernment attended by official corruption, misappropriation and embezzlement together with armed robbery, bank robberies, religious and student riots, all point to the fact that the reality of post-Independence is a far cry from the utopian heaven it seemed to promise. The degree of pessimism and cynicism this disparity between expectations and reality has engendered can be measured by the indifference of the average Nigerian to matters of public good. This is a society where human corpses do stay exposed in public places for days before individuals and government officials overcome their complacency and act.

It should therefore not surprise anybody that conditions such as those that prevail in Nigeria and in other African countries in varying degrees should produce writers with "pessimistic vision" who feel that the most appropriate way to deal with "the widespread dislocation and loss of equilibrium in modern African society" (Nkosi, 1981: 55–56) and with "the conditions and absurdities of neo-colonial Africa" (Chinweizu, 1978: 2) is through an absurd art. This is inevitable particularly when these writers are not only familiar with Western absurdist literature but also have an oral tradition in the absurd.<sup>3</sup> Omotoso's *the combat* (1972), for instance, has been recognized by many (Omotoso, 1981: 220; Dash, 1977: 49–50; and Oladitan, 1979: 16) as an allegory reflecting the absurdity of the Nigerian fratricidal civil war of 1967–70.

Tutuola's fiction is a sure link between African oral and written literary traditions and it reveals the connection between African folklore and African modern practice of the absurd. An examination of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1953), for example, suggests that this novel is predicated on the assumption that the absurd is an acceptable mode of oral narration. Were it not true, it would have been unthinkable to accept the fantasy that would suggest that it is reasonable for a man to love palm wine to such an extent as to risk the safety, security, and comforting certainty of his familiar world to go into the mysterious and dangerous bush of ghosts in search of a dead palm wine tapper. Here is a man who so loves life and pleasure that he seeks to guarantee his pleasure by starting an undertaking that was certain not only to eliminate pleasure but endanger life itself. This undertaking is so fabulously absurd that nobody of course takes it other than as a mythical allegory, but it is important all the same to remind ourselves of this underlying absurdity.

But for this acceptance of the absurd, it would have been totally unimaginable to consider a situation in a Yoruba culture, in which the hero, a first male child, has not only raised "pleasure to the status of work" (Achebe, 1978: 26), but is actually encouraged in his anti-cultural tendency by his father whose duty—his wealth notwithstanding—is to uphold tradition. Since all family responsibilities at a father's death devolve on the first male child, Yoruba culture uncompromisingly insists that the first child must be responsible. But here we have a complete reversal which makes nonsense of tradition. To a Yoruba this is an absurd reversal of values. Absurdity also underscores the fantasy which suggests that a child could be conceived in and delivered from a swollen thumb rather than from a womb. Finally, if it were not for the assumption in *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* that the illogical and the absurd are native to oral narrative, nobody would accept the fact that a hero who possesses the magical power to transform himself into a boat

or a bird would allow himself to be embarrassed on several occasions when this power is all he needs to find food or escape ordeals at the hands of enemies.

The underlying absurdity in the fantasy of Tutuola's novels would of course cease to matter when we abandon literal interpretation for the more fruitful allegorical and mythical analysis as numerous examples (cf. Achebe, 1978: 26, and Coates, 1980: 122–29) have shown. All the same, it should not be forgotten that the literal understanding of a story always precedes its depth analysis. A thorough study of African oral literature will no doubt reveal that the style of the absurd is more prevalent than we have suspected.

*The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, for instance, contains a story that is common to the folklore of many nationalities in Africa. This is the story about a girl who would marry only the ideal man—the “complete gentleman,” as Tutuola puts it. This story, which reveals man's universal search for perfection, is narrated with absurdist details wherein shock, horror, and pornography are treated matter-of-factly. Tutuola's heroine pursues her “complete gentleman” to the bush of ghosts in a journey that is marked by increasingly terrifying episodes. In a characteristically absurdist fashion, the “complete gentleman,” who is the most handsome man alive, is progressively dismembered until final horror is attained and he becomes a mere skull (1953: 18–32). What is more significant is that this is told in a straightforward, realistic language that does not suggest that anything is amiss. Yet all is amiss: the world has been turned upside down; evil has become more attractive than good, and human beings have been reduced to machines with spare parts. This motif, as we shall see, is also used by Taban lo Liyong in an absurdist short story titled “Tombe 'Gworong's Own Story” (1978: 29).

Contemporary African literature of the absurd therefore developed as a reaction to the general world malaise and the absurd conditions of modern Africa. European absurdist tradition and African oral absurdist literature have also played major roles in fostering its growth.

African absurdist literature, however, differs in style from the European tradition. The latter is characterized by “extreme forms of illogic, inconsistency, nightmarish fantasy,” abandonment of “usual or rational devices and the use of nonrealistic form” (Holman, 1980: 2–3) in the effort to create an “anti-style” that presents absurdity “in being” (Hinchliffe, 1969: 10) so that absurdity is reflected in absurd style. Except perhaps in a few instances such as is the case with two short stories of Taban lo Liyong titled “Sages and Wages” and “Lexicographicide,” African absurdist literature in general does not aim at creating an “anti-style” to make absurd form reflect absurd content. Rather, following the example of African oral literature of the absurd as reflected in *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, modern African absurdist writers use normal, rational and realistic devices combined with hyperbole, irony and satire to convey the absurd. There is, of course, a basic use of fantasy as in all absurdist traditions because without suspension of disbelief absurdist literature is hardly possible. Other than this, the language of narration is realistic even though it is heightened by exaggeration and satiric irony. Femi Osofisan, for instance, presents in his *Kolera Kolej* (1975) a dream world where common sense has been totally displaced by illogical reasoning, a world ruled by an absurd logic involving the reversal of all standards of judgement, be they aesthetic or ethical, political or social.

The country “Kolera Kolej” is ruled by a cabinet of ministers composed exclusively of professors who show an amazingly high degree of ignorance and illiteracy. A professor of Geophysical Sciences, for example, cannot tell whether

Holland is only “a town in Russia” or “a fishing company in Denmark.” In this country assassins are required to book appointments with their prospective victims to arrange the date of assassination. Here it is considered mean to be faithful to one’s wife, and to be patriotic is to qualify as a traitor. These are the characteristics of the absurd and surreal world of *Kolera Kolej*, where wanton murder is considered normal. Nonetheless, all these absurdities are conveyed by Osofisan in a highly lucid and realistic language which at times reaches an enviable height of ironic lyricism as in the following extract which vividly recalls T. S. Eliot’s poem, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” (1915, 1975: 1175–76):

He was thinking: there is a warning of storm in the air: but they will tell us, there is a time for everything: perhaps even a protocol of passion of token fury and patriotic curses: a time also like this moment, tense and stripped for harmattan, for the cracking lips of wanton flesh.

My heart is dry like the drought.

Kole Omotoso, who in *the combat* (1972) depicts a world which is no less absurd than that in *Kolera Kolej*, is even more realistic in his style. Unlike Osofisan, Omotoso does not plunge us immediately into an unrecognizable, absurd world. Rather, he guides us gently into a very real world where the trivial leads imperceptibly into the tragic, realism is gradually replaced by fantasy, and logic yields to illogicality. The world of *the combat* is a world where it is possible for a child to have two biological fathers; it is a world where two “bosom friends” engage in an internationally sponsored and refereed combat; a world where man is treasured only after death.

In what we might therefore describe as its “unabsurdist” mode of presenting the absurd, African absurdist literature is not unique. It closely resembles the style of contemporary American novelists of the absurd who, according to Harris (1971: 20, 23–25), use the traditional novelistic conventions of characterization, language and plot in an ironic reflexive manner which employs burlesque and parody. Harris says that “the absurdist novel of the sixties in America is rarely so total in its commitment to absurdity as are the French plays nor does it completely abandon the use of rational devices.” He further states that American novelists of the absurd:

seldom employ what Leslie Fiedler calls “the fallacy of imitative form” by attempting to reproduce absurdity through an “anti-style.” In a way, such “imitation” is what is happening in the French Theater of the Absurd and the *nouveau roman*, both of which may be seen as attempts to reproduce that absurdity felt by the artists to lie just beneath the surface of existence. American novelists of the absurd, on the other hand, while they sometimes exaggerate “reality,” seldom feel the need to distort it beyond recognition.

The most significant distinction between African literature of the absurd and its Euro-American counterpart, however, lies in the difference in their philosophical outlooks on life. Even though American absurdist novelists “do not insist that despair represents the only possible human response to life’s absurdity” (Harris, 1971: 31), and even though these novelists in fact believe in the possibility of love as a way of coping with absurdity, it is significant that the same novelists do not have even the faith the existentialists have in man in a world where there is no God: “To the contemporary novelists of the absurd . . . man is far too puny and helpless for self-reliance” (Harris, 1971: 31).

The French Theater of the Absurd is deeply steeped in despair and pessimism. Thus, whereas the European absurdist sees life as being absurd and meaningless, so absurd and meaningless in fact that he contemplates suicide as a solution, the absurdist in Africa is like the Afro-American Outsider who does not accept "absurdity as being so normal that he believes in nothingness" (Lester, 1976: 93). The African absurdist writer does not believe that life in itself is absurd or meaningless. As a matter of fact, life to him is very meaningful; what can be absurd and meaningless are individuals and situations. The conditions, the instances, the personalities, and the attitudes that deprive life of this meaning which he values so much are the things he ridicules in his works by exposing the absurdity inherent in them. Ultimately, therefore, the absurd for the African fulfills the same purpose as satire—a way of correction. The African absurdist may have a pessimistic cynical vision but he has not yet despaired.

The corrective objective of African absurdist literature on the one hand, and this literature's "realistic, unabsurdist" style on the other hand, obviously begs the question as to what constitutes the difference between satire and absurdist literature. There is in fact a close similarity between the aims and methods of both, but the distinction is also clear. Satire can indeed employ the absurd as one of its methods but that which is satirized is not necessarily absurd. Objects of satire are usually human frailties and social imperfections. Jonathan Swift's aim in *Gulliver's Travels* was not to portray a world that was totally absurd, but to satirize imperfect—let's even say absurd—aspects of an otherwise sane world. Also, even though characterization in the novels of Chukwuemeka Ike is usually absurd in the process of satirizing Nigerian university intellectuals, the academic community which is the focus of his novels is never presented as being absurd in its entirety, nor are the stylistic devices in the novel, apart from characterization, pervaded with absurdity.

In the literature of the absurd, on the other hand, that which is depicted is always wholly absurd. The ironic realistic language of *Kolera Kolej* and *the combat* does not for a moment deceive us into accepting any aspects of the world of these novels as being normal. On the contrary, the realism of the language only heightens by ironic contrast the absurdity of the worlds of these novels. Using a calm, unruffled, realistic language to present absurdity as Osofisan and Omotoso have done is perhaps a more effective way of emphasizing absurdity than committing "the fallacy of imitative form" in an effort to make an absurdist style reflect absurd content in an "anti-style." Thus, satire is only partially absurdist—if at all—in content and form, whereas absurdist literature is totally absurdist in content and form even though the form may masquerade as realistic, "unabsurdist." A "realistic" language which heightens absurdity through the force of its ironic contrast is ultimately a shade different from the realistic language of the realistic novel. We can differentiate, therefore, African literature of the absurd from the European absurdist literature and from satire.

#### **TABAN LO LIYONG: THE ABSURDIST**

Taban lo Liyong is an exciting African avant-garde writer who refuses to be tied to any traditional literary models. Although he acknowledges his indebtedness to both Tutuola (see epigraph to "Lexicographicide," 1978: 39) and African oral literature from which he claims he draws inspiration (Zell and Silver, 1977:

152–54), his attitude toward these sources is not slavish but creative.<sup>4</sup> Basil Busacca (1977: 153) aptly identifies the freedom of his creative spirit when he describes lo Liyong as a writer who “genuflects before no idols—European, Nigerian or local—and who proves that he is right to exercise the prerogative of genius.” Like most avant-garde artists, lo Liyong proceeds in his writing from the premise that literary models existing before him are no longer adequate to express the reality of his time. An artist who accepts without question existing artistic traditions is not likely to create anything new. The Italian Futurists, for instance, announced their appearance with this provocative manifesto (Howe, 1967: 170–71):

We want to demolish museums, libraries, fight against moralism, feminism, and all opportunistic and utilitarian cowardices. . . . Set the library stacks on fire! Turn the canals in their course to flood the museum vaults!

The call to destroy museums and burn libraries, of course, was only a symbolic gesture on the part of the futurists, who knew that nothing new could be created until the artists turned away from traditional models. This also was the point the Russian writer, Yevgeny Zamyatin (1970: 11), was making when he wrote:

The formal character of a living literature is the same as its inner character: it denies verities, it denies what everyone knows and what I have known until this moment. It departs from the canonical tracks, from the broad highway. . . . Let yesterday's cart creak along the well-paved highways. The living have strength enough to cut away their yesterday.

Among African writers Taban lo Liyong is perhaps the one who best understands the challenge of “a living literature.” He perpetually experiments by synthesizing old and new methods with the hope of creating a style that is uniquely suited to his themes. In a story called “Sages and Wages,” for example there is a sentence with an unusual syntax covering sixteen lines. We may note here that this kind of experiment with syntax has been equalled and surpassed by the American writer, Donald Barthelme, whose story “Sentence” (1975: 213–20) is a one-sentence story covering eight pages. What is important, however, is that, given lo Liyong's independent approach to writing and his taste for avant-garde experimentation, it is only to be expected that he would explore the exciting artistic possibilities of the mode of the absurd.<sup>5</sup>

Taban lo Liyong's collection of short stories, *Fixions*, can be rightly described as an “African Short Fiction of the Absurd.” There is absurdity in the use of details. For instance, in a story with the intriguing title “Lexicographicide” a character details his experience of being waylaid by robbers in the following manner:

Being evicted, walking home, halfway through the journey, accosted by four masked men. Said they have no clothes, no money, no writing things, and have never experienced the joy of dispossessing a man for two whole days. If I pleased, I might oblige them with my coat *and its pockets*, my eyeglasses *and the handles (and case too, if I had any)*, my watch, *its winder, and straps*, my shoes *and the strings as well*, my socks *(the holes and smell too are good for them, my trousers buttons and buttonholes included)*, *the zip too was worth their trouble*, if I had a belt, that was also one of their specialties, my shirt, tie, tie-pin, my vest, *and my underwear*. I did not understand their language. [emphasis mine]

Hardly any reader can miss the absurdity in the act of robbers demanding, among other things, a victim's pair of socks solely because they covet the smell

and the holes in these socks. An element that further heightens the absurdity is the contrast between the intention of the thieves and the language employed by them. It is highly unusual for thieves in the process of robbing a man of all that he possesses to speak in such a refined, delicate, and polite manner as would make one think they were gentlemen performing a service for which one should be grateful. The details of this character's dream in which he is cannibalistically devoured by his creditors reveal greater absurdity:

The skin was removed (together with the ears and the nose), the lower jaws were disengaged, with tongue, teeth, and palates. Two creatures (I think man and wife) sucked my eyeballs at a go. Now the skull was eaten away, and earthworms given the privilege to gobble my brain.

This passage recalls the shocking declaration by the narrator of "Tombe 'Gworong's Own Story": "I am a Tombe 'Gworong—that is, of the tribe that eats people." Later on in the story we read about the over-demanding daughter of a chief who, like the heroine of Tutuola's tale, wants to marry only a perfect, ideal husband. She finally finds a person "who fulfilled all her prescription of what her man should be," but this is how she treats him:

She went with him to his home. At night when they were about to sleep, he took off his clothes. She looked at him and found he was a different person. He looked as ordinary as one of those men she had sent away. So she got out a knife and cut him to pieces. When she was going to throw the cut pieces away, the man part of the dead man jumped about dancing and singing a song, nodding his head. It finally jumped and disappeared right into her woman part.

The absurdity in these passages and in those similar to them is not just in the shocking act of cannibalism itself but in the manner in which it is described. The act is presented in such a calm deliberate manner as if there were nothing to it, as if it were the most mundane of things. Cannibalism is a total negation of human civilization, a negation of all that man stands for; the ease with which it is accepted in these passages is absurd if only because such an acceptance is totally unthinkable.

Often the absurd is created through the use of exaggeration. In "Lexicographicide," for instance, we are informed that a child decided to leave school at the age of seven "on the ground that being in school was a waste of time." In another story with the long title, "Ododo pa Apwoyo Gin ki Lyeche," a female character so much liked the food prepared by her host that "she ate, and ate, and ate, till she even ate one of her fingers."

Sometimes, Taban lo Liyong exploits human weaknesses to create an absurd story. For instance, man's habit of often going into extremes in his actions provides the occasion for the absurd and hilarious story titled "He and Him." Here the sophisticated urban white man with his tendency to overdepartmentalize life to a rigid and illogical extent is made the object of ridicule. In the story a farmer from the country is paying a visit to his friend in the city. The host is the typical affluent, sophisticated, departmentalizing urban white man, whose house is so full of amenities and conveniences that apart from the regular separate rooms for sleeping, dining, reading, lounging, and so forth, he also has separate cubicles for smoking, another for yawning, a third for sneezing, and a fourth for coughing, and so on. The absurdity of the situation is further heightened by the fact that the town-man rigidly enforces the use of these amenities. He commands his farmer friend:

Yawn away all you like here, as freely as you like. In the future if you feel it coming, make a dash for this place. These amenities are here to be used, and must be used, otherwise how can we justify their existence?

Thus, we can see that the departmentalizing white man (as indeed any other departmentalizing man, black or white) has not only created amenities for his convenience but has also made himself a slave to these amenities. This is what lo Liyong is attacking with his method of the absurd. This is what he is inviting the reader to laugh at.

In fact, while reading stories by Taban lo Liyong one cannot help but laugh. One laughs, for example, when the folly of prejudice is ridiculed in the story called "Stare Decisis Deo," which explores a motif common to the folklore of many African countries. This story depicts hypocrisy and racism using the form of a parable. On a Christmas day Monkey visits his friend, Python. The latter prepares a feast and invites his guest to eat. Monkey rushes at the food, being very hungry, but he is ordered to go and wash his hands. Monkey complies but his host is not satisfied with the washed hands. Monkey rewashes his hands but his host still remains dissatisfied:

"Do you call those hands washed?" was what Python said, "Have some sense. Those hands are black and dirty. Use soap and warm water."

Monkey went and did so. He returned clean hands, palm out.

"No, Monkey, where were you raised? How can you come to the table so dirty, so smelly, so black. Get that blackness off your hands."

Monkey took a butcher's knife, skinned away the black skin on his palms. The palms turned red, red with blood. Tears dropped from his eyes as blood dropped from his hands.

He was still hungry. He came to eat.

"How can you be so uncultured? So unintelligent? Don't touch my food with your blood. I am no cannibal." Those were Python's words.

Monkey started for home.

A year passed and it is the turn of Python to pay a visit to his good friend Monkey on Christmas day. Monkey prepares a delicious feast and invites his guest to table. Python starts to eat but Monkey does not like his guest's sitting posture and requests him to seat himself properly. Python readjusts his posture but Monkey still does not like the new posture. Python tries again and again but repeatedly fails to satisfy his host:

"Mistah, we don't call that 'sittin'," said Monkey. "Now, get seated like other folks. See what I mean?"

Python uncoiled himself. He pushed the greater part of his twenty feet outside the hut. His head was near the pot of food.

"I didn't tell you to lie on your belly. You must learn to sit, and to sit properly inside a house." Monkey said like that.

Python assembled all of himself inside the hut. He started to sit, on his tail. His head went up, up, up, till it pierced through the roof.

Monkey ate the food. He took a cutlass and chopped off seven feet from Python's tail. Python jerked up the bulk of his squirting length through the grass roof.

Significantly, during both of these Christmas visits, the peace-loving dove keeps singing its words of wisdom:

Accept him,  
As he is.  
Accept him  
As he is.

Everyday the Dove sings:

Accept them, as they are.  
Accept them, as they are.

As we have seen, the friends ignored the song of the dove and the result, of course, is a vicious cycle of prejudice and discrimination expressed through laughable absurdities. The poetic beauty of this story, achieved mainly through the simple device of repetition and parallel syntactical constructions, is striking and it recalls the passage quoted earlier from Osofisan's *Kolera Kolej*. Just as in Osofisan's story, the aesthetic satisfaction derived from the poetry ironically contrasts with the unpleasant subject matter, thus the exposed absurdity is further heightened.

The title story in Taban lo Liyong's collection *Fixions* also paints a picture wherein a president of an African country receives in his secret chambers an envoy of a foreign nation in the middle of the night. This president had requested aid to build a road and a bridge to his home. The envoy now comes to report that the money for the project has arrived. The president concludes arrangements for the money to be diverted into his personal bank account. He is overjoyed for, as he says, "It will earn me quite a bit of interest." The envoy then proceeds in a studied fashion to inquire about the state of the president's national security. Thereafter the envoy discloses that a coup d'état is secretly being hatched by the leader of the opposition in collaboration with the deputy president and that the plotters aim to kill the president. Before departing, the envoy succeeds in putting the president in a state of seething rage. The story ends as the president is about to unleash a blood-thirsty, insane revenge on the supposed plotters.

All along the story strongly suggests that nobody is actually plotting a coup. Instead the calculated lie is told with the aim of destabilizing the African country. Furthermore, the reader is aware that the malicious envoy succeeds only because he is not dealing with an African leader of worth but with this greedy fool of a president, who appears to be even more gullible, and more naive than a child. This president is indeed no better than an animated cartoon being manipulated according to the wishes of the foreign envoy, his master. When a person—the more so a president—becomes a mere puppet, his life loses meaning. It becomes absurd. This story is an obvious satire on African heads of state. Furthermore, the situation which makes the reign of such ignorant, unpatriotic characters possible is exposed for its absurdity.

Humor also pervades the story called, "A Traveller's Tale," which presents a comic incident as the answer to the rape-wish of a sexually starved housewife. This woman is so starved for sex, "she wanted to be raped. She looked forward to it." At long last she finds an obliging Negro bum who, with her full cooperation and participation, rapes her on the open platform of a subway station in Harlem, New York, in full view of waiting passengers. As if this is not enough, the situation is made even more absurd by the appearance of an African student who helps to complete the job. The woman is raped again on the same spot and with her full cooperation and participation. The humor and the absurdity of the story are further heightened as it ends with the woman's hypocrisy:

why did he want to rape me? me, a mother of four?, and among all these people?

Just as hilariously absurd is the story titled "Sages and Wages." The absurd epigraph, which is a parody of the American Declaration of Independence, sets the tone of the story:

We hold these as truths, self-evident:  
A reader must not yawn  
During the yarn  
Without the loss (of his head)  
Or that, of the writer's.

After this epigraph a reader who expects a logical, meaningful narration will be disappointed because, of all the stories in the collection, "Sages and Wages" is easily the most heavily loaded with absurdities. There is lexical and semantic absurdity:

but I am still seventeen years old compared to the captain who accomplished the same distance in fifty-four seconds when her age is already forty, T t tra, l ab ba cir stan cum ces phy graph hmn l you she that this in on at aton afin onat thishe.

There is absurdity of illogical reasoning. Here, for instance, is a conclusion without a premise:

that javelin I threw this morning fell just four inches beyond the point I threw yesterday, it is therefore a fair calculation that tomorrow, everything being equal, I should be in a position to throw just one-half inch beyond this point and the day after another one-half of one-half inch will bring me to the same distance as our captain.

There is also the absurdity which derives from an improbable exaggeration:

. . . three miles I can now run in exactly one minute, . . .  
. . . We must remember that they are athletes, now athletes do not "sleep":  
they are forever athletizing: awake or dreaming.

We also find absurdity emanating from human behavior. The character who at the end of the story impersonates Jesus Christ acts like a madman:

He, on his own accord, taking off his tunic and waving it about like a wand, and exposing his sides to everybody around said: "She is not dead. . . ."

The greatest absurdity of all, however, is that this ten-page story which mixes facts with fantasy, reality with dream, makes absolutely no sense. No matter how one reads it, the story yields no meaning and one is forced to conclude that perhaps the author simply wants to create an absurd meaningless story using an absurd meaningless style. This obvious deviation from the usual mode of rendering absurdity in African absurdist literature shows that lo Liyong, if he so wishes, can successfully employ the European absurdist mode of "anti-style" to make form reflect content.

At every stage in this story lo Liyong manages to amuse the reader although the humor tends to be profane. A woman who is in birth-labor is, for instance, shown bound to "a pillar so that her hands and legs met on the other side of the pillar and a large bandage or sash bound her mid-region firmly on to the pillar." Frequently, this woman cries out to her mother:

Mama, choke me! Choke me! and her mother would be at it till the eyes of both mother and daughter were red. But she was stronger than her mother, and the latter ended up by relaxing her grip before the daughter was weakened enough or had the satisfaction from the choking.

Humor in these stories serves two traditional purposes: namely, to sustain readers' interest and to heighten the effect of satire especially when absurdity reflects human culpability. Making oneself the slave of one's creation becomes all the more ridiculous after reading "He and Him," just as racism and discrimination are more distasteful once we have read "Stare Decisio Deo." Similarly, Africans who read "Fixions" will become more critical of their puppet-heads of state in the same way as the readers of "A Traveller's Tale" will have a greater abhorrence for hypocrisy. Thus, like Omotoso and Osofisan, Taban lo Liyong has remained faithful to the optimistic vision of African oral literature of the absurd by making the absurd serve a satiric end. His stories, whatever the level of their absurdity, are optimistic and are postulated on the belief that absurdity ultimately can be overcome. This belief makes the need for the writer to communicate his abhorrence of absurdity in such a way as to be understood by his readers—a determinant factor in the mode of rendering absurdity. Using the method of "anti-style" might be more intriguing, more ingenious, but communication will be more hampered; for the absurdist with a satiric objective, communication is not negotiable. Hence lo Liyong, again like Omotoso and Osofisan, has followed the example of African oral absurdist tradition by not abandoning "usual or rational devices" in rendering absurdity. He rarely resorts to "the use of non realistic forms," rather he predominantly presents the absurd in a "realistic," "unabsurdist" style.

One of the qualities which distinguish lo Liyong from Omotoso and Osofisan as absurdist writers is the former's greater sense of humor which makes his readers escape the depressing experience of unrelieved absurdity which, for the most part, attends the reading of the works of the latter two. This difference is partially explained by the fact that Omotoso and Osofisan patronize the genre of the novel which is by nature cumulative in the way it creates impression through a prolonged process of amassing details. On the other hand, the short story which lo Liyong uses, achieves its effect with epiphanic brevity. Even after this generic explanation has been given, lo Liyong still appears a more lively writer who is more at ease in his narration.

The other distinction between these writers is that whereas Omotoso and Osofisan still for the most part, conceal their art, lo Liyong in his characteristic lively manner deliberately reveals his technique. He begins "He and Him," for instance, by saying: "A story doesn't have to have many characters in it. In this one, for example, we have two people, and we feel they are enough." Generally, lo Liyong loves to be playful with his readers and even to tease and puzzle them. The story, "Tombe 'Gworong's Own Story," for instance, begins with this announcement: "To understand this story there are three things you must know." Thereafter he gives a lengthy explanation of the "three things" in four paragraphs of three and a half pages. Finally, he tells "the story," which covers only a paragraph of six and a half lines. The reader is not only amazed at the disproportion in size between "the introduction" and "the story" but is also puzzled by the discovery that what purports to be "the story" is in fact only a footnote summary of the moral of the first of the "three things" earlier advanced to aid the reader in understanding "the story." Thus it seems the writer has

written a story that is not a story.

On the one hand, this might be lo Liyong, the absurdist, commenting on the failure of art, on the pretension of art which claims to create illusion of reality. Taban lo Liyong might be saying that here we have the example of a story that has failed in its most basic task of telling a story. If art cannot fulfill its purpose, then it becomes redundant, its existence is absurd. On the other hand, it could well be that the exact contrary is the case, that lo Liyong is emphasizing the importance of art by revealing its inner complexities. It would appear that he has played a simple trick on his reader because each of the "three things" given to aid the reader's comprehension of "the story" is in itself a full story. In effect, we have not one story, but three stories. The reader, it would seem, is thus being tutored in the art of reading the short story, a genre which prides itself in its epigrammatic, allusive terseness. To fully understand a good story, a reader has to pay attention to all of its details; unless the reader does this, he may not understand "the story" as always happens at the first reading of "Tombe 'Goworong's Own Story." I am encouraged in this interpretation by one of the possible semantic readings of the already quoted epigraph to "Sages and Wages," that is, if we emphasize the phrases in italics:

We hold these as truths, self-evident:

*A reader must not yawn*

*During the yarn*

*Without the loss (of his head)*

*Or that, of the Writer's*

If a work is not read carefully both the reader and the writer have sustained losses, namely, the reader has failed to learn and/or be entertained and the writer has failed to teach and/or entertain.

There is no doubt that lo Liyong has succeeded in his absurdist experimentations. His stories have a unique freshness emanating from his dexterity in deploying elements of oral and written literature of Africa and Europe to enhance the quality of his avant-garde writing. His stories are exciting and aesthetically pleasing to read. Finally, he has succeeded in using the modernist art of the absurd to probe contemporary African reality without deviating from the principles of African traditional aesthetics which demand of art purposefulness and committedness. His stories are comprehensible and purposeful. They present absurdity not as the summation of life but as a comment on the negative aspects of life, and their objective is both satiric and corrective.

## NOTES

1. Chinweizu, Jemie, and Madubuike had earlier (1974, 1975, 1978, 1979) jointly published their criticisms of the modernist tendencies of the Ibadan-Nsukka School of Nigerian Poetry (now developed elaborately in chapter 3 of *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature* [1980]) in *Okike* 6:11-27, 7:65-81, 13:37-49, and 14:43-51.
2. Nkosi's understanding of modernism is a little broader than mine. He has treated as modernist, works I would have hesitated to classify as such. His position in this quotation, however, coincides with the views I expressed earlier in Balogun, 1982.
3. Contemporary African writers of the absurd mentioned in this study have all had close acquaintance with world literatures. Taban lo Liyong, for instance, participated in the Iowa Writers' Workshop; Femi Osofisan has a Ph.D. in French literature; and Kole Omotoso holds a Ph.D. in Arabic literature from Edinburgh.

4. For the influence of oral literary tradition on Taban lo Liyong, see Balogun, forthcoming.
5. The fact that *Fixions* (1978, first published 1969) was written before Idi Amin Dada gained worldwide notoriety for the grotesque horror of his reign (1971–79) is further evidence that the absurdist vision has been part of African reality all along, although significantly intensified by post-Independence disillusionment caused by politicians like Amin.

## REFERENCES

- Achebe, Chinua. 1980. "Work and Play in Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*." *Okike* 14 (September): 25–33.
- Bucassa, Basil. 1977. Statement from Review as quoted in Hans Zell and Helene Silver (eds.) *A Reader's Guide to African Literature*. London: Heinemann.
- Balogun, F. Odu. 1982. "Modernism and African Literature." *Ife Studies in African Literature and the Arts (ISALA)* 1:57–70.
- . Forthcoming. "Taban lo Liyong: A Return to Origins," in Samuel Omo Asein and Albert Olu Ashaolu (eds.) *Modern Essays on African Literature: The Novel*. Ibadan: Ibadan University Press.
- Barthelme, Donald. 1975. "Sentence," pp. 213–20 in Joe David Bellamy (ed.) *Superfiction or the American Story Transformed*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Chinweizu. 1973. "Prodigals, Come Home!" *Okike* 4 (December): 1–12.
- . 1978. "Beyond European Realism." *Okike* 14 (September): 1–3.
- Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie and Ihechukwu Madubuike. 1980. *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature*. Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishers.
- . 1974, 1975, 1978, 1979. Four articles. *Okike* 6: 11–27, 7: 65–81, 13: 37–49, 14: 43–51.
- Coates, John. 1980. "The Inward Journey of the Palm-Wine Drinkard." *African Literature Today* 11: 122–29.
- Dash, Cheryl M. L. 1977. "Introduction to the Prose Fiction of Kole Omotoso." *World Literature Written in English* Volume 16, No. 1 (April): 39–53.
- Eliot, T. S. 1915. "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," pp. 1174–78 in Sculley Bradley, Richard Croom Beatty, E. Hudson Long, and George Perkins (eds.) (1974) *The American Tradition in Literature*, fourth edition, volume 2. New York: Grosset & Dunlop.
- Esslin, Martin. 1969. *The Theatre of the Absurd*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Harris, Charles B. 1971. *Contemporary American Novelists of the Absurd*. New Haven, Conn.: College and University Press.
- Hinchliffe, Arnold P. 1969. *The Absurd*. London: Mathuen & Co. Ltd.
- Holman, Hugh C. 1980. "The Theatre of the Absurd." *A Handbook to Literature*. New York: The Odyssey Press.
- Howe, Irving. 1967. "A Manifesto of Italian Futurism," pp. 165–72 in Irving Howe (ed.) *The Idea of the Modern in Literature and the Arts*. New York: Horizon Press.
- Lester, Julius. 1976. "The Outsider in European and Afro-American Literature." *Okike* 10 (May): 83–94.
- lo Liyong, Taban. 1978. *Fixions*. London: Heinemann.
- Nkosi, Lewis. 1981. *Tasks and Masks*. Harlow, Essex: Longman.
- Oladitan, Olalere. 1979. "The Nigerian Crisis in the Nigerian Novel," pp. 10–20 in Kolawole Ogungbesan (ed.) *New West African Literature*. London: Heinemann.
- Omotoso, Kole. 1972. *the combat*. London: Heinemann.
- . 1981. Interview by Lee Nicholas, pp. 218–29 in Lee Nicholas (ed.) *conversations with african writers*. Washington, D.C.: Voice of America.
- Osofisan, Femi. 1975. *Kolera Kolej*. Ibadan: New Horn Press.
- Tutuola, Amos. 1953. *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*. New York: Grove Press.
- Zamyatin, Yevgeny. 1970. "On Literature, Revolution, Entropy, and Other Matters (1923)," pp. 107–12 in Mirra Ginsburg (ed. and transl.) *A Soviet Heretic*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Zell, Hans M. and Silver, Helene. 1977. "Taban lo Liyong," *A Reader's Guide to African Literature*. London: Heinemann.