

APPENDIX C: (continued)

C. COLLOQUIUM "Black Civilization and Education"

1. Black Civilization and Pedagogy Traditional and Modern
2. Black Civilization and Development of an Indigenous National Language
3. Black Civilization and Religion
4. Black Civilization and Political History
5. Black Civilization and Mass Media
6. Black Civilization and Industrialization
7. Black Civilization and Modern Government

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Morgan Kulla graduated from UCLA in June 1976 with an MA in Political Science. She is now in charge of the School Program for the Africa - Oceania - Americas Gallery of the M.H. de Young Memorial Museum in San Francisco.

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BOOK REVIEW

THE ANONYMITY OF SACRIFICE by I.N.C. Aniebo

Heinemann. London, 1974. pp. 117.

I.N.C. Aniebo's *The Anonymity of Sacrifice* will always have a special place in African literature because it is the first novel to focus on what the Nigerian civil war must have meant to those who were involved in it.

The book covers only three days of the war. Its drama is centered on two major characters: Captain Benjamin Onwura and Sergeant Cyril Agumo, both career soldiers fighting on the Biafran side of the war. However, neither man is aware of the other's existence (except on the impersonal and official level), attitudes, temperament, class or upbringing. So when they finally confront each other towards the end of the novel, they clash in a violent encounter which results in their destruction.

commander's orders to retreat. He does this in spite of his own insistence on discipline and despite his knowledge that, in times of war, the punishment for disobedience is often death. Captain Benjy, on the other hand, is determined to courtmartial Sergeant Agumo and sentence him to death for his disobedience to show that he is still in control of his battalion, even though his own instincts warn him that he is dealing with a dangerous man who must be approached very cautiously.

In the course of analyzing both characters one soon discovers that they are foils of each other. They are two facets of one and the same man. Captain Benjy would have very much liked to have the manliness of Sergeant Agumo. At the beginning of the novel, the author makes reference to his "effeminately delicate lines of the face." It is this other side of Benjy that makes the reader wonder if, indeed, he belongs to the army. He has a chronic fear of the enemy and of death which does not become a man of war. Yet, with all his courage, as demonstrated by the fearlessness with which he fights the enemy, one wishes that Sergeant Agumo had had some of the formal education, the discipline, the finesse and the thought before action that Captain Benjy possesses. Each of these characters see in the other the qualities they hate in themselves. In destroying each other, therefore, they are not so much destroying the other man as they are destroying that part of themselves that is least desired.

I have spent a good part of this review on Captain Benjy and Sergeant Agumo because, unlike so many other African novels, *The Anonymity of Sacrifice* is a novel of character. One searches it in vain, for example, for a picture of either traditional or modern African life that one finds in the novels of say, Chinua Achebe, Mongo Beti or James Ngugi. The only exception appears on page 69 where, in connection with Cyril Agumo and Maria's courtship, one gets a glimpse into some of the modern Nigerian marriage customs.

The most conspicuous aspect of Aniebo's style is the constant use of the flashback. There are at least a dozen passages dealing with the past lives of the main two characters which are woven into the fabric of the narrative by this method. In following the present actions of Captain Benjy and Sergeant Agumo, we are constantly jostled into their past for explanations of personality and motivation. The effect is that reading the story, the reader gets the same experience as one does in watching a movie. Indeed this book can easily be adapted for production in this medium or on the stage. While the main narrative is written in the simple past tense, these scenes from the past are always announced by the use of the past-perfect (or the pluperfect) tense.

In contrast to Sergeant Agumo is his commander, Captain Benjamin Onwura, known as Benjy. He is an elitist, trained in a cadet school in Britain. This experience abroad left him with a bitter memory and a resentment towards the "snobbery and inhospitality of fellow British cadets and the disdain and disregard of some of the officer instructors."

In his twenties, he wears heavily the pain that he has suffered at the hands of the enemy who had

butchered his parents at Kaduna; thrown him into prison--where they had whipped him daily, fed him stale grain meal, rotten meat and, once in a while, urine and feces--and when they were fed up, had thrown him out of the North, and confiscated all his property. Now they had chased him into his own home, where he had gone to lick his wounds, and were bent on killing him, looting the remaining possessions, destroying his land, and raping his women! (pp. 15-16)

Another element which contributes to Benjy's downfall is envy. At the beginning of the novel we are told how he had almost despaired of becoming a battalion commander. All the time he was watching officers whom he considered inferior get promoted before him. Towards the end we see envy eat his heart away as he receives the news that one of his old rivals has been promoted before him to the rank of major:

Benjy felt a twinge in his heart and his eyes momentarily misted over. He read the signal over and over even though he had understood it at the first reading. He soon realized that he was merely going over the signal to give himself time to master the pain. But the pain would not go so easily. The course mate who had been promoted was and had always been a rival, a rival in practically everything: clothes, girls, household possessions, cars. It was because of this officer that Benjy had waited some time before he bought a car. He wanted to see what the officer would buy so that he could go one better. And now... (p. 81)

Like Sergeant Agumo, Benjy is also very ambitious and, after setting a goal, is very ruthless in its pursuit.

It is this envy on the part of Captain Benjy and the ambition and inflexibility which both men share that trigger off the last chain of events which lead to their mutual destruction. During one of the encounters with the enemy, Sergeant Agumo is so thrilled and excited at the success with which his men are holding back the enemy's attack, that he disobeys his battalion

Aniebo's major shortcomings seem to be with the use of language. I found it very irritating, for example, to read technical war terms, abbreviations, and codes which I did not understand. The same was true of all those Ibo words sometimes covering whole passages and of the Pidgin English. I think that the author should have either supplied a glossary or used these non-English terms in such a way that they would be perfectly understandable from the context.

The other problem is the author's tendency to use clichés and stock phrases. As Captain Benjy drives to Oron, he describes the night as "the calm before the storm" and finds that "even the radio is in tune with the spirit of this night." As he looks at the maps in his new office as Captain, a cock flaps its wings and "trumpeted the approach of dawn." He also describes his first day at Franca's as having been "heavenly."

Fortunately, these misdemeanors are few and spread far apart. They do not, therefore, greatly damage the pleasure of reading this generally well written, suspense filled story in which Aniebo is at his best when he is being himself and original. I will quote one example that I found particularly fresh and very impressive. It is the passage in which the author summarizes Captain Benjy's split personality. Complaining about his misfortunes, Benjy holds up a glass of "kaikai"--a locally processed drink, as colorless as vodka and infinitely more potent--and wonders why life is not as clear as the drink before him.

"But this is an end product" his mind told him. "It had to be distilled. It cannot be got in this form in its natural state." "So what?" his other self asked. "So is life. You have to distil it before it can become clear." "But how can one distil life?" his other self asked again. "That's what you have to find out." "Who has the time?" "If you can't make the time," his mind sneered, "be prepared to bear, without self-pity, the muddiness of life." (p. 85)

- BEDE M. SSENSALO

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Ssensalo is a lecturer in African and Afro-American Literature at California State University, Chico.