

Winter 1990

Voices from Twentieth-Century Africa: Griots and Towncriers by Chinweizu

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Recommended Citation

Thompson, Pamela Jo, "Voices from Twentieth-Century Africa: Griots and Towncriers by Chinweizu" (1990). *Foreign Languages and Literature Faculty Publications*. 17.

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Record: 1

World literature in review: General area. By: Smith, Pamela Olubunmi. World Literature Today. Winter90, Vol. 64 Issue 1, p179. 4/9p. Abstract: Reviews the book 'Voices from Twentieth-Century Africa: Griots and Towncriers,' edited by Chinweizu. Reading Level (Lexile): 1240. (AN: 9610220490)

Database: MasterFILE Complete

WORLD LITERATURE IN REVIEW: GENERAL AREA

Voices from Twentieth-Century Africa: Griots and Town-criers. Chinweizu, ed. London. Faber & Faber. 1988, xi + 424- pages. 6:95/812.95.

Voices from Twentieth-Century Africa, a comprehensive, one-volume introduction to African literature, is a spinoff of Chinweizu's (et alia) previous work, *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature* (1983; see WLT 58:2, p. 313), and a forerunner to the "anthology of 5000 years of Pan-african Literature" promised therein. Based on a pan-African cultural standpoint, a la Okot p'Bitek's cultural revolution, *Voices* serves as another vehicle for Chinweizu's crusade to: 1) correct the conventional view of African literature as merely a third-rate appendage to or a fledgling offspring of European literature; 2) make African literature less tortuous and more accessible to a wider African readership by freeing it from its "Euromodernist dungeon"; and 3) dismantle the wall between African "obscurantist," academic, "prestigious" (modern) literature and African popular culture.

Because African literature is Euromodernist-centered and of the academy, it is marginalized with a center or nora that is questionable, Chinweizu argues. *Voices* is therefore a bid to foster an Afrocentric, nonacademic literature and to reintegrate the marginalized folk literature with an already-marginalized "academic" literature. The result of this blend will be a "panorama of African life and experiences," African classics, as authenticated through the African voices of "mastersingers, poets, story tellers, and orators"--the griots and town criers. All this, Chinweizu envisions, will constitute the essential Afrocentric materials for teaching African humanities.

Although *Voices* earns merit for its scope and aim (there are no other comparable anthologies), it is grossly limited because it lacks a framework for establishing whether or not the marginalized popular and/or academic African literatures have literary merit. The volume's introduction is at best a further defense of "bolekajaim," which has been unequivocally articulated in *Toward a Decolonization of African Literature*. With the publication of *Voices*, the issues raised in *Decolonization* become even more pressing: are the measures of what is to be considered good African literature merely those of simplicity, readability, folk-orientedness, and easy comprehension by this new audience which Cbinweizu feels should not be obliged "to gnaw through unreadable but prestigious stuff called African literature"?

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