

Who Counts ? De-ciphering the Canon

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In 1985 I introduced a simple arithmetical scheme for measuring the literary stature of writers from anglophone Africa both comparatively and diachronically. Since this elegant blunt instrument is not yet widely known, and since I now intend to extend its scope upto the end of 1991, it may be well for me to rehearse once again the ground rules governing the reduction of fine literary distinctions to the less subtle certainties of round numbers.

My objective was to provide verifiable answers to several looming but unresolved questions : Who are the major authors in anglophone Africa today ? How can the reputation of one be measured against the reputation of another in an objective manner so that the relative importance of each can be ascertained quickly, accurately and dispassionately, without the least trace of subjective bias ? How, in other words, can we determine scientifically who stands where in the pecking order established by the preferences and prejudices of public opinion ? How can we quantify qualitative discriminations ?

As one approach to these problems, I devised a Famous Authors' Reputation Test that records the frequency with which an author and his works are discussed in detail in print by literary scholars and critics. A score is thus arrived at that can be compared to the scores achieved from the same date base by other authors. Those who score highest can be said to have gained wider recognition than those who register a lower number of substantive citations. The Famous Authors' Reputation Test ensures that an author's fame will be assessed not intuitively or ecstasically but purely mathematically. Plain numbers will determine the final ranking.

The data base from which statistical information has been taken in this quest for objective analysis is the most comprehensive one I could lay my hands on - namely, my own bibliography *Black African Literature in English : A Guide to Information Sources* (Detroit : Gale, 1979), and its

two five-year supplements, *Black African Literature in English, 1977-1981* (New York : Africana, 1986) and *Black African Literature in English, 1982- 1986* (Oxford : Zell, 1989), to which I will now add the data from the latest five-year compilation *Black African Literature in English, 1987-1991* (London : Zell, 1995) - volumes which together attempt to list all the important critical books and articles (in whatever language) published on anglophone Black African literature from 1936 to 1991. The first volume (hereafter cited as BALE I), covering the earliest forty years of academic productivity, contains 3305 entries; the second (BALE II), covering five additional years, contains 2831 entries; the third (BALE III), covering another five years, contains 5689 entries; and the most recent five-year supplement (BALE IV) contains an impressive 8772 entries - a proportional increase testifying to the tremendous growth of critical interest in this literature in recent times. The expanded data base now consists of 20,734 books and articles produced over a 55-year period. This is not a small or inconsequential corpus of criticism.

But while these four volumes seek to be as comprehensive as possible, they remain to a degree selective: certain materials of marginal interest are deliberately omitted. For instance, brief reviews of books and of stage performances, political biographies of statesmen, and newspaper reports on some of the nonliterary activities of famous authors are excluded, but not review articles, biographical materials and newspaper items possessing some literary significance. No creative works - novels, stories, plays poems, anthologies - are recorded unless prefaced by a critical introduction. The intention throughout is to provide thorough coverage of major scholarly books and periodicals as well as selective coverage of other relevant sources of informed commentary.

In each volume the bibliographical corpus is divided into two parts, the first organized by genre or topic, the second by individual author. Annotations are appended to some entries, mostly to identify the authors with whom the article or book is primarily concerned. The general rule of thumb is to note all authors who receive at least a page or two of commentary. If many authors are mentioned but none is discussed at length, the annotation indicates that the work is a survey. "Et al."(and others) is used whenever a work briefly treats additional authors.

A concerted effort has been made to list each item in the cumulative bibliography only once and to provide numbered cross-references to it in all other sections to which the item belongs. For example, an article on Nigerian dram discussing J.P. Clark, Ola Rotimi and Wole Soyinka in some detail (i.e., devoting at least a page to examination of each writer) but treating other Nigerian dramatists in a cursory fashion (i.e., discussing them in less than a page each) would appear in the drama section in Part One with an annotation reading "Clark, Rotimi, Soyinka, et al." The number of that entry would then be included among the cross-references following the individual sections in Part Two listing books and articles devoted exclusively to Clark, Rotimi and Soyinka respectively. On the other hand, a specialized article on only one author - e.g., "Pidgin English in Soyinka's Plays" - would be recorded under Soyinka in Part Two with numbered cross-references appearing in the topical sections on "Drama" and "Language and Style" in Part one. So each author treated in the bibliography has special niche in Part Two where all the books and articles dealing with him or her alone are listed, after which numbered cross-references provide leads to all other items in the bibliography that offer substantive commentary on his or her work. A good many of these cross-references may yield no more than a few pages of sustained criticism, but certain of them - book chapters, lengthy monographs or doctoral dissertations focussing on only two or three writers, for instance - may provide much more exhaustive treatment of specific text than do some of the individual articles.

Nonetheless, in devising a scoring system of my Famous Authors' Reputation Test, I have decided to award three points for every discrete entry on an individual author and one point for every cross-reference. This seems to reflect the balance between the two categories more accurately than does a straight one for one system that would tend to inflate the scores of authors who are frequently cited but seldom examined with any care. An author who is known but never studied intensively may be a significant minor reference point in African literature, but it is unlikely that he commands the kind of respect that would earn him a measure of distinction. Literary critics and scholars tend to gravitate towards those writers whose works interest them the most. They do not waste too much time on second-rate talents.

What follows is a list of the fifteen writers who achieved a score of at least 500 on the Famous Authors' Reputation Test and then a list of

twenty-five others who achieved a score of at least 160. According to statistics gleaned from more than half a century of critical commentary, these forty names are those most consistently chosen as worthy of serious attention, the figures on the left constituting what could be called a High Canon and the figures on the right a Low Canon.

CHART ONE

But since such a list may be biased toward older writers who have been on the scene a long time, it may be interesting to look at the figures derived from the latest volume alone in order to see who among the younger writers has emerged as important in the eyes of scholars and critics in more recent years. Chart Two thus gives the scores for twenty writers who gained more than 150 points between 1987 and 1991 and then lists twenty-eight others who earned at least 70 points during the same period. Asterisks have been placed beside those names making the most striking short term gains. These are evidently the most upwardly mobile celebrities at the moment, but it remains to be seen whether they will have the kind of staying power that some of their numerically superior colleagues have already manifested.

CHART TWO

Since some reputations have waxed or waned overtime, I am presenting in Chart Three the breakdown of figures for the top scorers in BALE I, BALE II, and BALE III separately and then giving grand totals for each of the four categories on the score board. To this I am adding the figures for BALE IV separately and then cumulatively under New Grand Totals, and supplementing the original High Canon of fifteen names with those of nine up-and-coming neo-canonical or near-canonical figures of impressive statistical weight. As can be seen from the new numbers ranges in the final column at the bottom right, Head, Emecheta and Rotimi have already overtaken Awoonor as all time greats, but only Head has managed to break into the ranks of the High Canonicals (ie., those with over 500 points).

CHART THREE

The scoring method employed in the Famous Authors' Reputation Test works as follows : Entries (E) and Cross - References (CR) have been added together to produce a Raw Total (RT). Entries have been added together to produce a Raw Total (RT). Entries have been multiplied three times and then added to Cross References to produce a Weighted Total (WT),

which I regard as more reliable indicator or reputation than a simple Raw Total. The last column at the bottom right - the Grand Weighted Total (GWT) of BALEs I, II, III and IV - reveals where each author stood in relations to others in the pantheon of anglophone African literature by the end of 1991.

Next there is a diagram (Chart Four) that may help us to see the diachronic patterns more clearly. The connected dots show the position held by each author in the Weighted Total (WT) rankings in each volume as well as the position that author holds today in the Grand Weighted Total (GWT) rankings derived from the cumulated data in all four volumes. To give the chart more depth, and to show the great gains that have been made at various intervals by surging upstarts who had no visibility on the chart back in 1976, I have displayed places 16, 17 and 18 in the Grand Weighted Total, places occupied in BALE I by Onuora Nzekwu, T.M. Aluko and Taban lo Liyong respectively - authors who have suffered a decline in relative standing in the past fifteen years.

CHART FOUR

An author's rise or fall in reputation can be gauged by the trajectory produced by the linkings of his or here first four dots, with the fifth dot representing where in the grander scheme of things that author stands today in relation to all others past and present. It is clear, for example, that Achebe and Soyinka have always been at the very top; that Ngugi and Armah have made impressive gains in the past decade to solidify their hold on places 3 and 4; that Clark and Ekwensi have wobbled a bit but have made game comebacks in BALEs III and IV respectively, partly on the strength of substantial cross-reference numbers; that La Guma and Mphahlele have made modest gains; that Tutuola, Okigbo, Abrahams and Okara on the other hand have experienced moderate declines; that women writers - notably Head, Emecheta and Aidoo - have made striking advances of late; that Saro-Wiwa, the most meteoric new kid on the block, has suddenly made his way up from being an almost complete nonentity in BALEs I, II and III to occupying position number 5 in BALE IV and in position 20 on the all time list; that Okot and Brutus' and have experienced substantial instability, leaving them in a potentially precarious equilibrium; and that Awoonor, though suffering a precipitous recent drop, has retained sufficient residual numerical strength to remain, at least for now, in the top twenty on the new Grand Weighted Totals (GWT).

A second diagram (Chart Five), which ignores the five year fluctuations between 1976 and 1991 and only charts individual trajectories from beginning to end of this entire period, may enable us to isolate dominant trends in these diachronic patterns more readily. On this simplified chart it is plain to see whose reputation has risen, whose has fallen, and whose has held steady.

CHART FIVE

However, if we look more closely at Chart Four, taking into account the organization of entries in the data base, it is not difficult to explain some of the seismic ups and downs we see represented there. Entries under "Individual Authors" in Part Two of each volume of *Black African Literature in English* are divided into four categories: (1) Bibliography, (2) Biography and Autobiography, (3) Interviews, and (4) Criticism. If an author is newsworthy - that is, if he or she attracts a great deal of attention in the press or in periodicals as a result of notorious deeds (e.g., the winning of a prize, the losing of a freedom, the taking of a stand, the giving of a tribute, the initiation of a controversy, the ending of a life), there are likely to be numerous entries in the Biography and Autobiography subsection, each of which will garner the author three points in the Weighted Total as well as in the Grand Weighted Total, the same number of points that are awarded for a critical book or essay on the author's work. Thus, Wole Soyinka's Nobel Prize, coming at the end of 1986, was sufficient to catapult him well ahead of Chinua Achebe, with whom he had been running almost neck and neck in BALEs I and II. Indeed, had it been possible to list every newspaper article published on Soyinka's winning of this prize, the gap between Soyinka and Achebe, not mention all the rest of the anglophone African writing community, would have been much wider. Similarly, Ngugi's detention in 1978 and subsequent political activities both in Kenya and abroad; the deaths of Okot p'Bitek, Alex La Guma and Bessie Head; the return of Es'kia Mphahlele to South Africa in 1978; and the deportation trial of Dennis Brutus in 1982-83 added considerably to their individual WT scores.

In BALE IV the high scores for some of the newcomers can be traced to both literary and extra-literary factors. Festus Iyayi won a Commonwealth Writers' Prize in 1988, but he also made headlines when his political activities got him sacked from the University of Benin in 1987 and arrested and detained in 1988. Niyi Osundare was the recipient of four major literary

honors : an Association of Nigerian Authors Prize in 1990, the Noma Award in 1991, and the Commonwealth Poetry Prize twice - in 1986 and 1991; these successes led to many newspaper interviews and journalistic profiles of the author as well as to increased critical attention. And Ken Saro-Wiwa, who rose faster from obscurity than any other writer in anglophone Africa, was given extensive media coverage when his serialized comedy, *Basi and Company*, became one of the most popular television shows in Nigeria; in fact, Saro-Wiwa earned the great majority of his points from reportage and interviews in the Nigerian press. There were hardly any articles published on him outside Nigeria. He won his reputation almost entirely at home, not abroad.

Such biographically inflated figures do not necessarily detract from the statistical reliability of the Famous Authors' Reputation Test. Notoriety, after all, is part of what makes an author famous. But remarkable variations in an author's trajectory - especially the sudden ups we noted earlier - need to be studied carefully if we are to understand whether they are the consequence of increased public attention being given to the author's deeds or to his works. Some authors may be more notorious than they are respected. A relatively high GWT score in 1991 is not necessarily an irrevocable passport guaranteeing permanent entry into an anglophone African writers' Hall of Fame. Time marches on, and if a writer's works do not sufficiently interest or engage future generations of readers after that writer is gone, he or she will eventually lose relative standing, a fate that will be reflected in a downward trajectory on later charts.

A word also needs to be said about gross numbers. More significant than a writer's relative rank in the Famous Authors' Reputation Test is the total number of points he or she has accrued. Perhaps it would help to put this in visual terms, using the GWT figures for all four volumes as the basis of the following graph :

CHART SIX

The dramatic disparities between the front-running troika (Soyinka, Acheba, Ngugi) and the rest of the pack are now quite apparent. Indeed, it is unlikely that anyone will catch up to them in the near future, for at each five-year interval so far they have put greater distance between themselves and their followers. In any construction of a canon of anglophone African

writing, works by these three writers would have to rank high. Their reputations are very great and growing.

This is not to say that there is no hope for younger writers whose names do not yet appear on any of the charts. On the contrary several of them have made striking gains in the past ten years, and one may expect a handful of them to keep rising in the ranks. But the only way that they and others can continue to ascend or to hold their own in future tabulations is by regularly being the subject of critical scrutiny - that is, by frequently being written about. The Famous Authors' Reputation Test shows no mercy on writers whose works or lives do not attract commentary. The unexamined literary career is not worth much in a noisy marketplace of ideas. To be famous, to be reputable, to be deemed worthy of serious and sustained consideration, an author needs as much criticism as possible, year after year after year. Only those who pass this test of time - the test of persistent published interest in their art - will stand a chance of earning literary immortality.

And the progress of such pilgrims towards final canonization can be assessed as easily and accurately with statistics gleaned from a citation index as with any other divining instrument. Simple numbers may not tell us the whole truth and nothing but the truth but they can reveal something of the truth in an objective and unbiased fashion. Indeed, quantification may be the best possible method for dispassionately measuring and comparing literary reputations. To arrive at an honest, trustworthy, scientifically constructed canon, all we need to do is count and de-cipher the relevant numbers.

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CHART ONE

NEW GRAND WEIGHTED TOTALS (1936-1991)

1. Soyinka	5329	16. Emecheta	467
2. Achebe	4290	17. Rotimi	443
3. Ngugi	2710	18. Awoonor	415
4. Armah	1080	19. Aidoo	366
5. Clark	844	20. Saro-Wiwa	365
6. Ekwensi	784	21. Osofisan	361
7. Tutuola	778	22. Farah	341
8. Head	617	23. Amadi	286
9. Mphahlele	607	24. Omotoso	277
10. Okigbo	586	25. Nwapa	275
11. La Guma	577	26. Osundare	238
12. Okot	575	27. Liyong	237
13. Brutus	571	28. Equiano	} 235
14. Abrahams	563	Marechera	
15. Okara	530	30. Rive	223
		31. Aluko	211
		32. Chinweizu	} 208
		Iyayi	
		Serote	
		35. Plaatje	199
		36. Mazrui	187
		37. Nkosi	182
		38. Ike	173
		39. Mtshali	} 167
		Okpewho	

CHART TWO

GRAND WEIGHTED TOTALS (1936-1991)

1.	Soyinka	2358		24.	Aidoo	137
2.	Achebe	1827		25.	Nwapa	} 124
3.	Ngugi	1053			Rive	
4.	Armah	437		27.	Okigbo	123
5.	Saro-Wiwa*	337		28.	Okot	122
6.	Head	325		29.	Serote	115
7.	Ekwensi	256		30.	Okpewho	110
8.	Clark	236		31.	Amadi	105
9.	Emecheta	233		32.	Mapanje	103
10.	Osofisan*	223		33.	Ike	102
11.	La Guma	222		34.	Okri	100
12.	Osundare *	207		35.	Fonlon	98
13.	Iyayi*	190		36.	Equiano	88
14.	Tutuola	188		37.	Tlali	87
15.	Farah*	185		38.	Mazrui	82
16.	Mphahlele	179		40.	Nkosi	} 81
17.	Rotimi	177			Nwoga	
18.	Brutus	175			Ndebele	
19.	Okara	173		43.	Ngema	80
20.	Marechera*	161		44.	Sepamla	} 79
21.	Chinweize*	149			Sofola	
22.	Abrahams	} 144			Sowande	
	Omotoso			47.	Plaatje	72
				48.	Awoonor	70

CHART THREE

Authors	BALE I (1986-76)				BALE II (1977-81)				BALE III (1982-86)				GRAND TOTALS			
	E	CR	RT	WT	E	CR	RT	WT	E	CR	RT	WT	E	CR	RT	WT
Abrahams	40	69	109	189	21	29	50	92	31	45	76	138	92	143	235	419
Achebe	185	309	494	864	190	151	341	721	216	230	446	878	591	690	1281	2463
Armah	25	77	102	152	27	68	95	149	80	102	182	342	132	247	379	643
Awoonor	16	64	80	112	21	31	52	94	28	55	83	139	65	150	215	345
Brutus	26	35	61	113	16	25	41	73	52	54	106	210	94	114	208	396
Clark	30	154	184	244	17	52	69	103	49	114	163	261	96	320	416	608
Ekwensi	36	116	152	224	23	40	63	109	42	69	111	195	101	225	326	528
La Guma	14	49	63	91	12	30	42	66	50	48	98	198	76	127	203	355
Mphahlele	26	73	99	151	22	48	70	114	34	61	95	163	82	182	264	428
Ngugi	43	98	141	227	129	108	237	495	242	209	451	935	414	415	829	1657
Okara	16	111	127	159	7	43	50	64	21	71	92	134	44	225	269	357
Okigbo	39	91	130	208	16	41	57	89	39	49	88	166	94	181	275	463
Okot	30	42	72	132	20	45	65	105	55	51	106	216	105	138	243	453
Soyinka	175	280	455	805	144	168	312	600	418	312	730	1566	737	760	1497	2971
Tutuola	55	123	178	288	28	47	75	131	42	45	87	171	125	215	340	590

BALE IV (1987-91)

Authors	E	CR	RT	WT
Abrahams	30	54	84	144
Achebe	500	327	827	1827
Armah	109	110	219	437
Awoonor	8	48	54	70
Brutus	47	34	81	175
Clark	55	71	126	236
Ekwensi	64	64	128	256
La Guma	59	45	104	222
Mphahlele	40	59	99	179
Ngugi	268	249	517	1053
Okara	34	71	105	173
Okigbo	24	51	75	123
Okot	28	38	66	122
Soyinka	676	330	1006	2358
Tutuola	40	68	108	188

NEW GRAND TOTALS

E	CR	RT	WT
122	197	319	583
1091	1017	2108	4290
241	357	598	1080
73	196	269	415
141	148	289	571
151	391	542	844
165	289	454	784
135	172	307	577
122	241	363	607
682	664	1346	2710
78	296	374	530
118	232	350	586
133	176	309	575
1413	1090	2503	5329
165	283	448	778

Newcomers

Emecheta	50	83	133	233	109	140	249	467
Farah	53	26	79	185	92	65	157	341
Head	88	61	149	325	166	119	285	617
Iyayi	58	22	78	190	59	31	90	208
Marechera	48	17	65	161	66	37	103	235
Osofisan	56	55	111	223	86	103	189	361
Osundare	63	18	81	207	72	22	94	238
Rotimi	44	45	89	177	100	143	243	443
Saro-Wiwa	104	25	129	337	112	29	141	365

CHART FOUR

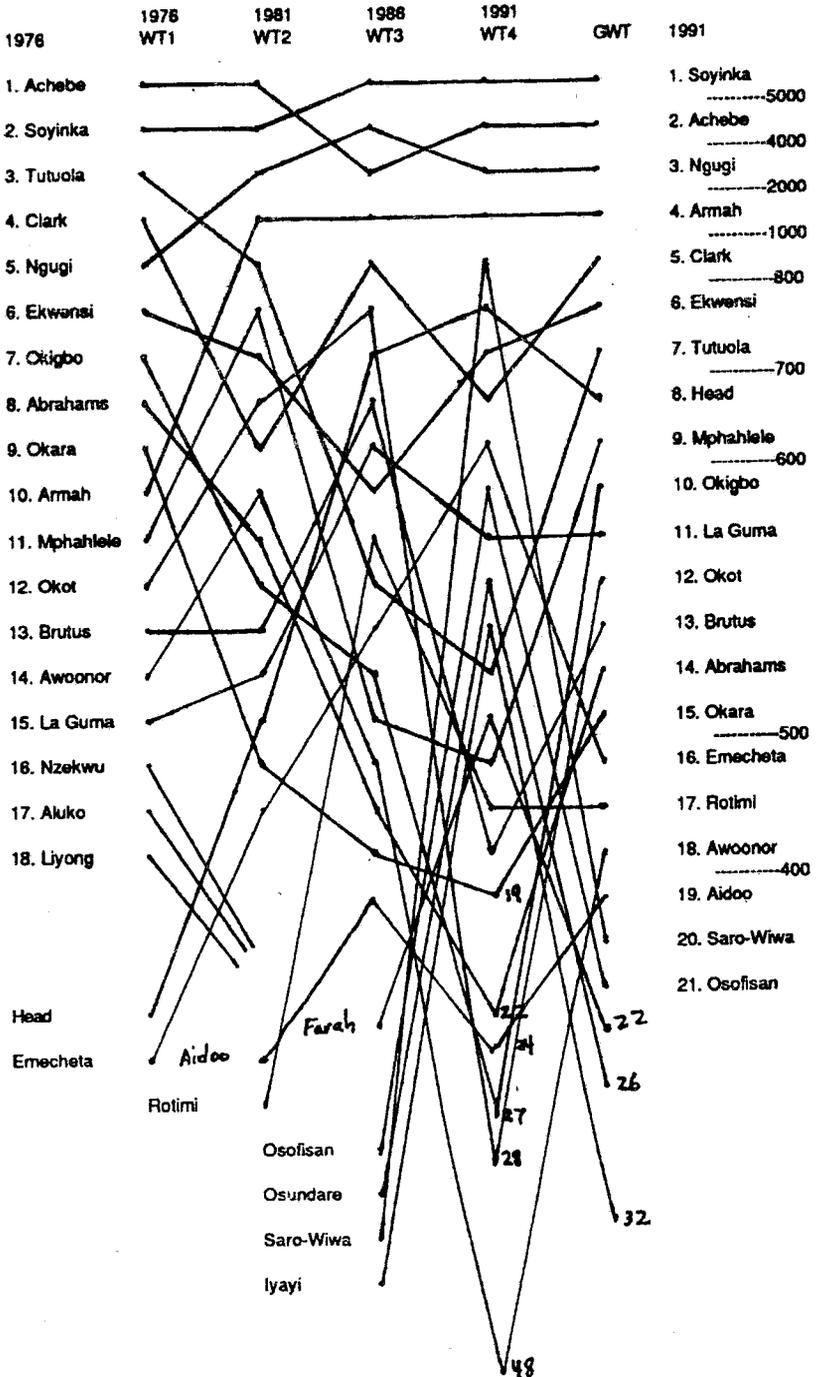


CHART FIVE

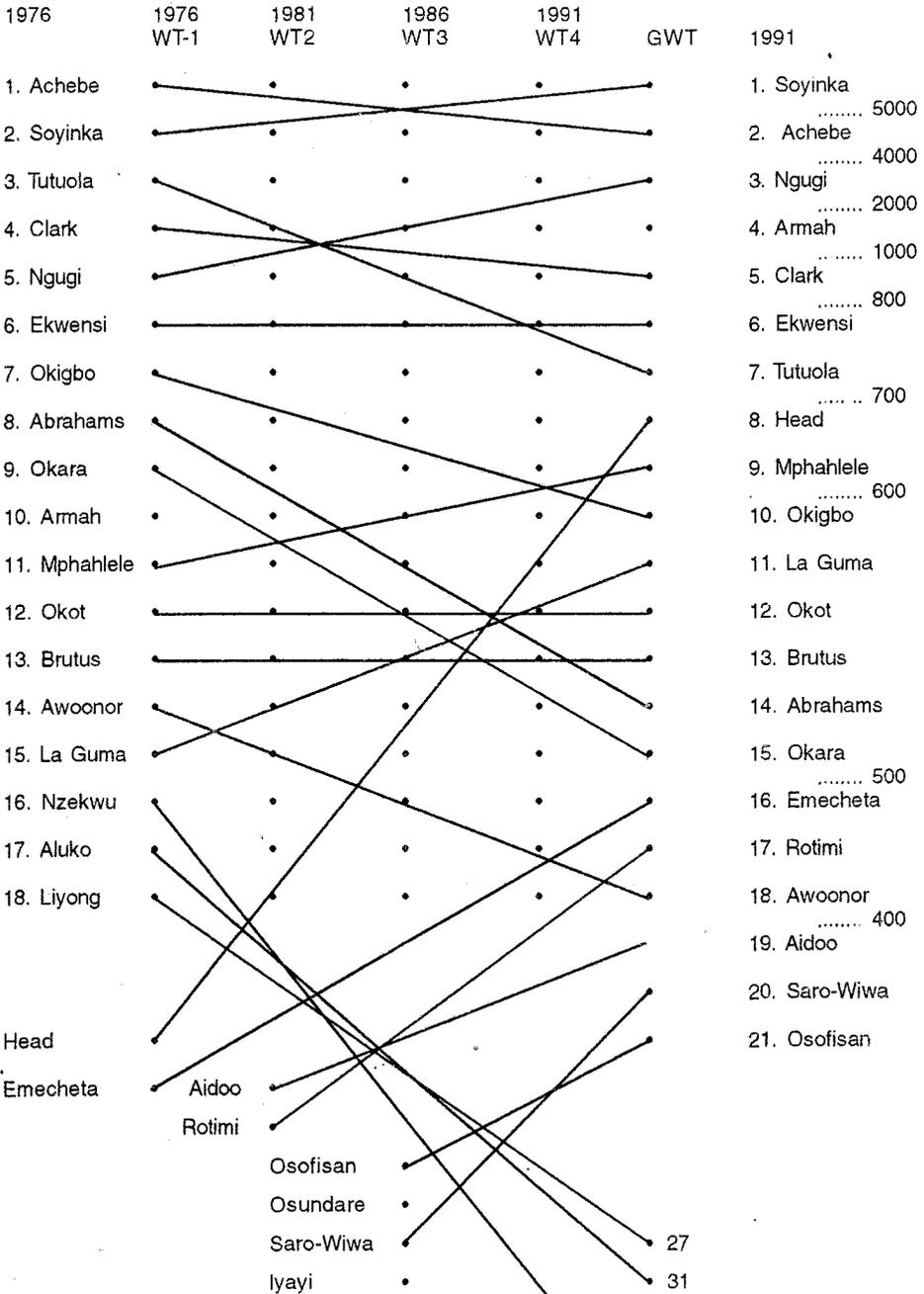


CHART SIX

NEW GRAND WEIGHTED TOTALS (1936-1991)

