Preface

This book is the product of four years of research, reflection, writing, and revision. It was completed with the help of two successive visiting research fellowships in the humanities at the Rockefeller Foundation. I began the first draft at the foundation’s offices in New York and completed it and revised successive drafts during a two-year teaching stint at Fourah Bay College of the University of Sierra Leone. I thank my colleagues and associates at the Rockefeller Foundation, especially Joel Colton, for their practical assistance and encouragement, and my students and faculty colleagues at Fourah Bay for providing an invaluable foil for testing the underlying notions of intellectual and cultural development.

Begun at the Rockefeller Foundation as a cross-cultural investigation of “the relationship of literary magazines to intellectual and cultural movements,” this study both broadened in its intellectual scope and narrowed in its focus. I saw the currents of thought and creativity that had begun with the African independence movements as an interesting special case in literary and intellectual history. A few people, some of them cultural insiders, some cultural outsiders, had inspired, molded, and, it was subsequently charged, distorted the progress of a generation of writers, artists, intellectuals, and scholars.

To those familiar with Black Orpheus and Transition, it will perhaps be unnecessary to explain why I have limited this study to two magazines. For good or ill, these two magazines were at the center of much that happened intellectually and culturally in anglophone black Africa during the period from the late fifties to the late seventies. The
small group of expatriate and indigenous editors who directed them had extraordinary power to open and close doors when theirs were almost the only doors. That they used their power with skill, openness, and goodwill did not prevent a succeeding generation from criticizing them for having misappropriated or abused it, and neither does later criticism invalidate what Ulli Beier, Rajat Neogy, and their successors accomplished.

Other cultural and intellectual magazines also commented on and published the works of the new African cultural and intellectual movements. The first, Alioune Diop’s Parisian cultural review Présence Africaine, had been publishing the work of the négritude writers since its founding in 1947. Présence Africaine spoke for a movement whose effect upon anglophone Africa remained limited, however, even after Ulli Beier began a campaign in the early Black Orpheus to build bridges across that cultural border. Moreover, Diop’s expatriate journal predates the period under discussion here and, like the négritude movement itself, was tied at least as closely to the black diaspora in Europe, North America, and the Caribbean as it was to Africa itself.

The only significant feature magazine on the African continent to rival the early Black Orpheus and the early Transition was the delightful, witty, and unrepentantly lowbrow Drum of Johannesburg, South Africa. Though run by a succession of British editors (among them Anthony Sampson and Tom Hopkinson), Drum was nevertheless a breeding ground for young black writers in white-ruled, and increasingly white-repressed, South Africa. However, although it was widely read in East, Central, and West Africa as well (for a time maintaining special East and West African editions), and in spite of its success in sponsoring literary apprenticeships, Drum does not fit the purposes of the present study. It merits a separate study (which Sampson and Hopkinson have themselves partially provided), but it too much resembled an African Look or Life (and too little resembled an African Criterion or Encounter) to qualify for inclusion in a study of intellectual and cultural magazines.

Once Black Orpheus and Transition had charted the routes of cul-
tural commerce, a small galaxy of local little magazines (more limited in their contents, shorter-lived, and geographically parochial) sprang up in imitation throughout anglophone Africa. In Johannesburg, for example, two Drum alumni, Nat Nakasa and Lewis Nkosi, founded South Africa’s first black-written, black-edited, black-run literary and artistic review, *The Classic*, using funds from the Congress for Cultural Freedom and the Farfield Foundation. While it lasted, *The Classic* rivaled *Black Orpheus* in the quality of its literary “discoveries,” and *Transition* in the toughness of its political awareness. Its scope and influence elsewhere in Africa, however, in no way compared with *Transition’s* or *Black Orpheus’s*.

In independent black Africa, the little magazines centered themselves, as had *Black Orpheus* and *Transition*, on one or another of the new universities. In Nairobi, for instance, James Ngugi (Ngugi wa Thiong’o) brought out a few erratic issues of a stimulating review, *Zuka*. At Legon, the Ghana Society of Writers brought out, equally irregularly, a review called *Okyeame*, whose purpose was to publish younger Ghanaian writers. One of the magazine’s founders, Kofi Awoonor, explained to me in a 1980 interview that the idea was to establish “a forum” for “the writers who were then emerging” and “to create a readership for Ghanaian literature.” Neither goal could be fostered in “a widely circulated journal like *Black Orpheus*” alone.

Perhaps the most important parochial intellectual magazine was *Nigeria Magazine*. Subsidized by first the colonial and then the independent government of Nigeria, it had been founded privately by an expatriate school teacher and remained, through Michael Crowder’s editorship in the mid-sixties, independent of government editorial control. Although basically an old-fashioned regional magazine, *Nigeria Magazine* ran exceptionally intelligent features and took a pioneering interest in African art and traditional society. It predated *Black Orpheus*, but its scope was limited to Nigeria and its career in many ways paralleled that of its better-known compatriot. The story of *Nigeria Magazine* is therefore also reluctantly reserved for another place.

Both in Africa and elsewhere, *Black Orpheus* and *Transition* have
become hard to find. (When I taught at Fourah Bay College only a handful of copies of either magazine remained on the library shelves. A few weeks before my arrival, as a housecleaning measure, the bookstore had sold off a stack of old issues of *Black Orpheus* for five cents a copy.) Full runs of the magazines are often not available even in major research libraries. (For example, the New York Public Library's file of *Transition* is incomplete, though catalogued as complete through *Transition* no. 50/*Ch’indaba* no. 1; Rajat Neogy's haphazard methods of numbering volumes camouflaged gaps.) Since much of what appeared in them is not in print elsewhere, it has been necessary in the course of this study to focus in greater detail on the contents of individual issues of the magazines than might otherwise be called for.

Another reason for surveying the magazines' contents is their uniqueness. In a way rather rare in magazine history, *Black Orpheus* and *Transition* possessed distinctive personalities, as identifiable and individual as any single author's. Both succeeded in developing, refining, and adapting a tone, style, and perspective independent of individual contributions or contributors. This is not to say that the periodicals were more important than those who wrote for them, but only that a special kind of cross-fertilization of intellect had taken place (and cultural community, after all, has special meaning in Africa). In its analysis of their contents, therefore, this book seeks to define the development of each magazine's special personality, tone, and style.

That development, as the magazines' principals recall, was in some ways deliberate, in some ways fortuitous, and nearly always reciprocal. Though he perhaps "never really thought of the business of editing in such purposive terms," *Transition*'s second editor, Wole Soyinka, nevertheless reflected in a 1984 letter to me, "one damned well has an idea what one wants to do with a magazine." Kenyan political scientist and *Transition* associate editor Ali Mazrui adds, "It is not often realized that writers can sometimes be profoundly changed by the very media they use. I as a writer have used *Transition* as a medium over the years. I may have influenced *Transition*; what is cer-
tain is that Transition influenced me. I regard Transition as an important factor in my own personal intellectual history” (Transition no. 44, p. 12).

My research has been greatly aided by the reference staffs of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture and the central library on 42nd Street of the New York Public Library, as well as by the staffs of the University of Nairobi Library, the Kenya National Archives, and the Rockefeller Foundation Library. I am also much indebted to the pioneering efforts of Dennis Duerden’s Transcription Centre in London, whose audiotapes of interviews with African writers and intellectuals proved an invaluable primary source of information.

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