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Poetic Imagination in Black Africa

Tanure Ojaide

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The poet in black Africa has a distinctive character that is derived from his literary traditions and sense of mission. Although native African literature is written in a foreign language (English, French, or Portuguese), it strongly mirrors traditional indigenous cultures. In addition, it is marked by teaching and satire. The conditions of the age have also placed their stamp on the African imagination, producing types of poetry that seem to characterize developing societies.

In Africa a poet is not only a specially gifted person but also a gauge of his society's condition. More perceptive than the man of common disposition, he sees through the surface of things, through what appears to the rest of society as opaque. Lenrie Peters, the Gambian poet, knows the "lies behind the truth." To the Nigerian Christopher Okigbo,

\[ \text{who could jump your eye,} \]
\[ \text{your mind-window,} \]
\[ \text{And I said:} \]
\[ \text{The prophet only the poet.} \]

In other words, the poet and the prophet are the same in that both possess the quality of insight. Doubtless it was the heightened qualities of prophecy, foresight, and insight that enabled Okigbo to prophesy the Nigerian crisis of the late sixties. In "Come Thunder" he foresees the chaos which preceded the army takeover in 1966:

\[ \text{Now that the triumphant march has entered} \]
\[ \text{the last street corners,} \]
\[ \text{Remember, O dancers, the thunder among the clouds...} \]
\[ \text{Now that laughter, broken in two, hangs tremulous} \]
\[ \text{between the teeth,} \]
\[ \text{Remember, O dancers, the lightning beyond the earth...} \]
The smell of blood already floats in the lavender-mist of the afternoon.
The death sentence lies in ambush along the corridors of power;
And a great fearful thing already tugs at the cables of the open air,
A nebula immense and immeasurable, a night of deep waters—
An iron dream unnamed and unprintable, a path of stone.3

The poet's foresight is reinforced by his personal experience, for
The drowsy heads of the pods in barren farmlands witness it,
The homesteads abandoned in this country's brush fire witness it:
The myriad eyes of deserted corn cobs in burning barns witness it.4

The inner vision of the poet gives him an advantage in society.
J. P. Clark assumes special insight in "What the Squirrel Said," a poem about the January 1966 coup in Nigeria:

THEY KILLED the lion in his den
But left the leopard to his goats
They killed the bull without horns
But left the boar to his cassava
They killed the elephant with his brood
But left the crocodile to litter the field
They killed a sheep who played shepherd
But left the hyrax who was hyena.5

Since the poet in Africa holds himself high relative to the rest of his society, he appears to be proud. In 1962 Okigbo boasted in Kampala, Uganda, that he did not read his poetry to nonpoets. The Olympian Wole Soyinka remains distant from the society he tries to enlighten. Lenrie Peters's learning elevates him to a pedestal higher than his African audience can easily reach. All the most eminent poets in Africa—Clark, Okigbo, Peters, Soyinka, Taban lo Liyong, and Okot p'Bitek—exhibit common traits and similar ideas about the vocation of literature. They conceive themselves to be sages who possess deep wisdom, wide knowledge, and large experience. Seeing through superficial phenomena, they tend to observe and dramatize the irony of things.

Many African poets regard themselves as cultural standard-bearers charged with a peculiar sense of mission. The Ghanaian Kofi Awoonor is a bard of Anlo Ewe, the god of songs; the Nigerian Soyinka has as his mentor Ogun, the Yoruba god of hunters and craftsmen; Okigbo asks for poetic inspiration from "mother Idoto." I myself rely on Uhaghwa, the Urhobo god of songs. A poet fortunate enough to speak for people who have a traditional and ancient culture shares in an environment which is not merely geographical and historical but also psychological, conveying a highly charged state of mind.

Many of these poets employ the rituals, myths, legends, beliefs, world view, and history of their peoples to express their ideas. Soyinka's "Dedication" is a ritual in which the speaker projects the positive qualities of the earth and its fauna and flora into a newly born girl so that she will live a safe, fruitful, and long life:

3. Ibid., p. 66. In Okigbo's life, as in his art, politics and poetry were inextricably intertwined. He was a public servant as well as a writer and publisher. When the Nigerian Civil War began in 1967, Okigbo enlisted in the Biafran secessionist forces and was commissioned a major. That October, while engaging Federal troops, Okigbo was killed in action. He was thirty-five years old.

4. Ibid.

The poem is a rendition of the Yoruba christening ceremony. The emphasis of the verse is on the triple desires in the Yoruba value system: children, wealth, and long life. This poem is the African counterpart of Yeats’s “Prayer for My Daughter.” The poetic expression is highly indebted to the Yoruba language of the poet.

Like Soyinka, Okot p’Bitek draws on African traditions. He employs the Acholi culture of Uganda as the vehicle of his critique of modern African urban society in Song of Lawino and Song of Ocol. Clark, in “Ivbie,” absorbs Urhobo and Ijo cultures of the delta area of Nigeria to condemn imperialism and colonialism. Oswald Mtshali appears to be the modern Zulu standard-bearer as he celebrates the birth of Shaka in Sound of a Cowhide Drum. Even the much-acclaimed Gambian internationalist Lenrie Peters could not resist the African cultural charm in “Karchikali.” The indebtedness to the indigenous culture is such that the poets seem to be translating from local languages into English when they use African proverbs. Okigbo says in “Hurrah for Thunder,”

The eye that looks down will surely see the nose; The finger that fits should be used to pick the nose.

Soyinka has a wealth of proverbial sayings in Ogun Abibiman:


Proverbs give African poetry a certain peculiarity of expression which distinguishes it from poetry elsewhere.

African cultural consciousness is also very intense in Leopold Senghor, Birago Diop, and other poets with a strong sense of black awareness, who tend to romanticize ancient Africa in spite of itself. By embracing their ethnic cultures, these writers show that their origins as men and their impulse and power as artists are inseparable. Thus they propagate
their own minicultures in their work. They also realize that most of their public shares with them the same traditional background, and that cultural references serve as exotic spices to readers.

The poet’s conception of himself as more perceptive and sensitive than the ordinary person in his society encourages him to assume a didactic role. This role originates in the tradition of teaching with folktales and songs. To be a credible teacher, the poet assumes a traditional African role—sage, priest, prophet, or even a god’s representative on earth. Soyinka, for instance, conveys the impression that he is the mundane equivalent of Ogun, the dual-natured Yoruba god.

Having presented himself as a qualified teacher, the African poet reports something to his people. He rarely describes for the sake of merely describing. Didactics, not lyricism, prevails in modern African poetry. Ideas rather than feelings are emphasized. As Ali Mazrui puts it, African poetry in the traditional mode is “emphatically an exercise in meaning. There are themes to follow; tales to tell.”

There is in African poetry a crisis atmosphere in which the poet is a savior who wants to deliver an urgent message. Okigbo was urgent as he prophesied political trouble in Nigeria. In “Hurrah for Thunder,” he says:

If I don’t learn to shut my mouth I’ll soon
    go to hell,
I, Okigbo, town-crier, together with my iron bell.

The poet here is the town crier who alerts his society about what is happening or is about to happen.

Peters is perhaps the African poet most zealously determined to instruct his readers. In Satellites, he says:

I want to
    drag you out
    shake your eyes
    open with pictures
    sounds and words
    compel your imagination

Drag you to
    your knees till
    you sniff the
    throwback of
    my vision
    with ease...

Like a preacher, he tells his audience:
    To reach God
    Man must transcend
    the present moment
    Exchange knowledge of self
    for that of others
    Desisting immediacy
    only with intimacy
    of universal distress.
    To reach God
    Man must be worthy
    of His image.
Peters uses rhetoric to convey his vision of things to his audience. He speaks clearly and repeats. His syntax is lucid, and his words are exact, not ambiguous.

The traditional teaching role of the African poet has been heightened in modern times. Highly educated poets feel obliged to enlighten the people, since in traditional African societies the literacy rate and sociopolitical consciousness are very low. Because of the didactic inclination of the African imagination, there is interest in sociopolitical criticism manifested in satire and ideological commitment. Satire, like teaching, is in the African poetic vein. The poets assail the negative forces in their respective societies in order to bring about improvements. Okot p’Bitek makes fun of the cultural copycats of Ugandan society, who embrace Western cultural modes without leaving room for their African heritage. Lawino pokes fun at Tina and Ocol, the cultural renegades of Acholi society. In a similar manner, Oswald Mtshali in “The Detrimental’’ ridicules those Africans who become cultural bastards in order to be considered civilized.

Soyinka satirizes the military leaders of Nigeria in A Shuttle in the Crypt. He indicts the military establishment for its hypocrisy, tyranny, and inhumanity, indirectly asking for a humane, virtuous, and free society. The African poet is a defender of the positive values of his society, not just a teacher. Soyinka, like the god Ogun, is an “orphans’ shield,” a defender of the helpless.

The problems in Africa put the writer in a position of choice—for or against. Good is pitched against evil, as in the vatic tradition. To a large extent, African writers are committed in varying degrees. G. C. Mutiso has this to say of them:

*In their expression of preferences for certain outcomes over others, the writers are acting within their roles as recorders, interpreters and especially judges of the society of which they are a part. To the extent that they offer choices and criticisms of social phenomena, their ideas have a clear social and political relevance. All literature in the African context tends to function as a kind of social commentary. The artist creates art based on the ideas and problems which exist in his own particular society.*

African poets are artists in the Orwellian sense, since they seem to write with “a desire to push the world in a certain direction, to alter other people’s idea of the type of society that they should strive after.”

Soyinka, for example, looks toward an idyllic and agrarian society. Peters is not alone as a dreamer.

The poet’s special gift and his didactic role enable him to assume the responsibility of spokesman for the black race. This feature of African imagination is an extension of the communal solidarity in folk songs. The assertion of blackness or black solidarity is not solely the preoccupation of francophone African writers. Soyinka, who attacks negritude in his London poems and in Ogun Abibiman—“a tiger does not proclaim its tigritude, but it pounces”—is as aware of the African cultural heritage as Senghor or David Diop. Clark and Soyinka are spokesmen for the black race in “Ivbie” and Ogun Abibiman, respectively. In “Ivbie,” Clark catalogues the exploitation of Africa by colonialists, a theme strongly expressed by the Senegalese David Diop in “Afrique” and other poems. Soyinka has the double function of encouraging black liberation fighters in South Africa and defending violence as a just means.
of achieving black rights and independence after the failure of diplomatic and peaceful attempts.

The solidarity of black peoples expressed in African poetry arises from the historical heritage the writers share. This sense of racial unity travels across oceans and is discernible in the writings of blacks from the Caribbean, the United States, and South America. In dealing with black solidarity, poets tend to correct prejudicial impressions of foreigners about Africa, as Soyinka does:

\[\ldots\] Vengeance
is not the god we celebrate, nor hate,
Nor blindness to the loss that follows
In His wake.
Nor ignorance of history's bitter reckoning
On innocent alike. Our songs acclaim
Cessation of a long despair, extol the ends
Of sacrifice born in our will, not weakness.\(^1\)

There is a strong sense of history in African poetry. The great issues are slavery, colonialism, culture conflict, civil war, apartheid, postindependence frustration, and neocolonialism. The current trend of harsh irony in letters is related to the poets' perception of African rulers as falling short of their social and political ideals. The caustic dialogue between a subject and a ruler in Peters's "In the Beginning" illustrates this point:

'I see
But my children—
beg pardon Sir,
will they go to school?'
Later!
'Will they have food to eat
and clothes to wear?'
Later I tell you!
'Beg pardon Sir;
a house like yours?'
Put this man in jail.\(^2\)

Because the poet satirizes repressive forces and is committed to progress, he tends to be a victim—of society, of political rulers, of destiny. The victim figure is pervasive: The poet's society makes fun of him as a dreamer, like Peters; rulers persecute him for outspokenness, as they have persecuted Soyinka, Dennis Brutus, and Mtshali; destiny subjects him to the natural laws of age and death, like every human being.

The poet always tends to have something to complain about, hence the maudlin tone. Despite his gifts of foresight and learning, he is low in the social scheme and an outsider to decision making. These realities often give him authority to speak for the masses and attack the rulers. During the Nigerian crisis, for example, Soyinka spoke for the suffering Ibo people.

The African poet also has a private life which gives uniqueness to his writing. Clark in "For Granny (from Hospital)" recollects

\[\ldots\] the loud note of quarrels
And endless dark nights of intrigue
In Father's house of many wives .. .\(^17\)

Nostalgia is a common feature, especially noticeable in the early edition of Okigbo's Heavensgate. The bulk of Soyinka's A Shuttle in the

16. Peters, Satellites, p. 84.
Crypt, Awoonor’s Ride Me, Memory, Clark’s Casualties, and Brutus’s Letters to Martha and Other Poems from a South African Prison are exhumed experiences.

Despite the tendencies of African poets toward social criticism, commitment, and spokesmanship for the people and the black race, there are variations. The Camerounian Mbella Sonne Dipoko, author of Black and White in Love, feels that the poet should be totally disengaged from politics and its prejudices; hence he avoids politics in his poetry. To Soyinka, however, “the man dies in all who keep silent in the face of tyranny.” 18 His vision, shown in The Man Died and A Shuttle in the Crypt, is not acceptable to the establishment.

Some writers do not fit into an African mold. The poetic imagination is, of course, not uniform; nor can imagination be unitary or collective because of diverse individual experiences and the influences of different geographical areas. Though African poets emphasize the meaning of ideas, some writers are inevitably obscure. Ali Mazrui links obscurity in African poetry with “Protestantism and . . . liberal individualism.” 19 Those who practice obscurity are abstract—especially the Nigerian Okigbo and Soyinka, who display modernist tendencies in their fragmentation, incoherent images, and disconnected thought. Mazrui considers “abstract exercises with verbal pictures . . . a profound departure from the tradition” because of the learning evident in such work. 20

Some of these poetic qualities, along with their variations and deviations, are not unique to Africa. The poet, wherever he is, draws ideas from a common cosmic pool. Besides, the modern world is so cosmopolitan that there is no literary island not influenced by the rest of the world. Human problems also tend to be universal—corruption, tyranny, love, death, and so forth. For example, Soyinka in The Man Died and A Shuttle in the Crypt is aiming not only at social criticism but also at recording as a witness the atrocities of Nigerian military rulers—much as Mandelstam and Solzhenitsyn have done in exposing the shortcomings of the Soviet system. The poet—whether in the Soviet Union, Africa, or South America—will continue to revolt against injustice, lack of freedom, oppression, and exploitation as long as those problems prevail in his environment.

The volksgeist affects the poetry of a particular region at certain times of its history in the move from traditionalism to civilization and from underdevelopment to development. Some of the social problems that concern certain African poets have preoccupied and continue to preoccupy many South American writers. César Vallejo and Pablo Neruda were social critics in their own ways. Critical and historical concerns are therefore not unique to the modern African imagination.

Despite its closeness to some other literatures, African poetry is different from its American counterpart. Poets in the United States do not see the need to teach because of the high degree of enlightenment in their society. Rarely is there any social criticism in contemporary American poetry. Aggressive individualism and a measure of material well-being seem to have made the American poet turn inward. While Lentric Peters is interested in the physical welfare of the masses and the availability of schools, and Okot p’Bitek is concerned with the type of government his country adopts, the contemporary American poet is not his brother’s keeper or his society’s savior. He shows a certain indif-
ference toward politics. Ezra Pound was a single voice in his time; the Beat Generation writers who criticized the establishment were outside the American mainstream. Despite the civil-rights movement and the Vietnam war, the personal problems of confessional poets have become the vogue in America.

The African poetic imagination, on the other hand, draws on individual experiences as well as shared culture, environment, and history. Nourished by special roots, the poet in Africa assumes the responsibility of teaching and fighting verbally to save his people.