

A Momentous Overview of the Challenges and Victories of Orality & Literacy in Modern African Poetry

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Abstract

This paper is poised to examine the early African poets, with particular reference to their use of style and language. It was observed that their writing was more or less like a copy of their European counterparts. They were thoroughly, criticized for the use of imported imageries and attitudes. A new wave of poetic style gave way to a new heritage, which has different themes on love, politics, sorrow, and cruelty, which can be used for different occasions. We argue that modern African poetry has come a long way in translating the literary tradition of the African folks into African poetry that is known today.

Key Words: African Poets, European, Heritage Literary Traditions, African Poetry

Introduction

The history of poetry is not well defined this is because there are doubts as to how poetry came into existence. Akporobaro (2008) opines that “The first poetry probably was associated with music and dance. When a nation or a people experienced great event such as war, a migration, a flood, it seemed natural to chronicle and preserve these episodes in dance and songs”. There has been several attempts to define poetry this research will be looking at a few of the definitions that will add value to this work. According to Akporobaro (2008) “attempts to define poetry are note worthy....” And he gave several definitions of poetry as follows:

1. I would define the poetry of words as the rhythmical creation of beauty. Its sole arbiter is taste. With the intellect or with the conscience it has only collateral

relations. Unless incidentally, it has no concern whatever either with duty or with truth- Elgar Allan Poe

2. Poetry is the imaginative expression of strong feelings, usually rhythmical, the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings recollected in tranquility.- William Wordsworth

3. The proper and immediate object of science is the acquirement or communication of truth; the proper and immediate object of poetry is the communication of pleasure.- Samuel Taylor Coleridge

4. Poetry a criticism of life under the condition fixed for such a criticism by the laws of poetic truth and beauty,- Matthew Arnold

5. Absolute poetry is the concrete and artistic of the human mind in emotional and rhythmical language.- Theodore Watts Dunton

6. Speech framed to be heard for its own sake and interest even and above its interest of meaning.- Gerard Manley Hopkins

7. An actual poem is the succession of experiences- sounds, images, and thoughts, emotions- through which we pass when we are reading as poetically as we can.- Andrew Bradley

...the list of more definition of Poetry is endless.

Introspection of African poets

Early African poetry was populated by writers who starve on their writings and poetry to meet up with European standards. Some of these writers were referred to as Euro-modernists because they aped 20th century practices of European modernists poetry. Some of these poets were Wole Soyinka, J.P. Clark and Christopher Okigbo others were Gabriel Okara, Lenrie Peters and Dennis Brutus and the traditionalist like Kofi Awoonor, Okot P' Bitek and Christopher Okigbo. These classes were called the traditionalist because they sourced their materials from traditional elements.

Naturally because of the massive anxiety of influence and a tendency to copy the style of European Poetry, the early euro-modernist found, patronage on the circles of modernist and European critics. Initially, these traditionalists were overshadowed. Some of the elements and features of Euro modernism, were criticized by Chinwizu et al., in Decolonization of African literature, for being old fashioned, craggy, unmusical, and full of imported imagery which symbolized a divorce from African oral traditions.

Their language is archaic; they seem to pattern their language after a 19th century or even 16th century British writers. For example J.P Clarks "Irbie" replete with such clichés and shakes peareanisms as "thereby hangs a tale", "bade us hold our tongue Bade us note "sleep no more" in Heavens gate they were totally criticized

for their craggy, humpy language full of obstructions, unnecessarily and artificial difficult (Chinweizu 166).

Poets like Okigbo and Soyinka were thoroughly criticized for what they call 'pleasurable nonsense', imported imagery and attitudes. It is against this background or Europeanism that a fresh orientation, new and totally African sprung to life.

Decolonizing their art by the verification of African experience, African themes shift to issues on love, invocation, evocation, supplication, war chants, war poetry, hunters' chant, and other rituals ceremonies and occasions. The above themes were discussed in details by the poets, who have installed elements of traditional heritage in their poems by using predominant theories, styles and the issues of translation as they objectify and subject the experiences of modernity to scrutiny and analysis in contemporary Africa.

Okot P' Bitek: the East African Poet belongs to the class of traditionalists, who went the way of black aesthetics, in his poem, song of Lawino he mocks the Christian Church, by reducing the saints, and other holy figures to Africa personalities and their names.

He says
When we suffer misfortune
We should say:
Look Mariya
Mother of the Hunchback
We should pray to Joseph

And Petero, and Luka
And the other ancestors of write men!
He says
It is stupid superstition
To pray to our ancestors
To avert the small pox
But we should pray
To the messengers of the Hunchback
To intercede for us
(song of Lavino P.155)

Okot transliterates. "Mekhisedech" and "Gregory" into "Medikije det" and "Giklrigologo". This is a brave attempt at confronting elements of modernity. The Christian idea of salvation through Christ. He does this clearly, by introducing familiar names and changing their morphology, into something African bringing in much musicality to the words, thereby recalling our attention to the possibility of our own ways, which is totally fresh, new and different from that which is European.

African poetic modes fall within the categories of love songs, harvest songs, songs of sorrow and songs of abuse these various forms of poetry serves as sources of entertainment, warning, and also acts as functional materials during funerals, marriages, festivals etc. In the poem “New Yam” by Ulli beiver translated from Yoruba, the new yam is praised for its impact on the traditional society .

“Cassava and maize are only the poor relations to yam
 Yam is a warrior who brings strife wherever he goes.
 The children quarrel for the biggest portion
 The landlord complains it was not pounded
 Smooth like yesterday
 To plant is costly – but it amply repays
 Its own debt
 You put the yam to bed in the grand
 It will bring you money
 That will plant you on top of a beautiful woman (Beier 1978 – 89)

In this poem, Ulli Beier an European scholar, confronts, modern aesthetics of form, presentation and style, by evoking cultural attitudes, behaviours and traditional economic values attached to the New yam, and the wealth, its planter or owner acquires after a full harvest . This is not totally in consonance with expected modern standards, infact it is in conflict. In modern experience, such a poem, as written by Romanus Egudu, becomes pravitist, sterile and sounds like a labored and lifeless attempt at nostalgic revivalism (Chinweizu, 185)

The contrast being exposed here is between the modern literary experience and the traditionalist attitude to writing, which are at contrapuntal points. The European tendency or modern aesthetics promote the individuality of the poet, his privatist attitude is welcomed, while in the traditional setting, the themes, styles and issues of translation go against the grain by being open, understandable, free flowing in their verses and directly informative, instead of the elusive and cryptic personalism presented in modernalist or modern writers.

In Matei Markwa’s “life in our village”
 In our village
 When elders are around
 Boys must not look at girls
 And girls must not look at boys
 Because the elders say
 That is not good
 Even when the night comes
 Boys must play separately
 But humanity is weak.
 So boys and girls meet (Unknown source)

The picture is clear in this poem and there is an attempt at making the poem hard to understand. It is obviously sourced from moonlight, or children's evening play, where they get together and have fun in the evenings. This type of setting gives way to natural songs and poetry. The style here is simple, without any pretention to high poetry, rather its entertainment values is high, obviously it was translated from a local language and context within this experience and its final state, the problems of translation does not exist, rather it serves to enrich the poem, and its accessibility.

The poem *Alajire* by Ulli Beier, is one of such deployments of traditional elements, by contemporary African Poets. A poem in praise and invocation of a god of suffering, comes clearly from the collection of Yoruba mythology and deities. The traditional belief system in gods and their power to control life and death is the theme of this poem and the ultimate wisdom which the superficial withholds access to. That which the initiate or follower must constantly yield to.

This poem is a clear contrast to the experience of modernity, a conflict with the modern style of presentation, modern experience, modern values and experiences

Alajire, we ask you to be patients,
You are very quick tempered
And we worship you for it
We ask you to be moderate
You are wildly extravagant
And we pray to you for it
We ask not to be jealous,
You are madly jealous
And we love you for it.
We ask you not to be jealous
You are madly jealous
And we love you for it.
Alajire, you have a strange kind of pity
Will you swallow my head,
While you are licking away the tears from my face?
Alajire; you frighten me,
When you fall gently, like a tired leaf,
Do not covert the beautiful
On the faces of dead children
Alajire, I am lost in the forest but every wrong way I take rightly way
Towards your wisdom (Beier 1970)

The themes are truly African to be precise Yoruba. This is a total departure from the idea of modernity. It takes us back to the essence of "god worship" the glorification, invocation and loyalty to Yoruba African traditional gods and religion. The style is equally simple and other poem is easily understood. It can be interpreted as a conflict against the issue of modernity, Christian religion, and the life of the god which are served by the Africa.

In Okigbo's poem titled "Idoto" we also find an illusion to Africa water goddess.

In it we find a deployment to traditional imagery.

Before you, mother Idoto
Naked I stand;
Before your watery presence
A prodigal
Learning on an oil bean
Lost in your legend

In apparent submission, and repentance by a prodigal son, who has erred, and seeks the face of his goddess. As usual the poem treats a familiar theme of Africaness and the departure from traditional ways of life, by praying and begging mother Idoto, for forgiveness.

“Prayer to the Dead Father” by Ulli Beier translated from Igbo is similar to the prayer of mother Idoto. It was translated by Ulli Beier into English:

My father
I am giving those yams to you
When you are reborn
May you be a farmer of many yams
My father
I am killing this goat for you
When you are reborn
May it be as my own son

Also Okigbo’s poetry, path of thunder, where he deploys proverbs, dirges elegies, praise names and praise songs and leader(Choral antiphonies on traditional voice). His synthesis of traditional elements, is most profound on the poems condolences, as he thematise death and his pity for people, family and individuals who died during the war. Condolences.....from our swollen lips laden with condolences the mythmaker accompanies us the rattles are here with us condolences from our split – tongue of the slit drum condolences.

Or

Thunder that has struck the elephant
The same thunder can make a bruisecondolences
We should forged the names
We should bury the date
The dead should bury the dear.....condolences
From our brushed lips of the drum empty of condolences

This is a typical example of modern African poetry carefully sorted, enriched with a sensibility for the needs of Africa especially Nigeria modern society . There is a special and desperate need for a voice to call for peace with song of armistice which leads the way forward in a time of conflict during the Nigeria civil war. He just does not speak of the war, placate or call for order, but he does so with powerful traditional symbols, proverbs, praise, metaphors etc. he strongly carved a niche and

position for himself as one of the makers of modern Africa poetry. His style is earthly, simple and assessable, definitely its theme is appropriate and right for its moment. A moment when Nigeria needed a voice from the falling and warning crowd of another poet who is around to help out.

Our impression of the harsh insatiableness of Soyinka's language may be seen as an exact equivalent in words of that increase of the mind that is the lot of vision through colonials. (Macebuh, 1975 – 76:88). Chinweizu et al., views this dysfunction of the author's vision as a sad one, because of the believe that these poems, works automatically close to their meaning. what can be achieved is a loss of meaning and direction when the poems are read through the use of an ordinary eye. Macebuh, makes a case that the Arglo – satio retune of his English, and the rigors of translation from his culture 'Yoruba' which makes his language heavy, dense and promise of translation, in the ages of Soyinka's works which are presumed to be dim, because he resorts to obscurantism, confuted language, and a mangling of syntax. The reverse is the case when we look at Ulli Beier and Bakare Gbadamosi translation of Ifa divination poetry in Yoruba poetry:

*Tititi lo ri ogbo
Bisripe Bisripe domi okoo – da
Dida lomi okoo da
Omo oko kii yi,
A difa fun Oodua alewonro
Nwon nibo lon lo
Lodun yii ni o gore yee baba e
Bii o irubo
Lodun yii ni o goroyee baba e
Sabee loro
Logun lofa
Nwon o je sigun ilobinrin
Ki nba won lo
M ba mu pa
Ma mu ta,
N ba mu rele do so binnu
This poem is translated as:*

The soul of elders is everlasting
The water made a came moves backwards and forwards
The water inside a cause only splashed about
It does not spill away
Cast ifa for Oodua, he who ascend the throne of his father
And, if he did not make sacrifice
It was in that year, that he would ascend the throne of his fathers
The people of sabee have poison
The people of Togun leave aurous
They dare not open up the siege of the clynawas
I would have gone with their
I would have killed some,
I would have sold into slavery,
And I would have taken some home as wives.

The prospects of translation from the cultic Yoruba version, retains the richness and message of the original, without any problem of the meaning getting lost in translation.

When you line up Wole Soyinka's poem against a roll of other poets like Okot P' Bitek, David Kuneme, Hampata. Ba, D.F. Niame, and Birago, Diop, they believe, his art or translation would lead to much envy. But he has also been praised for his surfaced clarity in translation done on poems like "salutation to the Gut" where he translates the praises to the behalf and the power of hunger. He clearly translates the Yoruba praise poem, into English, without his usual tendency for obscure language.

Conclusion

There has been an increasing tendency on the part of modern African writers to identify with the literacy traditions of the people in terms of content and technique. The reason is not so far to seek this is because for a long time before African Nations won political independence from the European colonizers, African culture was mis-understood and mis-presented. We can conclusively say that they have adopted oral traditions into African poetry and despite translation problems African poetry has emerged triumphant.

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