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## PUBLIC POETRY OF WEST AFRICA

### A SURVEY

by

Tayo Olafioye

Public or political poetic thought in this essay covers the activities of any government in Africa whether Colonial or African. Also reflected is the role of the officials who execute the policies of such a government. The dispensation of power either by an individual or groups of people or institutions and how that power affects the lives of Africans and those of foreign nationals on the continent are analyzed. Also included is poetry that contemplates cultural, social and spiritual values but where colonization is implied. Other poetry constitute the merging of spiritual, cultural and political concerns found in the African awareness --its "personality". The regional categories I use in this essay I hope, will facilitate a clear understanding of how each geographical or national division is highlighted by its own peculiar history which in turn influences the circumstances and the methods of articulation by its poets.

Nationalism in the 1940's unified African consciousness throughout West Africa. The common enemy then was colonialism. Most of the national leaders, including artists, spoke for West Africa as a whole. The English-speaking parts of this region were then being administered by one colonial power, Great Britain. Because many of the West African leaders were born in the first two decades of this century and because a number of them studied overseas where they had experienced racial discrimination, they came to learn more about the colonialists in their natural habitat, they became acquainted with British social and political thought and the motivations behind the colonial enterprise.

The upsurge of nationalism led to the rise of the Pan-African movement. Among other things the movement was dedicated to the liberation of African territories from colonial control. It attracted many outstanding African students studying abroad who were later to become political leaders in their respective countries. Prominent among these were Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya, Leopold Sedar Senghor of Senegal, Nnamdi Azikiwe of Nigeria, and Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana. The movement included Black American nationalists and others

from the West Indies, like Marcus Garvey.

Nationalist activity also continued against colonialism in each individual African country when the Africans returned home from European schooling. In Nigeria, for example, there were the Zikist movement led by Nnamdi Azikiwe, and Egbe Omo-Oduduwa led by Obafemi Awolowo. In Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah launched a series of disruptive strikes against the British colonial government. While the nationalists were fighting on the political front, the artists were writing declamatory, rhetorical, and sometimes bookish poetry mostly patterned after the English and French traditions. Even the aggressive nationalist verse written by others was also derivative in style and form.

The early writers of African nationalism are known as "Pioneer poets" in Nigeria and as "Pilot poets" in Ghana. The poets were in the vanguard of cultural nationalism seeking to gain respect and political independence for Africans. The poets who expressed public concerns idealized African expectations concerning independence. They emerged as teachers, critics, judges, and advisors and attempted to arouse the consciousness of the people about various aspects of colonial life. They wrote poems on Africa, nationalist pride, suffering, politics, domination, culture. They projected a glorious, rich and harmonious Africa after independence.

Most pioneer poetry is prosaic in style and sentimental in content. The diction is simple, didactic and direct. The poets themselves lacked originality in that they did not use traditional elements to create a new frontier for the English language. But as simple as their style was, their message was clear: independence.

One of the best known pilot poets was Gladys May Casely-Hayford. She was born at Axim, in Ghana, in 1904. Her father was a prominent Ghanaian lawyer, Joseph Casely-Hayford, who was himself an author and a traditionalist. The mother was Adelaide Casely-Hayford, also an author. Gladys came from an enlightened family which was responsible for her education in Britain. Young Gladys' poem "Rejoice" is an appeal to Africans to be proud of their color. Dr. James Aggrey, a Ghanaian educationist had said, "He who is not proud of his color is not fit to live."

Gladys' "Rejoice" is straightforward and to the point:

*Rejoice and shout with laughter  
Throw all your burdens down,  
If God has been so gracious  
As to make you black or brown.<sup>1</sup>*

The poet talks directly to her audience. Her tone is instructional: "rejoice," "throw." She instructs her fellow Africans to outgrow their inferiority complex and be glad that they were



black: "rejoice," "shout with laughter," be "glorious," "gracious." God had made Africa the cradle of beauty and delight for all the world:

*For you are a great nation,  
A people of great birth  
For where would spring the flowers  
If God took away the earth?*

It seems clear that in those days the Africans felt inferior to the Europeans. Uneducated and without technical skills, they felt that the European skills were responsible for every good thing on earth. Undoubtedly, there is a romanticization of Africa in the mood of the poem; symptomatic, of the "negritude" mode that glorified the African past in order to assert an African presence. Such sentiment characterized much of early modern African writing indicating then a need for a psychological and cultural lift. There is an appeal to emotion, with the expression "glorious heritage", that seeks to arouse confidence and cultural pride and serves to restore the Africans sense of worth which the conditions of colonization had helped to undermine.

Another early Ghanaian poet is Raphael Grail Armattoe. He was born at Denu in 1913 and was educated as a medical doctor in Northern Ireland, where he spent the next decade after graduation from medical school. Most of his poems are elegiac in mood because of his sad personal experiences. Having stayed so long overseas, he was a misfit when he returned to Ghana, then the Gold Coast. But his people misunderstood his approach to their problems. Armattoe was a man of many talents—a poet, physician, historian, and an anthropologist. His great understanding of human nature is philosophically interpreted in his elegies.

Armattoe's first political poem is called "Africa". It begins:

*I once saw a maiden dark and comely,  
Sitting by the wayside, sad and lonely.  
Oh! pretty maiden, so dark and comely  
Why sit by the wayside, sad and lonely?  
I am neither sad nor lonely, she said  
But living, Sin, among the deaf and dumb  
Relentlessly, watching these shameless dead  
Makes my warm heart grow very cold and numb.<sup>2</sup>*

This poem expresses disappointment in some of his political adversaries in the Gold Coast who misunderstood his political process. They criticized him bitterly and misconstrued his good intentions for his country. The "dark and comely" maiden is Africa. She is sitting idly by the wayside of progress, sad and lonely. The rest of the world is passing her by and she does not even realize it—

"I am neither sad, nor lonely." However, Africa--the maiden, recognizes that some of her people are deaf to reason. She assumes a neutral position watching them--dead and shameless, living in ignorance. The maiden is also the poet, R.G. Amattoe. He is the sophisticated African who is out of tune with his people. He calls them "dumb," "shameless," and "deaf" because they did not agree with his political thinking.

The poet stands out among his people because they did not share his anxiety. Their despair and disappointment: "Makes my warm heart grow very cold and numb"; the poet laments. Perhaps the artist is ahead of his time, perhaps he is simply out of step with his people from having lived abroad for so long. The fact that Ghana later gained independence indicates that Africa arrived when it was ready. Amattoe the humanist is also a patriot and a visionary. He is a paradox. To criticize his society is agonizing and painful because he loves the country dearly. Yet to fail to guide the society is to fail in one's responsibility as an artist.

The most often quoted pioneer poet is Chief Dennis Osadebay. He is a West African of Nigerian origin. His "Young Africa's Plea" demonstrates a poet's pride in his culture as well as his concern for its assault and patronage by foreign personnels. He sees a need for refinement in the culture because its sophistication will make better people of Africans. But he hates to see the culture disrupted, derided, misunderstood or embraced out of curiosity:

*Don't preserve my customs  
As some fine curios  
To suit some white historian's tastes.  
There's nothing artificial  
That beats the natural way  
in culture and ideals of life.  
Let me play with the whiteman's ways  
Let my affairs themselves sort out.  
Then in sweet rebirth  
I'll rise a better man  
Not ashamed to face the world.  
Those who doubt my talents*

.....  
*They know I am no less a man  
Let them bury their prejudice*

.....  
*My friends will never know regret  
And I, I never once forget.<sup>3</sup>*



We are experiencing a union of political, cultural and spiritual awareness in an attempt to promote the survival of the poet and his traditions. He gains new inspiration from this culture in recognition of a real image in life. He must seek to preserve it. But he is persuasive, not assertive, because the poem is not directly political. Rather, it is a poem in which cultural values also concern political self-sufficiency.

The poet has no need to be apologetic about his culture, especially since he sees the future of the new African man in it—"I'll rise a better man." The poet is working "with the brains of a blackman" who looks forward to a renaissance—a "sweet rebirth." That is, a new Africa fashioned out of the old. The problem with the pioneers is that when they are not extremely sentimental and nostalgic they are ambivalent. They are enchanted by Western culture and religion and the things that go with it: literacy, a new mastery of the environment, of the soil, of communication. And yet they do not want to abandon their native culture.

The pioneers learned the style and form of poetry from religious hymns and the Anglo-Saxon poetic tradition, particularly the Victorian manner of expression. They behaved according to the pattern of their education, which was missionary schooling. Even the most travelled of them were limited. They capitalized solely on emotional and pedestrian philosophies and banal expression, without really suggesting concrete proposals to meet the problems facing them. But it is evident that they love their country. They carried to a fever-pitch the exhortation of "Mother Africa," an example of which is the didactic verse by Nnamdi Azikiwe in his *Renascent Africa*:

*Come now, Renascent African, believe in yourself.  
Believe that you have the talent, but it is latent,  
Believe, and it shall be done unto you*

*Africa has produced geniuses in the past. Africa  
is producing geniuses today. And Africa can and  
will produce.*

.....

*Behold a continent which had stood the test of space  
and time!  
Behold a continent which gave the universe the  
human race!  
Behold a continent which produced and nurtured great  
civilizations  
Behold a continent whose majesty and splendour are  
now overshadowed by suffering and woe...*

*Africa, arise and walk....<sup>4</sup>*

The African that Nnamdi Azikiwe appealed to was literally a lethargic one. A conscious language of appeal to arouse that kind of Africa was inevitable. We must remember that a biblical culture held sway, an aspect of which is the prophetic diction and command that feature in the excerpt. "Behold," "Come now," are biblical forms of address. A flashback into the great African past is also an artistic device to stimulate awareness and racial pride. Michael Dei-Anang and Beni Bengor Blay, both of Ghana; Crispin George of Sierra Leone and, Roland Dempster of Liberia are few other pioneer poets who write in similar mode.

After the pioneer poets come the poets of the fifties, or the "poets of transition." I shall conveniently refer to their poetry as "contemporary." Because none of the pioneers are working anymore, contemporary poetry spans the 1950's and 1960's and perhaps 1970's. Writers of contemporary poetry are better educated than the pioneers because some of the former attended various European universities where they studied the literary movement led by Eliot and Pound.

Contemporary West African poets such as Christopher Okigbo, Abioseh Nicol and Gabriel Okara patterned their early styles after those of the twentieth-century English poetry. This new source of poetic influence created a major difference between the poetic style of the contemporary African poets and those of the "Pioneers". We must restate that the pioneers were principally influenced by the Bible, the hymnal books, and British poetry of the nineteenth century. The contemporary African poets wrote succinct and complex poetry that speaks about African concerns and breathes an African atmosphere. In addition, the political climate of the fifties was more intense than in the 1940's.

The late fifties or the early sixties witnessed militant political and cultural awareness that hastened the course of independence. Some of the poets of the 1950's wrote generally the same kind of poetry as that of the previous decade. Similar overlapping from contemporary poetry is true in the composition of those who are writing since independence. Their works speak of independent Africa. They face problems created by African politicians and the problems are fundamental to national development. As the contemporary poets grapple with the problem of development and a greater variety of skills, knowledge, and political styles, they enjoy a wider range of materials for poetry than their fore-runners did.

The contemporary poet has more to engage him as he assesses the problems and developments of his time. Owing to his more



intensive training and greater self-assurance, he experiments with greater freedom. He uses traditional symbols, invents new diction and gives his art a cultural distinction. The contemporary poet evolves personal styles because he is more intensely individualistic than his forerunners, even while he purports to speak for a nation and a continent. He hits at a wider range of meanings because his audience is more sophisticated. He needs to arrest their attention in order for his message to get through. The contemporary poet is also more professional both for the sake of art, of spokespersonship, and for the sake of his market. He strives to attain excellence because he is not intending to please a few at cocktail parties, but a large world. He has to be good to sell.

The decade of the fifties is the eve of political independence. The poems that reflect that struggle are one type. This class of poems is "negritude" in nature. By "negritude", I mean the reaction which expresses pride in African traditions or seeks to free her from the colonial yoke. The poet paints the picture of a glorious Africa; an Africa under siege, a continent being plundered. The second category of poets is represented by those poems that emerge after the attainment of political independence. They are the contemporary poems. The first group attacks colonization as a system that upholds foreign political rule, and the second group seeks to instill African cultural pride to buttress nationalism. The poet in this case hopes that nationalist pride will overthrow European rule.

While the poetry of the 1950's was pointedly directed against the Europeans, the poetry of independent Africa was focused on African politicians, whose style of political administration is often worse than those they criticized prior to independence. Corruption is rife, and progress is slow moving. The politicians cannot claim with any justification that Europeans are responsible for the mismanagement of Africa today. Alfred Zanker, an American journalist, commented in *U.S. News and World Report*:

*Ten years ago, the nations of black Africa were full of confidence. Their newly won independence would surely bring instant prosperity and stability. Today, most of their hopes are unrealized. True prosperity lies far in the future. And lasting stability may take decades more to achieve.*<sup>5</sup>

There is same truth in this statement. However, visionary politicians realize that there is no short cut to progress. No one could possibly achieve prosperity and stability in ten years, let alone Africa at the level of the United States two hundred years ago. The concern of most African poets in an independent Africa is the abuse of power which leads to strife, frustration,



exile, civil disorders and social immobility. Beginning with the 1950's, the poetry of West Africa urges in a more sophisticated way than ever before, cultural nationalism as a weapon for independence. Sometimes the poet makes a direct statement about this, at others his intention is implied. Our first example of early political poem is the "Meaning of Africa," written by Abioseh Nicol, a Sierra Leonean poet:

*You are not a country, Africa,  
You are a concept,  
Fashioned, in our minds, each to each  
To hide our separate fears, To dream  
our separate dreams.<sup>6</sup>*

"Meaning of Africa" laments the arbitrary division of Africa into countries. The political creation and division of the continent compounds the problems of development for Africa, which was divided into many administrative units in 1884 by European colonial powers at the Berlin convention. The territorial sharing of Africa was for the commercial and political convenience of the Europeans. Each European nation owned overseas territories from where to exploit natural resources badly needed at home. Each territorial possession in Africa enhanced the international stature of the European nation that "owned" the territory. The preoccupation of the European politicians with the affairs of their nation's African territory helped them divert attention from domestic, social and political problems. The Africans themselves were the ones who had much to lose. They were divided amongst themselves, one ethnic group broken into units only to be lumped with other splintered ethnic groups with whom the former had no cultural affinity, to form new nations. These divisions could only have disastrous effects on African development. Each ethnic nationality could have formed a viable nation in which one language expedites progress. Only a few countries in Africa have an indigenous national language. The absence of one often impedes social progress.

All the above sequence of events explains what the poet means by saying that Africa is a "concept." She is a concept, an idea which takes different shapes in African minds—each hides his own separate fears and dreams his own separate dreams. For all we have in common, too many elements in our backgrounds are dissimilar. We have French, English, Spanish, and Portuguese speaking Africans. Each experienced a different pattern of colonial education. It may take decades of contact between African nations before they can completely understand one another and trust one another sufficiently to march together in progress.

From David Diop, a Senegalese born in France, came a poem that represents Africa as a continent once great, now humiliated:

*Africa my Africa  
Africa of proud warriors in ancestral Savannah  
Africa of whom my grandmother sings*

*On the banks of the distant river  
I have never known you  
But your blood flows in my veins  
Your beautiful black blood that irrigates the fields  
The seat of your work  
The work of your slavery  
The slavery of your children*

*Africa tell me Africa  
Is this you this back that is bent  
This back that breaks under the weight of humiliation*

.....

*And its fruit gradually acquire  
The bitter tastes of liberty*<sup>7</sup>

This poem represents a romantic vision of Africa because the poet feels a sense of loss and alienation both from his adopted country--France, and from his land of birth of which he has heard only in his grandmother's songs. Diop is nostalgic, but vague, in his evocation of Africa's past greatness: "Africa of proud warriors in ancestral savannahs." But all the heroic past and the present beauties are lost. Like most nationalists the poet is rebellious. He sees himself as an "impetuous son." He senses that something must be done to heal Africa from the "red scars" and "the whip under the midday sun." To reclaim Africa, the young generation of Africans who are the "fruits" of the soil must be devoted and dedicated in order to "acquire the bitter taste of liberty."

A school of poetry emerged among Africans studying in Paris in 1930's. They called it "negritude." It was a movement meant to restore African roots, to infuse poetry with African images, to instill pride in African values. This cultural nationalism was conceived as a weapon for political independence. Leopold Sedar Senghor became the leading voice in this movement, together with Aime Cesaire, Leon Damas, and Birago Diop.

Leopold Sedar Senghor, a poet, philosopher and the President of the Republic of Senegal in French West Africa, is an outstanding advocate for the greatness of Africa. He is one of the early nationalists to regain respect for and pride in Africa. His sense of the attributes of Africa is often exaggerated but it indicates the need of the time. Africa that has been humiliated must be saved. The themes of the great African past, of ancestral guidance, of a superior African rhythm and humanity dominate most of his writing. One of his most representative poems is "Prayer to Masks":

*Black mask, red mask, you black and white masks,  
Rectangular masks through whom the Spirit breathes  
I greet you in Silence! And you too, my pantherheaded  
ancestor.*<sup>8</sup>



The above excerpt is an invocation of the dead whose spirits the masks symbolize. Masqueraders are said to come from the world beyond representing the dead. We do not think of the masquerader as a living human, but as a representative of the dead, once he covers his face with a mask and begins to speak in a guttural, rasping voice. This invocation recognized the presence of the dead in the lives of Africans. The ancestor is usually deified and is constantly called upon to assist human efforts in time of danger or difficulties. Prayerful petitions accompanied by sacrifices are offered at the family shrines. Africans need to coax and reach God through the ancestors. We believe that once we placate the ancestors, God will listen and grant our requests. The poet greets his panther-headed ancestor with the regard Africans accord their elders—"I greet you in silence." Senghor is here employing spiritual means to gain a political end. The synthesis of both the spiritual and the political is often an artistic device of the African writer to articulate his concern. References to heritage often engender needed emotion to stimulate action in politics. The image of the panther imbues the ancestor with awe while making the issue at stake look rather cultural. Another African poet, Christopher Okigbo, a Nigerian, sounds a similar note in his poem "Idoto"—a mother goddess in his village.

In Africa the dead are not forgotten. They are part of the living present. In the "Prayer to Masks," Senghor enjoins his ancestor to "guard this place"—that was the sacred African soil. The ancestors are to guard it against perpetual colonial domination, and example of spiritual articulation for political gain. He also asks them to "purify the air of eternity, here where I breathe the air of my fathers." The poet compares his physical build to that of his ancestor—"You have composed this image, this my face that bends over the altar of white paper in the name of your image, listen to me." The importance of the Masks to almost all things the African does is emphasized by the attitude of the poet. He holds his ancestors responsible for his guidance, safety and aspirations. He makes an emotional appeal to them stressing to them that the latter must not disappoint him because the poet is the ancestor's image—"In the name of your image, listen to me," for the poet's goal is political.

Senghor pits African humanism against that of the West by over-praising the African's:

*For who else would teach rhythm to the world that  
has died of machines and cannons"*

In other words, it is only the African world that is sane. This is not true. The West is the world of technology—"cannons and machines." It is a world of wars, it is a world of wickedness. But one cannot assert that Africa is not violent, since violence is part of human nature. Most of "Masks" is spiritual in theme. Poets of Senghor's persuasion often glorify African traditions in order to express a sense of loss which resulted from European



conquest. The ultimate aim is therefore to show up the spiritual poverty of Europe:

*They call us men of death, but we are the men of  
dance  
Whose feet only gain power when they bear the soil.*

Our next poet is not particularly political. He is relevant to our discussion because his is a fine example of poetry that recognized the dual personality of the educated African: the man who was a meeting point between the African and the West. We need to see the African as Okara sees himself—the man who uses European techniques to attack European power while he remains firmly rooted in African soil. He is one of the first to use typically African elements—spiritual worlds of past and present, the life-death cycle, palm trees, jungle drums and maidenhood—to compose poems that describe African life in a state of flux. Gabriel Okara is a Nigerian of Ijo origin. He received only a secondary education, but advanced himself through private study. J.P. Clark, a fellow Ijo poet describes Okara as "no shallow sheet of water but a real Chameleon figure standing fast in his reflection of the outside world!" In his "Piano and Drums",<sup>9</sup> Okara symbolizes Western culture as a piano and the African as a drum. But the poet is merely juxtaposing the piano and drum to show how complex his own personality has become. Each of the two cultures has a place in the complex personality:

*When at break of day at a riverside I hear  
jungle drums telegraphing the mystic rhythm,  
urgent, raw  
like bleeding flesh, speaking of  
primal youth and the beginning  
I see the panther ready to pounce,  
the leopard snarling about to leap  
and the hunters crouch with spears poised.*

Okara is not dramatically political. Rather, his bent is cultural: he comments on himself and others like him whose 'personality' has suffered a jolt, a split owing to the admixture of the two worlds of experience—Africa and the West. The mistake he makes is to think that Africa is summed up in simple ways, primal youth that are illustrated in the drums, rhythmic dances, panther or the baby suckling on his mother's lap. Okara forgets that traditional Africa is complex in its own way.

The piano symbol represents the complexity of Western culture which Okara implies is opposed to African natural styles:

*Then I hear wailing piano  
Solo speaking of complex ways  
in tear-furrowed concerts;*

of far away lands.  
And new horizons with  
Coaxing diminuendo, counterpoint,  
crescendo. But lost in the labyrinth  
of its complexities, it ends in the middle  
of a phrase at a daggerpoint.

His use of the metaphor "daggerpoint," implies that there is the sudden, often unmelodic ending of a movement or phrase in a concerto.

As the poet carries in him the imprint of two cultures--one of the drum (Africa) and the other of the piano (West), in the same way the African elite harbors a dual and complex personality and is often "lost in the labyrinth of its complexities." The African elite often feels the conflict of cultures, not knowing who or what they are.

Yet one of the two cultures sustains the other in the African. Ezekiel Mphahlele, offers some advice on how the African can merge his two personalities to evolve a constructive African personality. In his revised edition of *The African Image*, Mphahlele writes:

*...the real African personality is a dialogue of two selves. A dialogue between two streams of consciousness: the present and the living past...The personality (with a capital 'p') that Nkrumah talked about was a beacon on the battlefield, a thrust, an assertion of the African's presence; it was a coming into consciousness of the African...The culture dynamics in African societies will have to define the African personality (with a small 'p') from time to time. At rational levels we have the choice to take control of things or coast along mindlessly... I have seen the survival, in the most urbanized ghettos of South Africa, of the toughest of traditional traits; the sense of community, the rituals surrounding birth, marriage and death, the theater that surrounds life generally...The intellectual may agonize about the distance between him and the stream of traditional life. He has the ability to select. We shall certainly see some of our traits die out, some revived, some modified.*<sup>10</sup>

The last of the contemporary poets under review is Christopher Okigbo, a fervent nationalist who died in 1967 in battle fighting for the now defunct Republic of Biafra against the Nigerian Army. He was one of those known to have imitated early twentieth century English poets such as Ezra Pound. He defended his imitation of others in a comment he made on his "Limits":

*My "Limits"...was influenced by everything and everybody...It is surprising how many lines of the "Limits" I am not sure are mine and yet do not know whose lines they were originally. But does it matter?*<sup>11</sup>



Regardless, he was a great African poet and a great defender of African cultural and political nationalism.

Religion is central to two volumes of Okigbo's poetry: *Heavensgate* and the *Limits*. He was anti-Catholic but in favor of indigenous African religion. He held Catholicism responsible for undermining African indigenous religion. He ridiculed the Pope and satirized his sacraments.

The first part of his *Heavensgate* is the poem "Idoto."<sup>12</sup>

*Before you, mother Idoto,  
naked I stand,  
Before your watery presence,  
a prodigal  
Leaving on an oilbean,  
Lost in your legend....*

The poem is an invocation to the goddess for inspiration and protection. The poet, like other African elite, had been unfaithful by first deserting his indigenous religion for foreign religion as represented by the Catholic Church. The Europeans are to blame for the misdirection of the Africans. The Europeans came to colonize Africa and Evangelize it, thus diverting the African from his traditions. Now that the African is conscious, he must return to his roots and embrace his religion. After all, Christianity is an offspring of Hebrew culture. Why should the African not embrace his own, the poet asks. The allusion to the prodigal son suggests that the African will return to his only salvation--African culture--in this world of "cannons and machines."

As the poet laments the death of his mother, it becomes, metaphorically, a lament for the death of indigenous culture. The mother image symbolizes tradition. Christianity had killed African traditions and poet mourns it in *Heavensgate*:<sup>13</sup>

*Me to the orangery  
Solitude invites,  
a wagtail, to tell  
the tangled-wood-tale  
a sunbird, to mourn  
a mother on a spray.*

The "sunbird" includes the dead mother, the goddess "Idoto," and the lost tradition in Africa. "White buck and helmet" (Christianity and colonialism satirized) were responsible for this loss of tradition.

In "Limits," the missionaries deliberately killed the "sunbird," which reminds us of the albatross. The poet reacts to the killing by spewing invectives on the missionaries. They



are the "beasts," "Malisons," "malediction," "bombast," "pomposity," and "pride," and the talons--possessed by birds of prey. The Church, which killed African culture is definitely, to Okigbo and all Africa, the "archtyrant" of the "holy sea"--a parody of the Holy See. Okigbo also employs mathematical symbols to lampoon church officials:

*Square yields the moron,  
fanatics and priests and popes,  
organizing secretaries and party managers;  
better still, the rhombus--  
brothers and deacons and liberal politicians  
and selfish self seekers  
and all who are good doing nothing at all;  
the quadrangle,  
the rest me and you.....*

By "liberal politicians" here Okigbo means those African authorities who tolerate the presence of Christianity despite the wrong it has done to Africa.

A group of contemporary poets has emerged since independence in the last decade who criticize African rulers, politicians and intellectuals for their roles in the mismanagement of modern Africa. Prior to independence, the Europeans were the common object of such satire and vilification. Most African nations, however, gained independence from colonial rule since the 1960's. Each new nation is experiencing a new set of problems--problems of development especially. Every country is rife with the abuse of public trust. Corruption and tyranny are rampant; fundamental human rights are suspended in order to repress political opposition in some countries. Therefore, culture and social progress suffer terribly. Whenever there is a collapse of authority in a country, the armed forces step in. The need for a sound national value system underlies the current African experience. The armed forces, too, lack depth and responsible alternative national ideology to replace the evil ones that necessitated their take-over. The nation is worse for it.

As the African poet watches the decline of his society, he documents what he sees, by recording both his own individual experience and revulsion and those of his compatriots thereby calling public attention to the ills in society. Most often he philosophizes while sorrowing for the breakdown of order, morality, culture, and progress. Because most of the contemporary poetry focuses on morality and civil disorders, it is elegiac in tone. The sensitive intellectual becomes alienated and goes into exile or lands in jail and those left at home clamor for saviors. The poet must ultimately complain about the breakdown of values.

Ghana is an example of an African country where the poet carries further the theme of cultural disharmony. In his "Exiles," Kofi Awoonor the Ghanaian poet says that those in

exile find nothing exciting to which they can return. The politicians at home had defiled sacred traditions. The poet is concerned with spiritual exile, for there are those Africans who are sensitive to the corrosion of culture. The main-stay of any society is its culture and to strip it away is death for the living and the conscious.

*Should they return home  
And face the fences the termites had eaten  
And see the dunghill that has mounted on their birthplace.*

Termites are destructive insects, which symbolize the evil forces that corrupt a society and leave it in ruins. They destroy what has been neglected by those who went into exile. Exiles want to return home to repair the damage others have done to culture. Those in exile were there in the first place because of the mismanagement at home. If they return they will find "dung hills" in their birthplaces. They must rediscover values they had lost. "They committed the impiety of self-deceit" because they enslaved the beleaguered people at home. Political harmony can only be attained after the sacred rites have been observed. The fabric of society is therefore its culture:

*...Wounded their souls  
And left the mangled remainder in manacles  
Before the sacred altar, alongside the sacrificial cock  
Whose crow woke the night sleepers at dawn.*

Africans need to cleanse themselves and re-unite in their culture by returning to the shrines of the ancestors to ask for forgiveness—"The ceremony of oneness is near." Awoonor continually stresses the importance of culture. It is integral to any social organization. This is the theme of his "Come, Let us Join" and "Rediscovery." Most of his poetry deals with this spiritual exile, the need to return from exile to correct and reconstruct their cultural "home." The white man's role in African affairs is only implied. "The Weaver Bird" is one of the very few poems that have a direct reference to white rule. Traditionally, the weaver bird builds. But it is equally destructive. In this instance, the bird comes to Africa—"they say it came from the west"—and it is allowed to build and lay eggs while the Africans watch, hoping that it would behave like the African traditional weaver bird:

*The weaver bird built in our house  
And laid its eggs on our only tree.  
We did not want to send it away  
We watched the building of the nest  
And supervised the egg-laying*

But the bird goes away only to come back to claim the house.



"The weaver returned in the guise of the owner preaching salvation to those that owned the house." The allegory in the poem is clear. The attitude of the bird is descriptive of how the West took over Africa. First, they came as explorers and next as evangelists. They "signed" treaties with African chiefs. All these led to territorial claims--the prelude to colonialism.

Seeking independence, the Africans reject European domination and reclaim the lost past:

*We look for new homes everyday,  
For new altars we strive to rebuild  
The old shrines defiled by the weaver's excrement.*

Kofi's other poems are only indirectly political. They deal mainly with culture and its degradation by the Church, its neglect by those who became assimilated into Western culture. The European carry the blame for the African's deviation from his own traditions. But Awoonor also finds fault in the Africans who have allowed themselves to be assimilated into Western culture.

In a collection of dramatic pieces, J.P. Clark, a Nigerian poet, presents the picture of a country set ablaze. I find in his poems themes of panic, fear, deprivation, distrust and death. He enriches his descriptions and messages with animistic symbols. The animal images illustrate human elements that are responsible for setting the country ablaze. In his *Casualties*, the poem "Seasons of Omens"<sup>14</sup> portrays Nigeria in a state of anarchy. Fears and panic build up and their vibrations touch every corner of the nation. The country is plagued by arson because the people are dissatisfied with the administration of their national affairs:

*When calabashes held petrol and men  
turned faggots in the street  
then came the five hunters.*

To carry petrol (gas) in calabashes as an expression of discontent is a very bad omen in Africa--Molotov cocktail Nigerian style. "Calabashes" are ornamented bowls made out of gourds. The calabash is an article for divination and the expression of joy. It is a container for food or drinking water for the sustenance of life. But now, it is disdained and used to harbor death. Such an act does not augur well for Nigeria. Ezekiel Mphahlele comments on the cultural essence of the "calabash" in happy times, especially in marriage and betrothals:

*A calabash holds fresh water or milk or beer--all  
sources of nourishment, a possible expression of generosity.  
These suggest the woman's womb, her giving and receiving  
capacities. The calabash is smooth on the outside; a down  
easily on it. The calabash is fragile: a woman should not  
be kicked around.*<sup>15</sup>



But in Clark's poem the "calabash" represents disharmony in Nigeria. The five hunters are the original five Nigerian military officers who planned and overthrew the democratically elected but inept Federal civilian government. The government's irresponsibility plunged the country into anarchy. "Mansions" and "limousines" were set on fire "in sunset cities." This is a reference to the then Western region of Nigeria. As a sign of the time, residential homes of noted individuals were set ablaze. Western Nigeria started the Nigerian political crises when the ranking officials of the ruling party there were at odds with one another. The Federal government did not arbitrate soon enough and fairly. It sided with one group against the other, all for a short term political advantage.

The army seized power. Those authorities, symbolized as "antelopes, lions, and jackals" lost their lives in the uprising. The civilian leaders had not prepared for the uprising since they held the country in contempt. Some of them—"antelopes"—were sleeping, while the "lions" snored and others were making merry at night clubs. Panic seized the country and people from the Eastern region of the country fled home in hundreds. This is the subject of the poem "Exodus":

*They flee the altar who in  
the ceremony of forging the faggot  
Danced around the anvil, swung  
the heaviest hammer.*

Distrust was common among personal friends, and among ethnic groups. Personal friends refused to confide in each other, each fearing betrayal of his own ethnic group. This is vividly illustrated from the poet's personal experience recorded in "Casualties" when the poet met in London with Chinua Achebe, a fellow Nigerian artist of a different ethnic origin--Ibo. Both writers had been good friends but could not see eye to eye during the crisis. In his other ode—the "Song," Clark reminisces:

*I can look the Sun in the face  
But the friends that I have lost  
I dare not look at any yet I have held  
them all in my arms, shared with them  
the same bath and bed. Often  
Devouring the same dish...*

The enormity of the Nigerian situation becomes clearer when one imagines the impingement of the sun on the eyes. Yet the intensity of the existing hostility among friends is greater. But the poet evinces a tone of love towards his friends. They were close in those days when to eat together out of the same dish signified African "oneness" and trust.

In "Aburi and After," the military leaders of the warring factions met outside their country to attempt to find a solution

to the national crisis. They met at Aburi, a city in Ghana. The meeting ended inconclusively. The leaders agreed at first on a dangerous proposition which they called "confederation." But the soldiers knew each other's intentions in "Scowls" and "masks"—symbols of deceit and distrust:

*...only  
when bones were wrenched out of joint  
in the court of a stranger,  
Did we walk to the scowl  
of implacable masks...*

From here on Nigeria tottered precipitously towards total collapse.

In "The Burden in Boxes," J.P. Clark describes the reality that eluded many in the country. The reality is that the "gifts"—a metaphor for the military ascendancy—were intended to remove political chaos in the country. But the gift constitutes "burden in the boxes"—the murdered political leaders whose deaths were later to be avenged. Those who killed them were from the eastern section of the country where no political leader was killed. The partiality to the Eastern axis of the country is explained by "Seasons of Omens" where each of the five leaders of the coup "read in the plan a variant."

In "Skulls and Cups," the poet writes:

*Look J.P.  
How do you tell a skull  
from another? asked Obi.*

.....  
*How does one tell a cup on the floor  
From another, when the spirit is emptied?  
And the goblets are legion  
Broken upon the fields after Nsukka.*

Nsukka was one of the major battlefields where hundreds of lives were lost. Nsukka symbolizes a field of destruction, violence and death. Also in his "Dirge" there is hardly a home in the country which does not lose a soul. The tragedy is widespread and shared by all. In "The Locust Hunt," genocide is committed against individuals of the then eastern Nigerian origin. These are the Ibo, hunted as "Locusts" in the then northern axis of the country. The Ibo, the poet suggests, behaved in some respects like locusts—ambitious, blindly loyal, aggressive, and destructive. It was the army officers of their origin that executed the first coup, but a few of them made some mistakes that were later to haunt the country. But other groups in the country were not without blame. The Hausas and Fulanis of



the north went after the Ibos, hunting them "down to women and children/with mortar matchet, with broomsticks and rackets/in shops, in streets, in offices/and also in courts and convents." Not even the "Weaverbird" was spared. He was shot and killed at Akwebe--a field of battle in the east of the country.

The weaverbird is the Nigerian poet Christopher Okigbo, who fought along with his people, the Ibos, as a Major in the Biafran army. Yet there was the "Benin Sacrifice," in which soldiers caught looting or molesting civilians are killed by a firing squad in a historic spot in Benin, a city in the mid-west state of the country. These killings take place as if the victims are ordinary animals. Both the killings perpetuated by the Ibos, or by the rest of the country against the Ibos, during the unrest simply shows the bestiality in human nature. The poet attempts to arouse our awareness and condemnation of the horror of war, its ignominy, its dirt and of those who master-mind it. War is an enemy of humanity, of his harmony and of his progress. Satirizing the base elements in man, the poet recalls the festive mood of people on the day of the public execution in Benin:

*Before a full arena  
Adorned by governor, trader, and  
Parlour wife, two rams are led  
Hoofed to stakes, anchored  
to barrels of sand...*

The two soldiers condemned to death are "rams" for sacrifice. Their death, ironically, is an atonement for peace. One death is legitimate, the other not. An elegiac mood prevails over the country in "The Rain of Events." Both "the friends/that we have lost/the kins we see no more/and those who were at home/on sea, air, and land" drift and drown together. All these sum up the poetic themes of the tragedy and death in Nigerian politics.

J.P.Clark also criticizes his fellow intellectuals for their indifference. He writes: "To My Academic Friends who sit tight on their Doctoral Theses and have no chair for Poet or Inventor."

*You who will drive forward  
But look to the rear mirror  
Look at the crashes and  
Casualties holding up traffic  
To the market. He drives  
Well who arrives  
Again and again with fresh goods.*

The "crashes" and "casualties" Clark mentions imply the frailties of Nigeria's body politic. The country is torn apart by ethnic hatred fueled mostly by politicians. Such divisiveness slows

national progress—"...holding up traffic/to the market." But what do the intellectuals do to arrest the divisiveness? Many of them sit tight saying nothing. They are afraid to speak up. They compromise integrity with corruption in order to save their necks and their jobs. The point is that in a society where the majority are un-lettered, intellectuals in the society are a privileged group who should know right from wrong. They should speak up in order to foster strong, enlightened public opinion.

In the "Casualties," the elegy that mourns the Nigerian tragedy, J.P.Clark says that the casualties of the civil war are not only those who died or were wounded, or those whose property is lost or those who suffered directly from it. They are also the intellectuals whose silence encourages the upheaval.

*The casualties are many, and a good number well  
Outside the scenes of ravage and wreck;  
They were the emissaries of rift,  
So smug in smoke-rooms they haunt abroad,  
They are the wandering minstrels who, beating on  
The drums of the human heart, draw the world  
Into a dance with rites it does not know.*

Who are these "emissaries of rift"? Who are the "wandering minstrels"? They are the intellectuals. They are ambassadors, propagandists. They travel abroad in their pretty suits, living in cozy hotels, meeting in "smug" and "smoke-rooms" with foreign government representatives. The smoke-rooms are places of pleasure. While the intellectuals are smoking, drinking and dining, the people for whom they obtain arms and ammunition are busy dying and killing one another. This is what Wole Soyinka, another Nigerian poet, calls the current cycle of human tragedy.

*By taxes and rumours, the looters for office  
And wares, fearful everyday the owners may return,  
We are all casualties,  
All sagging as are  
The cases celebrated for kwashiorkor,  
The unforeseen camp-follower of not just our war.*

Wole Soyinka's own account centers on alienation; the loss of individual freedom, especially that of the poet. Soyinka suffered incarceration under the Federal government for allegedly siding with "Biafra" during the war. He was detained for two years in the northern sector of the country from where his personal experiences were written into poetry and novels. He saw wrong-doings on both sides of the war and mustered both national and international pressure groups to head off the national disaster. Yet he suffered inhumanly for the cause of truth he stood for. His prison poems are indicative of the savagery of wars and those who will expose it in "Live Burial":<sup>16</sup>



*Sixteen paces  
By twenty-three. They hold  
Siege against humanity  
And truth  
Employing time to drill through to his sanity .*

.....  
*Seal him live  
In that same necropolis  
May his ghost mistress  
Point the classic  
Route to outsiders' Stygian Mysteries.*

*Bulletin.  
He sleeps well, eats  
well. His doctors note  
No damage  
Our plastic surgeons tend his public image.*

*Confession  
Fiction? Is truth not essence  
of Art, and fiction Art?  
Let it rust  
We kindly borrowed his poetic license*

Wole Soyinka was a loner in search of truth. "Live Burial" shows his encounter with the military "establishment" in his country. The military alienated him from society at least temporarily--by locking him up in a tiny enclosure--"sixteen paces/by twenty three." But it is not Wole Soyinka as a person that was imprisoned; rather, it is what he represents--TRUTH. The military held "Seige" against the symbol of the "truth." The military had engaged in reprisals against "Biafrans" and Wole Soyinka as an artist feels that the truth about the reprisals must be exposed. Art must not condone injustice to humanity because justice is the first order of humanity itself. The poet suffers for his patriotism because he defended humanity and not a particular interest. And his patriotism was no less than J.P.Clark's who supported the government. Both represent the contemporary African's poetic tendencies--patriotism and individual choice and freedom.

FOOTNOTES

1. Gladys Casely-Hayford, "Rejoice," *West Africa Verse*, ed. Donatus Nwoga (London: Longmans 1969), p.5. All Pioneer and Pilot poems discussed in this essay are taken from this edition.
2. Nwoga, p.11
3. Nwoga, p.17
4. Nnamdi Azikiwe, *Renasant Africa* (London: Frank Cass and Co., 1937), p.117
5. Alfred Zanker, "Black Africa Finds Slow Going Trying to Make it Alone," *U.S. News and World Report*, 75 (December 30, 1973), p.62
6. Abioseh Nicol, "The Meaning of Africa," *Contemporary African Literature*, ed. Edris Makward and Leslie Lacy (New York: Random House, 1972, pp.310-312.
7. Nwoga, p.111
8. Leopold Sedar Senghor, "Prayer To Masks," *Modern Poetry from Africa*, ed. Gerald Moore and Ulli Beier (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1966) pp. 53-54.
9. Nwoga, p. 36.
10. Ezekiel Mphahlele, *The African Image* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1974), pp. 70-72.
11. 'Transition Conference Questionnaire', *Transition*, II, 5 (July - August 1962), 12.
12. Nwoga, p. 50
13. Christopher Okigbo, *Heavensgate* (Ibadan: Mbari Publications, 1962).
14. P. Clark, *Casualties* (New York: African Publishing Corp., 1970), pp.11-12. All poems of J.P. Clark's discussed in this essay are taken from this edition.
15. Mphahlele, *Voices in the Whirlwind*, p.3.
16. Wole Soyinka, *A Shuttle in the Crypt* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), pp. 60-61
17. Soyinka, *Idanre* pp. 49-55

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