

THE AESTHETICS OF CREATIVE COMMUNICATION IN AFRICAN PERFORMANCE SITUATIONS

Kofi Emmeleh Agovi

Since the appearance of Ruth Finnegan's *Oral Literature in Africa*, in part a decisive response to the misconceptions of the unwritten literature of Africa, no one seems to have really pursued the full aesthetic implications of her observations, although a 'Performance School' of folklore researchers has emerged.² Earlier scholars of this school, notably, Nketia (1964; 1970; 1971), Philip Noss (1970; 1984) and Harold Scheub (1970; 1986) focussed their writings almost exclusively on the relationship between the artist, his material and his techniques of exposition as he interacts with a live audience in the performance situation. This approach was intended to underline the individuality of the traditional artist's creativity as well as his improvisational skills in the actual moment of the performance. It also helped to consolidate views on the traditional artist's originality, the communal authorship or otherwise of the material and, equally significant, his relevance as a symbol of artistic and cultural continuity in his society. The complexity in unravelling such creative relationships in the total artistic product has been captured by Harold Scheub's apt description of the performance situation as a 'unique and evanescent phenomenon'.³

This paper, then, is concerned with the concept of 'performance' in traditional African literary and dramatic contexts. It attempts to analyse it as a complex, communicative event or a complex creative phenomenon in which the artist establishes a creative relationship between his ima-

gination, his message and his audience through the harmonisation of various media of expression. It will examine whether in this relationship there is a distinctive individuality to the overall process in a way which emphasises the existence of an original talent and vision of the artist. It will follow up with a discussion of intended reactions and critical evaluations of a target audience and come to some conclusions with regard to their aesthetic implications and relevance in the context of the performance situation.

The development of 'performance traditions' in several African societies which, according to Nketia, 'give scope to specialists to perform on their own, and on their own technical level' has also led to important studies that seek to emphasise art traditions and their institutional framework in African societies. Such contextual studies have revealed important relationships between social and cultural factors and performance, including especially the effect of oral tradition on composition and transmission of artistic material. In the process, this has eventually led to a 'new' perception of the organisation of the arts in relation to performance. Peggy Harper for example, has observed that 'within the range of arts traditional to Nigeria's indigenous cultures, the visual, musical, kinetic and poetic arts do not merely relate. they 'inter-penetrate' to the point of merging into an inseparable whole as they meet their audience in the activity of performance'.⁶ In Richard Dorson's view,

"the bard and the narrator facing their live audience employ gestures, eye contact, intonation, pantomime, histrionics, acrobatics and sometimes costumes and props as the author of written words never does".⁷ In effect, writes Harold Scheub, "the drama of performance is an effort to capture both the ritual, the graphic images of transformation, and, more importantly, the fierce focussing of venerable emotions on contemporary change".⁸ A major concern of this paper is to examine the inter-relation of performer, audience, setting and content material in stipulated occasions and, in particular, the interplay of communication and aesthetics in the 'drama of performance'.

In more recent developments, Dan Ben-Amos has argued in his seminal paper, "Toward a definition of folklore in context", that folklore is 'not an aggregate of things, but a process - a communicative process, to be exact'. It is not only 'an artistic action', but it also involves 'creativity and aesthetic response, both of which converge in the art forms themselves'.⁹ These ideas, in a way, seem to have greatly influenced Richard Bauman in his study of *Verbal Art as Performance*.¹⁰ In addition to his view of performance as 'artistic action' and 'artistic event ... involving performer, art form, audience and setting - both of which are basic to the developing performance approach', he conceives of the performance situation as basically 'a mode of language, a way of speaking'. Although he limits the scope of his study to 'verbal, spoken art', his overall insights are particularly relevant to the concerns of this paper in its multi-media approach to the problem of creative communication in performance contexts. First, is Bauman's contention that verbal communication assumes the 'responsibility to an audience for a display of communicative competence'. Second, it involves 'accountability on the part of a performer to an audience for the way in which communication is carried out, above and beyond its referential content'. Third, from the point of view of the

audience, the act of expression is 'subject to evaluation for the way it is done, for the relative skill and effectiveness of the performer's display of competence'. And finally, performance is 'marked as available for the enhancement of experience, through the present enjoyment of the intrinsic qualities of the act of expression itself'.

These considerations seem to have decisive implications for the artist's creativity, originality and transmission processes. This will be a central concern of this paper. Moreover, there is now the need, as Bauman has also pointed out, to expand 'the conceptual content of folkloric performance as a communicative phenomenon, beyond the general usage that has carried us up to this point'.¹¹ It is in this regard that the following problems become important to the focus and analysis attempted in this paper: how do traditional African literary artists organise their material to establish communication lines in performances? Are such communication lines affected by aesthetic considerations or by considerations of function? How do Africans conceive of their creativity and originality in the performance situation? What is their idea of a good performance? How do they assess artistic events performed within a single location?

The owners and creators of traditional African literature were never in any doubt of the answers to these questions. African societies have always known that verbal expression, even in the most prosaic context, communicates effectively when embellished by other forms of expression. They have also known that creative texts and utterances have no validity until they have been made to communicate in the performance situation. This is because it is the performance occasion which gives birth to the communication idea, the situation in which sound, movement, words and visual effects are harmonised for men to relate to an integrated level of ideas, thought and feeling at a given location or place.

KINDS OF PERFORMANCE SITUATIONS

Three performance situations may be identified in terms of creative activity in African societies. There is first the performance situation which focuses attention on the individual artist, allowing him to exhibit his skills and artistry completely on his own. He occupies the centre stage because he is the prime mover of the occasion, as for instance, in the performance of a Griot, story-teller, or a poet-drummer. Second, on recreational and festive occasions a number of creative artists may perform together as the focus of attention in the performance occasion. They may either perform independently of each other or groups of artists with related idioms of expression may find it necessary to pool resources together for an integrated performance. In this context, the performance occasion may permit the contextual organisation of related forms of expression which are then effectively integrated to express a coherent set of ideas, thought and feeling for the benefit of the audience. Finally, a performance occasion may consist of a dominating central event such as a ritual or ceremonial occasion, whose primary motivation is subsequently supported, highlighted or given additional expression by creative performances organised in relation to the central event. Creative performances in this context simultaneously become integral and ancillary events to the occasion which motivates the performance.

In all these situations, a single, contiguous location or area is necessary. Such a location has the effect of promoting an integrated audience response and reaction to the performance occasion. Where several performing groups find themselves in the same contiguous area, they are induced to be conscious of 'other' groups thereby engendering a competitive spirit which may otherwise be absent in a single-artist performance. Another important characteristic of such performance situations is that a complex communication

context is provoked in which composite expression becomes important. In other words, a central idea (to be expressed in a given form) is brought into creative harmony with other related forms of expression; these are in turn intended to reinforce the central idea in order to realise its full communication potential in the performance situation. So, for composite expression to take place there is need for one single artistic form to interact with other related forms. The result of this process is the communication idea, a coherent and compact entity which may then be impressed on the audience through a network of communication symbols.

Interestingly, two features of African languages seem to demonstrate a tendency towards 'composite meaning' through their expression in specific contexts. These are the ideophone and the proverb. According to Noss (1984), the semantic possibilities of the Gbaya ideophone in narrative sessions may include sensations of feeling, smell, touch, sight or emotion.¹² Thus among the Nzema of South-West Ghana, if it is said that *ɔɔble aze tuu* - "he fell down *tuu*", or when in a folktale the narrator says *ovandenle kadeba la ane ɔɔla aze tuu* - "when he lifted spider (in anger) the latter fell down *tuu*", it reveals an ironic contrast between the weight, size and density of the object and the intensity and duration of its fall. The humour which emerges is the result of the impact between two physical entities - the spider and the earth - whose densities are unequal. Associated with this physical impact are other visual images such as ease of fall and the expression of pain on the face of a mischievous character. These are intended to reinforce the central effect of humour. Thus, while the ideophone itself is a verbalised sound unit, its total context of use may evoke non-verbal semantic units. The central idea embodied in a given sound is reinforced or amplified by physical, emotional and visual settings of meaning suggested by the context of use. In other words, a multi-

ple non-verbal image is evoked to support an essentially verbal-centred sound unit.

The same feature is shared by the proverb in African creative discourse. The African proverb always seems to evoke a central image in a given situation or context. The central image of laziness in the following Tiv proverb - a pregnant woman with a hoe is like a cow climbing a hill¹³ - becomes significant only because it gives rise to other ideas and values which strengthen or complement the total effect. While the central image is visual in character and is the result of a versatile verbal painting, the other reinforcing ideas that give it validity and depth of meaning belong to the realm of reflection, abstraction and thought. Although the sarcasm of the Tiv proverb is as wry and painful as the physical act of movement in the proverb, a moral question is also evoked: is it right to expect a pregnant woman to work? A pregnant woman burdened with child is not only physically lazy but she is not expected, in that condition, to be hard at work on the farm, however necessary it may be to grow food. A moral evaluation therefore is clearly embodied in the visual image of laziness. Thus, as was argued in relation to the ideophone, a verbalised semantic unit may give rise to a "composite" pattern of meaning which involves visual and abstract entities as a major stylistic feature.

In performance situations where individual artists or groups of performing artists are the centre of attention, the concern is not with composite meaning. The emphasis is rather shifted to composite expression as a process of realising an integrated communication idea. In the performance situation, the individual creative artist who constitutes the focus of attention, is faced with a complex network of relationships, attitudes and expectations that he has to resolve. He has to establish a distinctive control over his medium of expression and evoke credibility as an artist. It is in

fulfilment of these expectations that the idea of 'composite expression' in the performance situation becomes perhaps the most relevant and practical concept for the performing artist in traditional African society.

COMPOSITE EXPRESSION

An awareness of the aggregate demands of an artist's medium is important. As Noss (1970) has indicated, it is imperative for the Gbaya narrator to combine and harmonise the skills of the dramatist, actor, public relations officer, dancer and musician in order to realise his idea of a 'beautiful' or successful tale.¹⁴ Similarly, for a dancer in the ring to respond to the challenge to dramatise, interpret and communicate emotion and ideas simultaneously he has to combine movement skills with an ear for music, a feel for acting, colour, costume and props and a live sensitivity to the mood of the audience,¹⁵ while 'eloquence' in song also imposes, in the performance situation, requirements of the skills of an actor, dancer, visual artist and public relations officer. These demands on the artist's perception of and sensitivity to his medium lead to the creation of a communication situation where the development of effective methods of communicating his intentions and vision becomes necessary. These methods necessarily involve a reliance on the integration of various other forms of artistic expression in complementary relationship to each other. The total effect is to transform his performance into an act with a distinctive 'personality' of its own, as is indeed expected by the audience. The Yoruba *dundun* for example is primarily an instrumental concept which is realised in a music occasion. However, when the performance starts, it quickly becomes more than an instrumental concept; it becomes an act of public homage in praise, chant, dance, and historical narrative that raises the whole performance into a dis-

tinctive form of political drama. According to Akin Euba the Iyalu drum - the principal drum in the *dundun* orchestra - 'may be fittingly described as a dramatic "actor" combining with others to produce a show which has a more than musical interest'.¹⁶ The central message of homage is enhanced or reinforced by related ideas in dance, chant and spectacle. Similarly, an *Apae* performance - an occasion for Executioners' poetry at the Court of the Asantehene - may be transformed from the basic motivation of praise and adulation into a dramatic act of political and historical affirmation through mime, costume, dance and the use of props in complementary roles to the primary verbal performance. In these contexts, distinctiveness finds expression in the total end-effect of a given performance. It is the result of a successful blending process of several artistic elements or forms stamped on the performance by the personality and ingenuity of the artist.

An interesting aspect of this situation is that these 'other forms' of expression are intended by the artist to add significant dimensions of meaning to the central message of the performance, particularly in terms of helping to create or shape appropriate moods, responses and attitudes to the central message or idea. As Kwesi Yankah has indicated of an Akan *Apae* performance, a reciter for example,

... may either stand idle in front of the Chief or stand a few meters away from the Chief and move dramatically towards him as he recites. With a sword in his right hand the *apae* performer (*jobrafo*) gesticulates and mimes, makes faces, and forms such facial configurations as would depict (and shape) the mood of the poem he recites...¹⁷

The use of gesture, poses, facial expressions, colour and props, sometimes interlaced with dance movements in a libation performance may suggest deliberate levity or seriousness, solemnity or laughter,

intensity or dullness and in this way sharply define audience attitude to the core verbal message. Subsequently, an audience's instant and vocal evaluation of a performance - in the form of ululations, honorific gestures and spontaneous participation - becomes important aesthetic expressions on the quality of the performance and the effectiveness of the composite communication process adopted by the artist. Nevertheless, for the literary artist to impose a distinctive personality on his performance, he has to be always in firm control of the performance, controlling and influencing audience participation and reaction. For, in the final analysis, it is the artist's hidden intentions of levity, humour, satire and/or moral earnestness which prevail, and it is through these dramatic elements compositionally formulated that those hidden intentions are revealed and communicated to an immediate audience.

COMPOSITE COMMUNICATION

An important encapsulation, on a rather panoramic scale, of the phenomenon of composite communication is the ceremonial occasion in Africa. The installation of a chief, conferment of chieftaincy titles, *darbar* of chiefs, rituals of the traditional state, and festivals are occasions for the display and performance of various forms of artistic activities. In effect, there is always a central event to the ceremonial occasion. This event usually takes place in one location very often in full view of the public either in the village square, in the chief's palace or any other place recognised by the society for ceremonial events. Normally, creative and dramatic activities are performed in support of the main event of the ceremonial occasion in the sense of dramatising values central to the occasion.

A significant event in the Nzema *Kundum* - a festival of expiation and reconciliation among the people of South West Ghana - is the performance of the *Audlene* song

contest. It is a performance intended to extol achievement and exorcise laziness, crime and evil from the society through the medium of verbal insults, praise texts and dramatised postures.¹⁸ Alongside this main event is the performance of drumming and dancing as part of the *Awudiene*. Since the poetic contest and the drumming and dancing session take place simultaneously in one location, the performance context seems to insist on a fusion of these apparently 'separate' performances. In the minds of participants, the music and dance can neither be separated from the *Awudiene* performance nor can the *Awudiene* be meaningfully appreciated without regard to the music and dance at the other side of the performance arena. In this situation, the participant or observer is compelled to take account of all these performances at the same time in order to properly define his sense of the occasion.

Similarly, among the Mbieri Ibo of Imo State, Nigeria, the *Okoroshia* masquerade is an occasion for celebrating a sense of social proportion through the harmony of dance, music, song and spectacle. It emphasises a sense of beauty and leisure through a deliberate fusion of dramatic, verbal and non-verbal elements that are constituted into a coherent communication idea. At the performance itself, the ear, eye and mind of the audience are simultaneously and variously subjected to a kind of competition for attention and control. There is first a group of instrumentalists whose ensemble consist of talking drums, metal gongs and wooden percussives. They play complex and demanding rhythms whose verbal basis constitutes a world of meaning within the total performance. A short distance away, is an enclosure of women singers who clap, dance and ululate in addition to what their songs have to say. Finally, when the different masquerades begin to appear and dance in the arena one by one, there is a flow of colour, costume and props which go with vigorous dance

expressions intended to reflect the character-interpretation of each mask. Movement patterns, verbalisations and visual elements therefore combine to make total demands on the attention and judgement of the audience. The diversity of performance elements seems to offer the audience the freedom of choice as to what to watch, listen to or evaluate. However, this freedom is constrained by the central focus of the performance - entertainment and moral education which insists on a unified and coherent communication idea or message. In this context, the audience is compelled to take account of all these diverse elements together in order to derive a sense of a coherent idea or message of the performance.

Sometimes the process of realising such an idea or message may be made less or more difficult for the audience depending on the scope and complexity of a given occasion. At a recent chieftaincy - title conferment occasion in Isiekenesi in the Ideato Local Government Area of Imo State, Nigeria,²⁰ the grandeur and spectacle of verbal, non-verbal and dramatic performances, built on a corresponding design of repetition, gave rise to a communication situation whose complexity and elaborateness tended to confuse audience concentration. The central tenet of the occasion - praise and acknowledgement of personal achievement - was given simultaneous expression in several related performances. Praise, for example, was recited and enacted in song, on horns, drums and wooden instruments. It was also expressed in dance formations by women and male groups (often accompanied by songs and instrumental arrangements) or choreographed in stylised movements that dramatised values of bravery, courage and group discipline. There were instrumental groups, song groups and groups which combined song and instrumentation, each enhancing the sense of dignity and achievement intended by the occasion. And finally, the wealth of information in colour, finery, decorations, props and

regalia - principally in the form of beads, eagle feathers, caps, stools, fly whisks, bracelets and amulets - constituted a 'spectacle of ideas' that also created its own demands on the attention of the audience. Given this panorama of seemingly 'isolated' performances, members of the audience were kept in perpetual motion, moving from one performance to the other, in an apparent attempt to take in aspects of all the performances. The competition for audience attention and its continued retention therefore became more lively in this context and necessarily gave rise to the finest exhibition of competitive skills by all the groups. Whether the performance was visual, aural or kinetic, a certain degree of excellence was required to attract and keep an audience in search of its idea of a 'good' performance. Consequently although the incidence of audience mobility was high, the degree of audience participation at any of the performances was a good indication of the kind of artistic excellence on display. In other words, a communication situation was brought into play which enabled participants to make common comparisons and common aesthetic judgements of all the performances. These judgements or standards necessarily had to be applied across the board, in a uniform manner and in a way which would psychologically reflect the unitary character of the total performance because to the audience, each of these creative events shared the common vision of the occasion. In such a situation, the standards for judging 'a good performance', even in the context of distinctive or related artistic forms may not be as varied as one would expect. Normal distinctions and creative standards associated with distinctive forms may, in a sense, be either suspended, compromised or relaxed in accordance with the expectations of a given performance occasion. Where this happens, the success or strength of the communication idea becomes a good indication of the quality of the fusion process which has taken place in

support of the main theme of the occasion.

THE ARTIST'S CREATIVITY

Performance occasion then is a crucial concept in the formulation, interpretation and evaluation of traditional literary and dramatic performances. Indeed, the ability of a performance occasion to evoke a dominant communication idea or message from a multiplicity of related artistic forms has important consequences both for the literary artist and his audience. For the latter, it is an occasion that compels a unique form of communication in which their sense of the beautiful is realised on a number of artistic levels. It is also a time for establishing a communication situation in which cherished ideas and values are enacted or affirmed, enabling each member of the audience to acknowledge and accept his essential relatedness to the corporate community. For the literary artist, on the other hand, the performance occasion enables him to realise his creativity and celebrate his immortality in the minds of his audience. It is a framework for the flowering of the artist's creativity in terms of his communication idea or vision. It provides the means for establishing a relationship between imagination and manipulation and is the occasion for arousing the audience to take note of important values of the immediate occasion.

Thus the creative artist in the performance situation has to be aware of complementary forms of expression that can help him realise his creative idea effectively. In addition, he has to acquire the basic skill to blend and integrate all the complementing forms of expression into one coherent artistic product. And, it is in this formidable task of the moment - the process of creating harmony, composing his vision through the careful selection, deployment and integration of related forms - that his creativity and originality may be appreciated. The novelty of his message and the distinctiveness of his vision depend to a large

extent on this process of composition, of blending and harmonising in judicious proportions, the artistic ingredients that complement the demands of the specific medium. Thus the composition which takes place for example in a story-telling session may not only be the narrator's cleverness with words or his ability to 'renew' a tale through an imaginative verbal painting or his ability to relate a tale to an audience. That of the singer or libator may not necessarily lie in the creative use of voice or the emotional sharpness of the verbal content. Composition, upon which the creativity and originality of the literary artist is judged in African societies is the sum-total of a certain creative complex or essence arising out of the artist's skill in deploying verbal and non-verbal elements appropriate to his chosen medium and vision. For a literary work to be considered successful, beautiful or relevant, it ought to achieve a distinctive personality of its own, a personality which depends on a telling harmony between sound, movement, words and visual effects for man to relate to an integrated level of ideas, thought and feeling, as already observed.

CONTENT OR FORM?

This creative complex or essence is even suggested by the recognised names and titles that traditional society bestowed on its artists. The Kabyle Berbers of Algeria call their traditional poets *Iferrahen* - 'those who rejoice, who give joy to mankind and sing of universal experience'. The Court poets of Bini in Nigeria are known as *Ugboron* - 'men of Heavensgate' and the Griots of Senegal, Gambia, Mali and Guinea are known as *Nyanakala* - 'the memory of mankind'. Similarly, the Nzema of South-West Ghana call their poet-cantors *Ezomen-lena* - 'the silent rememberers', while the appellation of the Atupan drum poet of the Akan of Ghana is *Odumkoma Kyerema* - 'God's Tongue' or the 'Creator's Drummer'. These names and titles, few as they are here, are suggestive of the emphasis on the poet's message rather than on his primary

mode of presentation. Since the traditional society shared the artist's profound concern with significant communication it recognised the artist by names that identified the artist with the creative content of his art. A system of recognition based on the significance of the artist's message or communication idea made content rather than form a more important consideration in the creative process of the traditional artist. Moreover, in the immediate context of performance the artist becomes more concerned with communication as a system of effective ways and means than anything else because he is compelled to enter into a dialogue with an immediate audience that attaches importance to content expression in literary performances. In addition it is also a means of acknowledging the artist's allegiance to communication as an expressive tool of his creativity. The artist and those who assess him regard communication as a process of effective selection, deliberation and integration towards the emergence of a coherent message. Since quality of the message depends on a 'blending process', the concept of composite structuring becomes important. It enables the artist to free his vision from an obsession with form in order to concentrate on a cohesive perception of a creative process that stresses the relationship between ear, eye and mind.

CONCLUSION

Consequently a primary aesthetic consideration in traditional African society is a belief in the integration of the senses as a prerequisite for total creative intercourse. The literary artist realises his creativity and vision only in the performance situation where irrespective of his chosen medium, he stretches skill and imagination to deploy verbal and non-verbal elements in one sustained attempt to appeal to the 'total man' in terms of his ear, eye, feelings and mind all at the same time. A commitment to a composite realisation of art in the performance situation therefore is, in effect, a commentary on the literary artist's profound awareness of

the need to appeal to the total man through a creative process in which there is a progressive ordering and integration of man's senses and perceptions towards meaning and relevance.

NOTES

1. This paper was first presented at the Yaounde Conference on Oral Literature organised by Project Guelp, University of Yaounde, Cameroon from 28th January - 1st February, 1985. Both the title and text of the paper have been modified in this version.
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4. J.H. Kwabena Nketia, 1979. African traditions of folklore, in *Internationale Gesellschaft für Ethnologie*, Band 4, Austria: Manzsche Verlags. pp. 223-4.
5. See Nketia, 1963, *Drumming in Akan Communities*. Edinburgh, Thomas Nelson and Sons; 1966, *Music in African Cultures*. University of Ghana, Legon. p. 22-32; 1970, *The Creative Arts and the Community*, in *Proceedings of the Ghana Academy of Arts and Sciences*, Vol. VIII., Accra.
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7. Richard M. Dorson, ed. 1972. *African Folklore*. New York, p.11.
8. Harold Scheub, 1985. African oral tradition and literature, in *The African Studies Review* Vol.28, No.2 and 3. Florida: African Studies Association, p.3.
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10. Richard Bauman, 1977. *Verbal Art as Performance*. Massachusetts: Newbury House Publishers Inc., pp. 4-11.
11. R. Bauman, op.cit. p.4.
12. Philip Noss, 1984. The ideophone in Bible translation: child or step-child? Paper presented at the United Bible Societies Translation Workshop in Stuttgart, p.5.
13. Personal Communication from one of my students in the University of Calabar, Nigeria in 1983.
14. Philip Noss, 1970. The performance of the Gbaya tale, in *Research in African Literatures*, Vol.1, No.1. pp. 45-48.
15. Kofi Agovi, 1974. *Observations on the aesthetics of traditional African literature*. Legon, Institute of African Studies, p. 10.
16. Olatunji Akin Euba, 1974. *Dundun Music of the Yoruba*. Vol.1. Ph.D. thesis, University of Ghana, Institute of African Studies, p. 530.
17. Kwesi Yankah, 1983. To praise or not to praise the King: The Akan *Apɔɔɛ* in the context of referential poetry, in *Research in African Literatures* Vol. 14, No.3, p. 385.
18. See Kofi Agovi, 1979. *Kundum: Festival Drama Among the Ahanta-Wee of South-West Ghana*, Ph.D. Thesis. University of Ghana, Institute of African Studies, p.206.
19. The result of field research conducted in the area in December, 1983.
20. Part of field research conducted in August, 1984.
21. Quoted from Kofi Agovi, *The Poet's Politics in African society*. Paper presented at the Conference of New Writing in Africa, Commonwealth Institute, London, 1st - 4th November, 1984. pp.7-8.