THE MATTER AND MANNER OF MODERN WEST AFRICAN POETRY IN ENGLISH: A STUDY OF OKIGBO, CLARK, AWOONOR-WILLIAMS AND PETERS

Thesis for the Degree of Ph. D.
MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

Romanus Nnagbo Egudu

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Major professor

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ABSTRACT

THE MATTER AND MANNER OF MODERN WEST AFRICAN POETRY IN ENGLISH: A STUDY OF OKIGBO, CLARK, AWOONOR-WILLIAMS AND PETERS

by Romanus Nnagbo Egudu

Modern West African poetry in English deals with a variety of subjects ranging from personal and indigenous experiences to universal themes, like love and death. This poetry is influenced by West African vernacular and colonial poetry, which the author has treated as a necessary background for its study in this dissertation. It is also greatly influenced by English and American poetry. The poetry of Christopher Okigbo and John Pepper Clark from Nigeria, George Awoonor-Williams from Ghana, and Lenrie Peters from Gambia demonstrates very clearly the themes and techniques of modern West African poetry in English, the extent to which it has been influenced by the native and foreign poetry, and the fact that though it is written in a foreign language, it still remains essentially African.

Christopher Okigbo handles the theme of the clash of the indigenous and foreign systems of religious worship, and presents this clash symbolically by juxtaposing Christian

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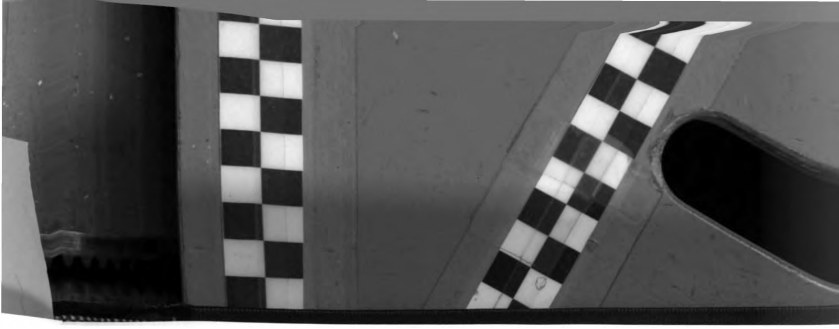
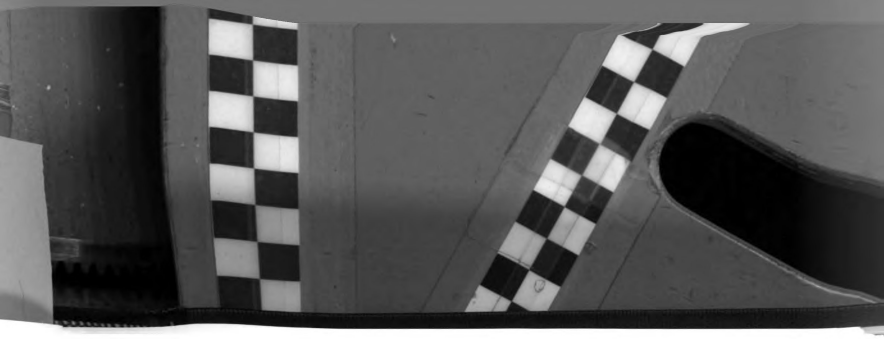


and pagan images throughout his major poems. Closely allied to this theme are the themes of cultural atavism and theomachy. Okigbo's techniques include image-making, melody-making, repetition, ellipticism, cryptic allusions, tags from several languages and deliberate obscurity, all of which show the pervasive influence of Ezra Pound. The tone of incantation, and such indigenous sacrificial objects as the "new laid egg" and the "white hen," which are associated with the indigenous system of worship, are among the influences of the vernacular poetry on Okigbo.

A tragic vision of life coupled with an incessant wail permeates the work of the next poet, John Pepper Clark. In his poetry, man is ever in chaos whether he is struggling against misfortunes, engaged in frustrating love adventures, or subjected to an oppression he cannot escape. He needs faith and courage to accept life on earth, if only with tragic joy. Clark's poetry echoes Hopkins, T. S. Eliot, Donne, Marvell, Arnold, Yeats and Auden. The influence of the native poetry on Clark consists of indigenous images, proverbs and mythology. Because of his power over words and his luminous vision, Clark is the greatest of the modern West African poets writing in English.

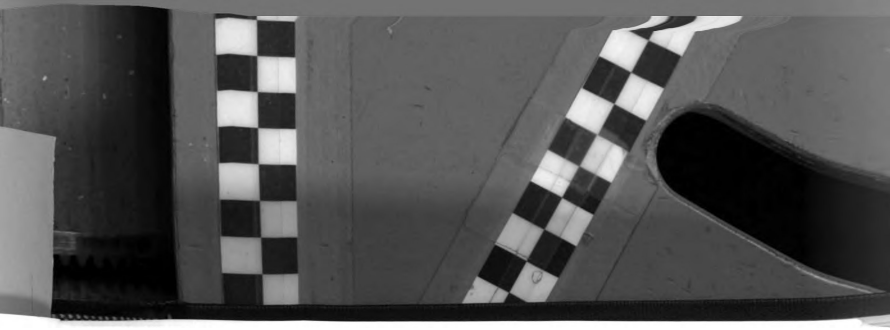
To study George Awoonor-Williams is to study many patterns of conflicts, such as cultural, erotic, and philosophical. His poetry is rife with local images, proverbs,



rituals and allusions to the indigenous myths, which are characteristic of the vernacular poetry. On the other hand, there are only slight echoes of foreign poetry in his work.

A diagnosis of the social, moral, ethical and intellectual sickness of the world is made in the poetry of Lenrie Peters. This poet sees life as diseased, with no assurance of permanent security in the "centuries plagued" here on earth, or in death, which only "deludes" men. Thus, throughout Peters' poetry, one finds biological, clinical and pathological images. Traces of Donne, Eliot and Dylan Thomas occur in his poetry, while little of the native influence appears.

The value of modern West African poetry in English is that it appeals to non-African English-speaking people, and much more to the English-speaking Africans. The English and the Americans, for instance, can appreciate its literary merits because it is written in a language that they speak, and because most of the poetry deals with universal themes. The Africans enjoy this degree of the value, and in addition, derive extra pleasure due to their knowledge of the indigenous vernacular poetry, mythology and cultural life in general.



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A THESIS

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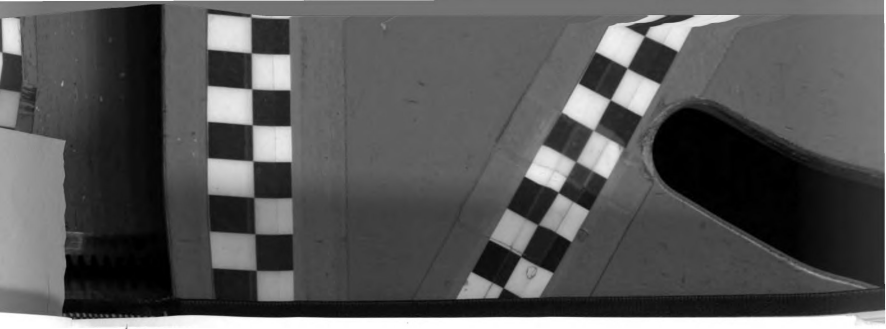

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INTRODUC

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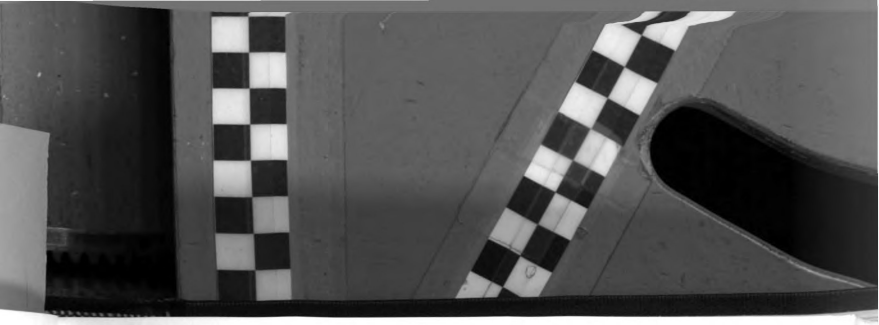

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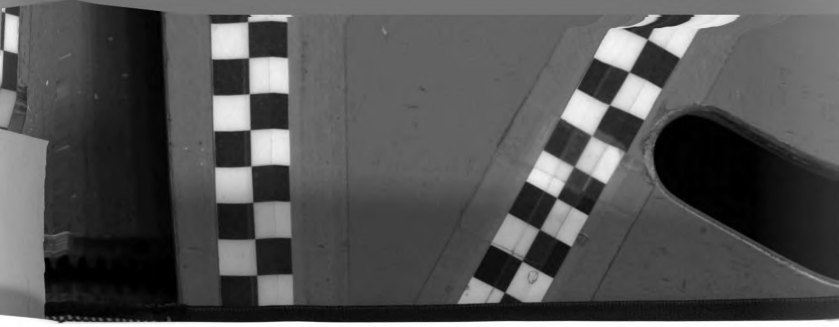

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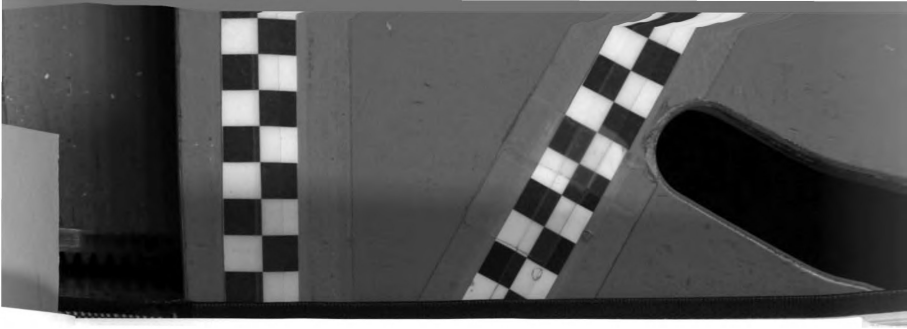

INTRODUCTION

The modern West African poets writing in English who are specially studied in this work come from three of the four West African countries that were formerly British colonies: Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone and Gambia. These poets are Christopher Okigbo and John Pepper Clark from Nigeria, George Awoonor-Williams from Ghana and Lenrie Peters from Gambia. All of them have had University education. Okigbo and Clark were both educated at the University College, Ibadan, where they studied Classics and English respectively; Awoonor-Williams read English at the University of Ghana, while Peters took a degree in medicine at Trinity College, Cambridge, and studied surgery at Guildford.

Most prolific among contemporary West African English-speaking poets, and producing most of the best poems written in English in West Africa today, the four poets have handled a wide range of subjects, including the conflict of native and foreign cultures, human sufferings and death, art and love, ancestral themes, and personal experiences. The degree in which they have dealt with these themes varies and accounts, in part, for the nature of the treatment given to each poet in this study.

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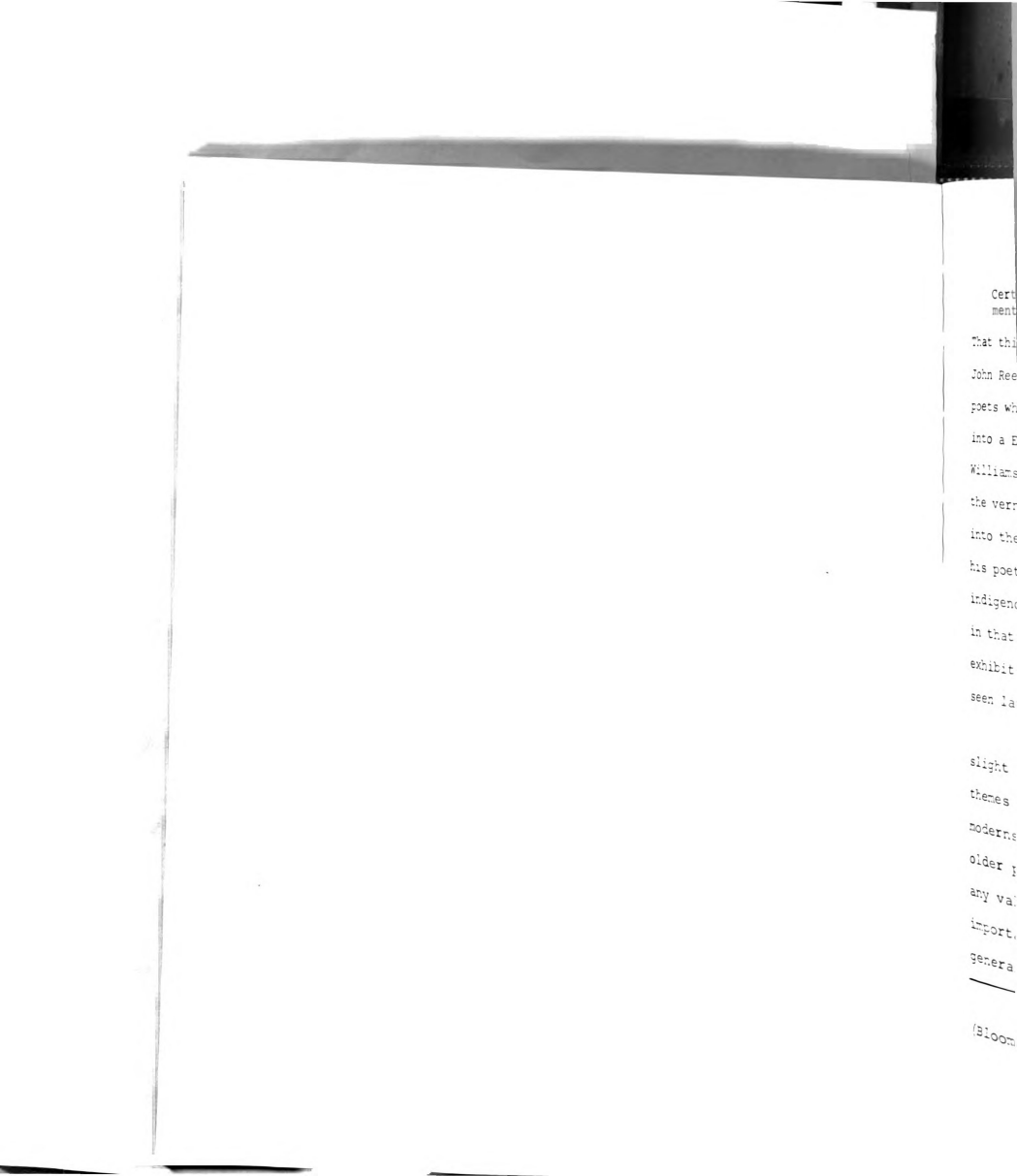
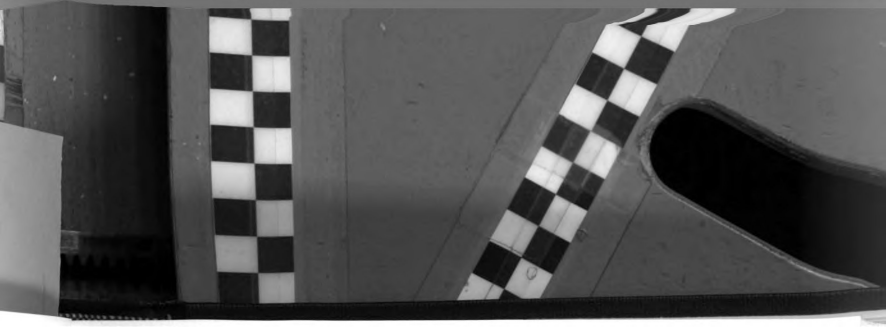
A great deal of the charm and strength of modern West African poetry in English results from its being influenced by West African vernacular and colonial poetry, and English, European and American poetry. Rising out of its own specific poetic tradition, modern West African poetry echoes, but does not reproduce the English, European or American tradition. Furthermore, the West African poets have not been equally affected by foreign influences. Nonetheless, the ability of each poet to read, speak and write English has opened to him new vistas into the wealth of poetic culture and experience found in many foreign countries, so that with his native creative talents, he can weld a measure of these foreign experiences into the bulk of his own traditional poetic material to produce poetry that is exquisite in artistry and rich in several nuances of appeal.

The influence of the indigenous oral poetry on modern West African poetry has often been pointed out, but it has never been dealt with in any detail. It stands to reason that the traditional oral poetry can be described, to some extent, as the "patrimoin" bequeathed to our modern poetry; and what sounds like a prophecy by one critic has already been fulfilled:

> There will no doubt arise in the New Africa
> creative writers who will soon combine in poetry
> the written word and the oral traditions. . . .





> Certainly this integration of indigenous elements can be beautifully done in poetry. . . .[1]

That this has already taken effect is the observation of John Reed and Clive Wake, who have said that "there are poets who are really adapting African vernacular literature into a European language."[2] The poetry of George Awoonor-Williams, for instance, derives its life-blood chiefly from the vernacular poetry. The themes of divination, initiation into the indigenous cults, and funeral ceremony are rife in his poetry. Also proverbs and images drawn directly on the indigenous culture appear more abundantly in his work than in that of any other of the poets. But these others also exhibit some influences of the vernacular poetry, as will be seen later.

West African colonial poetry has had only a very slight impact on West African modern poetry. Aside from the themes of anguish and the conflict of cultures which the moderns might have inherited from the colonial poets, this older poetry (most of it is really no poetry) has scarcely any value. The theme of culture conflict is, however, an important feature of modern West African literature in general, as Ezekiel Mphahlele has remarked:

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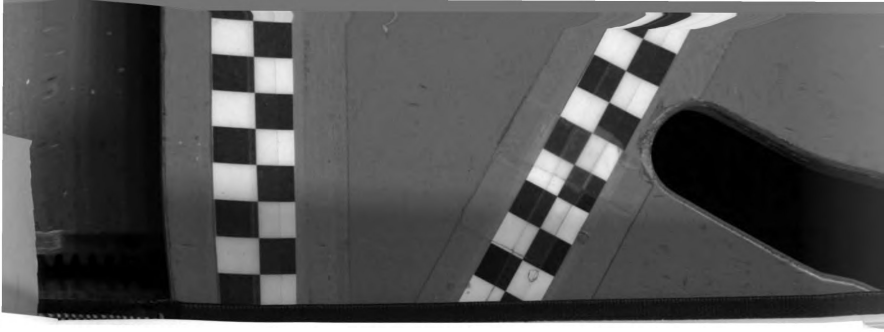
[1] Langston Hughes, ed. Poems from Black Africa (Bloomington, 1963), p. 15.

[2] A Book of African Verse (London, 1964), pp. 3-4.



> . . . the clash between the old and the new is much sharper than you can ever see in the South. And the artist in West Africa is preoccupied with this clash.[3]

It should, however, be constantly borne in mind that in matters of metrical technique the West African poets owe nothing to the indigenous vernacular poetry, and that the political rhetoric and the tendency to didacticism and sentimentality, which are found in the colonial poetry scarcely show in the modern poetry. But the "recognition of the painful reality of the destruction of an ancestral way of life," and "anguish" which is "one of the great central experiences" of the poets of the colonial period are two prominent strands reaching the present from the past.[4]

The other source of influences on modern West African poetry is foreign. These influences are primarily in the form of themes and the metrical and structural organisation of the poetry. Christopher Okigbo, for instance, is noted for his deliberate obscurity,[5] which arises from the use of strange language, allusions and ellipticism that Ezra Pound is the master of. He also has a great penchant for the

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[3] The African Image (London, 1962), pp. 193-194.

[4] Samuel Allen, "Tendencies in African Poetry," Présence Africaine: African Seen by American Negroes, 1958, pp. 177 and 192.

[5] Ulli Beier, "Three Mbari Poets," Black Orpheus, No. 12 (1963), 47.

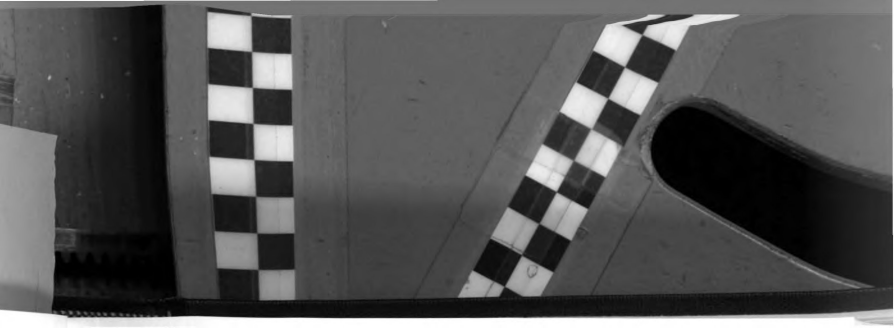

image-making which we find in Pound, and which A. J. M. Smith recognises as an important aspect of poetry by saying that "poetic language is a form of picture-writing. . . ."[6] J. P. Clark's intricately woven syntax and multiworded adjectives and alliteration show that Clark has been "apprenticed" under G. M. Hopkins. In Peters and Clark can be noticed that "intimate wedding of passion and argument which is the essential quality of the 'metaphysical' lyric";[7] and the "subtle spiritual and erotic conflicts in modern man" that bulk prominently in the poetry of John Donne and T. S. Eliot,[8] are characteristic of some of the poetry of Clark again and Awoonor-Williams.

Because of these many foreign influences and because the modern West African poets write in a foreign language, it has been often argued that these writers cannot produce "truly" African literature. Also it is the view of many scholars and critics that for the African literature to be "truly" African, the writers must write on African "topics." That these arguments are not solid is borne out by the

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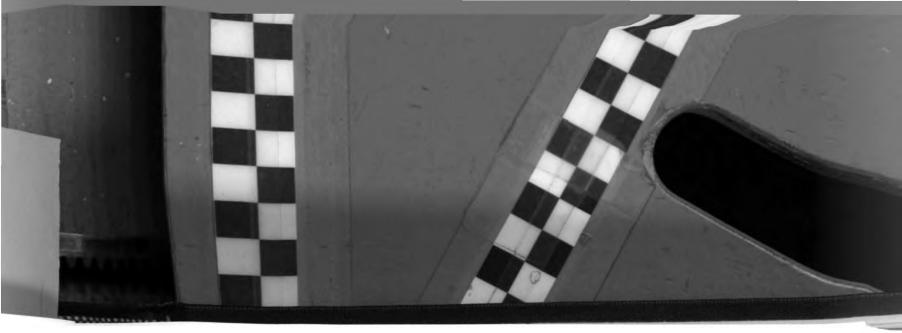
[6] 100 Poems (New York, 1965), p. x.

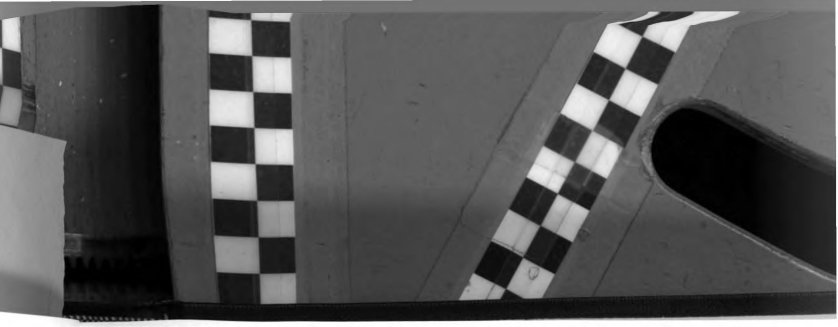
[7] Herbert J. C. Grierson, "John Donne," in The Cambridge History of English Literature, Vol. IV, ed. A. W. Ward and A. R. Waller (Cambridge, England, 1910), p. 245.

[8] Joseph Ellis Duncan, The Revival of Metaphysical Poetry: The History of Style, 1800 to the Present (Minneapolis, 1959), p. 154.



performances of the modern West African poets, who have produced not only "truly" African poetry, but also great poetry.

The following pages will deal with the nature and method of West African vernacular and colonial poetry in general, and the poetry of Christopher Okigbo, J. P. Clark, George Awoonor-Williams and Lenrie Peters in particular, demonstrating the themes and techniques of, and the native and foreign influences on these poets.



CHAPTER I

WEST AFRICAN TRADITIONAL POETRY IN TRANSLATION

> . . . les procédés stylistiques de la littérature africaine de tradition orale constituent un patrimoin commun a tous les Négro-Africains.[1]

Introductory Statements

Traditional African life in general is rich in poetic expressions, and these expressions are poetic in a sense that is far-reaching, for they are not only spontaneous and realistic, but also beautiful, musical, and profound in diction and imagery. The funeral ceremony of an important Ibo man, for instance, vindicates the elegiac qualities of the eulogy pronounced on this hero and his feats. This poetry is oral, and much of it is neither recorded nor translated, for it is rightly believed that once any song or poem is translated from the vernacular into, say English, it loses its essence. This is true, though only to the extent that the particular piece sheds the rhythm and some of the linguistic tricks and figurative devices which form the aesthetic

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[1] Janheinz Jahn, "Sur la littérature africaine," Présence Africain, No. 48 (1963), 162.

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equipage of most African languages; but it is not true to insist that no "meaning" can be retained by such translation.

Mr. Ulli Beier has noted this problem of translation from African languages, but still finds the task worth undertaking, illustrating the case for its utility by referring to the "Akan Funeral Dirges" translated by Kwabena Nketia,[2] and Adeboye Babalola's "Ijala"[3] as indicative of the fact "that the effort is worthwhile, because our knowledge of African life is greatly enriched."[4]

Though the difficulty of translation exists, considerable successful work has been accomplished in some parts of West Africa--Nigeria and Ghana. A study of some of these traditional poems, even though in translation, can reveal not only that poetry is not one of the innovations of colonialism, but that the modern West African poets (at least those writing in English) have inherited something from this tradition, not with respect to the technique of versification, but to the concept of poetry, poetic content, and imagery.

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[2]See The Funeral Dirges of the Akan People (Achimota, 1955).

[3]Published in Black Orpheus, No. 1 (September 1957), 5-16.

[4]Bakare Gbadamosi and Ulli Beier, trans. Yoruba Poetry (Ibadan, Nigeria, 1959), p. 6. Yoruba is a tribe in Western Nigeria.

Mr. Beier, for a different reason and in a different connexion, has pointed out the similarities and dissimilarities between European poetry and Yoruba poetry:

> Yoruba poems abound in metaphors, similes, onomatopoeia, repetition and alliteration (but not rhyme). They have humor, irony, pathos and bathos. But the regularity of rhythm patterns to which the European ear is accustomed seems to be lacking.[5]

Those qualities shared in common by European poetry and Yoruba poetry are not copied from European poetry, but are inherent in Yoruba language. Though the rhythmic regularity is wanting in Yoruba poetry, it seems that this poetry has its own kind of regularity that is enhanced by the use of parallel statements, and regular breaks along the lines. This point will be demonstrated in the course of this discussion.

Yoruba Poetry

The Gbadamosi-Beier collection contains many Yoruba poems classified according to their content, the groups who use them specially, the situation in which they are sung or spoken. The first kind is the Praise Names sung in honour of the Yoruba Creator God, Obatala.[6] The attributes of this

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[5] Ibid., pp. 8-9.

[6] Ibid., p. 14. Other references to this work will be given within parentheses in the body of this study.

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God are given. He is not the wrathful God of vengeance, but one who judges his people patiently. He is omniscient and so alert that whether he is far or near he sees all that is happening: "He sees you even when he is not looking." He is a protector, who "stands by his children and lets them succeed," and he keeps them happy, for "his eye is full of joy." His is not the gospel of giving more to him who has from the meagre store of one who has not, but that which "takes from the rich and gives to the poor," for

> Those who are rich owe their property to him.
> Those who are poor, owe their poverty to him.

This is Obatala, who creates--". . . turns blood into children"--and who, though a woman has "only one cloth to dye with blue indigo" and "only one headtie to dye with red camwood," is so generous and fair in his distribution of wealth and children that he will still "keep twenty or thirty children for me/ Whom I shall bear." Because of these divine cares, people ceremonialise the worship of Obatala with ritualistic dancing "to our sixteen drums," dancing "low" to eight of the drums and "erect" to the other eight. This is one example of the African's concept of the supreme God, which is highly votive and reverential.

The praise song of Ataoja (p. 23) presents a king who is a good and loving husband, a man of affluence and commensurate generosity and hospitality, whose physical charms parallel his moral suavity. He is a "wealthy man"

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and "will never be in want." In a patriotic spirit, he fed the coffers of his town Oshogbo with the money he collected "from Onitsha" where he dug "all the shillings," and "from Benin you bring money to build Oshogbo." He, unlike Dives, receives beggars: "You give away whole pots of soup to beggars," and this king's complexion is comparable to the richest (by the local standards) of all clothing materials: "Father of Ireola, black as velvet." This might seem exaggerated, but one who is conversant with the Yoruba people's humility to, and respectfulness for their seniors, will not be hard put to it to recognise the realistic proportions of such a song.

The Oracle poetry is of a different calibre, being shrouded with the awe and solemnity of incantation. These poems, said to be 4696 in number, are a series of reports of the sayings of the Ifa Oracle, transmitted and interpreted to the people by the Oracle priest (p. 25). The first four stanzas of the group recorded by Gbadamosi and Beier show some of the themes dealt with in such Oracle poetry. The first stanza sets falsehood and truth against each other, representing the former as cowardly and the latter as brave: "Lies travel for twenty years and never arrive/ But truth says it is better to deliver the truth and die." This is not the mere preaching of the Oracle, but a rigid moral principle which rules the life of the people in general, for to

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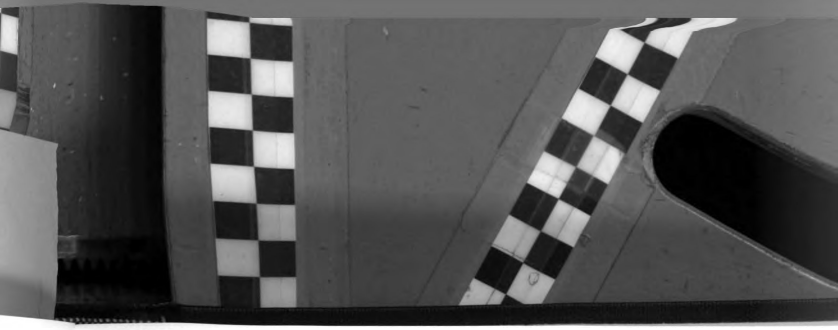

the people, especially the elderly ones, it is a calamity to tell lies.

Stanza two takes up the theme of creation, and reference is made to the Biblical story that man is made of clay: ". . . the mud, the origin of creation." The third stanza reiterates and amplifies this theme, for Obatala (Creator God) is shown as having received his power to create from "the great God." The very first line is significant in its purport: "The sky is immense, but grows no grass." To the people there is no life in the sky; it is not useful to man or beast, its vastness notwithstanding. That, perhaps, is the reason why Obatala is given "the reins of the world," which he is to populate.

In the fourth stanza the mystic nature of the Oracle is touched upon, which some initiates cannot understand, for they "thought that the Ifa nuts were nothing but palm-kernels." The magical power of the Oracle is even reflected by the beautiful metaphor of the fast flowing river which "puts its neck under a root and pulls it out."

The "Ijala," Hunters' poetry (p. 31), consists of diverse kinds of poems. Some are descriptions of the animals hunted, and others are "about" yam, cassava, women. It seems appropriate to discuss some of those dealing with the hunted game. "Akiti-Baboon" (p. 32) describes the baboon as "one who kills lice with a black hand," and who "has eyeballs to seduce women." The Red Monkey (Ijemere) is

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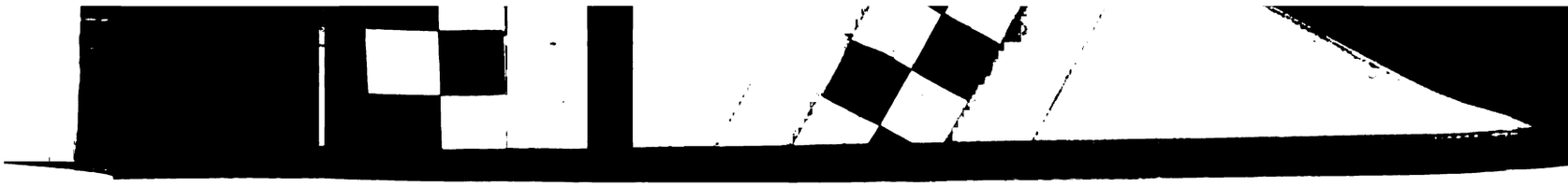
a "child of maize! Owner of the farm!" It continues "to steal" even though it is "old enough not to steal." As for the fowl (Adiye), it is "one who sees corn and is glad," and has such relations as oil, pepper, and onion. Salt is its friend: "If it does not see its friend salt even for a day/ It will not sleep peacefully." The wild pig (Tuku) is "the fat one of the thick bush/The animal that carries scissors in its mouth."

Characteristic of this series that constitutes "Ijala" is the personification of the animals and their habits, coupled with the rhythmic verve of the vernacular which shows even through the opaque surface of translation. Also very remarkable is the almost inevitable functionality of the metaphors which punctuate the poetry. The metaphor is indeed the very life-blood of most Nigerian languages.

Most of the poems of the masqueraders recorded by Gbadamosi and Beier are "about" social criticism and praises of different Yoruba towns. In the poem "Eye--It is befitting," there is a list of social anomalies which are satirised: "Hired trousers and shirts can never fit a man." This is a figurative way of casting jibes at hypocrisy and affectation. If everything is as it should be, "only the finger that fits the nose/Should be used to clean the nose." The poem also reflects social equipoise, for it recommends that one should do only that which befits him. The deaf, the blind, or the lame man, for instance, should not aspire towards kingship,



for it is beyond the pale of what he can be reasonably expected to attain. In the poem "Famine" (p. 42) is treated the sharpness of famine which even kills "the king of Omu." "The Lazy Man" (p. 43) satirises all the indolent people and points out that he who has "a lazy child has no child"; and about hunger, it says that "one who is hungry does not care for death." He can take any risks in an attempt to find food. This poem "Hunger" ends with advice for both the rich and the poor:

> Let the one who eats not rejoice,
> Let the one who is hungry not give way to grief.
> Satisfaction follows hunger.
> Hunger follows satisfaction (p. 44).

The funeral song (p. 51) expresses a wish to have the dead rise again. It is written in a tone of utter futility and dejection brought out clearly by the technique of contrast: Olu will rise, Awo will rise, the bride gets up when commanded, the elephant and buffalo get up when awakened from sleep, but this dead man, like an elephant that has fallen, will not rise.

The next group of poems, children's songs, is very important as a series of poetic expressions in the traditional life of Nigerian people. The Yoruba children's songs are varied: riddles, lullabies, songs about natural phenomena, songs that test one's alertness, songs about twins, mask songs, and songs to the god of children. Repetition and regularity of rhythm and rhyme are more common in

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children's songs than in other kinds of traditional poetry. To use but one example, one can look at "Children's Songs" (p. 54). The Duck is addressed in stanza one. She is a braggart, who has borne children, but has no back for carrying them. Rain, earth and birds are sung of in the second stanza. The third stanza poses a serious question under the cover of light verse. The child needs food and also soap. Economic decision is even involved here, and the order of preference is at issue. The child brilliantly comes up with the decision:

> But if I cannot wash my inside
> How can I wash my outside?

Metaphorically, to feed--satisfy hunger--is shown as washing "my inside," which must be done before one thinks of buying soap for washing "my outside." In the final stanza are metaphors strung up from the second to the fifth line, repetition and parallelism being used to quicken the tempo of the piece. Yam is apostrophised here. It is "of pure white," with "a gown of meat," "a cap of vegetables," and "trousers of fish." These images point to, and confirm the powerful poetic vision exhibited even in a song that is meant for children.

This study of Yoruba poetry can be looked upon as a microcosmic study of the entire Nigerian world of traditional poetic cultures. Tribal peculiarities allowed for, one notes that such qualities as abundant metaphors, proverbs, similes (especially sarcastic similes in Ibo areas)

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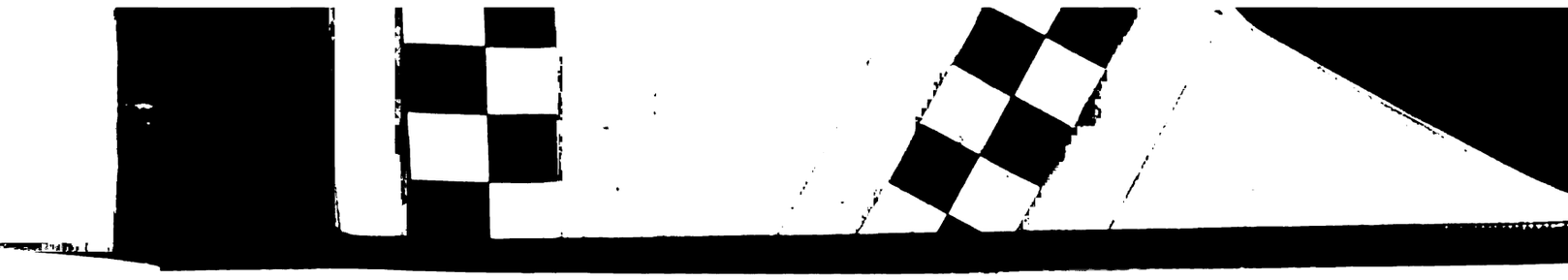

are common features of other Nigerian languages. The Ibo man has been represented as having said, for example: "He who asks me not to use proverbs, asks me not to speak at all; for proverbs are the salt and oil with which to 'eat' speech."[7] And about the significance of proverbs in Nigerian languages, Oladele Taiwo has this to say:

> Proverbs deal with all aspects of life. They are used to punctuate the words of the wise and are the stock-in-trade of old people who use them to convey precise moral lessons, warnings and advice--they make a greater impact on the mind than ordinary words. The judicious use of proverbs is usually regarded as a sign of wit.[8]

What relationship there exists among the traditional poems of the different parts of Nigeria can be exemplified by comparing the Yoruba poetry just surveyed with the traditional poetry of one part of Ibo land--the Ojebe Clan.[9] Before doing so, it may help to summarize the Gbadamosi-Beier classification of Yoruba poetry: The Oracle Verses (Odu Ifa), Hunters' Poetry (Ijala), Masqueraders' Verses (Iwi), Praise Names of gods or chiefs (Oriki),

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[7]This is a common saying in the Ibo area of Nigeria; it is not taken from any book.

[8]"Oral Traditions in African Literature" (Seminar Paper, No. 5, Department of Adult Education and Extra-mural Studies, University of Ibadan, June, 1965), p. 10.

[9]Ojebe is a clan in Udi Division, Enugu Province, in Eastern Region of Nigeria. It comprises seven villages (towns as they are locally called): Ebe, Abor, Ukana, Awhum, Okpatu, Umulumgbe, and Umuoka.

Laymen's Poetry (Arofo). In addition there are marriage and funeral songs, and Poetry for children.

Ojebe Poetry

In the Ojebe clan, there are seven categories of poetry: Invocatory poetry, "Triumphal" poetry, Incantatory poetry,[10] Laudatory poetry, Didactic and Satiric poetry, Lullabies and Private Songs, and Elocutionary poetry.

Invocatory Poetry

This consists of the poems sung by Idol-priests, hunters, and all the elders. The Idols are usually called Ugwu (Hill), and almost every village has at least one such Ugwu. In Ebe, for example, there are "Ugwu-Akuma," "Ugwu-Omelum," "Ugwu-Abazi," and so on. The verses addressed to "Ugwu-Akuma" run thus:

> Ugwu-Akuma, king living in wilderness,
> Guide of your people,
> Dispenser of justice,
> Ugwu the hero that is dreadful,
> The hero that is fearless,
> Protect your children
> From fiends and foes.

This is sung by the priest of this particular Ugwu, and he uses a special kind of horn, the 'Opi' for doing so. The

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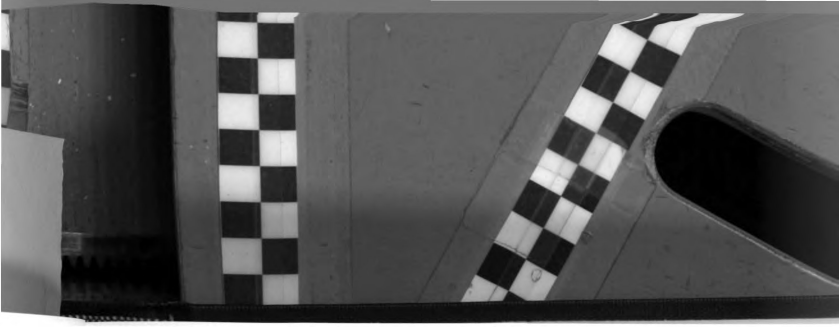
[10]The terms "Invocatory" and "Incantatory" have been used by Oyin Ogunba for classifying Igebu poetry. See "The Poetic Content of Festivals" (Seminar Paper, No. 6, Department of Adult Education and Extra-mural Studies, University of Ibadan, June, 1965), pp. 3 and 8.





hunters also invoke their god to help them kill a lot of game:

My god, hail,
I am in your hands
For today's hunt.
The hungry child
Runs to his father for food,
So I run to you for today's meat.
The Red Sun of the Sky,
Please, please, doo...doo...

And when the hunter kills any animal during the hunt, he intones jubilantly:

My god, I salute you, O O O....
I thank you, O O O...
I kneel before you, O O O...
May the killer kill again, O O O...

Another kind of invocatory poetry is the early morning prayer that every elder says as soon as he wakes up. It is, strictly speaking, an invocation, an offertory, and a petition. The man, after washing his hands and face, takes up his holy staff (Ofor), and brings kola nuts which are to be offered and then says (as in the particular case studied):

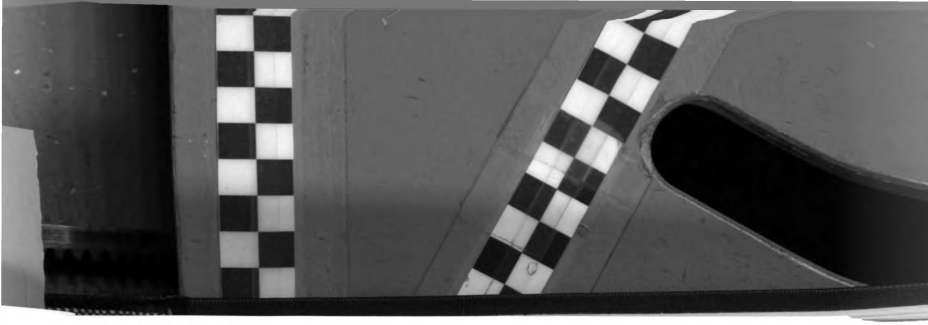
Nkwo, my father, come,
Take kola and chew.
Ukwuta that carries his brother,
The kola is come: it is for you.
Amadi and Ezamnoke, you caused
The kola tree to grow and produce
Fruit; come and have the biggest share.
Ezeedu, you the father of all the above and me,
You will come last, for the father eats
Only after his sons have fed: here is
Your own kola.
All the Hills and Valleys in Ojebe,
The kola is come, it is come, it is come
In great abundance; take it and chew.
Protect me and my family--my wife and children.
I wish no man evil,

> But if anyone says I have lived too long,
> Let him go before me to see what it is like
> In the land of spirits.

The names mentioned in this poem are those of the singer's ancestors: Nkwo, Ukwuta, Amadi, Ezamnoke, Ezeedu. The Hills and Valleys are the various Idols which are also believed to have great influence on the lives of the people, and therefore, have some claim on the votive rites of the people.

"Triumphal" Poetry--Praise of Self

The verse of the masqueraders is one kind of this poetry. During special festivals the masqueraders sing of themselves, narrating their activities and experiences. In the Ojebe clan the only known masquerade is the Odo, whose song represents the voices of the dead. The Odos are regarded as very powerful and wise, and as the dead come to life again. Therefore, they are supposed to know the past, present and the future. The poetry of the Odos is philosophical, musical and dignified, and often deals with their marvellous exploits and the idea that their sons must inherit their heroic blood. This is expressed in Ibo as "Ani-na-efu-Ngwu," that is to say, "The Land that Breeds the Ngwu Tree." The Ngwu tree is sacred and mystic; it is a symbol of magic and supernatural power. Another feature of this poetry is that it often consists of a number of proverbs so strung together that one not only explains, but reinforces the other:



I live by the Ngwu tree
Near the Nkwo market.
He who hastens to a fight
Knows not his death awaits him there.
Remember, my sons, the day
You called upon me for help,
Remember the wilderness
Where I encountered the foe:
It is for you to say what happened.

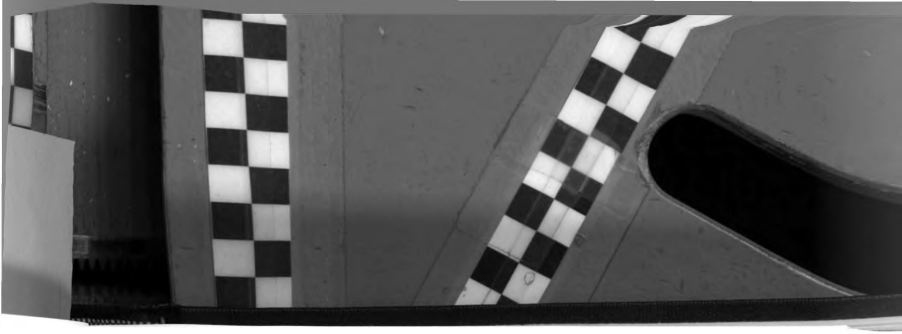
You have needed an increase of wealth,
I gave it before you asked.
I knew you had no male issues last year,
Today their cries are heard in your compounds.

When I was alive my name struck fear in my mates,
My deeds shone everywhere.
Now in the land of the dead,
My place is higher still.
My sons, let not the light go out in your time;
When a blind man mistakes a lump of earth for food,
It is his brother that is ashamed, not himself.

The Odo goes on to other matters; but the tone is throughout that of self praise in a spirit of triumph and exultation.

The Ozo-title poetry is another type of "triumphal" poetry.[11] On the day the Ozo takes the title, he sings aloud, in a mood of heroic pride, a list of names by which people will henceforth address him. These names are usually a series of proverbs, rich in imagery and metaphorically expressed, detailing the feats he performed, the difficulties he surmounted in his pursuit of the money for carrying out the costly title-taking ceremonies, and pointing to the various sources of his entire wealth. At this moment of the title-

[11]Ozo is a title taken by those who have money enough for taking it, and who have inherited the right to take it from their ancestors. The holders of this title are regarded highly in the society.



taking, he will, as a victorious chief, add some names significative of the opulence and social dignity which have become his. In the process, one person, often the female relation of the man, will be calling on him in a musical tone to give his names, and in response, he gives such names as the following:

I am:
The Camel that brings wealth,
The Land that breeds the Ngwu trees,
The Performer in the period of youth,
The Back that carries its brother,
The Tiger that drives away the elephants,
The Height that is fruitful,
Brotherhood that is mystic,
The Cutlass that cuts thick bushes,
The Hoe that is famous,
The Feeder of the soil with yams,
The Charm that crowns with glory,
The Forest that towers highest,
The Flood that can't be impeded,
The Sea that can't be drained.

Each of the names is a metaphor. As the camel brings wealth home to the owner, so the Ozo brings wealth home to his people. As the Ngwu trees are very important ones (see p. 19 above), the land that breeds them is highly regarded. This man compares himself to this land because by taking the Ozo-title, he has continued the tradition of his forefathers; for the land that grows the Ngwu trees never fails to produce them. Some of the names refer to the man's sources of wealth. He is "height that is fruitful." This means that one of the most important of his avenues of income is the tapping of palm-wine. He has to climb to a great

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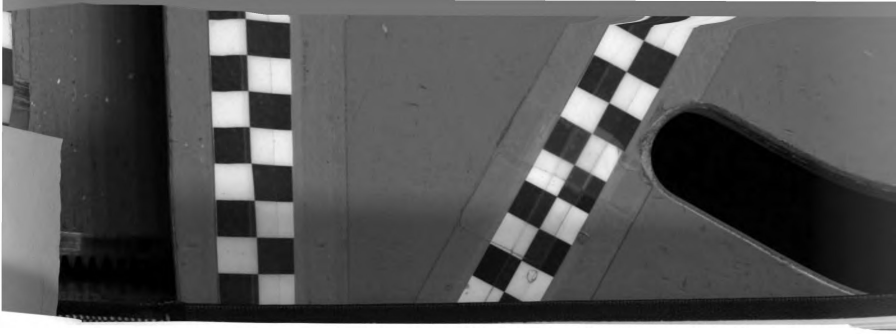

height to get the palm-wine, which he sells for money. Farming is another source of his wealth. This is shown by the names: "Cutlass that cuts thick bushes," "The Hoe that is famous," "The Feeder of the soil with yams." His status is now such that he is comparable to a "Forest" that has grown higher than the surrounding bushes, the "Flood" which is so voluminous that its flow cannot be stopped, and to the immensity of a sea which cannot be emptied of its water.

Ever after the time of the title-taking, the man goes by those names. Anyone desiring to hear some of them has only to ask the Ozo, "Your own, Ozo?" This is the cult way of saying, "How are you called, Ozo?" In response, he would often begin with "I am," and then give as many as the inquirer is patient enough to hear, or as many as the Ozo can remember at the time. However, the names are so much part and parcel of his life that he always has them at the tip of his tongue.

Incantatory Poetry

The fortune-tellers' verse is a kind of incantation. The verse begins in the form of a soliloquy full of questions never answered. Then the fortune-teller reflects on his power and that of his ancestors in this profession, and prays the gods and spirits of his forefathers to give him the power of vision which he needs. The poetry reads thus:

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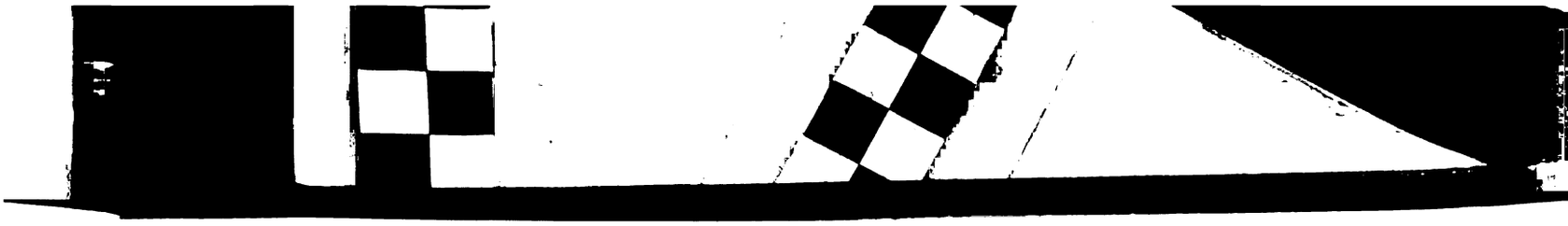

What will it be today?
Success or failure?
Death or life?
Ha! the flood cannot run up the hill.
What is this evil spirit that throws his shade
Between me and the truth?
I hold my sacred staff against it.
Here is the east, there is the west;
Here the sun rises--
See the truth come riding on the rays of the sun.
The Sky and the Earth keep me company,
And can my tongue go zig-zag? (i.e., Can I tell lies?)
The grey hair is an enemy of lies.
Come, the spirits of my forefathers,
Stand by your son.
Let us show this client of ours what we can do
We have been known for this power:
If one cuts the Ngwu tree by noon,
It mocks him with a new shoot before the sun falls
(i.e., before sunset).
Speak, speak to your son.
Show the way--
There, there, it comes, the truth comes.

At this point he has seen what he is looking for. He then addresses the client, and after asking him a few questions, tells him the solution to his problem by prognosticating future events.

Laudatory Poetry--Praise of Others

This group parallels what Gbadamosi and Beier call "Praise Names"; but while in the case of Yoruba poetry these names are mainly addressed to the gods and the chiefs, in Ojebe clan, they are addressed to the chiefs and any other persons who do something remarkable. Here such names have become so much mere social phenomena that one does not need to do any heroic action before he earns them. For instance, a boy or a girl that is hairy may be known and

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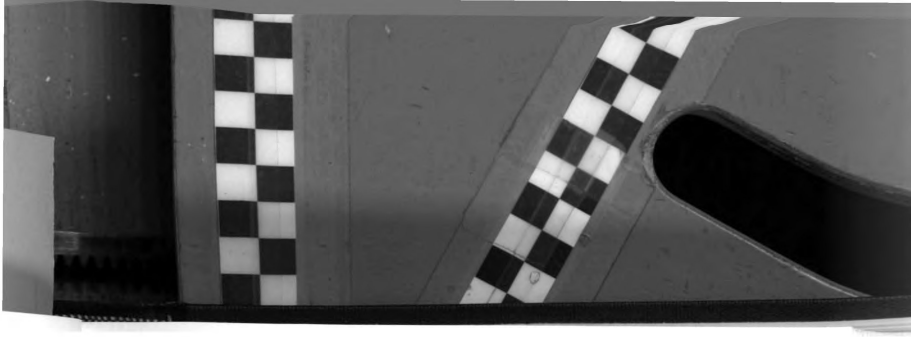


addressed as "Hair is the spice of beauty." This is one kind of laudatory poetry in the Ojebe Clan. It is also attributive, and a man or woman can have as many as the number of the praise-worthy qualities he or she has allows. In some areas, the reverse of this poetry becomes condemnatory and denunciatory. A man can be known as:

> The lizard that spoils his mother's funeral,
> Head is bigger than body,

and so on. The first name means that the man cannot help himself when others are willing to help him. The second is descriptive. He has a head that is out of proportion to his body; so it is said to be bigger than his body.

The most popular of the laudatory poems are heard at the funeral ceremony of a deceased Ozo-title-holder. In this case, the daughters and sons of the dead man rehearse his cult names, and add flourishes of their own to suit the occasion. As special drums are beaten, and amid the boomings of gun-shots, one hears these daughters and sons say in praise of their deceased father:

> You are:
> King who is a tiger,
> King that guards the town,
> The hand that breaks the hill,
> Wealth that imbues with wisdom,

and other titles that the man has been known by. At the same time the peers of the deceased sing his praises using their musical horns (Opi). Incidentally, these horns are also used to summon the people, especially the Ozos and the elders, to a gathering of the clan or the village.

Praises sung during community labour are also popular. One man usually stands by the workers and inspires them to action by singing out their praise names. He knows the praise names of all of them, and addresses them one after the other. This is one of such songs addressed to one man:

> You have wedded your hoe to the soil,
> You uproot trees with bare hands,
> You are the hero who does not care
> That to fight is to die,
> The sun and the rain are the same
> To you when the soil must be tilled,
> Yours are the hands that harrow the soil:
> The time is come again here and now,
> Show us now if you are still the man
> That you have ever been.

At this point, the man addressed will shout out passionately in answer to the singer, brandish his hoe for some time, and then demonstrate with the hoe that he is still as strong in tilling the land as he has always been known to be.

Didactic and Satirical Poetry

This kind of poetry is calculated to satirize social mischiefs. In the village of Ebe, for example, there was the "Iyo" singing group, now replaced by the "Omaja" group. Their objective is the same, which is to teach good manners by exposing the offenders in matters of social and ethical codes. The victims of this criticism include the young men who beat or insult their parents, married women who are unkind and unfaithful, spinsters who through their misdemeanour and general irresponsibility fail to get

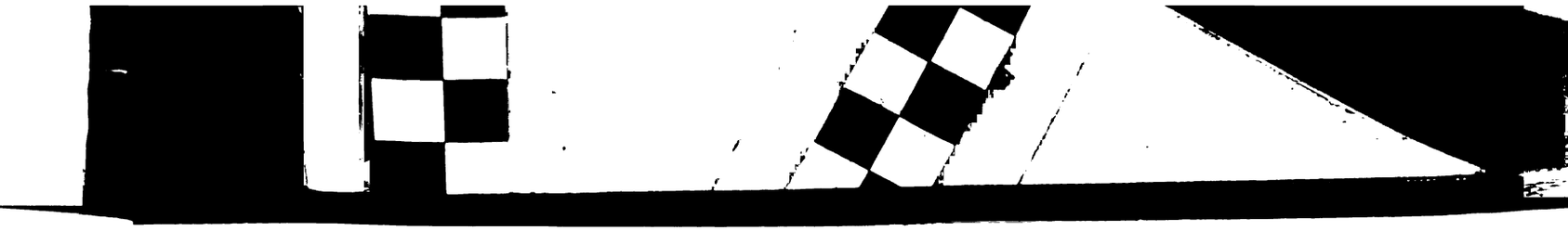


married and are thus living to die in their fathers' homes (a real blot on the escutcheon of such fathers), and the Ozo-titled men who eat cassava (something strictly forbidden by the cult of the Ozo group). Such songs are often full of pithy, sarcastic, yet humorous sayings, and in the clan, their effects in redeeming evil, and instilling moral and ethical consciousness into the people, have been wonderful. The following two songs are collected from the village of Abor.

> Woman you enter other men's rooms,
> By night and by noon,
> You must remember what our people say:
> A thing that is sweet can kill the eater;
> So retrace your footsteps
> Or meet your doom.

This song satirizes the woman who, though married, goes to meet other men. It is a warning to her, reminding her of the implications of her action, and the probability of danger.

Another song from the same village deals with the theme of unkindness on the part of a woman, who does not like to give food to other people. The woman is supposed to be cooking, and there is someone present, who, though he is not invited, would wish to be asked to the table. The woman purposely leaves the cooking pot on the fire for a very long time, even though the food has been done, and this to make the man feel tired of waiting and so leave. But the man is quite ready to wait for as long as the pot is kept on



the fire. The singing group takes up the idea floating in the waiting man's mind and satirizes the woman in the following words:

> Woman though you cook without ending
> And leave your pot on fire till evening,
> Though you let the food burn into charcoal
> That is as black as the coal
> Mined at Enugu,
> The waiting man stays without going,
> Stays even unto midnight without sleeping.

A third satirical song is from Awhum, where the singing group consists of girls, and it concerns an illegitimate pregnancy. The girl being satirized tried to effect abortion, but could not succeed. It was reported that she drank all sorts of concoctions prepared by the local herbalists, and ran long distances so as to dislodge the foetus. In the end she was doomed to carrying her shame about. Addressing her, the girls sang:

> You may drink the root-juice
> From today till tomorrow;
> Go to the dibias young and old,[12]
> Collect from them the herbs of the bush
> And make a meal of these day and night,
> Run up the hill, run down the hill:
> The foetus still sticks fast, very fast.

Lullabies and Private Songs

Under this heading are included the songs of the babysitters, the morning songs of a girl sweeping her father's compound, the meditative and lyrical pieces sung by

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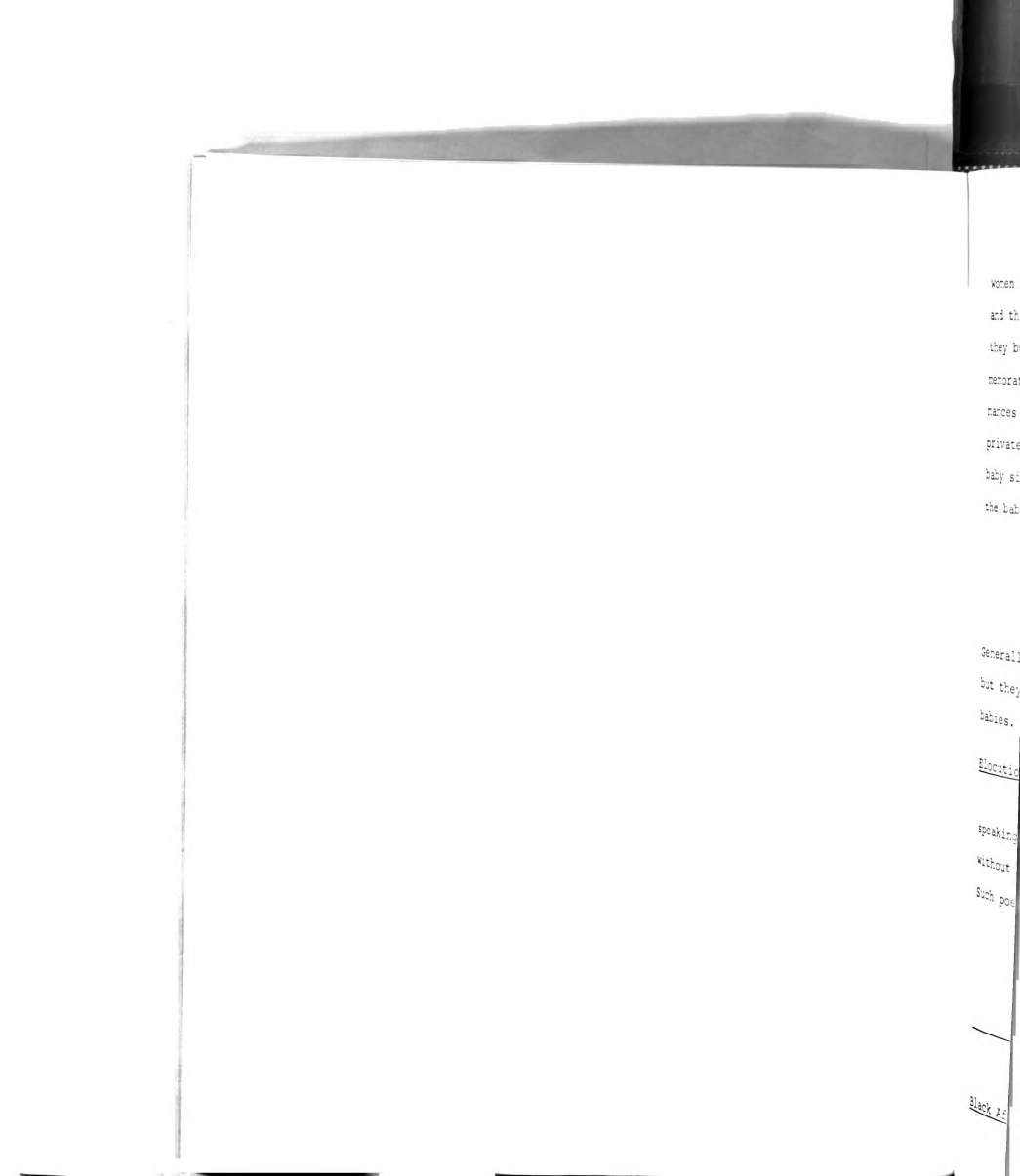
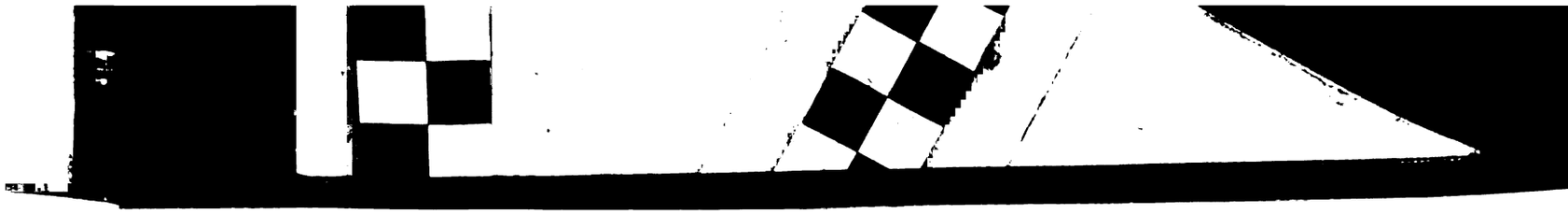
[12]Dibia is the Ibo word for a herbalist.





women as they spin threads, thresh beans or peel cassava, and the historical narrative verses often sung by men as they build fences, or train the vines in their farms, commemorating their own, or their forefathers' heroic performances in the past. The lullabies are more common than private songs among the people. A girl taking care of a baby sings such a song as the following, especially when the baby becomes restless and is crying:

> Mother is gone to Egede market,[13]
> Mother is there to buy you a hen,
> The hen will be as white as chalk,
> Stop crying and look at your hen,
> The fox has come to eat your hen,
> Stop crying and let's drive the fox away.

Generally the lullabies are not very profound semantically, but they are musical and produce magical effects on the babies. That is all they are meant to do.

Elocutionary Poetry

Some poems are meant to exercise the people in speaking fluently and remembering the sequence of facts without halting on the way, and to give them general pleasure. Such poems are usually recited in one unbroken breath:

> Give me pear pear for parrot
> Give me parrot parrot for money
> Give me money money for land
> Give me land land for farming
> Give me farming farming is wealth
> Give me wealth wealth makes enemies.[14]

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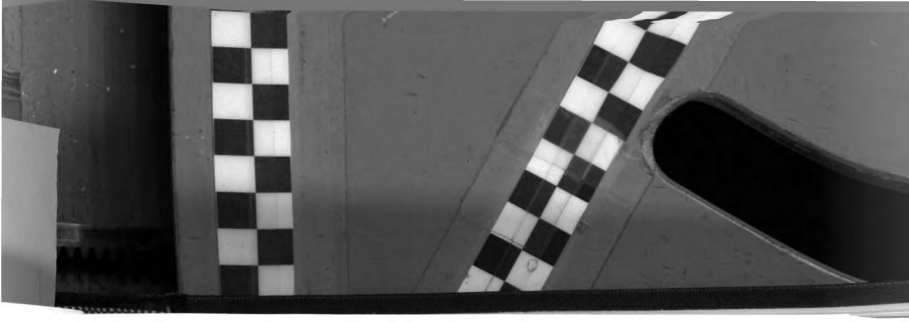
[13]Egede is a neighbouring village to the Ojebe Clan.

[14]Cf. Osadebay's "O Lamb Give My Salt" in Poems from Black Africa, ed. Langston Hughes (Bloomington, 1963), p. 25.

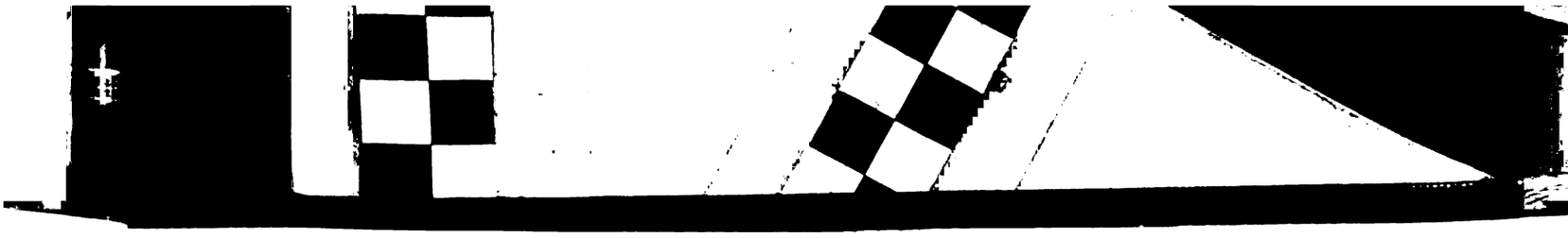


In this kind of poetry, it is not so much the sense as the sound that counts. The rhythm is regular; the last word of a line is sung twice at the middle of the next line, and the initial phrase "Give me" runs through the lines, so that the whole song sweeps rapidly from the beginning to the end, where the last line wittily clinches the entire piece: ". . . wealth makes enemies."

In another poem of this group, the whole movement depends on the word "crooked" which appears in all the lines. Like the preceding song, it moves very fast, and should be read rapidly:

I entered a crooked bush
And cut a crooked stick
For staking a crooked yam
To be harvested by a crooked man
With a crooked digger,
And given to a crooked woman
To cook with a crooked pot
For celebrating a crooked feast.

All these poems from the Ojebe Clan are handed down orally from generation to generation. They are not recorded; but the old men in the villages are reliable repositories for most of them, and they are very willing to give an inquirer as many as they know.



Comparison with Yoruba Poetry

Comparing Yoruba poetry and Ojebe poetry, one notices many similarities. There are a few differences, however. The Yoruba Praise Names have Ojebe laudatory poetry as their counterpart. The difference lies in the extent of the application of those names. The nearest parallel to Yoruba Oracle poetry is Ojebe Invocatory poetry or Incantation. The incantation of the fortune-teller, especially resembles an Oracle poem. As for the hunters' poetry, it chiefly deals with the animals hunted in Yoruba, while it is invocatory in Ojebe. In the same way there is the masqueraders' poetry in both areas, but whereas it is satirical in Yoruba, it is a type of incantation or a heroic song in Ojebe. The funeral songs express sorrow in the former locale, but in the latter, they praise the dead. Lullabies and some elocutionary poems in Ojebe are similar to children's songs in Yoruba. The chief difference may be that in Ojebe both children and adults make use of the elocutionary poems, and some lullabies are not relegated to children alone.

Generally, the similarities among the poems from these two areas are very striking, especially with respect to content and techniques. One exception may be noted. The Ozo-title poetry has no equivalent in Yoruba. There are also differences in the purpose and context of the poems.



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As for techniques, repetition, parallelism, metaphor and simile, personification, and proverb are remarkably abundant in both cases.

Akan Poetry[15]

In Ghana (West Africa), traditional poetry is as rich and diversified as in Nigeria. Kwabena Nketia has done excellent work in studying, translating and classifying this poetry, indicating its cultural meaning and significance to the people, together with its aesthetic and visionary characteristics.[16] In his study, Mr. Nketia deals with the four trends of development of the traditional poetry of the Akan peoples of Ghana.

Under Oral Poetry, there are poems of praise recited by special minstrels, and the praise is chiefly of chiefs, something resembling the Yoruba praise names and the laudatory poetry of the Ojebe Clan, except that the Yoruba poetry praises the gods in addition. In an Akan praise poem, the paramount chief is described thus: "He is bullet proof: when you fire at him, you waste your ammunition." According to Nketia, the praise poem may be in the form of a dialogue between the minstrel and the chief who is being praised.

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[15]Akan is a section of Ghana comprising the Ashanti, Fanti, Akim, Kwahu, Akwapim, Asen, etc.

[16]"Akan Poetry," Black Orpheus, No. 3 (May 1958), 5.

The Recitative tradition is a composite of dirges and hunters' poems, with this common characteristic that they are "half spoken and half sung. . . ."[17] The usual themes of the dirges are the ancestor, the deceased, any individual, or a living place. The ancestor theme is illustrated by the following poem:

> Grandsire Opon Sasraku.
> I ask you to help me in clearing the forest to make a farm.
> Then I ask you to help me in felling the trees on the farm.
> Then I ask you to help me in making mounds for the yam seeds.
> But for harvesting the yams, I do not need your help,
> Your subjects, male and female alike, are terrible suckers. . . .

As is the case with Nigerian traditional poetry, here are also the tricks of repetition and parallelism in the traditional poetry of the Akan peoples.

The other kind of recitative poetry, the hunters' verse, is like the hunters' poetry in Nigeria, sung or spoken during the hunting process, but the Akan peoples have added another use to theirs, which is, singing it when a famous hunter dies.

The bulk of Akan traditional poetry belongs to the Lyric group, and Nketia defines this lyric tradition as "the use of the song as a vehicle for poetry."[18] Making up this

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[17] Ibid., p. 13.

[18] Ibid., p. 15.

cluster are songs of prayers, usually sung for the king; cradle songs (parallel to Ojebe lullabies), songs used as interludes or terminals in folk tales, maiden songs addressed to their lovers or fond relations by ladies; and warrior songs.[19] These cradle songs, usually sung by mothers, are something more than the lullabies calculated merely to pat crying babies to sleep. Among the Akan peoples, the mother uses the cradle song for lampooning her husband, venting her ire against him, expressing her triumph over the other wives she thinks are jealous of her, and for resigning herself to the will of God who, though He has seen that she is poor and lays her baby "on a torn mat" instead of "on the camel blanket of the rich," still has sent the child to her:

> Little child, come for a feed.
> If you divorce me, you cannot take away my child.
> ('You' refers to the husband.)
> . . . . . .
> Someone would like to have you for her child
> But you are my own. . . .
> ('Someone' refers to another wife of the same man.)

Horns and drums are used to produce music among the Akan peoples, and this music constitutes their fourth poetic tradition. Nketia defines 'Horns' as "musical horns made out of the tusks of elephants."[20] In the Ojebe Clan (Nigeria),

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[19]Oladele Taiwo makes a similar point in his Seminar Paper, No. 5, p. 4: "Most of the time the narration is accompanied by dramatic and musical performances. . . . The listeners also participate in the performance, singing choruses, beating drums and playing other instruments to heighten the effect of the story."

[20]Kwabena Nketia, "Akan Poetry," Black Orpheus, No. 3, p. 13, footnote 1.

the Ozo-titled men and the Idol-priests use such horns in the same way as do the paramount chiefs of Akan. Among the Akans the horns can be used to produce poetry of diverse kinds--praises of the chiefs or the ancestors, lyric poetry. As for the drums, they are used for "panegyrics or eulogies," as when "Osee Asibe, the noble ruler," "Child of the Ancient God," "the brave man," "the valiant man that fights with gun and sword," is praised by the drummers.[21] There is also the drum poetry associated with the announcement of the fact that on a certain occasion the chief is drinking gin or palm-wine:

> Chief they are bringing it.
> . . . . . .
> Chief you are about to drink imported liquor.

And also:

> Chief they are bringing you cool and refreshing drink.
> They are bringing you palm wine.[22]

Last in this group are the proverbs produced by drumming. Drum proverbs seem to be very important in the traditional poetry of the Akans. Nketia has a whole article on the drum poetry of the Akans. Here he gives four distinct kinds of the poetry of drums: the prelude (called Anyaneanyane--"the Awakening"); personal poetry and praises in which historical allusions are made; announcements and

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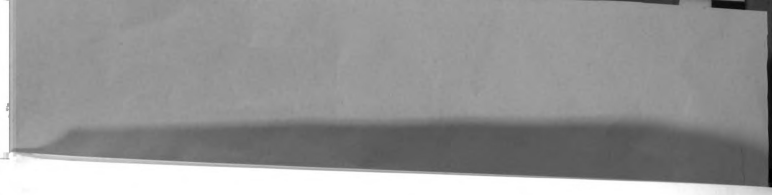
[21] Ibid., p. 24.

[22] Ibid., p. 25.



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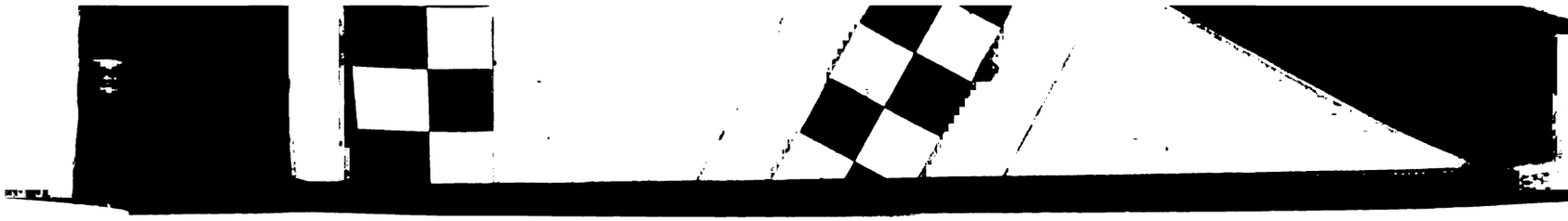

greetings (announcements of deaths of chiefs, outbreak of war, or fire, or loss of some person in the forest); and finally the drum proverbs.[23]

Proverbs, it seems to this writer, have as much significance for the Akan peoples as being the very marrow of the local languages, as they have for Nigerians. However, the examples given by Nketia of these proverbs are not quite clear to this author, as they seem to contain more elements of the riddle than the pithy, epigrammatic characteristics for which proverbs are known. The first six lines of the examples he gives are quoted as follows:

> Rustling noise by the way side
> Means what creature?
> The wood-pigeon, the wood-pigeon.
> Wood-pigeon Seniampon,
> He goes along the path eating grains of millet.
> Condolences, wood-pigeon.

The first two lines read, it seems, like what the Ibo people would regard as riddle:

> What are the two brothers that never see each other?
> Answer: Two palm-kernels in one shell.

However, since this author does not speak or understand the languages of the Akan peoples, he cannot claim a full understanding of their linguistic operations. Moreover, as Nketia writes:

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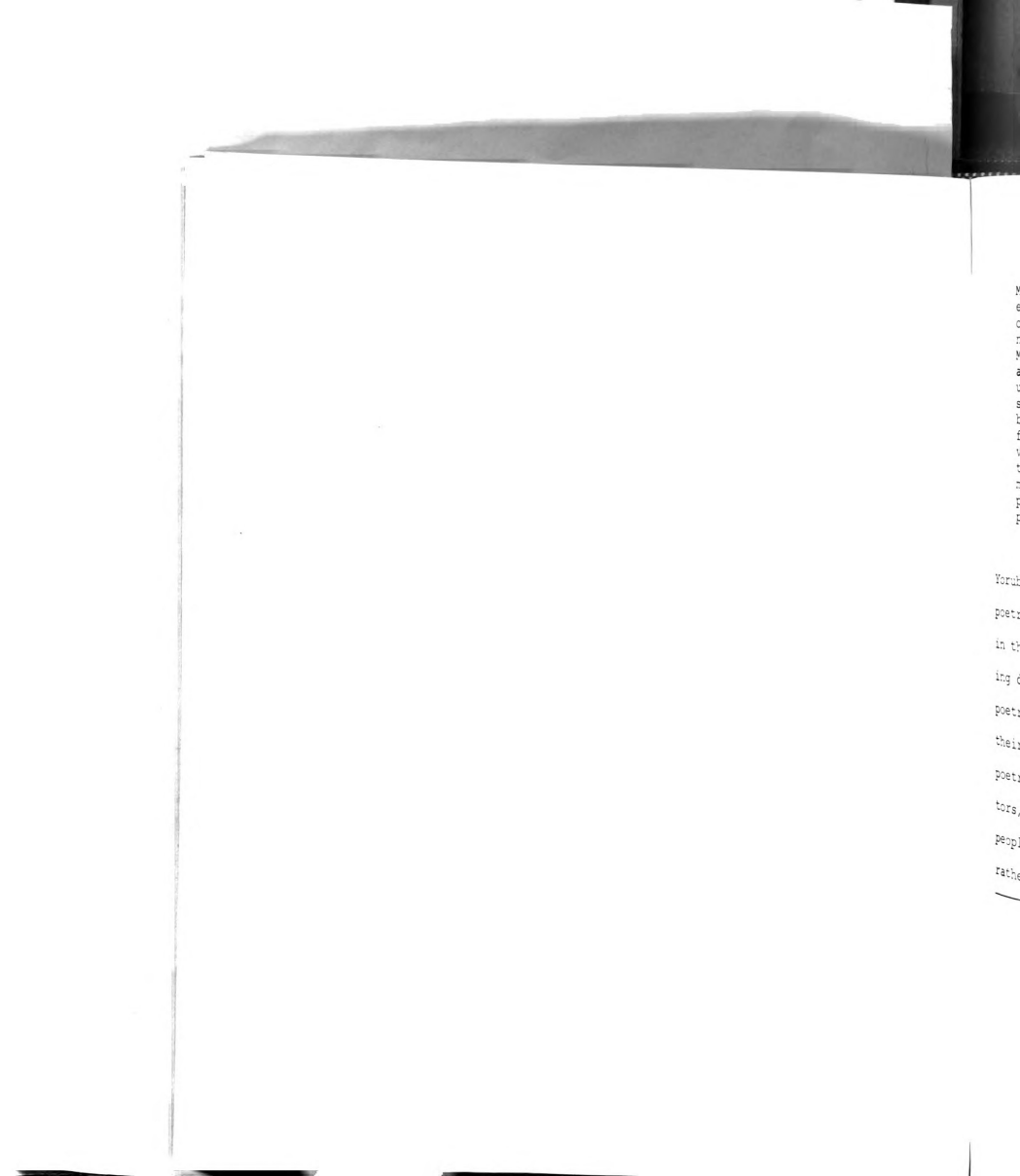
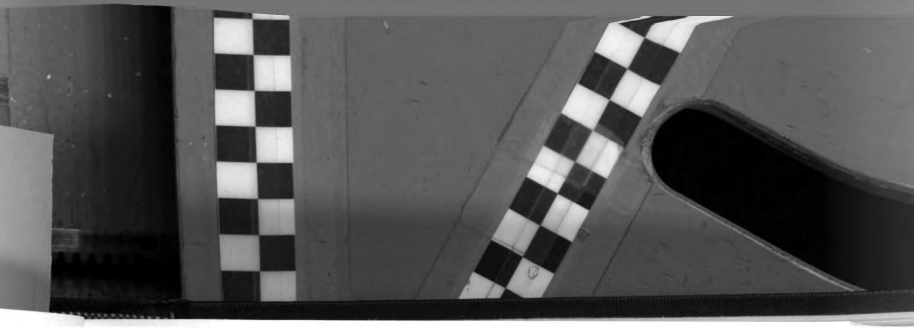
[23]"Poetry of Drums," in Voices of Ghana: Literary Contributions to the Ghana Broadcasting System 1955-57, ed. Henry Swanzy (Accra, Ghana, 1958), pp. 17-18.





> Many of the texts cannot be fully understood except by reference to our culture--our way of life, and our accumulated experience of nature and society, our system of values. Moreover, it is important to keep in mind the actual contexts of situation in which particular texts are used, because style, form, subject matter and meaning are also governed by these, for it is such contexts that call for the use of appropriate verbal pieces providing entertainment, reflections or commentaries on situations or pieces that may incite men to action or to a definite line of action, pieces that may be used for condoling, abusing, praising.[24]

This can be generally said of the poetry of the Yorubas and the Ojebe people. Time and place determine what poetry should be spoken or sung by whom at any given moment in the lives of people. One may, however, note an outstanding difference between Akan poetry and Yoruba or Ojebe poetry. While the Akan people place greatest emphasis on their chiefs and paramount chiefs as subjects for laudatory poetry, Yoruba people emphasise their gods and their ancestors, and Ojebe people have praises even for the ordinary people among them. Yet the difference is not of kind but rather of degree.

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[24] Black Orpheus, No. 3, p. 26.

Ewe Poetry

Ewe poetry shows something of more philosophical depth and less ritualistic and mystical associations than the other kinds of traditional poetry already dealt with in this work. This poetry, being more a result of discontent with life in an environment that is boring and almost stagnant, than of jubilation and gorgeous traditional ceremonials, is rather calculatingly personal than spontaneously traditional. Georgmbeeyi Adali-Mortti stresses this note of sadness in Ewe poetry. It is generally "a study in sweet sorrow," and in "moaning," behind which "lies stoical strength and fortitude."[25] This is especially true of the first kind of poetry discussed by Adali-Mortti--poetry for maintaining "good humour and optimism in the face of hardship."

One such poem deals with a man who has lost all his relations by death:

> Last remaining, last to go:
> A border mark I stand.
> Were I a boundary post
> On the farm's edge,
> I'd heave myself
> Aside and free me.

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[25]"Ewe Poetry," Black Orpheus, No. 4 (October 1958), 37. Other references to poems in this article will be shown in the body of the work in parentheses.



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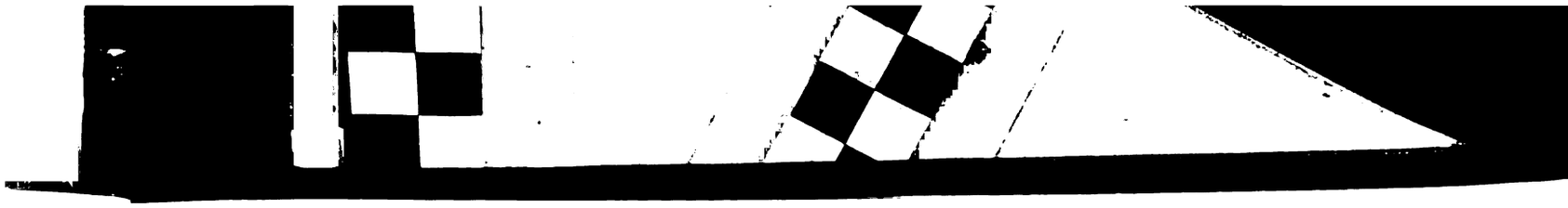

What can't be cured, must be endured.
Some folk unwisely fret
Under ills they can't prevent.
You who mock my loss of kin,
Know you the will of fate? (Pp. 37-38.)

The other kind of poetry which Adali-Mortti emphasises is the funeral song. This, like the first kind, is still lamenting poetry. One example is recorded which deals with a man bemoaning the death of his mother:

Mother dear!
Mother, who freely gives of what she has:
fresh food and cooked meals alike.
Mother, who never deserts the hearth.
Mother, hearken to me!
The crying child will call after its mother.
How is it that mother does not answer me when
I call--
Are we quarrelling? (P. 42.)

This poem seems more spontaneous than the one preceding it, and every line of it is heaving with tears, so to say. When we remember that these lines, which appear addressed to a living person, are in reality put to the corpse, we fully appreciate not only the poetic craftsmanship employed--the "superb touch of a skill composer"[26]--but also the desolateness, the disillusionment, and the complicated and agonised feelings of the protagonist.

More aspects of Ewe poetry are given by Israel Kafu Hoh, and these include the children's lullabies and play songs, hymns and vernacular music composed for schools, and

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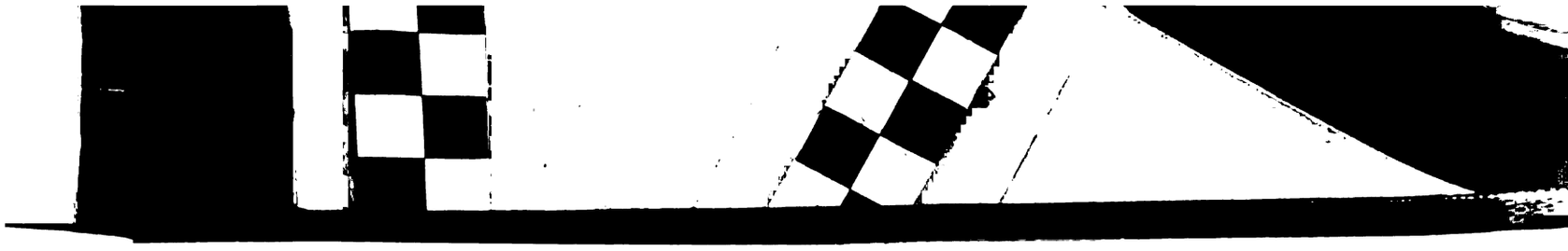
[26] Ibid., p. 45.



comic poems.[27] In addition to this, he tells who the Ewes themselves are in the following words:

> The Ewes are a people living east of the River Volta, with a language linked more closely to Dahomey and Yoruba than to the Akans. They have two main centres--the long coastal spit, sometimes not more than a hundred yards wide, that runs for over forty miles from Aflao to the Volta, past Keta, Anloga, and a dozen other villages and towns. The other centre (in Ghana) is in the mountains of Togoland round Ho and Hohoe, spreading into the lowlands of Kpandu. The larger part of this vigorous people lie, of course, over the frontier, in French Togoland.[28]

One wonders, and rightly so, why Ewe poetry does not resemble Yoruba poetry, since there is such a linguistic linkage.

A comparison between Ewe poetry and the vernacular poetry of the other areas we have surveyed shows that the former is chiefly concerned about life here and now, its bitterness and roughness, its miseries and losses. The protagonist is forever enduring, for he never remedies, and cannot remedy, his woeful lot. He is typically and, in a very physical sense, totally isolated. This is one side of the sad story of the modern man, who is not only isolated physically, but also morally, psychologically, and spiritually. The vernacular poetry of the other West African English-speaking areas is concerned with life in a more complete sense: its sufferings and tragedies, its comedies,

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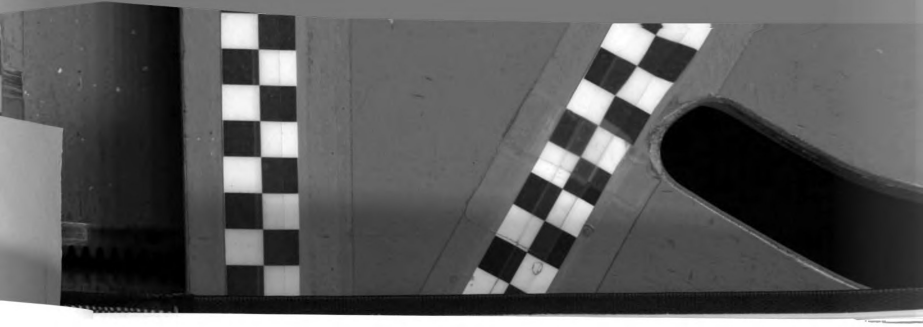
[27] "Ewe Poetry," Voices of Ghana, pp. 86-93.

[28] Ibid., p. 86.



joys and laughters; and this poetry also peers into the future, the hereafter, and into the realms of the gods and their influences on human life, favourable and otherwise.

Ijebu Poetry[29]

Oyin Ogunba deals with the traditional poetry of Ijebu in a slightly different way from that of critics we have seen before in this study. He emphasises the poetry expressed in different festivals of African communities, such as the Ogun festival, the festivals of the local deities, the festival of the Goddess of the sea and Water spirits, purification festivals, and the festivals of the ancestors. In a specific study of "the poetic content" of these festivals in Ijebu, he classifies the poetry into "invocatory," "incantatory," and "social."[30] Generally, the poems that come under the invocatory group are like the "Oriki" of the gods or chiefs or ancestors, which has been noted in connexion with Yoruba poetry; and they are also like the invocatory poetry of the Ojebe people. But this resemblance is only in spirit, mood and purpose. For there are variations from locality to locality. Furthermore, what Ogunba calls "social poetry" does not differ in any significant way from its

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[29] Ijebu is a clan within the Yoruba tribe in Western Nigeria.

[30] "The Poetic Content of Festivals" (Seminar Paper, No. 6, Department of Adult Education and Extra-mural Studies, University of Ibadan, 1965).

counterpart in the Yoruba, Ojebe, and Akan areas, except that it adds something over and above the content of that of the other places, which will be pointed out later.

The "incantatory" poetry parallels the poetry of incantation among Ojebe people. But there are marked differences in content and situation, and in fact, Ogunba's examples resemble those noted under invocatory poetry in the Ojebe clan. "Incantatory" poetry, he tells us, is associated with offering sacrifice, and he exemplifies it with a poem addressed to Ogun (Yoruba God of Iron):

> Take Ogun!
> A child sucks its left hand first
> Before the right hand. . . .[31]

Here Ogun is offered roasted yam. When he is next offered "erun" (yam dipped in oil), we hear

> The hand that makes palm-oil keeps dripping
> This is your "erun," Ogun
> For material success, for healthy children.[32]

The first three lines explain analogically the fact that Ogun is fed step by step, so that he may hearken to the supplication of the people, which is mentioned in the second three lines: "material success" and "healthy children." Ogunba points out the enriching significance of the metaphorical and symbolical use of "palm-oil" in the poem.

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[31] Ibid., p. 9.

[32] Ibid.



Two examples of social poetry are given among others, which seem to serve as a transition from the purely traditional poetry of the English-speaking West Africa to colonial and modern poetry: the satire poem on Samson the new convert, and the poem about political-party conflicts. In the former, Samson is satirised for his "smugness" and "priggishness," by those who have been in the Christian faith before him and are more experienced:

> We ate it together
> . . . . . .
> Samson do not be offended
> We ate the Oro loaf together.[33]

Samson must have been worried for having eaten the "Oro loaf"--Oro is a local cult--and satirically his friends show him there is nothing wrong in so doing.

The political theme is dealt with in a poem which shows the desire of the supporters of "The Cock" and "The Palm Tree" parties to kill off the members of the hated party, "Hand":

> If I get the sword
> I shall cut them to pieces.[34]

These two themes--religious and political conflicts--constitute the chief differences between Ijebu poetry and that of the other areas in West Africa. Also they (especially the theme of religious conflict) directly

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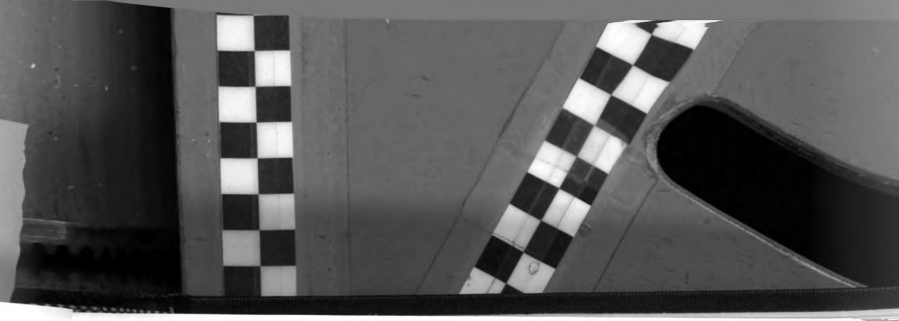
[33] Ibid., p. 12.

[34] Ibid., p. 13.



anticipate one of the major thematic concerns of the modern West African poets writing in English.

"Independence" (By Adebayo Faleti)

A note of variation in theme, not in technique, is sounded in "Independence," written in Yoruba by Adebayo Faleti and rendered into English by Gbadamosi and Beier.[35] This pathetic poem of sixty-four lines goes in a sermon-like way, with two analogous exempla, to show the triumphant joy that marks all kinds of emancipation. It may be a slave freed from his owner, or an elephant that steps from the lowly station of a man's beast for menial jobs to the rank of the "head of animals," or it can even be a nation that has shaken off the yoke of foreign rule.

The poem begins by stating a general dictum: "There is nothing as sweet as independence," and proceeds deductively to prove the veracity of the statement. The next twenty-two lines following the opening one present the slave in his state of freedom. He is no longer ordered about; when he farms, he farms for himself and owns his crops. He will "no longer waste his old age serving others," and for this total liberty he "will rejoice, rejoice, rejoice." In the next ten lines, the typical indigenous Nigerian technique of speech--piling up proverbs for emphasis and for

[35] Black Orpheus, No. 8 (n.d.), 4-5.

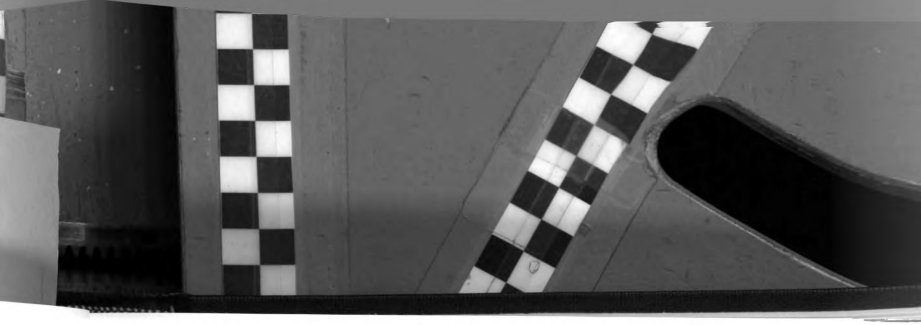
oratorical effect--is used to show what an awful ordeal the slave underwent:

> The one whose life has never been pawned
> Does not know the hardship of work before dawn.
> A person who has never been a slave
> Does not know the hardship of the stable boy.

The section closes with a line that is repeated almost verbatim at the end of the following seven lines: "The eyes of the slave have seen many things."

This third section still stresses, by the technique of contrast, the perversion of human worth and dignity that is involved in slavery of all kinds. The slave is compared with the master from the point of view of physical qualities, and although the slave may be "as tall as the Ogun tree in the king's market," and the master "burnt out like an old stick," yet the slave is "as small as a dwarf terrier" before him. The similes used for describing the slave and the master do not leave us in any doubt as to where the poet's sympathy lies.

The fourth section, the story of the elephant, is an exemplum. This device is quite common in Nigeria. In Ibo land, for instance, the elders can take a decision about a certain case by using analogies, proverbs and metaphorical statements, to such an extent that the young and inexperienced people among them leave without definitely knowing how the case has been decided. Such a situation is portrayed in a common Ibo proverb:



You speak to the sage and he catches;
You speak to the fool and he fools away.

In this poem then the story of the elephant is meant to emphasise not only the opening statement of fact, but also the slave-episode. It points out one quality--patience--upon which the poet is going to hang the moralising last section of the poem:

Let us learn wisdom from the elephant,
Let us shake off our suffering with patience.

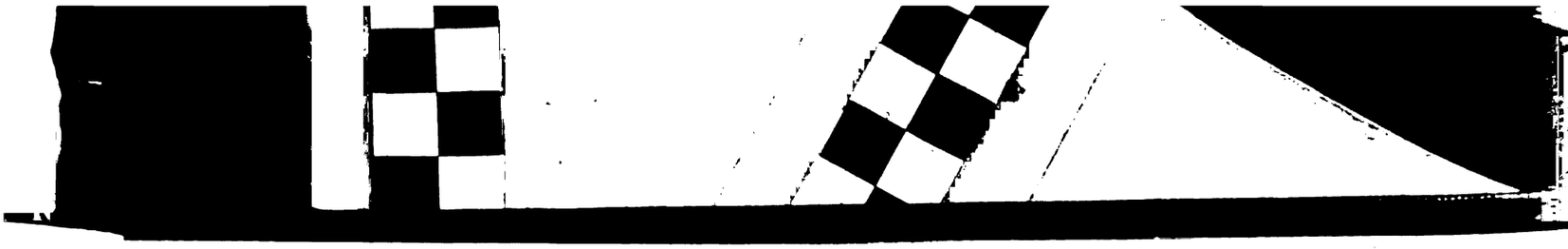
This section is really the destination of the poet. The whole poem is a series of case-studies. We have moved from the slave-scene, through the elephant-scene, and now arrived at "home." We see that the poet has not been merely delighting us with tales; these are not an end in themselves, but a means to an end. The end is to remind us that

. . . we have land, and we have hoes.
We have cocoa trees and we have bananas,

and other things to fall back upon when we are released from our masters. Then the exhortation:

Let us fight, so that we may cultivate our own farm.
To escape from being slaves and pawns.
Let all our people be free.

In theme and spirit, this poem anticipates modern poetry from Western Africa. The theme is emancipation from bondage; bondage implies conflict; and conflict is one major theme handled in varying degrees and in various ways by the modern West African poets writing in English. But in technique--language, versification, parallelism, and in being



rather pedestrain in metrical structure, it remains in the realm of the undeveloped vernacular poetry.

Conclusion

Thus the thinking of Adali-Mortti is well founded, that the West African traditional poetry in general could form a good basis on which "modern creative writing can be built, if it is to be distinctly original and West African."[36] He does not say, however, whether this modern writing "can" take its rise from the traditional poems with respect to theme, spirit, form, or technical matters, or all of these together. As has been remarked earlier, modern West African poetry owes something to the vernacular poetry with regard to themes and imagery, but not the technique and mechanics of versification, for there is in these latter matters a sharp distinction between modern poetry in general (and modern West African poetry in particular) and our vernacular poetry.

Like Adali-Mortti, Israel Kafu Hoh is of the opinion that modern African poets should endeavour to develop their traditional poetry:

> . . . Heaven forbid that we look with contempt on the only record of the thoughts and feelings of our forefathers as they are shown in our poems, and refrain from emulating them.[37]

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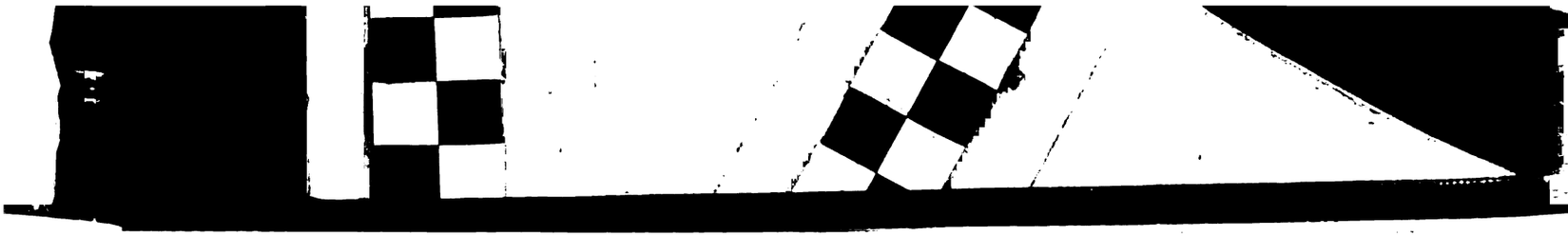
[36] Black Orpheus, No. 4, p. 45.

[37] Voices of Ghana, p. 93.



CHAPTER II

WEST AFRICAN COLONIAL POETRY IN ENGLISH (1950-1960)

> . . . patient faces on weather-beaten bodies
> Bowing under heavy market loads.
>
> (David Nicol, "The Continent That Lies Within Us")

General Statements

In English-speaking West African countries, writing poetry in English started when these countries were still under the colonial rule. Unlike the poetry translated from one or more of the vernaculars, West African colonial poetry was influenced by English and American poetry. It could not be explosively radical; though it expressed deep concern over, and discontent with life as it was lived then in those countries.

Sorrow and wistful yearning are among the chief features of West African colonial poetry, but there is also a general tendency towards optimism, and faith in life in the end. Mostly, this poetry is the cry of the African in quest of freedom from imperialism, and nostalgic for his home country if he had been staying in Britain. But at times, this trend is varied by a serious and concerned look into



the abyss of one's own self in an attempt to reach the meaning of existence. Some of the poetry also praises the fatherland.

In general, West African colonial poetry is not poetry in the true sense of the word. However, it is necessary to see what it is like because of the theme of culture-conflict which may be called its chief influence on modern West African poetry, and because historically, it is part of the background of modern West African poetry.

A prominent feature of West African colonial poetry is the conflict between the indigenous and foreign cultures:

> The West African poet writing in a European language finds himself in a difficult position. He is almost bound to be a nationalist and more often than not he is actively engaged in the fight for self-government. His poetry is naturally concerned partly with a criticism and rejection of European values--and yet he has to use a European language to express this same rejection.[1]

This remark, which was made about West African poets in general including those writing in French, was a little later pursued with another: "It is of course easy to understand that West African poetry is often a poetry of protest."[2] To most of the poems of this period, Janheinz Jahn's comment on African poetry in general can well apply: "In African

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[1]Ulli Beier, "The Conflict of Cultures in West African Poetry," Black Orpheus, No. 1 (September 1957), 17.

[2]Ibid., p. 19.



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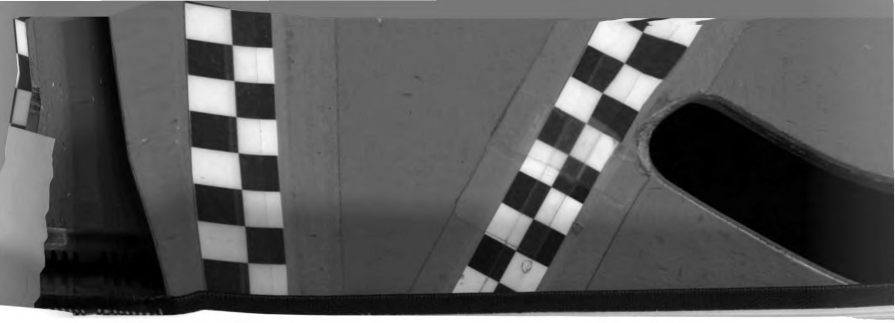

poetry one seldom meets abstract conceptions. There is no need to explain the image: the audience has the power of double vision."[3] However, more can be learned about this poetry by examining the poems themselves. The first to be examined will be a Sierra Leonian poet of vigour and fame.

Davidson (Abioseh) Nicol

Davidson Nicol (also known as Abioseh Nicol) in "The Continent That Lies Within Us" moves from the musing of an African in Britain suffering from that loneliness every exile knows too well, through his desperate desire to return to his fatherland, to the finding of contentment in Africa with all its signs of undevelopment.[4] In the mind of the poet, who was then one of "your lonely sons in alien shores" hangs the "shimmering image" of his fatherland. He is tired of everything in his foreign environment: "Sausages and mast," "grim-faced, black-coated men," "City typists," "queuing up for cheap lamb chops,/ At two for one-and-three." He then remembers the insulting remarks of the foreigners to the effect that the hinterland of his country is very primitive:

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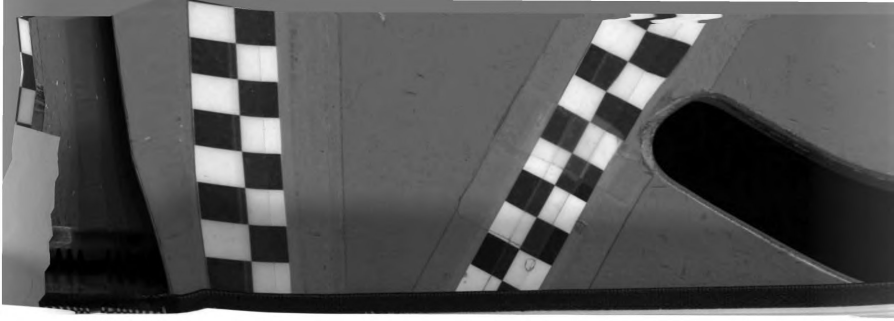
[3]"World Congress of Black Writers," Black Orpheus, No. 1, p. 41.

[4]Olumbe Bassir, ed. An Anthology of West African Verse (Ibadan, Nigeria, 1957), pp. 63-66. This same poem is also anthologised under the title "The Meaning of Africa," and greatly changed in layout and diction, punctuation, and typography, but retaining essentially the same "meaning" in Poems from Black Africa, ed. Langston Hughes (Bloomington, 1963), pp. 40-43.



> Go for bush, inside the bush,
> There you'll find your hidden heart,
> Your mute ancestral spirit.[5]

As he goes on his way he is "hopeful." The picture of the villages depicts the "uneven red road, huddled heaps of four mud walls/ And thatched falling grass-roofs," and the weary natives carrying very heavy loads on their heads. Even the "squawking chickens" and "pregnant she-goats" express "fear" as they "Lumber awkwardly . . . across the road," but the motto on the "overladen lorry" shows great trust in God: "The Lord is my Shepherd." And the last stanza resounds with this note of hope, trust, contentment and relief. Only the Africans themselves can find this happiness in Africa. The poet himself reaches a resounding affirmation:

> I know now that is what you are, Africa,
> Happiness, contentment and fulfillment.

The same writer later handles a different theme--a theme which is the core of the work of some modern West African poets--religious conflict. In "African Easter"[6] Nicol demonstrates the different attitudes to Christianity in colonial Africa. The ironic first section, which is a kind of dramatic "planting" for the rationalistic third

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[5]These lines are quoted by Hughes for a different purpose in An African Treasury (New York, 1960), p. xii.

[6]Langston Hughes, ed. Poems From Black Africa, pp. 35-40.



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section, points out the offences and infidelity of the converts:

> I am not your God
> If you have not denied me once, twice,

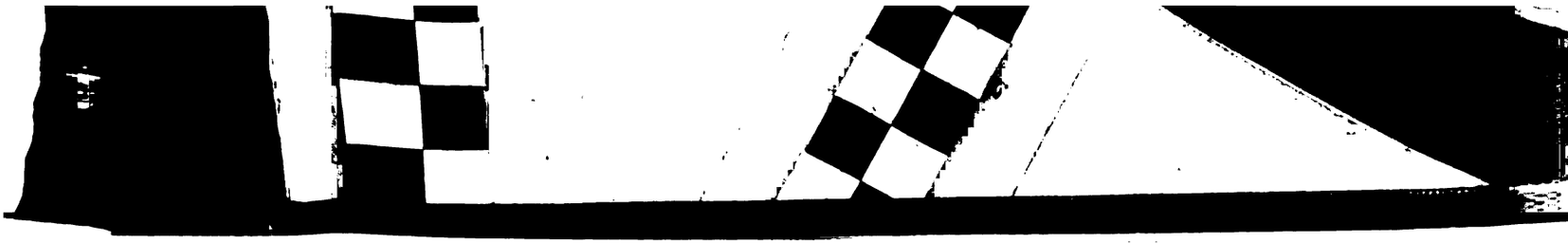
with the obvious allusion to the denial of Christ by St. Peter; and in stanza two we hear

> For what then am I worth to you
> If you were always sinless.

Though these words are given to Christ by Nicol, there is the implication that this is the kind of view that the lukewarm Christians do hold; for such doubting followers would often cite the scriptures; the devil, it having been said, quoting the Bible for his purpose. But in this clash of good with evil, good becomes more reassuring:

> Over your face and fevered brow, my torn fingers
> Will stray bringing such comfort
> As may claim your doubting heart.

After the interlude supplied by section II, "Easter Eve" (to which we will return), the argumentative, sceptical intellectual steps on to the stage, section I having prepared us for his entry. Though the Easter morning bell is ringing, and sleep has left his eyes with unusual willingness, still for him "the great rock remains unrolled." He is a Christian only in a haphazard sense, for he is deeply lodged at a crossroads. His dual allegiance is to God as well as to his "ancestral spirits." He resembles the laconic



Mr. Ikenga in Onuora Nzekwu's Blade Among the Boys.[7] And quickly anticipating Awoonor-Williams' protagonist,[8] this intellectual bursts out, addressing his ancestral spirits:

> I have turned away from you
> To One who stands
> Watching His dying dispossessed Son
> Shouting in Aramaic agony.

He becomes capricious: he is "a good Churchman"; yet he sets about ridiculing the Christian religion. He would accept the "chalice" from the priest at Holy Communion, but would make sure "that he wipes the wet rim/Not to spread dental germs." The tenth of his goods he, like the Pharisee,[9] gives "to the poor," but it is given "through income tax." From this point on, the intellectual waxes stronger in blasphemy till he denies Christ's death:

> You were not dead.
> It was just that we
> Could not see clearly enough.

Serving in a double capacity is the priest of the second section who (Nicol must have been conscious of this) is located in the middle, mediating between the offended God of the first section and the offending man of the third,

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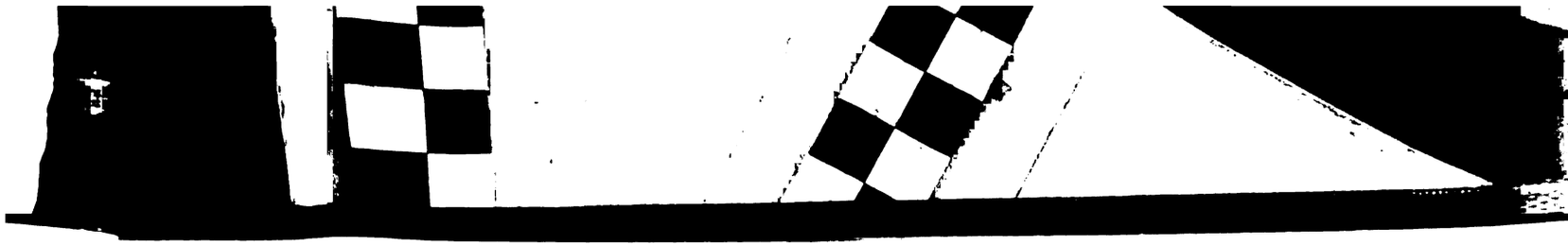
[7](London, 1962), p. 29: John Ikenga's Christianity was one "that accommodated some principles and practices of his tribal religion."

[8]Cf. "The Nim Trees In The Cemetery," in Rediscovery and Other Poems (Ibadan, Nigeria, 1964), p. 8.

[9]See "The Parable of the Pharisee and the Publican," in St. Luke, 18:10-14.



besides serving as the dramatic foil to the intellectual, endeavouring to expiate, as he palliates God, human incredulity and intellectual pride. Thus, he prays with hope and in faith:

> Come close to me, God, do not keep away,
> I walk towards you but you are too far,
> Please try and meet me half way,
> Because you are my all, my all.

And again aspiring to be good, he calls on the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost to "make of me a goodly man."

Davidson (Abioseh) Nicol is rightly a poet of two periods of West African poetry: a poet of the colonial period, largely and almost only in the historical sense, but still showing some affinity with the others of the same period in his concern with political freedom and Africanness; a modern poet in his involvement with words, melody and imagery, exploring the possible recesses of language and charging his words to their utmost, especially in his later work--all this coupled with his interest in modern problems in West Africa. About him Langston Hughes said, "The poetry of Abioseh Nicol is quietly moving and deeply personal."[10] And referring to Nicol's work in general, Tom Hopkinson noted that it is "simply contemporary writing of the highest class."[11]

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[10] Poems From Black Africa, p. 12.

[11] "Afro-English Awakening in Our Time," The Observer, September 17, 1961, p. 28.



J. V. B. Danquah

The next West African colonial poet handles a more universal theme. His concern seems to be life as anyone, especially a Christian, encounters it. Thus, in his "The Way of Life" J. V. B. Danquah of Ghana traces the trend of life from the position of man mystified to that in which he finds in God "our true and only destiny."[12] Life is shrouded in "magic and mystery"; the essence of life is not the here and now, but the hereafter, which is beyond our ken:

> It is not now nor then nor hence;
> Nor all that is above nor beneath;
> No, not all these,
> But that which is beyond--
> Beyond our present grasp and scope of life!

Akanji comments on these lines:

> And this is what another poet has got to say about "life.". . . Such abstract talk can hardly qualify as poetry nor are the ideas expressed sufficiently deep or original to deserve the name of philosophy.[13]

Akanji seems too bilious to recognise that the poet is not concerned with life on earth in these lines. This thing which is beyond our understanding, we must remember, "made Christ God" and makes the poet "man." We keep wondering

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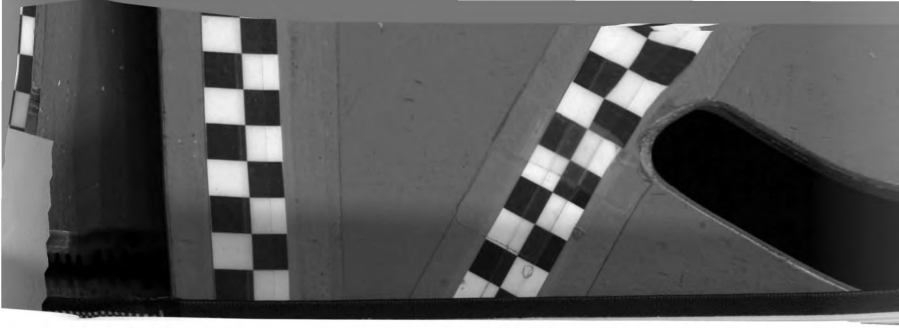
[12]The poem is contained in Olumbe Bassir's anthology, pp. 32-33.

[13]"An Anthology of West African Verse compiled by Olumbe Bassir, Ibadan University Press, 1957," Black Orpheus, No. 3 (May 1958), 58.





what it is till we are told in the fourth stanza that it is that which enables us

> To seek and see but know not how,
> To think and ponder but know not what,
> Yet all the while, great wonder!
> To feel the urge to know.

It is, then of course, faith which enables us to believe "where we cannot prove."[14]

Since life is all "a dream," a living in illusion, the dream can only be shortlived, and when it is "shortened/ The Vision is ended," and "We find our souls on earth again!" One may soar into the blissful kingdom of Heaven with his imagination, but with his return to consciousness, he finds he is still on earth. Such soaring is the result of "passion and desire," the "Offspring" of which is the "heart." The heart strips man of "consciousness" "to leave me naked in unconscious State." But with the "loosening of our hearts' contents," and the "opening much the door of spirit/With passions of faith and love and hope," we attain the power "to abide in God as gods," for He is our ultimate destiny.

Danquah follows this kind of meditation again in "The Cause of Death."[15] The movement is the same--from meditation on Nature and materialistic pursuits of men, to salvation in Unity with God. Fame, money, wealth and name,

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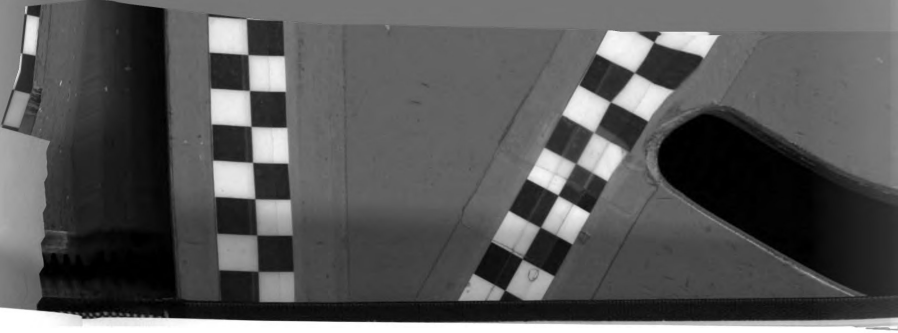
[14]Alfred Tennyson, "In Memoriam A.H.H.," Proem, l.4.

[15]Bassir, ed. An Anthology, pp. 60-61.





which are mundane pleasures and marks of earthly greatness, are but "vain illusive empty ends!" These are only the "lower rungs of longer ladders." These make life futile and restive. From this sardonic view of life, the poet moves to "truth" which is attained only by a "strongly walled heart," and "love" which "leads us on to life for ever/And makes us immortal/Though in mortal apparel clad." It is this love, that "eternal is," which will effect our "blending completely with God."

Dennis Osadebay

Gerald Moore and Ulli Beier remarked that some of the poets of the colonial period cried down the indigenous culture in favour of the newly learned "wisdom," and they illustrated their point by referring to lines taken from Dennis Osadebay's poetry:

> They questioned not the lies of magic
> And fetish seemed to have some logic.[16]

However, this is far from being the whole story of the verse of Osadebay, and is farther still from implying that this Nigerian poet has no respect for his people's culture. Osadebay's concern seems to be with the use made of the indigenous African cultures. If the cultures are to be preserved only to satisfy the curiosity of the white man, Osadebay would not take pride in such preservation.

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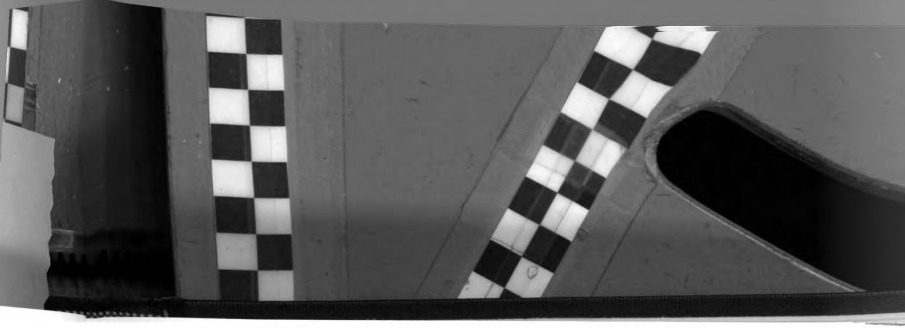
[16] Modern Poetry From Africa (London, 1963), p. 19.



Furthermore, his apparent interest in the foreign ways of life is merely ironical and contemptuous. These two points constitute the chief themes of the poem "Young Africa's Plea":

> Don't preserve my customs
> As some fine curios
> To suit some white historian's tastes.

(Mr. Beier noted this point before.)[17] Continuing in the same poem, Osadebay adds:

> Let me play with the white man's ways,
> Let me work with the black man's brains,
> Let my affairs themselves sort out.[18]

The poem ends on a note of optimism, for at the time of "sweet rebirth" the African will become "a better man"; and that moment of regeneration has been reached in the four poems "about" Nigeria published in West African Pilot, 1960.[19]

These poems all can be said to be written pro patria, for their overriding theme is Nigeria--praying for, and praising her; expressing love for, and pledging willing service to her. "Land of Sunshine" wishes the "sons and daughters" of Nigeria happiness and freedom and prays that God may "defend thee, bounteous land." "Bless This Land"

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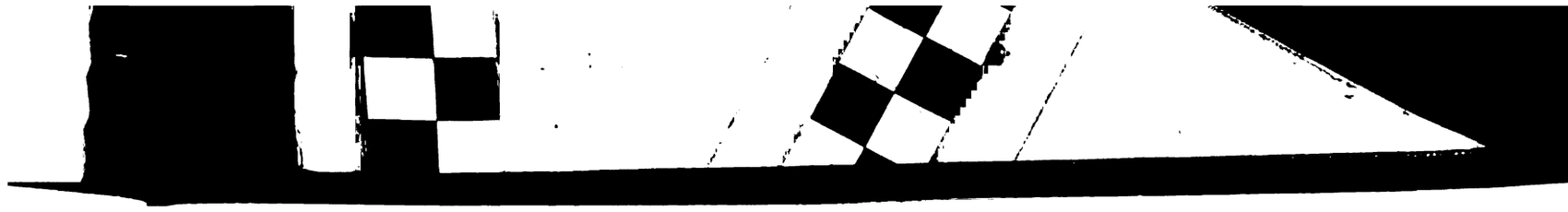
[17]"Conflict of Cultures in West African Poetry," Black Orpheus, No. 1, p. 18.

[18]Bassir, ed. An Anthology, p. 57.

[19]September 16, 17, 19, and 20, 1960.



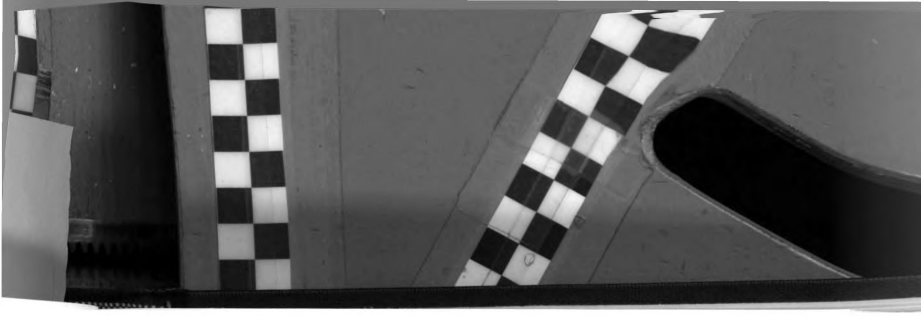
continues and intensifies the prayer. In fact it assumes a religious tone quite: "Bless this land oh Lord we pray," and as it asks the Lord to guide the country, implores Him to bless the people and "give them peace." The second stanza expresses the desire to love the land, and the poem ends with concern for "the cause of good and right."

The enthusiasm with which the poet lauds the land is shown throughout the poems: Nigeria is a "glorious land" in "Hail Nigeria"; she has a "glorious name" in "Bless This Land," and we learn of the "bounteous land" in "Land of Sunshine." The same Nigeria is the "brightest star/On Africa's radiant sky" in "Nigeria, Land of Hope." One may not be wrong to feel that this borders a bit on idealism. But on the other hand one can as well imagine the joy of a child whose mother is within hearing distance of home after her journey to the market.

Osadebay is never weary of his tribute of adulation to his country. "Hail Nigeria" praises her as a land of heroes, wealth and liberty, and expresses deep love for her, while promising to perform the duty of saving her name "from oppression and from shame," and concludes by blessing her friends and cursing her foes. Besides, it contains a stanza that is tolerably beautiful:

> May the Niger ever flow
> And the green fields ever grow
> In our fatherland and home
> While the waves on beaches foam
> As Nigeria's ensign flies
> And our happy anthems rise.





The fourth poem "Nigeria, Land of Hope," while expressing hope in the wealth, peace, freedom and fame of the nation, reiterates the pledge, praise and prayer that characterise the others. The last couplet concludes this process of wishing well and pledging:

> And cheer the Blackman's soul
> To play a noble role.

It is clear that Osadebay is enchanted with the image of the freedom that was at the time he was writing, September 1960, knocking on the door of his country, and Langston Hughes took note of this when he said that in Osadebay's poetry "the poet and pamphleteer meet to cry aloud for African freedom"[20]

Conclusion

The West African poets of the colonial period cannot be considered as poets in any serious sense. There is little or no aesthetic quality in their poetry. They seem to be concerned with putting their ideas across to their audience rather than with poetry as an art. Mr. Hughes has rightly remarked:

> The most interesting non-white poets of contemporary Africa are modernist in style, in contrast to the older writers of colonial days who were influenced by Victorian models or by the classical French poets taught in the missionary schools.[21]

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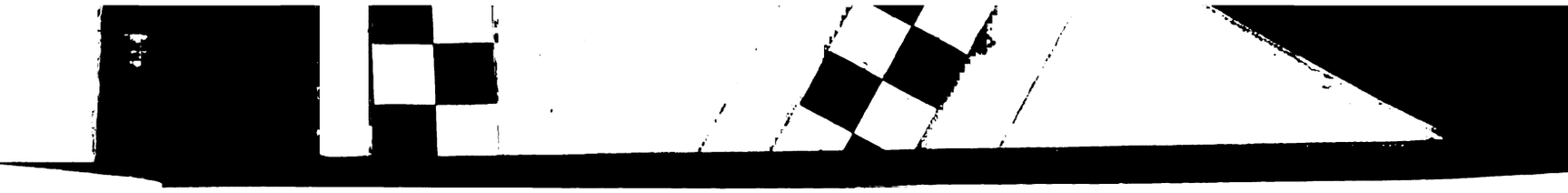
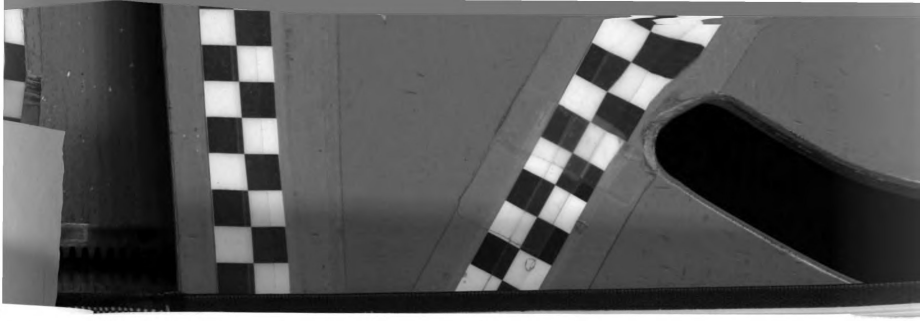
[20] Poems From Black Africa, p. 12.

[21] Ibid., p. 11.



The relationship between West African poetry and modern West African poetry is very tenuous, and consists only in the theme of the conflict of the indigenous and foreign cultures. Though this link exists, the fact remains that to the student of modern West African poetry, the colonial poetry is of instance mainly in the historical sense, for it precedes the modern poetry in time, and therefore, can be regarded as its background.





CHAPTER III

WEST AFRICAN POETRY IN ENGLISH TODAY

> No more fatal mistake could be made than to suppose that the West alone has something to give and the African has nothing to do but to receive. The African is not clay to be cast into western moulds but a living type which must develop in accordance with its own laws and express its native genius.[1]

Introduction

The problem of the definition of African literature has been perennial, and since it is a crucial one, the author intends to look at it, if only briefly, before settling down specifically on the modern West African poets themselves. The term 'modern' is another difficult one, but the writer will, for the purpose of the present study, adopt the definition given by Gerald Moore and Ulli Beier:

> In part it is a matter of the poets' awareness of the modern idiom in European and American poetry. It is this awareness that enables them to use their respective languages without distracting archaism and in a way that appeals instantly to the contemporary ear.[2]

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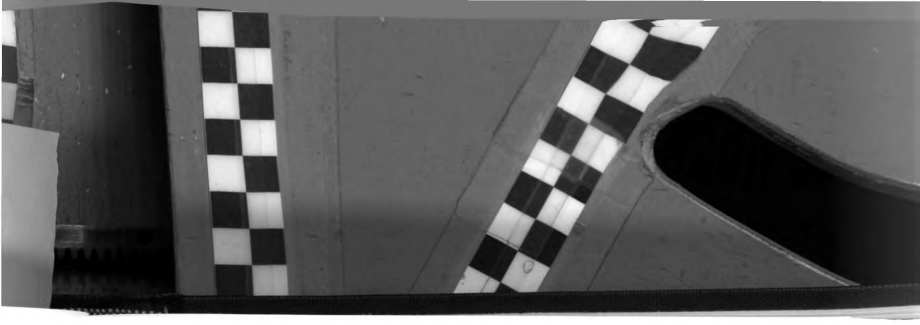
[1] J. H. Oldham, Christianity and the Race Problem (New York, 1925), p. 174. The second sentence of the passage quoted was cited by Sir Alan Burns in another context and for a different reason in History of Nigeria (New York, 1963), p. 25.

[2] Modern Poetry From Africa , p. 28.



It may be added that images based on African cultures and environments, and allusions to African history and tradition do not weaken this 'modernity,' rather they strengthen and enrich it by opening to the African poets extra vistas that are not readily available to their European and American counterparts.

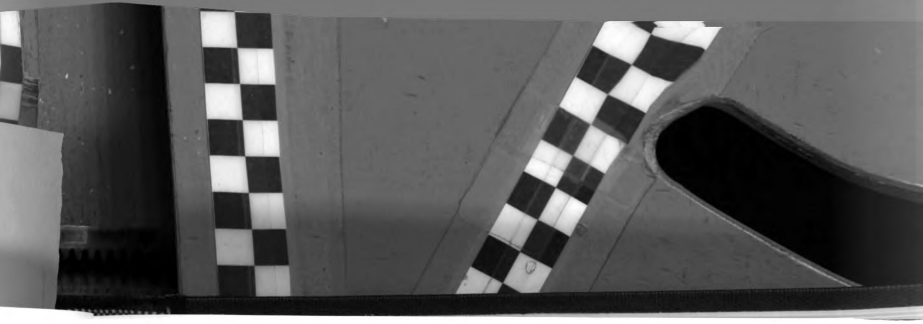
Serving as the ramifications of the problem of defining African literature in general are the choice of the medium of expression, the foreign influences on African literature, and the choice of subject-matter for African writing. The present chapter surveys these facets of the question in a general way.

Choice of Medium

Heated arguments had been carried on by the critics and writers of African literature in general as to whether the African writer should or should not write in a foreign language if he is to create a 'truly' African literature. Some African scholars seem to be convinced that to produce an African literature worth the name, the African writer should write in an African language. The most voluble among these appears to be Mr. Obi Wali.

In his article "The Dead End of African Literature?" Wali made the following points among others:





a. that because African writers such as J. P. Clark and Christopher Okigbo 'imitate' European and American writers, the resultant African literature "lacks any blood and stamina, and has no means of self-enrichment";

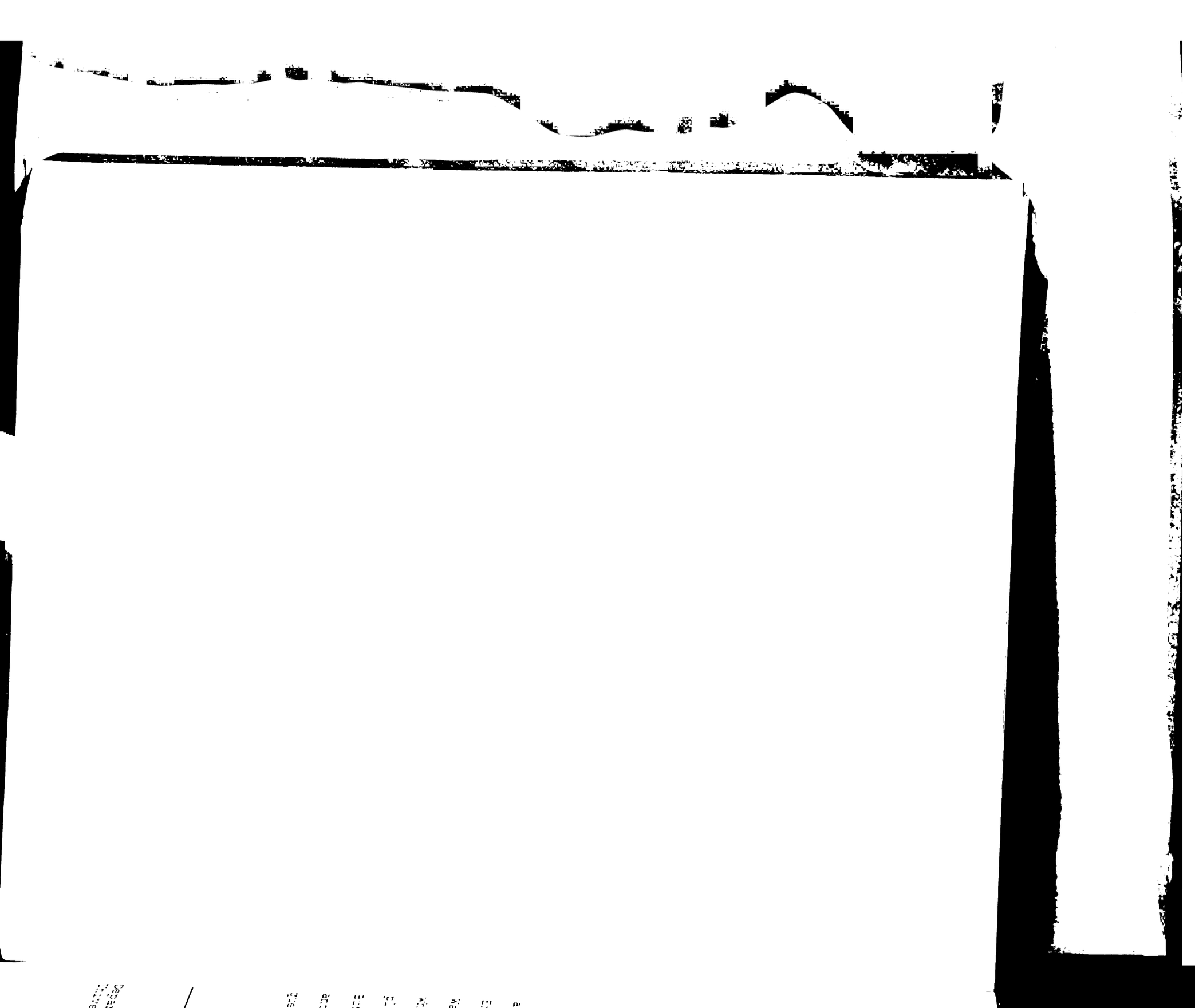
b. that until the African writers begin to write in African languages, "they would be merely pursuing a dead end, which can only lead to sterility, uncreativity and frustration";

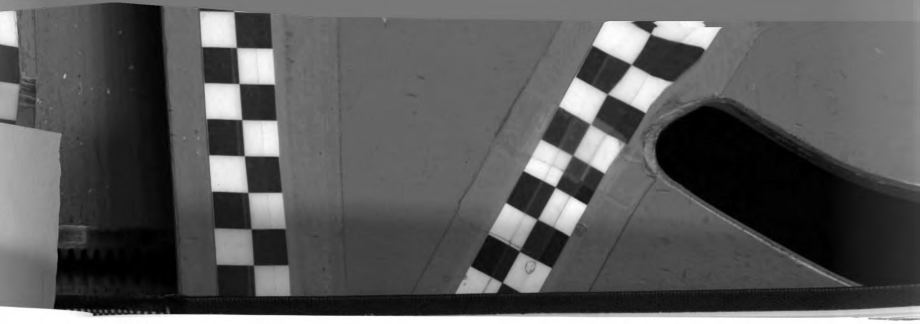
c. that the Conference of the African writers held at Makerere agreed that it is better for the African writers to "think and feel" in their own languages, and after that, effect "an English transliteration approximating the original";

d. that the original should be preferred to a mere "approximation";

e. that since "literature . . . is the exploitation of the possibilities of language," African languages should be developed by the African writers;

f. that the criticism of African writing sounds so dull, drab, and flippant, mainly because there is no opportunity for original thinking. There is no need for creative thinking in order to become a "leading critic or authority" in African literature. Frazer, Freud, Darwin, and Marx, are, as in European literature, the necessary reading for the acquisition





of the fundamental critical tools;

g. that though it is difficult, it is still necessary for critics of African writing to study some of the leading African languages;

h. that though there are the problems of "the multiplicity of African languages, the limitation of the audience to small patches of tribal groups, questions of orthography, . . ." there is the possibility for every language to be "developed as literature."[3]

By 1965, Wali not only kept fast to his thesis, but also reinforced it with a reference to the Indian writer in English, Mr. R. K. Narayan, who expressed a similar view to Wali's with respect to writing in a foreign language, and who, therefore, felt that English "must reach the market place and the village green if it has to send down roots."[4] But long before this time, Ulli Beier and Tom Hopkinson had anticipated Obi Wali's contention. Thus Beier hinted at the question and dismissed it hastily:

> Some people indeed have ventured the opinion that the West African should write solely in his native language. But such a purist attitude is hardly justifiable when one considers the facts.

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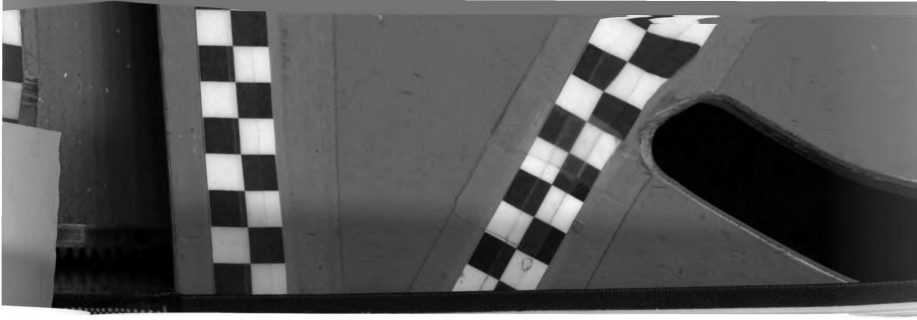
[3] Transition, III, 10 (1963), 13-15.

[4] "Criteria Other Than Linguistic" (Seminar Paper, Department of Adult Education and Extra-mural Studies, University of Ibadan, 1965), p. 1.



> The modern West African is already a member of a nation, and therefore he wishes to be understood beyond the limits of his tribe.[5]

And Hopkinson narrated the incident in which some "Europeans" were explaining to the "Africans eager to write what they have to say in English," "that such attempts are not only doomed to failure, since English is not their 'mother language,' but a 'betrayal' of their own background and heritage."[6] These two predecessors took to opposite camps, but each helped to generate the idea that Wali later presented so strongly and so insistently.

Wali's article was like maize grains thrown out in front of the house, for as soon as that is done, a number of contending chickens will be seen rushing to the centre of action. Wali's horn brought many critics to the battle scene. Barry Reckord, while seeing with Wali that the African writers should write in African languages since they think and feel in them, remarks that as he gathered at the Conference, the reason why the African writers do not write in their language "now" is that mostly "they think as freely in English and find it on the whole

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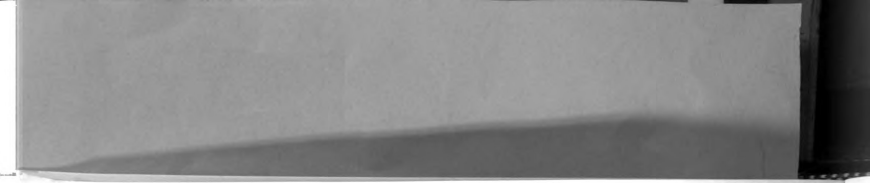
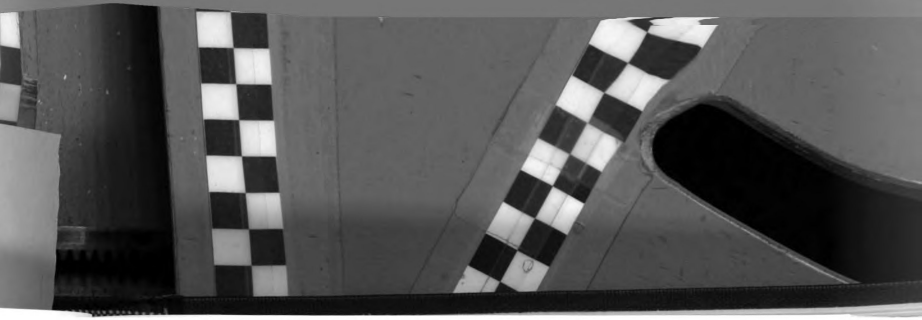
[5]"The Conflict of Cultures in West African Poetry," Black Orpheus, No. 1 (September 1957), 17.

[6]"Afro-English Awakening in Our Time," The Observer, September 17, 1961, p. 28.





satisfactory for expressing their experience."[7] Reckord does not see why Wali should blame the lack of original thinking of these writers "on language" and does not believe that what makes any "stuff literature" is its being written in one language rather than in another.

In the same connexion, Ezekiel Mphahlele notes, and very rightly so, that the African writers are not to blame for what critics say about them, and that the writers do not "get anywhere if it is implied that because [critics] see the theme of J. P. Clark's Song of a Goat as reminiscent of Greek tragedy (indeed it is!), then the reader or Clark is parroting Aristotle!" Aristotle is one of the foreign writers that Wali accuses the African writers of imitating.[8]

Mphahlele argues further that English and French are the languages which the Africans used for fighting their colonial "oppressors," and that where colonialism has been eschewed, these languages still remain a "unifying force."[9] He says also that the African writers may write in African languages only when these languages have been developed (the development being the work of the governments and the Universities in Africa, and not that of the writers only), but

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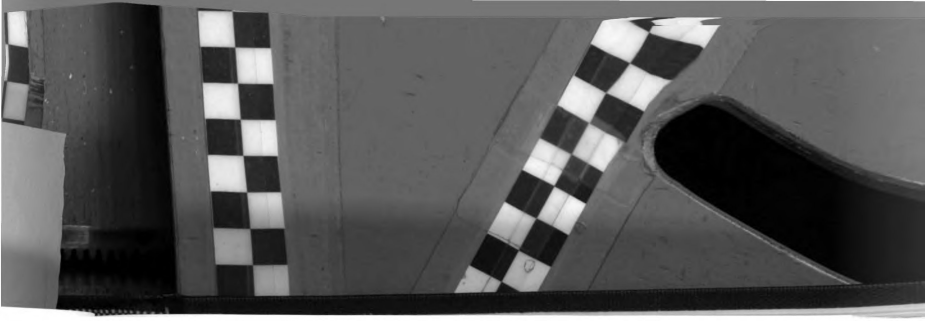
[7] "Polemics: The Dead End of African Literature," Transition, III, 11 (November 1963), 7.

[8] Ibid., p. 8.

[9] Ibid.





that writers should not wait till such a time before they try to express themselves: ". . . are we going to fold our arms and wait for that kingdom to come?"[10] He further states that though some few African languages have been fairly well developed, such as Sotho, Zulu, Xhosa, etc., the writer still has a choice as to whether or not to write in these languages: "A writer must choose the medium that suits him best. . . ."[11] And John Clare shares this view: "No writer wants to be told what he must or must not say and no more does he want to be told in what language he must say it."[12]

Clare makes another point in remarking that an "original mind," that is, whether in criticism or in creative writing, "will create its own opportunities"; though he does not give precision to his term 'opportunities.'[13] Gerald Moore is not far from this stand:

> If there are distinctively African modes of thought and experience a real writer will fight his way to expression of them in a language which gives him a hearing (and a living). If the words are not there, he will put them there, as countless other writers have done before him, as Achebe does in Things Fall Apart.[14]

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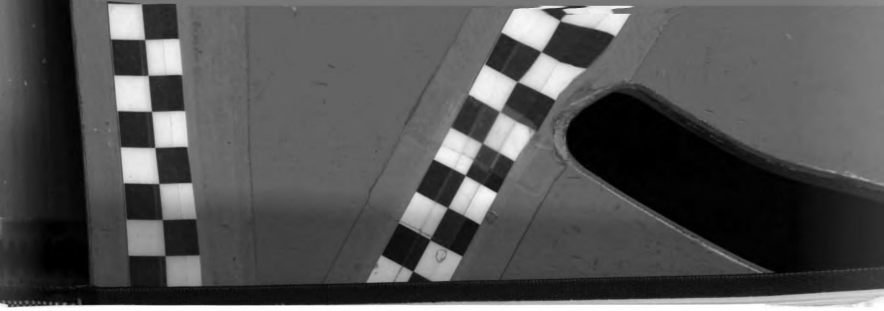
[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid., p. 9.

[12] "Polemics," Transition, III, 12 (Jan.-Feb. 1964), 6.

[13] Ibid.

[14] "Polemics," Transition, III, 11, p. 9.



It is labouring the obvious to insist that a writer has the absolute right to choose in what language to express himself.

Speaking in favour of literal translation, Gabriel Okara suggests the translation of African ideas, philosophy, folklore and imagery "almost literally from the African language native to the writer into whatever European language he is using as his medium of expression."[15] This is advisable but only in special cases, like the rendering of proverbs, greetings, riddles, etc. But one can find it hard to imagine a whole novel or a play written on the pattern of "almost" literal translation. Nor can one in writing poetry depend solely on transliteration; but when the poet has some images to be drawn from his native language, and finds that the images are already beautifully couched in the native expressions, it may be best to retain the images in this state by transliteration. Chinua Achebe has used this technique very admirably in Things Fall Apart. One example can suffice to clarify the case in point: "I am Dry-meat-that-fills-the-mouth."[16] If he had said, for instance, "I am small but effective," the image would not have been as vivid as it is, even though he might be saying, fundamentally, the same thing.

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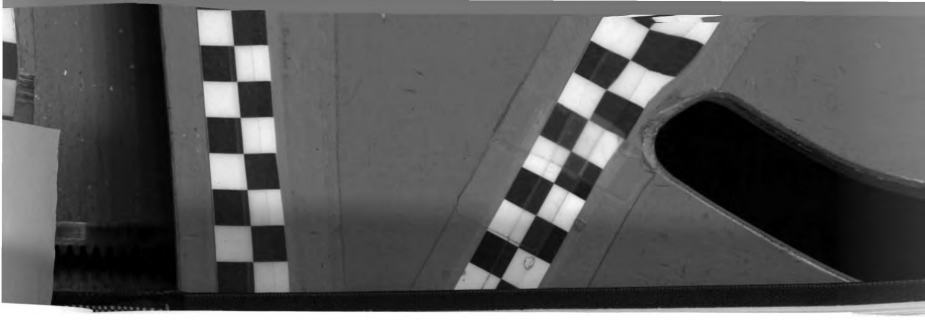
[15] "African Speech . . . English Words," Transition, III, 10 (1963), 15.

[16] (New York, 1959), p. 98.



At this stage of the controversy, Obi Wali replies to his critics. In defending his idea about the criticism of African writing, he says:

> When I complain of the dullness and drabness of the criticism done on African literature today, what I am saying in other words, is that aesthetic categories should be inherent in the structure of language and other elements of style dictated by structure. . . . It is unscientific to formulate theories of African literature in terms of the aesthetics of other languages. . . .[17]

Paul Edwards agrees with this view of Wali's by noting that "some attempts to relate African writing to the English or American literary tradition are ludicrous. . . ."[18] But Edwards seems to think that when a writer of one culture influences a writer of another culture, the latter is necessarily following the tradition of the former. This is not so, as will be shown fully later in this chapter.

Reviewing Obi Wali's novel written in Igbo (one of the African languages) Dr. Austin J. Shelton points out what seem to him to be its merits and demerits: "This is one of the first full-length novels ever written in Igbo . . . and it is the fulfilment of the author's dream of creating African literature by Africans for African readers."

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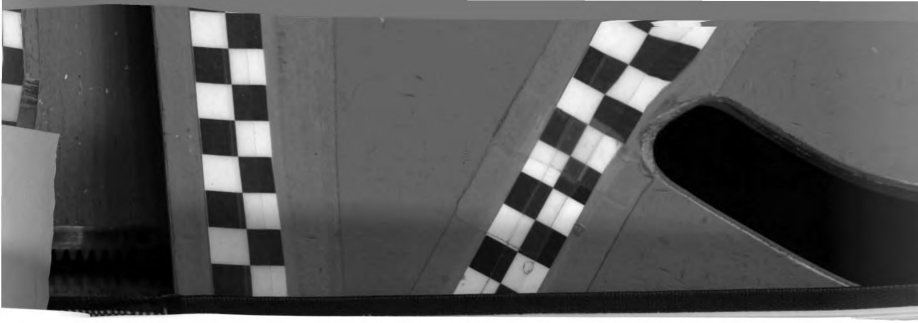
[17]"Polemics: A Reply to Critics From Obi Wali," Transition, III, 12 (Jan.-Feb., 1964), 7.

[18]Ibid., p. 8.





Shelton notes a number of problems in this novel, Ngozi dili Chukwu, in the nature of "variant orthography," passing from one dialect to another "without forewarning," and using "neologisms from English, which must be construed rather as necessity than as anything approaching neo-colonialism." Although Shelton recognises the artistic excellence of the novel, yet by implication, he does not share Wali's view that African languages, rather than English or French, should be the medium of expression for the African writers; for he underscores the fact that out of "more than eight million people [who] know Igbo,"[19] "somewhat fewer than 5342 of them can read all the subdialects. . . ."[20] If the prospective audience of the writer in Igbo is so small, Shelton seems to be saying, why all the fuss about writing in that language?

Dr. John Knappert in advocating Wali's idea that a 'truly' African literature must be in African languages, creates a new problem, which to the African speakers of native languages other than Swahili, may sound a contradictory sympathy with Wali's aspiration: "Since Swahili literature is more than a century older than any other African literature . . . there can be no better language for Africans to write their literature in than Swahili."[21] If every

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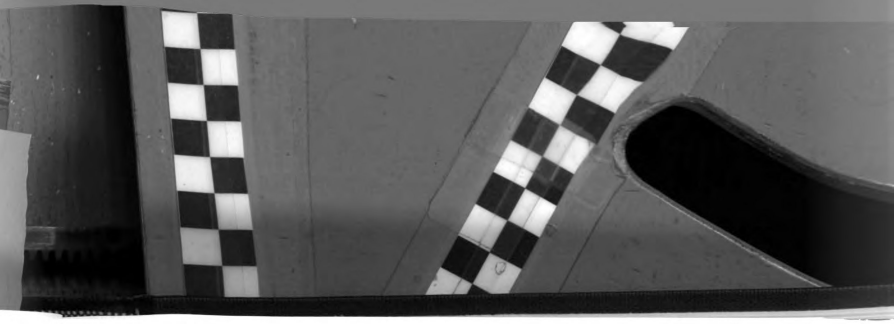
[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid., footnote.

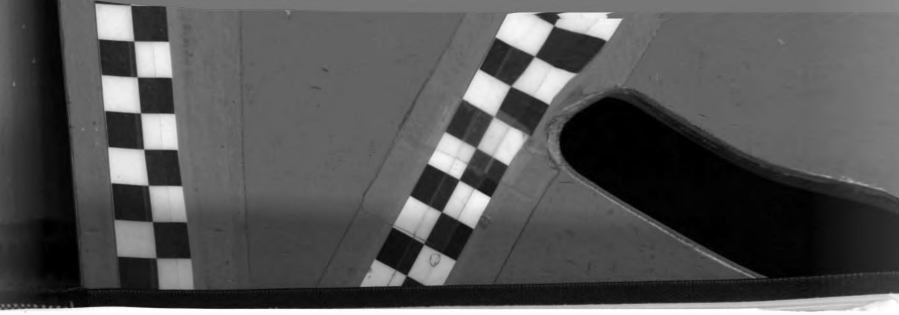
[21] "The Dead End of African Literature: Swahili as an African Language," Transition, III, 13 (March-April, 1964), 6.



African writer, by virtue of writing in Swahili, produces a 'truly' African literature, certain implications become glaring: (a) the writer must study Swahili if he has not been speaking or writing in it, Swahili being now his second language, of course; (b) since one of Wali's points of emphasis is the preservation of various African cultures, the African writer using Swahili as a second language will not achieve this objective any better than if he uses any of the European languages; (c) the development of other African languages becomes almost unnecessary to Dr. Knappert; and (d) therefore we end up producing Swahili literature, not African literature; for though African literature includes Swahili literature, African literature is not Swahili literature.

An argument which may be stimulating to the African writers is that since it has been possible to develop Swahili in the manner described by Knappert, it should also be equally possible to develop other African languages to serve as the writers' media of expression--a point which Knappert does not seem to consider.

The whirlpool of the arguments created by Wali continues its motion. Mr. Chinua Achebe approaches the problem very realistically and without sentimentality. He states that in a country like Nigeria, English is a national language, and that a national literature can only be produced



in Nigeria in English.[22] He goes on to prove that African literature produced in non-African languages will not "lead to sterility, uncreativity, and frustration." He quotes from Christopher Okigbo's Limits, and J. P. Clark's "Night Rain" to demonstrate African literature in English, but with African setting, and portraying African experiences. Achebe believes that such African writers as these are "speaking of African experience in a world-wide language."[23] He importantly (and perhaps correctly) remarks that though a foreign language can be used by the African writers to produce African literature; and though the language should not be altered "to the extent that its value as a medium of international exchange will be lost," the African writers "should aim to use English in a way that brings out his message best . . ." and "aim at fashioning out an English which is at once universal and able to carry his peculiar experience."[24]

Mr. Achebe, with respect to his view on 'setting' and 'experience,' has projected the definition of African literature arrived at during the writers' Conference at Freetown:

> The Freetown conference tentatively defined African literature, for the purposes of discussion, as creative writing in which an African

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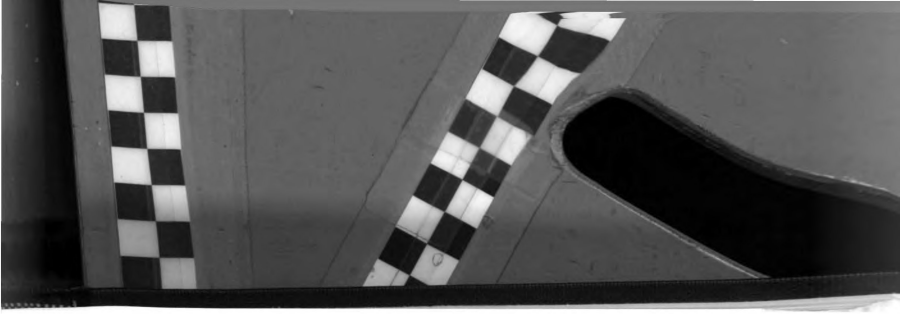
[22]"English and the African Writer," Transition, IV, 18 (1965), 27.

[23]Ibid., p. 29.

[24]Ibid.





> setting is authentically handled or to which experiences originating in Africa are integral.[25]

Other critics have given more definitions of African literature. Cyprian Ekwensi, for example, writes:

> My own definition of African writing is writing which reveals the psychology of the African. I use the term psychology very broadly to embrace reactions to situations and to the social order, religious beliefs, interpretation of moral codes, inter-relationships within the family. These factors inter-acting, create the African character which gives its stamp to African writing. The subject matter is incidental.[26]

It is clear that Ekwensi does not see from Wali's point of view, for he would like to see English or other European languages used, provided reactions to various life experiences are African; which is reasonable, it seems to me. And S. H. Olu Tomori is generally of the same opinion. Giving what he calls "two possible meanings of African Literature," he says: "It could mean literature written on an African topic in an African language. It could also mean literature written in a foreign language on an African topic."[27] Tomori is broadminded enough to accommodate both

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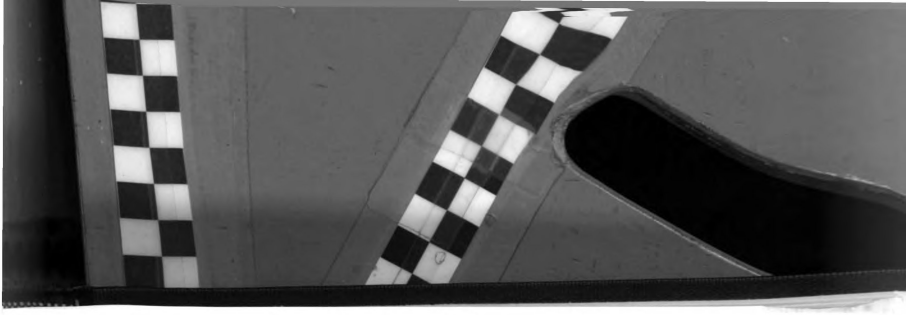
[25]Ezekiel Mphahlele, "African Literature and Universities," Transition, III, 10 (September 1963), 17.

[26]"Problems of Nigerian Writers," Nigeria Magazine, No. 78 (September 1963), 218.

[27]"Linguistic Considerations in the Selection of Texts" (Seminar Paper, No. 13, Department of Adult Education and Extra-mural Studies, University of Ibadan, 1965), p. 1.



African and foreign languages in his definition, but seems too narrow in insisting on "African topic," whatever he means by that.

One other critic approaches this question in a way that seems intelligent. While Janheinz Jahn recognizes that language is needed to classify literatures, for instance, "une poésie francaise," "une poésie anglaise," "une poésie allemande," he insists that language is not "un critére suffisant."[28] Having shown that although the English and the Americans use the same language yet they produce two different literatures, Jahn declares that style is therefore the chief criterion for such classification. And in the case of African literature, he points out that it is what he calls "procédés stylistiques non-européens" but "sont issus de la poétique africaine traditionelle" that are the criteria for determining what is African poetry; and further he says:

> ...ces procédés stylistiques se retrouvent également dans la littérature africaine moderne de langue française ou de langue anglaise.... et ils constituent par conséquent des critères précieux pour la classification de cette littérature.[29]

And by way of emphasis, Jahn insists:

> La poésie africaine est caracterisée par les procédés stylistiques définis plus haut, et non

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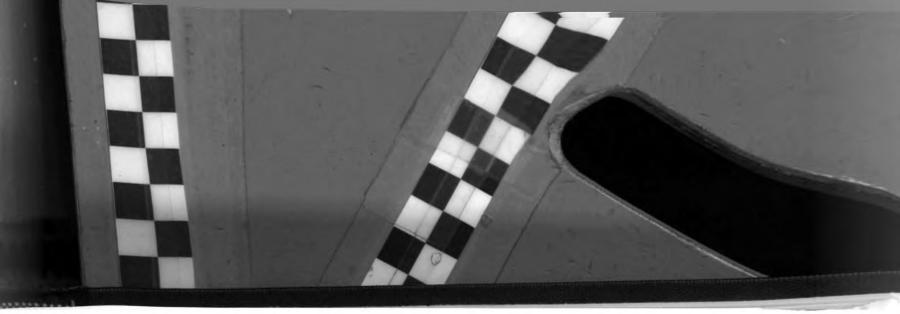
[28]"Sur la littérature africaine," Présence Africaine, No. 48 (1963), 151.

[29]Ibid., pp. 154-155.





> par la langue employée, non plus que par la coleur de peau de l'auteur.[30]

These stylistic behaviours which Jahn recommends as the distinguishing marks of African literature, are again pointed at by Achebe in his own views, and there is no doubt that these more than language are a more plausible means of characterising African literature. And in this way African cultures are respected and preserved, as Wali would have them be.

More than enough has thus been said about this problem of the choice of language facing the African writer today, and diverse views have been expressed about Mr. Obi Wali's patriotic obsession with the creation of a 'truly' African literature in African languages, which have been summarized in the preceding pages.

Allowing a word more on this very important issue, it may be said that Mr. Wali's notion of African literature in African languages is solidly sensible in its ambition, but emotional in the manner it is pursued. His critics have been emotional, more or less, with the exception (it seems to this writer) of Chinua Achebe and maybe Janheinz Jahn. Achebe's remarks are not only free from sentimentality, but are also the realistic comments resulting from direct personal experience, and these are logically put forth, with concrete details to buttress them. Wali has

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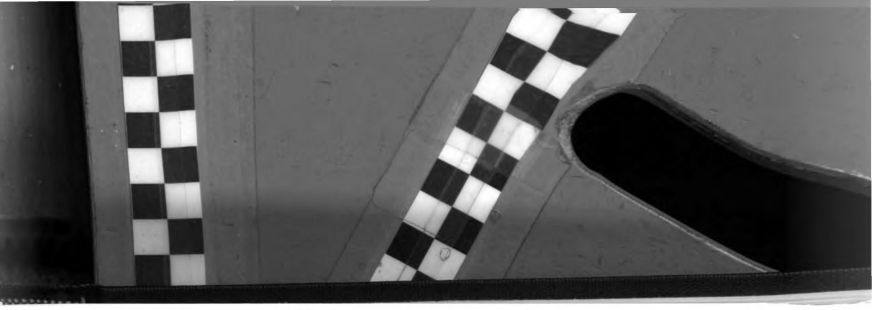
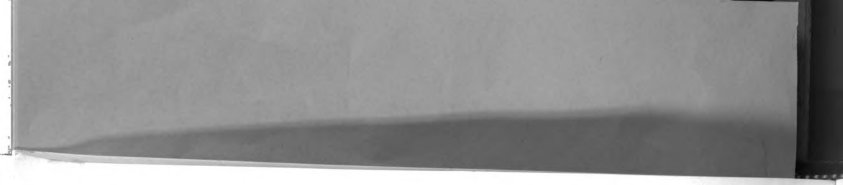
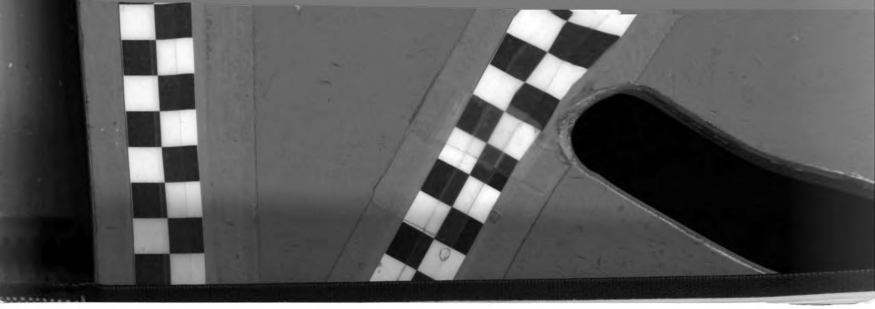
[30] Ibid., p. 156.



thus done well in pointing out the problem facing the African writers, and this writer wishes he would approach the problem more realistically and less emotionally--bearing in mind constantly that social, educational, religious and even political factors are all involved; that though a change be expedient, to effect it may be slow, and that slowness does not mean stagnation. As to whether or not English or any other European language could be used to produce a 'truly' African literature, to say that it could not is tantamount to a ridiculous refusal to see, for example, the poems of J. P. Clark, Christopher Okigbo, George Awoonor-Williams, and the novels of Chinua Achebe, to mention but a few, as great works of African literature, which of course they are.

Wali's point about the criticism of African literature requires closer attention. While, however, as he indicated, foreign patterns should not be imposed on African literary works, comparisons are legitimate in criticism; and a similarity discovered between a work by an African and that by a European, say, does not make the former any less African, or entirely European. (This point will be dealt with later in the next chapter in connexion with the discussion of Christopher Okigbo's work.) Furthermore, the fact that foreign critics of African writings approach these works from their own points of view, does not prevent any other critic from seeing them from his own angle. Instead of





diminishing the literary merits of such works, different possible (though relevant) approaches signify their richness. For what is criticism as work of art if it lacks this variety arising from the basic individuality of human beings? Louis Untermeyer's words may help drive the point home:

> . . . art itself is nothing more than a reaction to as well as a record of the things one loves or hates, and . . . criticism is merely an annotated explanation of these likes and dislikes. . . .[31]

Finally, it is strange that Wali should quarrel with the reading of Frazer, Freud, Darwin, and Marx in relation to the criticism of African writing, as if he thinks that these writers wrote only for one section of humanity and not for the others. Wali may, in the circumstance, be reminded that Sir Frazer, for example, includes specimens from "the Central African kingdom of Unyoro," and "three Hausa kingdoms of Gobir, Katsina, and Daura, in Northern Nigeria," for the discussion of the killing of kings.[32] And in discussing the priest of the Earth, Frazer again refers to Nigeria: "Among the Ibo people about Awka, in Southern Nigeria, the priest of the Earth has to observe many taboos. . . .[33] If Frazer is interested in speaking of Africa, as he is in speaking of other parts of the globe, one cannot understand

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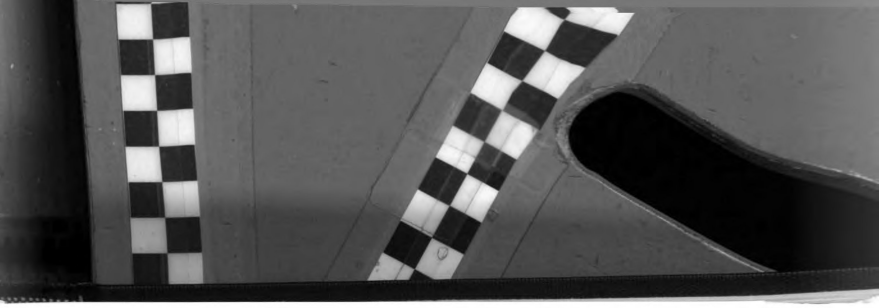
[31] American Poetry Since 1900 (New York, 1923), pp. vii-viii.

[32] The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion, Vol. IV (London, 1911), pp. 34-35.

[33] The Golden Bough, X, 4.



that it is a crime against African literature if one finds it necessary to read his work for purposes of studying this literature.

In the final analysis, however, English still remains the dominant medium of expression for the West African English-speaking poets. This is no unanimous resolution of the problem, but looks like a silent confirmation of the principle of individual right of choice of a medium.

Foreign Influences on Modern West African Poetry in English

In the introductory section of A Book of African Verse edited by John Reed and Clive Wake is the following:

> It is difficult to use a language without using some of the literary traditions which have grown up with that language, and most poets in this book have been influenced by the traditions of English and French poetry.[34]

Among the examples cited is "Gabriel Okara, [who] for example, writes in a way which suggests he has been deeply influenced by Dylan Thomas. . . ."[35] About the influences on J. P. Clark, Ulli Beier gives us the two names, T. S. Eliot and G. M. Hopkins,[36] and later another source points out that not only is he influenced by the moderns like "Yeats and T. S. Eliot," but also by "the Elizabethans" from whom "he

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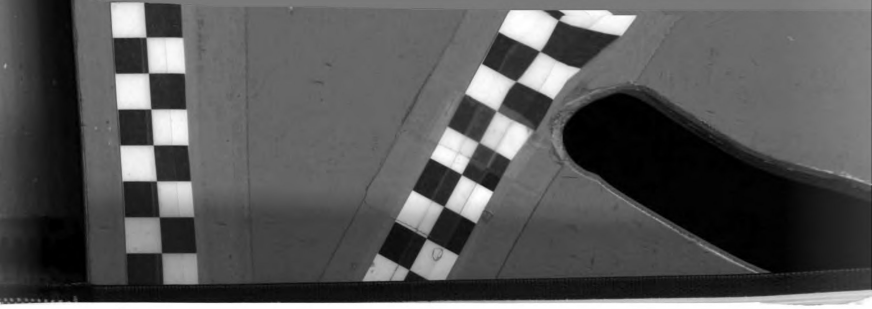
[34](London, 1964), p. 3.

[35]Ibid.

[36]"Three Mbari Poets," Black Orpheus, No. 12 (1963), 47.



took" a "note of easy-seeming power," and "fullness of voice. . . ."[37] Further still, Langston Hughes notes that the modern African poets "have read Auden and Spender and Eliot, Mauriac, Jacques Prevert and perhaps Brecht."[38] Janheinz Jahn is not content with mentioning the foreign influences only, but would bring out also the traditional influences:

> Comme la poésie néo-africaine est issue de deux traditions, l'africaine et l'européene, et comme chaque écrivain est libre de préférer la stylistique de l'une ou de l'autre de ces deux traditions, on distingue deux courants contraires dans la poésie néo-africaine contemporaine: l'un tend à rompre avec la tradition africaine, aussi bien quant à la forme que quant au fond, et à s'integer a la poésie occidentale.[39]

However, the next point which Jahn makes cannot apply to modern West African poetry:

> Sur le continent africain, la poésié écrite, conformément aux tendances assimilatrices des missionaires et des colonisateurs, commença par rejeter la tradition africaine et adopter les models européens.[40]

The truth of the matter is that the modern West African poet while accepting the influences of the "European models" on

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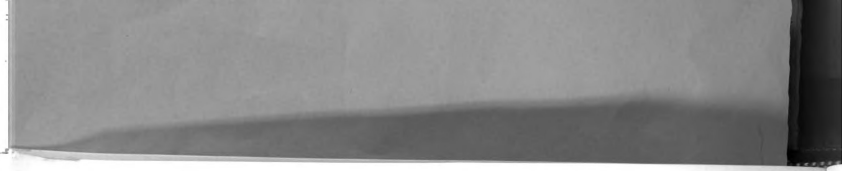
[37] E. B. "Modern Influences on African Verse," Insight, No. 7 (n.d.), 30.

[38] Poems From Black Africa, p. 12.

[39] Presence Africaine, No. 48 (1963), 157-158.

[40] Ibid., p. 158.





his work, still retains whatever he thinks useful in his traditional life.

Themes of Modern West African Poetry in English

Conflict is a prominent characteristic of the African literary world, not only in the sense that Négritude is a conflict between "blackness" and "whiteness,"[41] or that most West African writers in English are concerned with the conflict between indigenous cultures and the imported (superimposed may be the bitterer word!) ones, or yet that the situation in South Africa exhibits oppression versus the struggle to be free--not only these, but also in the sense that there is the conflict between the African advocates of Négritude (the French-speaking West African writers) and their English-speaking counterparts; and also the exasperating clash between the African writers and their critics--foreign and native. Another ramification of the conflict can still be found, as we have already seen earlier in this chapter, between the exponents of African literature in African languages, and their opponents. A less overt conflict may exist in each black African writer between the

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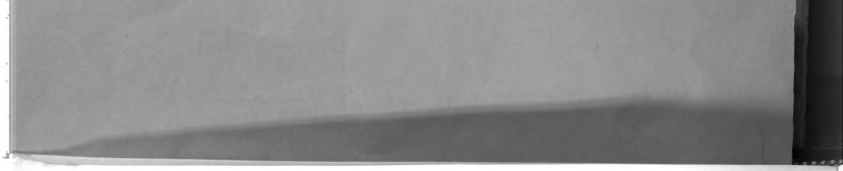
[41] Négritude, a term invented by Aimé Césaire of Martinique, is used to describe a movement in Negro literature, some of whose themes are the "warm triumphant beauty of African woman," and the "devastation of ancient Africa and its culture by white Europe." See Modern Poetry from Africa, pp. 16-17.





foreign language he uses for artistic creation, and his own native tongue. Discussions on these issues have punctuated the African literary scene, but the present task is with the West African poets writing in English.

Much has been said by various critics and observers of modern West African poetry about the theme of conflict. In this connexion, for instance, Ezekiel Mphahlele said that "conflict is an intensely-felt statement."[41] But while there is conflict of cultures reflected in this poetry, there are many other threads to the texture of the corpus of the poets' works, such as the celebration of traditional heritage per se, love and hate, tragic and weary views of life, and the treatment of the foreign and the indigenous without conflict in matter or in method. And what is more, from time to time, we find the poets dealing with the matter of pure aesthetics in their works. J. P. Clark also recognises this variety of themes in modern West African poetry in English, while witnessing still to the obvious theme of conflict:

> The great complication, perhaps, for the West African elite brought up in a system not quite British is that he swims in a stream of double currents, one traditional, the other modern. Both of them do not run parallel; in fact they are often in conflict. Accordingly, you are likely to find him at church or mosque in the morning and in the evening taking a title at home that carries with it sacrifice of some

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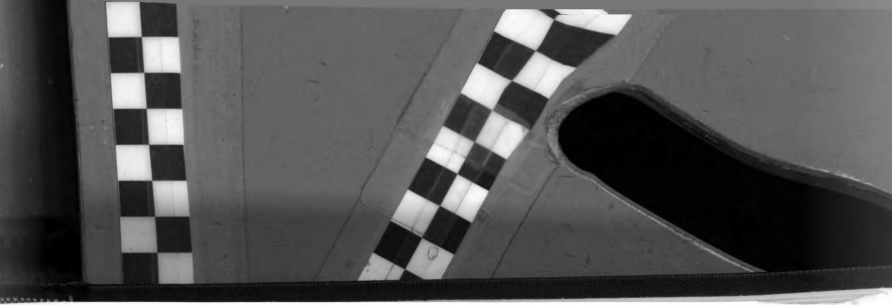
[41] Frances Ademola, ed. Reflections: Nigerian Prose & Verse (Lagos, 1962), p. 12.



> sort to his ancestors and community gods. . . . Quite evident too is an awareness of the conditions of human existence as known to each personally. Perhaps, following from this, is their tacit acceptance, whether in pride or in humility, of the fact that a poem summoned to life by a committee of citizens [an apparent reference to the Negritude school], however revolutionary, is more likely to be the hotch-potch and doggerel that many national anthems are than a genuine work of art.[43]

Clark has certainly repeated the idea that Jahn had given us before--"a stream of double currents, one traditional, the other modern, . . ." an echo of Jahn's "deux courants contraires. . . ." The point of interest in Clark's passage is his mention of the multiplicity of themes handled by the modern West African poets using English.

The remaining chapters of this study will demonstrate such themes, as used by the four modern poets being studied, and also the various influences--foreign and indigenous--on the poets, their use of English language, and their poetic techniques at large.

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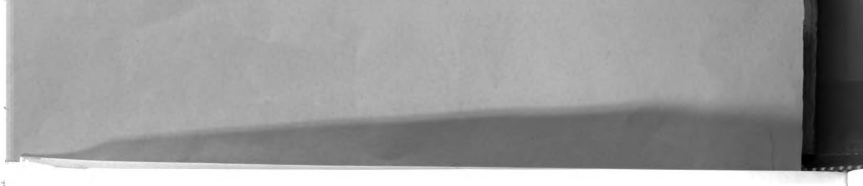
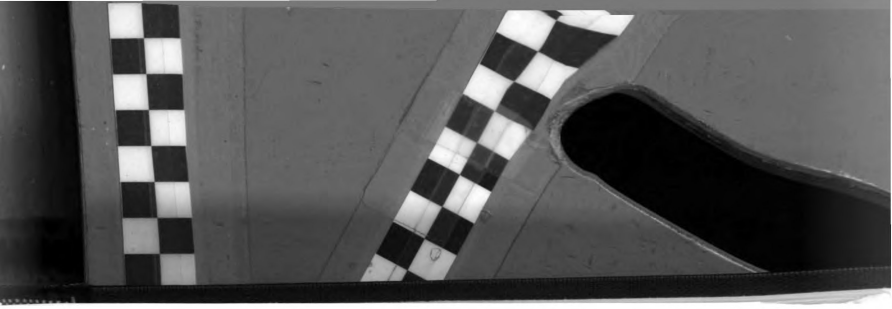
[43]"Poetry in Africa Today," Transition, IV, 18, p. 24.





CHAPTER IV

CHRISTOPHER OKIGBO AND FOREIGN INFLUENCES

> My Limits . . . was influenced by everyting 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?
>
> (Christopher Okigbo)[1]

Introduction

Christopher Okigbo is a good example for proving that although a modern West African poet may be greatly influenced by a foreign poet, yet the former's work remains essentially African. The point has been noted by most critics of African poetry that Okigbo is influenced by Ezra Pound. Mr. Ulli Beier hinted at this in his review, "Three Mbari Poets,"[2] and J. P. Clark went a step futher to make a specific reference to cantos 6 and 104:

> The bright aura and dazzle, the armpit, the lioness, the white light, the waves as escort, the crown and moonlight, the transience of the maid like "matchflare in the wind's breath," the mirrors and gold crop all constitute an

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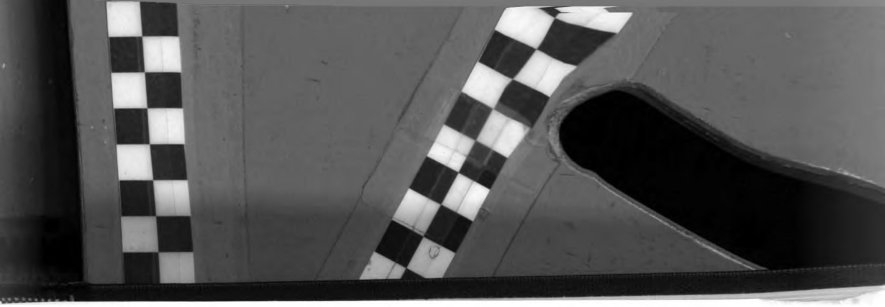
[1]"Transition Conference Questionnaire," Transition, II, 5 (July-Aug. 1962), 12.

[2]Black Orpheus, No. 12 (1963), 47.





> apparatus completely taken from Pound's Cantos 6 and 104, and where the "downward" movement here really was "upward," and the wind that of the King.[3]

Two things strike one particularly in this connexion. Firstly, what this influence of Pound on Okigbo is has not been pinned down wholly. Secondly, Okigbo himself has never made mention, to this writer's knowledge, of Ezra Pound as one of the artists that have influenced his poetry; yet he gave a list of many others:

> My Heavensgate (Mbari Publications) was influenced by the Impressionist Composers. It is curious how this happens, but this is the truth or part of it. I wrote several parts of Heavensgate under the spell of Debussy, Caesar Frank and Ravel. . . .[4]

In another instance, Okigbo gave the names of more people who influenced his work--Raja Ratnam, Malcom Cowley, Stéphane Mallarmé, and Rabindranath Tagore.[5] However, it can be hardly contested that Pound has had pervading influence on the poetry of Christopher Okigbo, as will be shown in this chapter.

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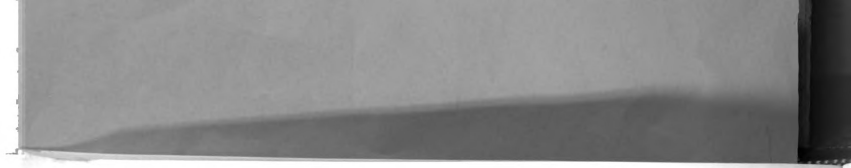
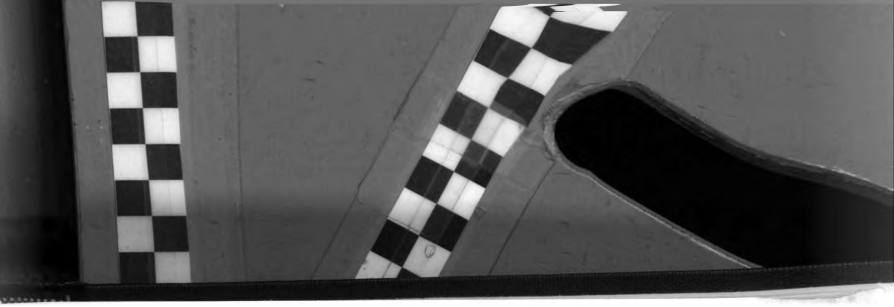
[3]"Poetry in Africa Today," Transition, IV, 18, p. 25.

[4]Transition, II, 5, p. 12.

[5]"Silences," Transition, III, 8 (1963), 13.





The Mortar Is Not Yet Dry

Canto VIII of Ezra Pound is one of those that deal with the Malatesta theme. Sigismondo de Malatesta was an Italian Renaissance soldier, whose superb qualities as a schemer, strong man and admirer of beautiful things held much attraction for Pound. Pound learnt the history of this passionate hero during one of his tours of the Italian battlefields, and in The Cantos (VIII, IX, X among others) he tipped him for commensurate glorification. Pound did not merely catalogue facts and events about Malatesta, but created "letters and documents to give his 'history' an air of disinterestedness."[6]

It is in such a letter, which appears at the very beginning of the eighth canto, that we hear the order:

> And tell the Maestro di pentore
> That there can be no question of
> His painting the walls for the moment,
> As the mortar is not yet dry
> And it wd be merely work chucked away.
> (11.27-31) [7]

In the next eight lines we learn that the buildings to be painted are "chapels," and that in the interim, "something else" would be arranged for the painter to paint. But he would still be given "so much per year" for "he needs cash,"

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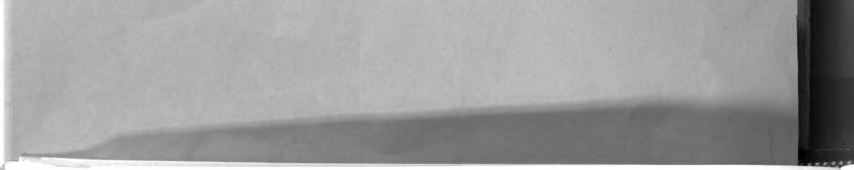
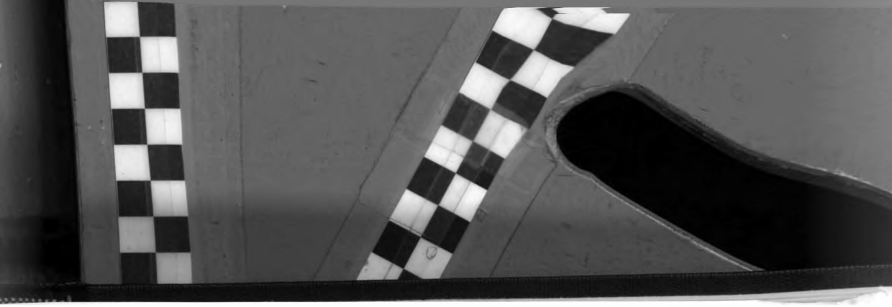
[6]William Van O'Conner, Ezra Pound (Minneapolis, 1963), pp. 35-36.

[7]The Cantos of Ezra Pound (London, 1964), p. 32.



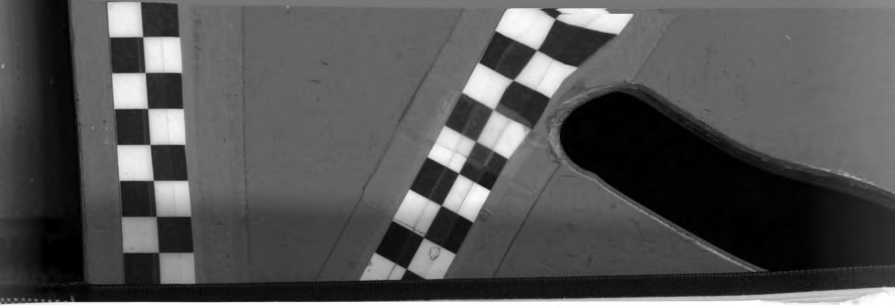


and finally, he is assured "that he will get the sum agreed on." Essentially, this is an order not to do something; it is prohibitive, even though not in a harsh way. The magnanimity of Malatesta shows vividly.

Okogbo has adopted one of the lines quoted above--"As the mortar is not yet dry," and but for "As" which is supplanted by "&" in Limits, the line is transferred intact. Limits II is packed full with images of the desire for growth, struggling for light, and need for expression. We have a whole picture of a weak dwarf in the midst of giants, or of an equatorial forest where the gigantic trees form a canopy with their leaves on top, preventing the low undergrowths from getting light and rain for effective growth. Very appropriately, therefore, "He was a shrub among the poplars," in need of "roots" and "sap to grow to sunlight." There is further a "feeling for audience" by the "selves." Why audience? There is need for expression, for "voice and soul with selves" have united. The voice is therefore struggling to be heard, and is groping (as if in the dark), looking for people to hear it. This is a different voice from that in the poet's "Distances" II and III.[8] This latter voice does not grope for audience, but in the total blindness in the "island," it "sought its echo." This is a mastervoice, for the protagonist will only be its "acolyte."

[8]Published in Transition, IV, 16 (1964), 9-13.





In Limits, there is even a competition among the selves. The selves may represent the things to be expressed, their qualitites; or who to express them--a historian, politician, poet, and so on. In the end, one self triumphs, and the "name" produces "its foliage," but it is yet young, and inexperienced. The adjective "green" points to this.

The promising hope with which section II ends is to be stifled in section III. The physical situation is adverse at the outset. The "banks" are "of reed." All the connotations of "reed" crowd in upon the reader here: does "reed" mean a musical instrument, or the brittle-stemmed marsh plant noted for its weakness and slenderness? Can it be reminiscent of the scriptural use of the word--"A reed trembling in the wind?"[9]

In any event, the next line shows that "reed" does not stand for a favourable idea: "Mountains of broken bottles," where one must tread very cautiously. The situation is chaotic and dangerous. Then comes the observation--"& the mortar is not yet dry. . . ." This is said by way of reflection; it may be a realisation of one's own weakness, or the obvious impossibility, because of obstacles, of proceeding with the work. What this work is here we do not yet know. All we know is that footfalls are silent, and "we must go/Wearing evemist against the shoulders/Trailing sun's dust saw dust of combat," with the notion of struggling

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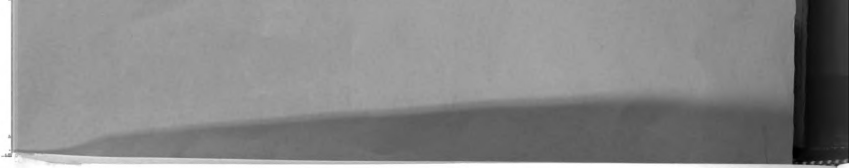
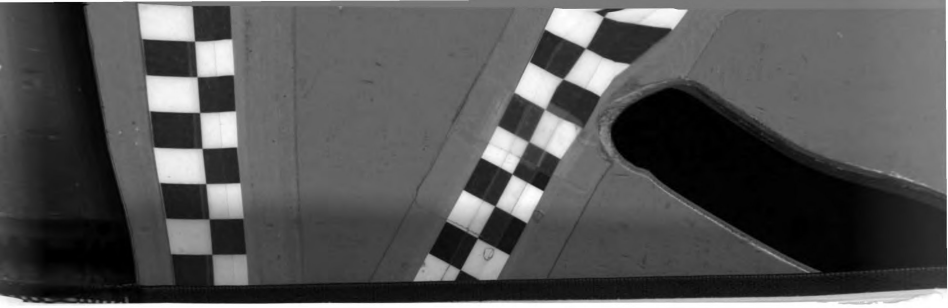
[9]Matthew, 11:7.





insisting. If there is to be singing at all, this must be done "tongue-tied without a name or audience." This is a height of suppression, lack of encouragement for the aspiring voice of the singer, the poet, or any artist. That is why Okigbo calls it "the crisis point."

This resembles the situation of the lamenting "sisters" in "Silences," (iv), where in the same paradoxical tone the bells that should normally sound have become dumb:

> We are the dumb bells
> We are the dumb bells
> Outside the gates. . . .[10]

Back to Limits, shortly after, the voice "is reborn" and it "transpires/Not thro' pores in the flesh/but the soul's back-bone." This can mean that the voice now speaks of the things of the soul and not of the flesh, that is to say, from the point of view of morality; or that since it is the voice of a poet, it speaks through the soul, for according to Matthew Arnold, "genuine poetry is conceived and composed in the soul."[11] The voice issues a series of commands--"Hurry on down, . . ." ending with:

> To rockpoint of CABLE
> To pull by the rope
> The big white elephant, . . .

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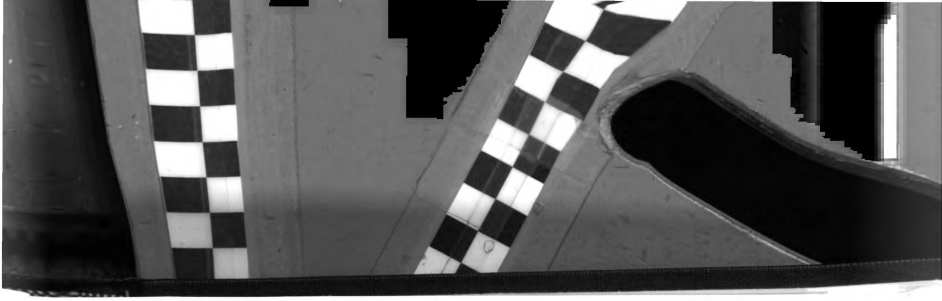
[10]Christopher Okigbo, "Silences: Lament of the Silent Sisters," Transition, III, 8 (March 1963), 14.

[11]Matthew Arnold' Essays in Criticism First and Second Series. Introduction by G. K. Chesterton (London, 1964), p. 279.



and again we hear "& the mortar is not yet dry" repeated. The commands here point to the difficult task of pulling a "big white elephant" by a rope. But the voice has spoken only in a dream, and when "the dream wakes" it fades "like a shadow, and does not leave "a mark."

The fourth section of Limits shows clearly that the concern of the poet is his art. But the image which "insists" after the voice has faded is a distracting one. This is the image of "my lioness" who has wounded the poet with her "seaweed face," and he is tired of her. But what is the poet distracted from? And why should he desire to be awakened "near the altar"? Since his concern is the writing of his poem, the obstinate image of the lioness prevents him from concentrating on his art. That is why he pleads:

> When you have finished,
> and done up my stitches,
> wake me near the altar,
> & this poem will be finished.

Probably he needs to be awakened near the altar to pick up his religious theme, which he dropped just before the end of Heavensgate, and will pick up in the second part of Limits--"Fragments Out of the Deluge."



Thematic Influence

From the point of view of themes, some parallels between Okigbo and Pound can be established. These may or may not indicate direct influence of the latter on the former, for many a time what we call an influence may simply be a coincidence: "What are called literary influences are usually only literary symptoms springing from the same cause as the works they are deemed to have affected."[12]

However, both Pound and Okigbo are concerned with cultural atavism, though of different kinds. Pound goes back, in The Cantos, to Homer (cantos I, XXXIX), to Ovid (XLIX, LI), to Italian Renaissance (Malatesta episode), to Confucius (canto XIII, for instance), and to the first World War (canto XIV) and so on, to find a pattern for re-ordering the chaotic society of the present. In the same way, Okigbo goes back, in Heavensgate and Limits, to the worship of Idoto and the deities of the palm grove to find a replacement for the conventional religion which he no longer finds satisfactory. His spiritual life has been disrupted, and only the religion of his forefathers can steady the weather-beaten soul.

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[12] Anthony Hartley, ed. The Penguin Book of French Verse 4: Twentieth Century (Baltimore, Maryland, 1963), p. xxiv.

Thus at the opening of Heavensgate he stands before "mother Idoto" as "a prodigal" desiring to return to his parent, and praying to her to "give ear and hearken" to his "cry." Paul Theroux noted that Okigbo is "a poet, prophet, prodigal."[13] Again at the beginning of Limits he prays to the goddess of "palm grove," who is "Queen of the damp half light." He hangs his egg-shells to her; he is an "Emigrant" leaving his country of exile for his home (Limits I). Eggs are often used in Igbo society for offering sacrifices. The whole atmosphere is that of the indigenous religion, and the sincerity of the votary-poet cannot be doubted. "Lustra" I, II, III in Heavensgate, also teem with reminiscences of the indigenous sacrificial systems.

If Okigbo is a "prodigal," an "Emigrant," from where has he been exiled and to where? The answer to this question brings out two other thematic links between Okigbo and Pound. Forrest Read, in his scholarly study of the Odysseus theme in The Cantos, made the point that Pound is like Odysseus who, after the destruction of Troy, sought his way home to Ithaca.[14] The chief point is that both are seeking their way home: Odysseus home to Ithaca, Pound home to Italy. It should be warned that Okigbo's situation resembles Pound's

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[13]"Christopher Okigbo," Transition, V, 22 (1965), 20.

[14]"A Man of No Fortune," in Ezra Pound: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Walter Sutton (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1963), pp. 64-79.

only in a very general sense. The protagonist of Heavensgate had been estranged from his indigenous religion when he was a child, and taken into the realm of a foreign (Christian) religion. In this sense, he is a prodigal, an outcast, an exile ("prodigal" is used three times in Heavensgate). And having had an unsatisfactory experience with the new religion, he, like the prodigal son of the Scriptures, comes back home now to his parent, begging for readmission into the family-fold.[15]

The idea of homecoming after terrible experiences continues in another poem--"Distances," where it assumes a tone of uncertainty, for it is to a dream that the protagonist is returning:

> . . . and the chamber descanted
> the birthday of earth, paddling me home through
> some dark labyrinth, from laughter to dream.
> (Sec. I)

It is in revealing the experience of returning home after a period of exile as is shown in Heavensgate that Okigbo shows another resemblance to Pound--his attitude to Christianity. Pound did not like the Church's inhibition of the sexual act. To him man needs sex in order to live; and like the French poet, Remy de Gourmont, Pound seems to believe that

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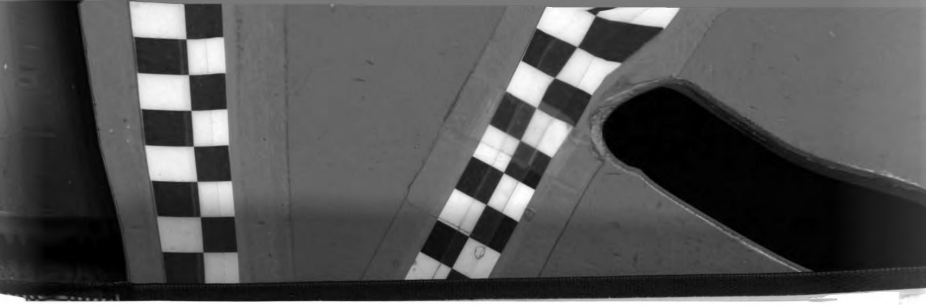
[15]Luke, 15.



> Il y aurait peut-être une certain corrélation entre la copulation compléte et profonde et le développement cérébral.[16]

Okigbo satirises the Catholic Church a great deal in Heavensgate.

In "Passage" iv, we hear of the "byelaws thereto appended/by Leidan,/archtyrant of the holy sea." Byelaws may be the Commandments or the regulations of the Catholic Church, and "Leidan" is certainly a Catholic priest or bishop, for he represents the "holy sea" (a pardoy of Holy See); and then he (Leidan) is "archtyrant." We know that this is so, for "Leidan" has the power to forgive sins, and the "forgiveness" is given "upon the waters of the genesis/ by Leidan." In "Initiation" (i), we learn that the protagonist was baptized by Kepkanly from whom he received the "mystery" "upon waters of the genesis." Paul Theroux and O. R. Dathorne said that the passage dealing with the "Scar of the crucifix" signifies that the poet is crucified like Christ.[17] But this writer rather thinks that the scar is only a sign or witness of the mystery of Baptism which the poet has received, for this "Scar of the crucifix/over the breast" "Witnesseth" the "mystery which I initiate/received newly naked/upon waters of the genesis. . . ."

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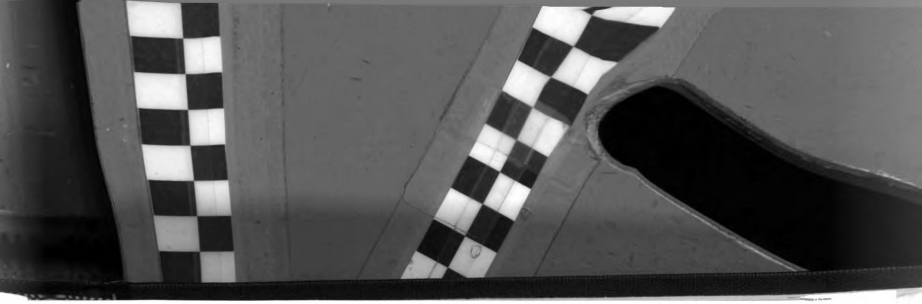
[16]William Van O'Connor, Ezra Pound, p. 27.

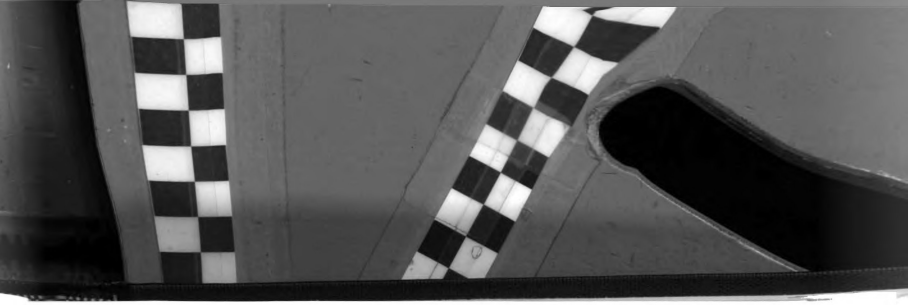
[17]See Transition, V, 22 (1965), 18-20; and Black Orpheus, No. 15 (August 1964), 59.



Immediately after this information is given we hear of "John the Baptist" who preached the "gambit," and this is "life without sin, without life," and one is not expected to make "decisions" about accepting it. It must be accepted without question. This is faith--believing without doubting what God has revealed. Life "without life" sounds satirical. It commands life without carnal enjoyments, and as we shall see in section V, it seems impossible to the poet. The ridicule continues to the representation of Church organisation in terms of mathematical figures: the "square yields the moron/fanatics, priests and popes,/organising secretaries and/party managers . . ."; then the "rhombus--brothers and/deacons and liberal politicians and/selfish selfseekers and all/who are good doing nothing at all." The satire becomes too scathing, and still goes a step further to show "the quadrangle, the rest/me and you. . . ." But Okigbo is not attacking religion as an institution, it seems to this writer, but the managers of religion. For he accepts that the "Mystery" would be a witness to "the red-hot blade on right breast/the scar of the crucifix" if there were not the "errors of the rendering." In other words, the rulers of the church have misinterpreted the religion of Christ.

The poet goes next into the area of Church preaching. This is all in the form of prohibition: not to "wander in speargrass" in the dark; not to "listen to a keyhole"--eavesdropping. To the poet these warnings are unnecessary, and





that is why he thinks that

> . . . there are here
> the errors of the rendering

Furthermore, some of the commands are hypocritical. One recommendation says "Screen your bedchamber thoughts/with sunglasses" so that there will be no interference from outside with man's mind. This is encouraging hypocrisy. Provided you do something in hiding there is nothing wrong in doing it--Victorian morality? But the poet proves the argument wrong, for the "prophet" and "poet" can probe the mind's chamber. And in section V comes the command, to the poet impossible of obedience, demanding that the ram should disarm. The poet responds

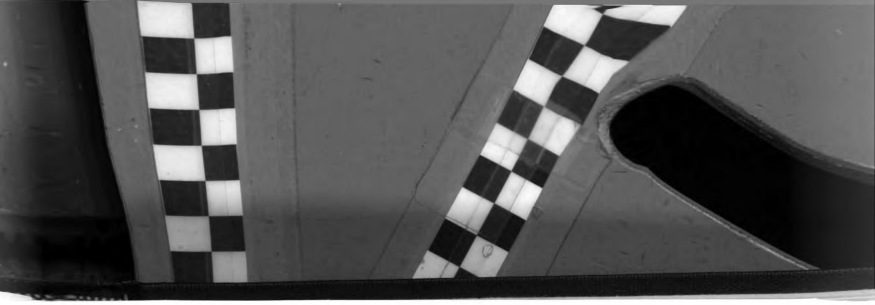
> except by rooting
> who could pluck yamtubers
> from their base?

This writer agrees to the interpretation given to these lines by Paul Theroux.[18] It is with respect to this view of the impossibility of checking sexual acts that Okigbo exhibits Pound's influence, from the point of view of their opinion of Christianity.

Closely allied to this theme of Christianity is the theme of theomachy, and again both Pound and Okigbo have dealt with it, each in his own way. In The Odyssey Eurilochus caused the killing of the sacred cattle belonging to the Sun-god. In Metamorphoses of Ovid the sailors behaved

[18] Transition, V, 22 (1965), 19.





against the wish of Bacchus by being so perverted in will that they broke all laws of truth and justice in their inordinate quest for worldly riches.[19] The god in each of these cases retaliated triumphantly by perpetrating sufferings on the human offenders. Pound made use of the former myth in canto XXXIX in connection with the Odysseus theme, and the latter myth in cantos XLIX and LI to illustrate the danger of usury.

Okigbo similarly deals with the fight against the indigenous gods by the exponents of Christianity. The fight indeed is between these gods and the Christians' God whom these Christians represent. Limits VII shows us Flannagan preaching "the Pope's message":

> To sow the fireseed among grasses,
> and lo,
> To keep it till it burns out. . . .

The message is to the effect of destruction; and there is the implication that it will be effective, for when fire is set to grass, the grass will naturally be burnt clear.

Section VIII introduces the "Sunbird" again. In Heavensgate--"Passage" (i), a "sunbird" was mourning "a mother on spray." The image of death is one that Okigbo often uses in his poems. "Distances" has such a terrible

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[19] Sister M. Bernetta Quinn, "The Metamorphoses of Ezra Pound," in Motive and Method in The Cantos of Ezra Pound, ed. Lewis Leary (New York, 1954), p. 82.

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picture of death with human beings crumbling around it like old, cracked mud-walls:

> At her feet roll their heads like cut fruits;
> about her fall
> their severed members, numerous as locusts;
> (Section II)

and the "dismembered joints/of the ministrants" accumulate "like split wood left to dry." An indigenous image, this. Such scenes are sorrow-inspiring, but we have different kinds of sorrow in the two poems. In Heavensgate, the sun-bird is identifiable with the poet himself; not so in "Distances." He has also a mother to "mourn"--the goddess of the forest. In "Water Maid" (iv) the poet is "fulfilling each moment in a/broken monody." What happens to the poet or the sunbird that warrants mourning is revealed in Limits IX and X. The enemies of the gods first killed the sunbird and then, entering the forest, found the twin-gods. The silence which pervaded the forest and which is "within me" signifies the sorrow that will be consequential to the vandalism of the invading "beasts."

There were curses--"Malisons, malisons, . . ." malison being a sort of malediction. "Bombax" helps to characterise the enemies. The image of climbing the "bombax" very exquisitely externalises the impulse of pride and pomposity of the Christian-enemies of the indigenous gods. They are birds of prey who possess "talons" which "they drew out of their scabbard," and "beaks" also which "they

sharpened
of Irkall
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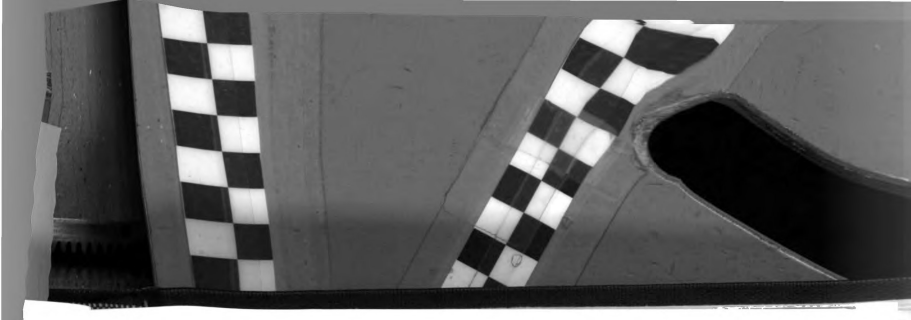

sharpened." Thus equipped, they fell "upon the twin-gods of Irkalla." Like the soldiers who cast lots on the garment of Christ after he had been crucified, the despoilers of Okigbo's "twin-gods" divided among themselves the gods' "ornaments," "beads," "carapace" and "shell." The evocation of the Christian image (death of Christ) is a variation of the technique of juxtaposing Christian and indigenous images, which Ulli Beier has noted also.[20] Besides, in this very image of killing the twin-gods meet the Christian and the pagan together. The fertility ritual in which a god is killed or hanged--an old pagan practice--is reflected by Okigbo, though his context shows an antagonistic rather than a religious purpose.[21]

The "calamity" does not end with the killing of the gods, but is protracted into complete desecration--"the gods lie in state/without the long-drum," and unsung; they lie outside the "Shrinehouse," mouldy and forgotten. And pathetically, almost ironically, the poet points out a platitude upon which he could lean for consolation:

> Gods grow out,
> abandoned;
> And so do they. . . .

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[20] Black Orpheus, No. 12 (1963), 47.

[21] Frazer, The Golden Bough, IV, 221.



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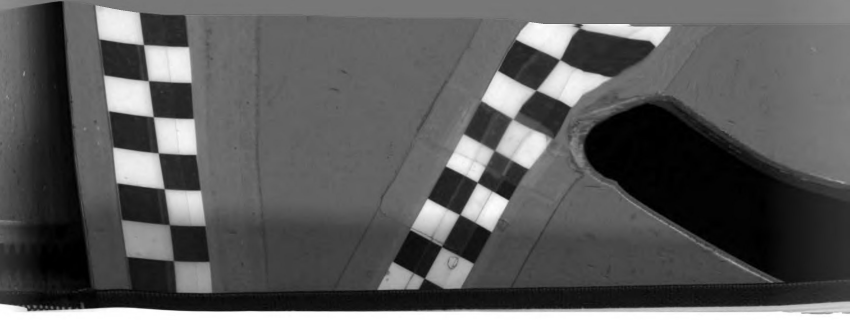

This suppression of the local gods reflects a true historical situation.[22] Now section X of Limits rehearses the incident within the limits of a dream and presents the sunbird as singing. The identity of the poet with the sunbird is most clearly brought out. "The newsprint-slits of his tongue/cling to glue. . . ." The sunbird is caught and muzzled; he cannot sing again. In the same way, the poet (or the voice that has been straining to be heard) is muzzled, and hence: "& the cancelling out is complete." But the gagging of the poet objectified by the sunbird-image is only a completion of the process started with the effacement of the twin gods. The gods were destroyed first, and then with the suppression of the poet, the cancelling process is completed. It is little wonder then that the sunbird, or the poet, mourns.

Incidentally, the Ghanaian poet, George Awoonor-Williams, expresses similar concern about the indigenous gods:

> For haven't I gone astray from old memories,
> desires and ambitions
> And placed my offerings before alien gods
> Whose shrines I saw only in my dreams?
> Haven't I asked for my appropriate portion

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[22]Cf. Sir Alan Burns, History of Nigeria (London, 1963), p. 264: "Although the change is slow, it is unquestionable that paganism is gradually yielding in Nigeria to the influence of Islam and Christianity, partly perhaps on account of the social and political advantages of these religions." Burns' book was first published in 1929.

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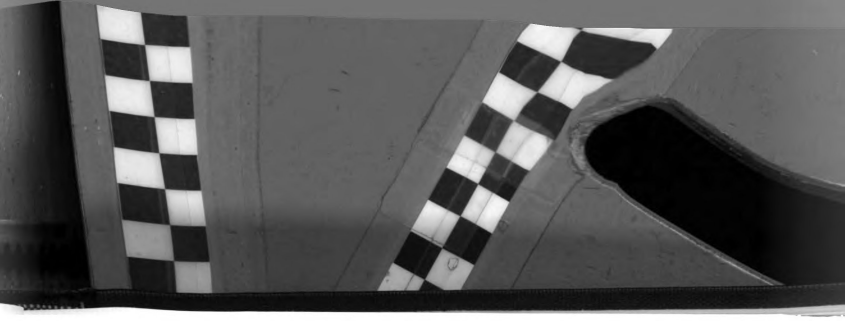

And deserted my father's house
For the company of the Gods that lie
    perpetually reclined
On the beach
Offering putrid joys that smell of night and
    spent love's weary sweat?[23]

This passage portrays again the prodigal-son situation, for the poet left his "father's house" and sought the company of "alien gods."

It is clear from the above analysis that this writer does not share O. R. Dathorne's view about the second part of Limits. Dathorne made the point that here "we get first a description of the ruin that is a sine qua non of the revolution of the spirit and out of this ruin comes about the regeneration of novelty."[24] And as for the end of the poem, he remarked that "the protagonist who began in Heavensgate as a suppliant is defied."[25] But he does not tell us who defied the poet. As has been pointed out above (p. 99), the sunbird and the poet share some identity: both are mourning lost mothers. Both are representative and exponents of the traditional religion, and since both are effaced (one killed, the other quietened) and the twin gods killed, it means that the alien religion has succeeded in suppressing the indigenous one, and thus "the cancelling out is complete."

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[23]"The Nim Trees in the Cemetery."

[24]Black Orpheus, No. 15 (August 1964), 59.

[25]Ibid., p. 60.

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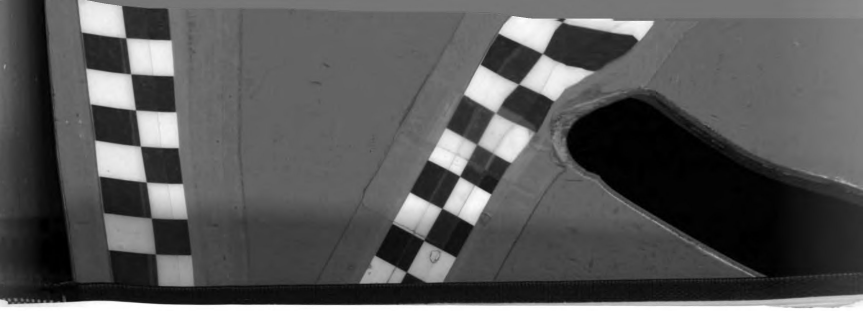

Stylistic Influence

The influence of Ezra Pound on Christopher Okigbo is more glaring from the point of view of techniques of poetic expression. The Cantos begin in medias res, like an epic, with Odysseus and his crew offering sacrifices in preparation for their journey to Hades to meet Tiresias. In canto XXXIX what preceded this can be seen: Odysseus had stayed for a year with Circe, the seducing goddess, who gave him the instruction to go to Hades to seek the advice of Tiresias in order to reach Ithaca.

Heavensgate in the same way begins in the middle of the action. The opening ovation to Idoto points to the banishment of the protagonist and his desire to return to his mother-goddess. The rest of the book on the whole treats his initiation into the new religion--Baptism, pentecostal forgiveness of sins, and his discovery that he has been isolated. Limits continues the trend and shows the initial combat in which the gods were destroyed; and it can be remembered that the poet and the sunbird had mourned this incident in Heavensgate, "Passage" (i).

In ABC of Reading, Pound gives the chief means of charging "language with meaning to the utmost possible degree": and these are "phanopoeia, melopoeia, logopoeia." These mean "throwing the object (fixed or moving) on to the visual imagination"; "inducing emotional correlations by the

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sound and rhythm of the speech"; "inducing both of the effects by stimulating the associations (intellectual or emotional) that have remained in the receiver's consciousness in relation to the actual words or word groups employed."[26] In other words, imagery, music and thought are to be emphasized. G. S. Fraser refers to them as "vividness, realization, image-making" (phanopoeia); "music, melody-making" (melopoeia); "word-making or thought-making" (logopoeia). Fraser thinks that except in Hugh Selwyn Mauberley, Pound never became "an absolute master" of logopoeia.[27] This is not entirely true, for in The Cantos, according to Harold H. Watts, "ideas in Action" is not the least emphasized among the themes.[28]

Okigbo's power for "image-making" and "melody-making" has been noted by Ezekiel Mphahlele and Ulli Beier. With reference to "Prelude to the Limits" (that is "Siren Limits" in Mbari edition), Mr. Mphahlele said that it is a "carpet strewn with loaded images. . . ."[29] And Ulli Beier was so much charmed by the music of Okigbo's poetry that he thought that one could get satisfied with reading it even if he does not understand what the poetry is "about":

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[26](New York, 1960), p. 63.

[27]Ezra Pound (New York, 1961), p. 31.

[28]Harold H. Watts, Ezra Pound and The Cantos (Chicago, 1952), pp. 32-40; 98-100.

[29]Ademola, ed. Reflections: Nigerian Prose & Verse, p. 10.

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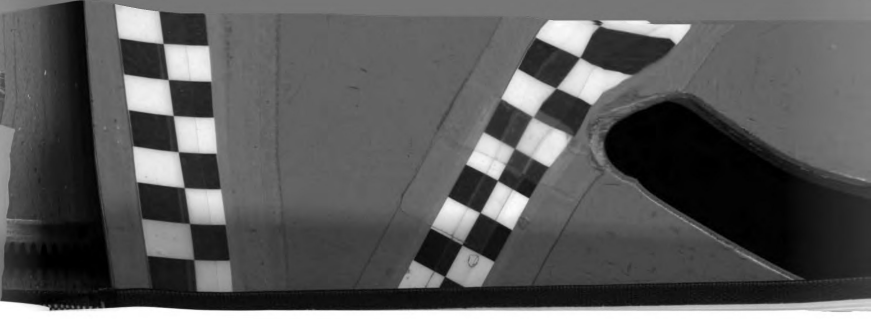

> Everything he touches vibrates and swings and we are compelled to read on and to follow the tune of his chant, hardly worried about the fact that we understand little of what he has to say. The obscurity in Okigbo's poetry is of course deliberate.[30]

This remark smells of the "autotelic" approach to poetry, the invention of which Karl Shapiro accused T. S. Eliot of.[31] This is the notion that what the poet says does not matter; what is of importance is the way he says it. This is precisely T. S. Eliot's attitude to Ezra Pound's cantos, in respect of which he said that he did not care for Pound's philosophy.[32]

It is not surprising that Pound and Okigbo should receive the same kinds of remarks from their critics. One can even go a step further to see this similarity. To Robert Graves, for instance, Pound is a "charlatan," and The Cantos are nothing but "sprawling, ignorant, and indecent."[33] Similarly, Mr. Mphahlele has wondered if the experience expressed in "Prelude to the Limits" is "disorganized, if the writer is merely composing an overture to introduce us into something to come later, the dominant theme of which will be the 'Lioness'? Or is it a purposeless

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[30] Black Orpheus, No. 12 (1963), 46-47.

[31] In Defence of Ignorance (New York, 1965), p. 29.

[32] F. R. Leavis, New Bearings in English Poetry (London, 1959), p. 136.

[33] Fraser, Ezra Pound, pp. 110 and 111.

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adventure trying to trail his thoughts?"[34] In connexion with "meaning" in poetry G. S. Fraser says: "What would be very wrong would be to say, as some critics have said, that you can ignore meaning and still get the poetry. . . ."[35] This statement is made with respect to Pound's Cantos. While this author generally agrees with Fraser that "meaning" is essential, he would like to point out that a poem may sometimes be obscure to the extent of making its precise "meaning" difficult of access, yet its poetic sensibility and beauty felt and appreciated: "The wisest of the Ancients consider'd what is not too Explicit as the fittest for Instruction, because it rouzes the Faculties to act."[36]

Both Pound and Okigbo share the technique of having a descriptive or lyrical passage followed by a vivid image, which epitomises and clinches the passage, or resolves the mystery therein. "Earl Miner, the closest student of Japanese influences on Pound calls this the 'super pository method.'"[37] Pound's "April" (in Lustra) is an example of this technique:

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[34]Ademola, ed. Reflections, p. 10. Italics mine.

[35]Fraser, Ezra Pound, p. 72.

[36]Ralph Maud, Entrances to Dylan Thomas' Poetry (Pittsburgh, 1963), p. 1.

[37]William Van O'Connor, Ezra Pound, p. 24.



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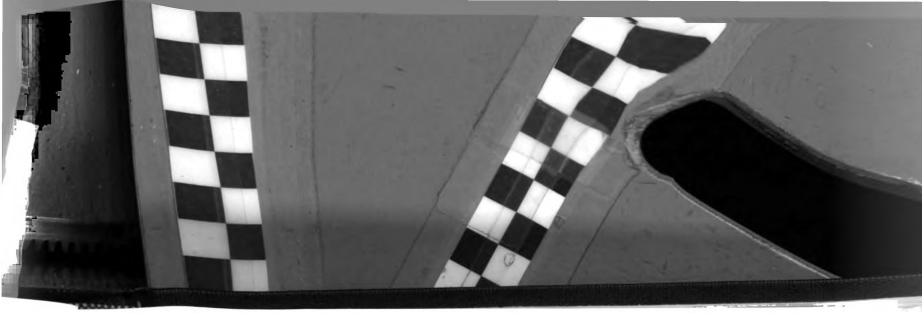

Three spirits came to me
And drew me apart
To where the olive boughs
Lay stripped upon the ground:
Pale carnage beneath bright mist.[38]

The last line contains the summarising image. We see this method again in "Gentildonna" (Lustra) where "Grey olive leaves beneath rain-cold sky" vivifies the situation of the "she" of the poem.[39] "Liu Ch'e" exemplifies the same technique. Here the final line--"A wet leaf that clings to the threshold"--points to the silence and immobility of the woman who lies "beneath" the leaves that "Scurry into heaps and lie still."[40] William Van O'Connor has referred to this poem in his discussion of Pound's use of "super pository method."[41]

This "super pository method" is used many times in Okigbo's work. In Heavensgate, "Passage" (i), the last line--"The young bird at the passage"--is a vivid image demonstrating not only the solitude of the poet mourning a lost "mother," but also the uncertainty that shrouds him as he is immersed in the "dark waters of the beginning." This situation of lonesomeness and uncertainty is dealt with again in "Water Maid" (i), where the last four lines typify the "super pository method":

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[38] Lustra of Ezra Pound, with Earlier Poems (New York, 1957), p. 27.

[39] Ibid.

[40] Ibid., pp. 49-50.

[41] Ezra Pound, p. 24.

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Okigbo's extraordinary power of image-making can hardly be better illustrated. The words in this passage are very ordinary, but the combination and texture effected by the poet's fertilising imagination is more than ordinary. "Shadow of rain" here means cloud, and one under a cloud is hazy about everything, visibility being obstructed. Equally effective are the two closing lines of "Transition" (Heavens-gate, p. 39) which round off the poem and the book at the same time with their vivid images. After the "heron" (the poet) "thrown against the infinite" has woven "her interminable mystery/under the lamp," the work of art is suspended, hence the "Transition." At this point, quite analogously:

The moon has now gone under the sea.
The song has now gone under the shade.

The parallelism is not only effective in itself as a poetic device, but also it exemplifies another technique shared by Pound and Okigbo, and that is "intensification by repetition."[42] In Limits II, the last line--"A green cloud above the forest," and the last line of Limits X--"& the cancelling out is complete"--are more examples of the "super pository method." These lines have already been commented on elsewhere in this paper.

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[42]Fraser, Ezra Pound, p. 43.

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Another poem by Okigbo vindicates this technique quite abundantly. "Lament of the Drums" which rehearses the themes of oppression, captivity and suffering, robbery of others' right and freedom, and the resultant desolation, also has in it very fine examples of the device.[43] In part II of this poem the reader hears of "the unheard of sullen/ Shriek of the funerary ram" which is the clinching point of the exposition of the situation of oppression that precedes it. Also in respect of the desolation that has descended upon the people, the reader is told that "nothing remains" and that there are the "broken tin-gods whose/ Vision is dissolved" in part III. Then follow the summarising pictures:

> Like PALM oil fostered
> In an ancient clay bowl:
> A half-forgotten name;
> Like a stifled sneeze.

In part V there is the epictorial resume of the entire infertility and destruction which punctuate the situation, and this is given in parallel, analagous images, which round off the poem:

> THE WAILING is for the fields of crop. . . .
> THE DRUMS' lament is:
> They grow not. . . .
>
> THE WAILING is for the fields of men. . . .
> FOR THE barren wedded ones
> For the perishing children. . . .

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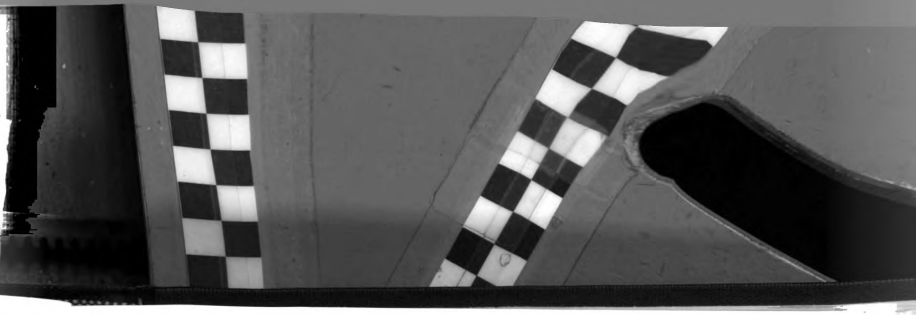
[43] Transition, IV, 18 (1965), 16-17.



THE WAILING is for the great river. . . .
HER POT-bellied watchers
Despoil her. . . .

One may also see this technique amply used in "Distances," a poem in which Okigbo lavishes his power of image-making and melody-making. After portraying the dead bodies around "Death," for instance, there follow the lines:

She bathes her knees in the blood of attendants,
her smock in the entrails of the ministrants. . . .
(Sec. II)

And throughout the poem one continues to hear the refrain--"I am the sole witness to my homecoming," a line which itself depicts the eeriness of the situation. By means of such vivid images, Okigbo is able to maintain the rule of terseness very effectively.

There are other techniques, which can be called minor, such as the reversed order of subject and verb, and ellipticism. In canto XXXVI, for example, we hear this:

Cometh he to be
When the will
From overplus
Twisteth out of natural measure.

Heavensgate, "Initiation" (ii), presents such a syntax:

. . . where liveth
in the heart of Aguata
a minstrel. . . .

Also we noticed the same technique in "Singeth jadum the minstrel," and yet again in "singeth jadum from Rockland." As for ellipiticism, it can be illustrated from any work of Okigbo and from the major ones of Pound--Hugh Selwyn Mauberley and The Cantos.

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One has the tendency to feel that the reason for this method is the fact that Pound insists on terseness--"the mock-bitter sententious terseness, . . . the laconism of a strong silent man." This is how Wyndham Lewis described it.[44] And Pound himself said as follows:

> Incompetence will show in the use of too many words. The reader's first and simplest test of an author will be to look for words that do no function. . . .[45]

Finally we come to the technique that can be called the artistic placenta between Pound and Okigbo, and that is the point with which we started--tags from other languages and other authors. Okigbo makes this influence of Pound on him dramatic by taking a line from Pound, who himself is noted for that kind of thing. Mauberley and The Cantos are full of lines from Greek, Latin, and French. The Chinese ideogram is also frequent in The Cantos. Where such lines appear, they are very significant in meaning: "Kalon Aoidiaei" is the Greek for "The Beauty of her Singing," which is the bewitching song of Circe that wooed Odysseus and his crew into her house to be transformed into swine.[46] In Mauberley (1920) the tag "Vacuous exercet aera morsus"--

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[44] Ibid., p. 90.

[45] ABC of Reading, p. 63.

[46] Walter Sutton, ed. Ezra Pound: A Collection of Critical Essays, p. 66.

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mouth snapping emptily in the air--is used to describe Mauberley's inability to follow the old tradition, or create his own:

> Pisanello lacking the skill
> to forge Achaia.

And the epigraph at the beginning of the second poem is in French:

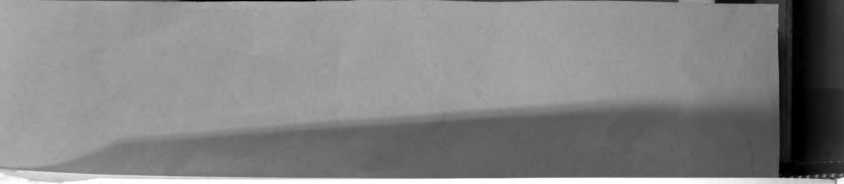
> Qu'est ce qu'ils savent de l'amour, et
> qu'est ce qu'ils peuvent comprendre?

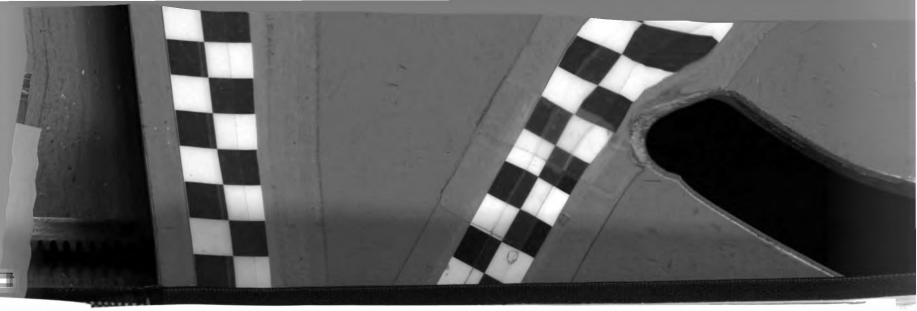
This is a good opening for a poem that deals with the theme of inability to respond to love's invitation.

In the same way, Okigbo has taken many lines from various sources besides the one from Pound's canto VIII. "Lacrimae Christi" and "Lumen Mundi" which appear in Heavensgate, "Lustra" (iii), are Latin tags connected with the Bible. "Lumen mundi"--Light of the world--is taken from John, 9:5:

> As long as I am in the world,
> I am the world's light.

This reminds one of "Lumen Christi" which is chanted on Holy Satuday. Lustra itself means purificatory sacrifice, and this section of the book deals with the reminiscences of both the Christian and the indigenous systems of worship. "Lacrimae Christi"--Tears of Christ--reminds us of the instances in which Christ wept in the Bible: during the Agony in the Garden of Gethsemane (Mark, 14:32-42); the Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem (Luke, 19:41-44); and the Death





of Lazarus (John, 11:33-35). Throughout Heavensgate the poet has mourned, and as we remember the tears of Christ, we also should remember the tears of the poet.

Conclusion

It is thus clear that Christopher Okigbo has been greatly influenced by Ezra Pound. But it is equally clear that Okigbo is not a mere imitator of Pound, and that Okigbo's poetry is perfectly African.

Okigbo is not merely imitating Pound, for whatever stylistic trait, or line he takes from Pound or any other source, he makes his own by his creative deftness. What Hugh Kenner says of T. S. Eliot's method can very appropriately apply to Okigbo's:

> For Eliot's method again and again is to deprive of its context some perfectly natural statement, or else some quotation, and leave the words to echo by themselves, often in a new context, where the echoes multiply.[47]

Finally, as for the "Africanness" of Okigbo's poetry, his themes of religious conflict, the suppression of the artist, and the whole notion of "exile" and "homecoming," show that the problems which Okigbo has handled are those that an African of his type and time could have faced. Besides, most of the images in Okigbo's poems are drawn on

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[47] T. S. Eliot: A Collection of Critical Essays (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1962), p. 7.

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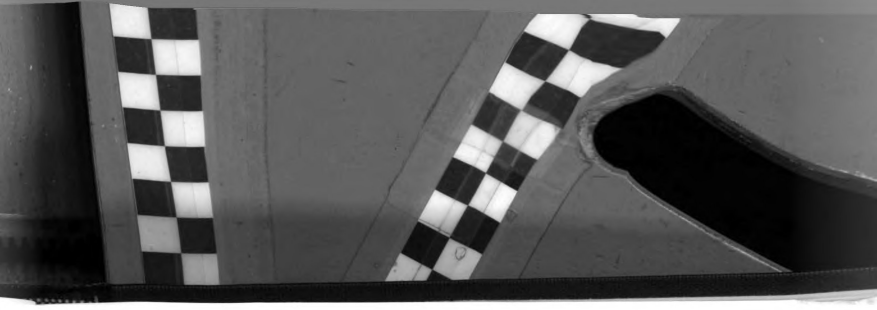
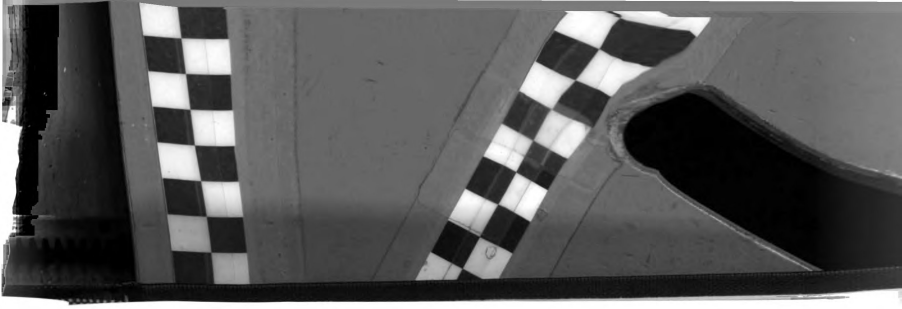


the indigenous culture and environment. Those are some of the ways, it seems to this writer, in which an African writer can make his work African in spite of foreign influence.



CHAPTER V

A CROSS OF HANDS ON HEAD: THE POETRY OF JOHN PEPPER CLARK

Hands over my head,
Down our village lane
I ran. . . .
("Hands Over Head")

General Observation

Grief, chaos, insecurity, and irredeemable loss constitute the general woof and warp of the deftly textured fabric that is Clark's poetry. Whether the reader looks at it from the position of the inhabitants of the small-pox ridden village, or that of the young man who has realised that "passion is fuel," or of those humans whose "flux" in life is "that interlocking of our souls with the stars"; nay, the reader may vary his position and get into the shoes of that fallen soldier who left "all the world blinded/And baffled in searing pain," or of the parent of the "child born to die"; still the same tragic vision of life passes before our gaze as Clark runs with his hands over his head from poem to poem. Perhaps, one of the canons Clark might have inherited from T. S. Eliot is that



> . . . the essential advantage for a poet is not, to have a beautiful world with which to deal; it is to be able to see beneath both beauty and ugliness; to see the boredom, and the horror, and glory.[1]

Like Eliot's, Clark's poetry can be said to be "eloquent of his vision of the boredom and the horror,"[2] and has depicted glory and beauty less than ugliness.

Writing on Dante, Eliot says:

> The contemplation of the horrid or sordid or disgusting, by an artist, is the necessary and negative aspect of the impulse toward the pursuit of beauty. But not all succeed as did Dante in expressing the complete scale from negative to positive. The negative is the more importunate.[3]

As we will see in this study, Clark remains negative almost throughout his poetry, but all the same he addresses the whole of humanity as Dante did. In his book, America Their America, which I may call an artistically wrought diary of his experiences in the United States--social, political, educational, journalistic, ethical and moral, and aesthetic--Clark says that his "play was simply for human beings everywhere and about human beings who happened to be in one particular place and situation."[4] This very aptly applies

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[1] The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism (London, 1948), p. 106.

[2] George Williamson, A Reader's Guide to T. S. Eliot (New York, 1962), p. 57.

[3] The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism (New York, 1964), p. 169.

[4] (London, 1964), p. 65.

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to his poetry, and in making this statement he very much echoes A.R. Humphreys: "The truth of human nature (the basic quest of literature) lies not in idiosyncrasies but in common humanity."[5] A critical and unbiased study of Clark's poems will demonstrate what Clark does and how he does it.

Man in Chaos

The stress under which man on earth lives shows abundantly in "For Granny (From Hospital),"[6] where something "stirred within your soul," and "you with a start strained me to breast." The memory that comes back to the poet is that of "the raucous voice" of rain that tumbled down "banks of reed/To feed a needless stream." The "banks of reed," as in Okigbo (see p. 87 above), connote an unwelcome situation shadowing forth the weakness of man caught up in a whirlwind of "quarrels" which mark the "endless dark nights of intrigue/ In Father's house of many wives." And here side by side with the reminiscence of the polygamous structure of a Nigerian family, with all its dangers, is the forestalling of the

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[5]Boris Ford, ed. From Dryden to Johnson: Volume 4 of the Pelican Guide to English Literature (Baltimore, 1963), p. 15.

[6]J. P. Clark, Poems (Ibadan, Nigeria, 1964), p. 10; anthologised with variants in Ademola's Reflections, p. 59; and in Moore and Beier's Modern Poetry from Africa, p. 88, without variants. From now on all references to Clark's Poems will be indicated in the body of this study in parentheses.

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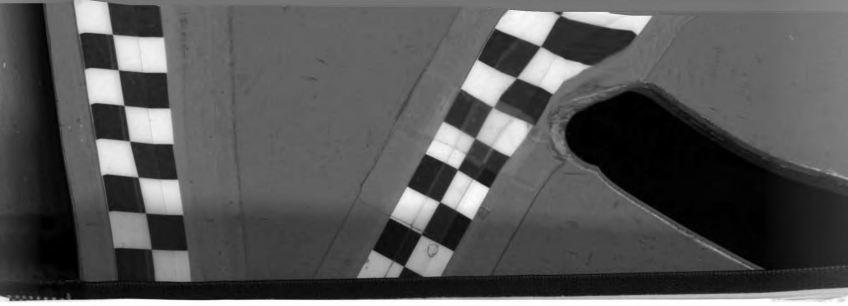

"vice of night" which the morning has come "to charm earth from" in "Ibadan Dawn" (Poems, p. 27). But life is not problematic only because of the struggles on earth; the heavenly bodies, "those footless stars," also help to complicate matters by making "shallow silten floors/Beyond the pale of muddy waters/Appear more plumbless than the skies."

"For Granny" is all an inquiry into, and a wonder at, this confused state of existence. The next poem, instead of providing an answer, presents more dramatically a woman struggling against nature and poverty. "Night Rain" (p. 11) is a sad poem, whose tragic overtones move from a state of stupor and inertia to that of "free" and "innocent" inaction. The roof of the house is thatched and decayed and cannot provide shelter for the woman with her children, or for her belongings, "bins, bags and rats"--an indication of her poverty. Prayer is of little help in the circumstance, and may be as perturbing as the "water drops" which the poet compares to the "beads I could in prayer tell."

"Night Rain" is structured not only on the conflict just seen between the woman and nature, but also on contrast and replication. As the mother is busy "deploying" about the "roomlet," the children sleep on "loosening mats" on the floor (another pointer to poverty). If they stir at all, they only bob "up bellywise," but most of the disturbed time, they "have drunk to-night of a spell." The word "drunk," objectified by the words 'owl' and 'bat' that are noted for

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sleepiness and are "wet of wings and may not fly," is an echo of "Doped," and these two words meet again in "spell." This is the drowsy state of people drugged as by a narcotic, who in the face of calamity are ineffective--something we notice again in "Easter" (p. 33) and "Ivbie" (pp. 44 ff).

The indigenous setting and imagery of this poem have been noted by a major Nigerian novelist. For quite a different reason and in a different circumstance, Chinua Achebe comments on the following lines from the poem:

> Out of the run of water
> That like ants filing out of the wood
> Will scatter and gain possession
> Of the floor. . . .

Says Achebe:

> I think that the picture of water spreading on the floor, "like ants filing out of the wood" is beautiful. . . . But Clark's inspiration derives from the same source which gave birth to the saying that a man who brings home ant-ridden faggots must be ready for the visit of lizards.[7]

Both images--Clark's and Achebe's--show how significantly an African writer can tap the resources of his indigenous culture and experience, and still write in a second (European) language and speak to the whole of mankind.

To turn to another poem, the victims in "Hands Over Head" (p. 14) have a chain of troubles around them. The epidemic is such a terrible one that "none must cry for dread"; the rude violence of the A.D.O. (Assistant District

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[7] "English and the African Writer," Transition, IV, 18 (1965), 29.

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Officer) forces "royal silence" on the people, and bees are swarming over the land. Normally the people would drive them away by beating "roof-zinc and brass," but they cannot now for there is "enough below for pain." It is said that when a farmer discovers something more important than his farm, he sells his barn!

In the last stanza of this poem is the speculation as to what might have been the cause of this calamity--is it the king, God, or something more? Is it Okuakpolokpolo, ("one of the titles of the Oba of Benin")? The title means '"He who asks for a hundred human heads today" and gets them!' As usual the people cannot avert the disaster, but silently acquiesce with subdued ease. "Hands-over-head" is a sign of woe and irrevocable loss. It does not matter who the cause may be--"When he's done, we shall sing."

Clark, as he watches these ugly scenes of life, takes a mental trip back to his childhood, the echoes of which sadly plague the mind. He discovers that with birth is announced the accompanying sorrow. In his Song of a Goat, a tragedy, the poet hints at this point, which is presented again in "Cry of Birth" (p. 15):

> You know now that each day we live
> Hints at why we cried out at birth.[8]

Likewise, in the poem we find the "echo of childhood . . ./ rolling back into piquant memory/the anguished cry of my

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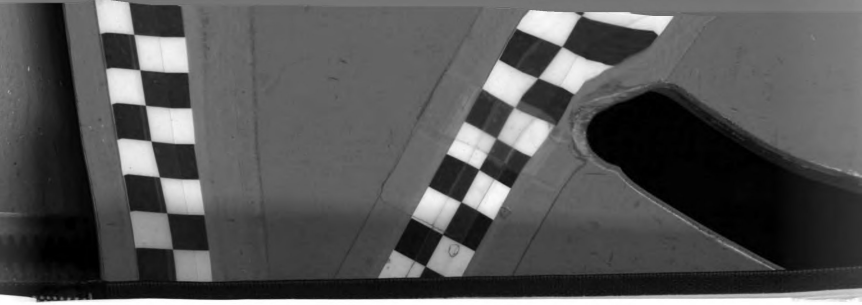
[8](Ibadan, 1961), p. 41.



birth." He would that he remembers not this "voice" coming from "the caverns of nativity," which "returns with a sharpness before unknown."

With this setting given, the poem develops the favourite theme of life as a tragedy, a state of spiritual stupor and incessant material pursuits, and winds up in the last stanza with the reverberating noises of factions "from the wilderness" and the sea. The last four stanzas smack of Matthew Arnold. The third stanza has the line "Poor castaways to this darkling shore"; the fourth comes up with ". . . with wanton motions bedevilling our breast"; in the fifth we hear "one harrowing shriek of pain and factions"; and in the final stanza we again hear ". . . the vague cogitation of the sea, its echo of despair and stress."

This cannot be a mere coincidence. The reader needs only to look at "Dover Beach" and "The Scholar-Gipsy" in order to see how much of Matthew Arnold goes into the making of Clark's poem. Thus "Dover Beach":

> And we are here as on a darkling plain
> Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
> Where ignorant armies clash by night.
> (11.34-36)

Clark has "darkling shore," "Shriek of pain and factions." The time is "night" in both cases. About the sea Arnold talks of "the grating roar/Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling" (11.9-10), and "its melancholy, long,

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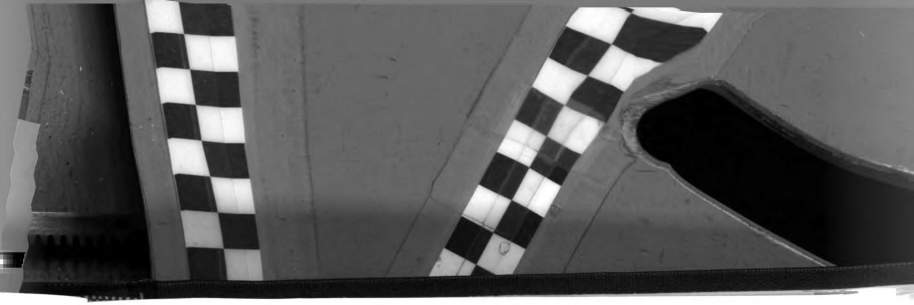

withdrawing roar" (l.25).[9] This is echoed by Clark's "vague cogitation/of the sea, its echo of despair and stress." As for Clark's "wanton motions bedevilling our breasts" and "gadfly," we can also find their predecessors in Arnold's lines from "The Scholar-Gipsy":

> Before this strange disease of modern life,
> With its sick hurry, its divided aims,
> Its heads o'ertax'd, its palsied hearts, was rife--
> Fly hence, our contact fear.
> (11.203-206)[10]

"Cry of Birth" is quite a beautiful poem. It achieves unity in three ways. The lines in each stanza rhyme alternately. Secondly, "anguish" in the first stanza, the crying "voice" of the second, the "horror" and "guilt" in the third, the "stupor," "wild" and "nightmare" of the fourth, the "passions," "gadfly," and "pain" in the fifth, and the "cogitation," "despair and stress" of the last stanza--all speak of the one restless, diseased and horrible world of materialistic humanity. Finally, the poem carries forward the idea of "doped" and "spell" of "Night Rain," of the "dark night of intrigues" of "For Granny," and anticipates the "irresistible blight" of "The Watermaid," (p. 23), so that it forms a unity with these other poems. As a gadfly is an insect that stings and annoys, so is "blight" a

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[9] The Works of Matthew Arnold, Vol. II (London, 1903), pp. 56-57.

[10] The Works, I, 227-238.

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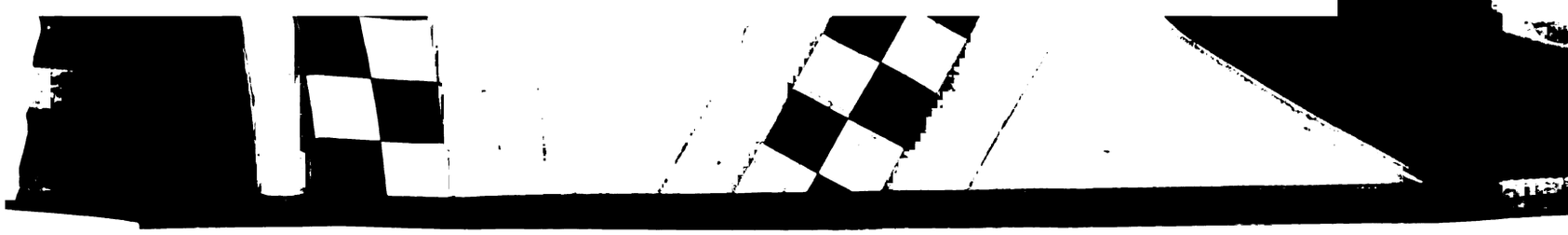

disease, or evil influence. Incidentally, ". . . and for gadfly have at my back/one harrowing shriek of pain and factions--" is reminiscent of T. S. Eliot's lines, from "The Waste Land":

> But at my back from time to time I hear
> The sound of horns and motors, . . .[11]

and through Eliot back to Andrew Marvell's "To his Coy Mistress":

> But at my back I alwaies hear
> Times winged Charriot hurrying near:
> And yonder all before us lye
> Desarts of vast Eternity.
> (ll.21-24)[12]

Circumstances are different with each of the three poets, but each is dealing with a world far from pleasant.

If the world of Clark's poetry is so dark, so wrung, split and restive, can men not bring relief to one another? Clark of course does not see the likelihood. Thus, lack of sympathy among human beings constitutes the theme of one of the shortest of Clark's poems, but one of the most powerful and charged, it seems to me. By a simple analogy, "Empathy" launches very precisely and acutely against humanity a charge of apathy. All five fingers belong to one hand, and though they are separate the harm done to one reaches the others. In the same way we should feel the pain being

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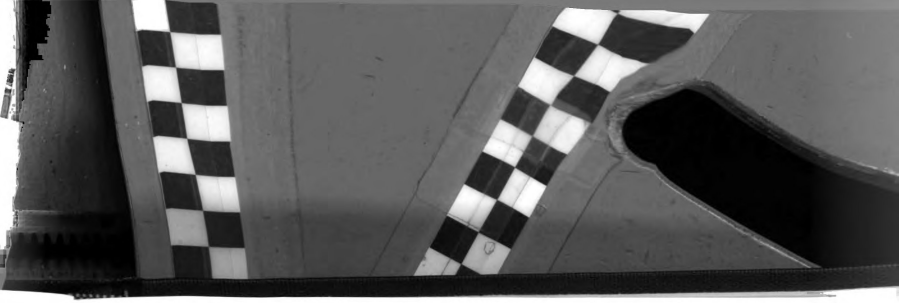
[11] "The Fire Sermon," ll, 196-197.

[12] The Poems and Letters of Andrew Marvell, Vol. I, ed. H. M. Margoliouth (Oxford, 1952), p. 26.



suffered by every other man, for we are all from "one stock." If we feel the pain, then we can sympathize, but unfortunately we do not:

> Out of one stock we came
> Yet when lame,
> Your lowest cry falls numb
> In my heart.

The heart of man is proof against the sorrowful cry of his neighbour. The satirical tone of the poem rings with a piercing horror, and its terseness fulfills one of the requirements of great poetry, which is, "that it should hold 'an ocean of thought in a drop of language.'"[13]

While "Two Seedlings" presents twin victims of the stress of life, it touches upon what might look like a clash of colonial and indigenous forces. The "ancestral crest/sunk in the wake of blunder," which one of the children tries to "rear again," is reminiscent of the process of suppression of the indigenous customs by the missionaries in West Africa during the colonial days. Further, this seems to be indicated by the tearing "adrift" of the children from "their mother's breast"! This latter image appears again in "To a Prodigal" (p. 37). The theme of cultural conflict so slightly hinted at here as it has been in "Hands Over Head"--the A.D.O. being a representative of the "oppressive"

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[13] A. C. Ward, Twentieth Century English Literature 1901-1960 (London, 1964), p. 159.

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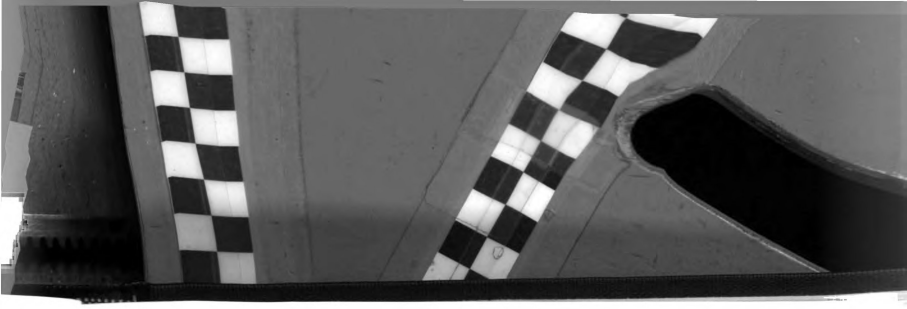


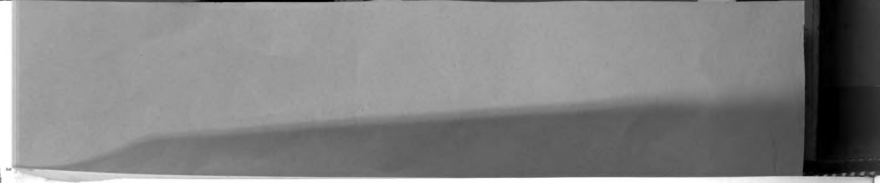
colonial masters--is accentuated to a tragic intensity in "Ivbie" (p. 44), which we will study later.

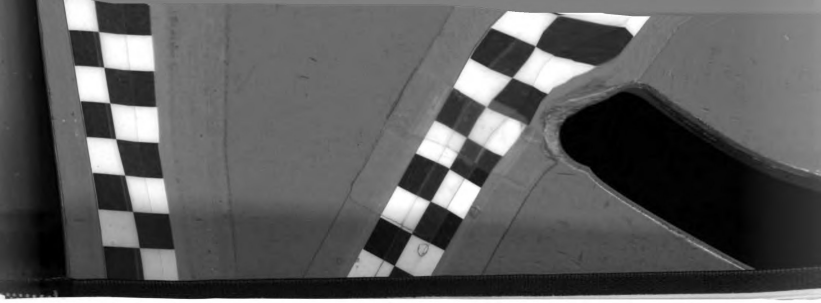
The two seedlings--children--of the present poem, unlike other sufferers in Clark's poetry, are active and daring. But their fateful life is doomed. They are caught up "in the weed" and "self-stifled," and being all the time separated, they now meet again, but quite "outspent" and drowned in the "annulling sea." They are heroic and altruistic though, for they perish in "loud vicarious agony."

We can even now begin to notice some establishment of rhyme patterns in Clark's poetry, at least in four-line-stanza poems. "Two Seedlings" departs from the pattern of "Cry of Birth," but resumes that of "Hands Over Head," which will be seen again in "Tide Wash" (p. 23) and other poems. The rhyme pattern of these poems is abba. However, the second and third lines of the last stanza of "Hands Over Head" do not form a perfect rhyme:

. . . more
. . . Okuakpolokpolo.

One more point may be made about "Two Seedlings." In the last line of the third stanza is the word "votices," which this writer thinks should read "vortices." This kind of spelling mistake is also made in "Girl Bathing" (p. 13), where we have "irridiscent" instead of the correct "irides-cent." It is hard to say whether such a mistake is authorial or compositorial.





"Tide-Wash" (p. 23) and "The Water Maid" (p. 23) placed one after the other, are complementary to each other. Both have to do with water, sea, and energy--spiritual, physical, erotic or otherwise. Like "Night Rain," "Tide-Wash" contains words that are linked together. "Steam," that is energy or force, of the first stanza is antithetically echoed by "depleted" in the second stanza. "Sun" and "pulse" (stroke) are also linked. At the end of the poem "we stand/Exposed more than ever."

Thus energy is lost, and in "The Water Maid" a prayer is addressed to the Maid for replenishment. Loss of energy leads to thirst, so that there is the need for "water whole" to "slake slake my soul." The use of "soul" makes one think that the thirst may be a spiritual one. The protagonist is assailed by an "irresistible blight" which is "sapmeal eating him." Grief in the two poems consists in depletion and want, and though the protagonist of the second poem prays to the Maid, there is no certainty of any help, and he may surely "dry" and "shall instant die."

Clark is deeply interested in words with respect to both sense and sound. The trick of word echoing word either synonymously or antonymously links him with Dylan Thomas who is famous for this kind of thing. In "The Force That Through The Green Fuse Drives The Flower,"[14] for instance, "mouthing"

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[14] Collected Poems, p. 10.

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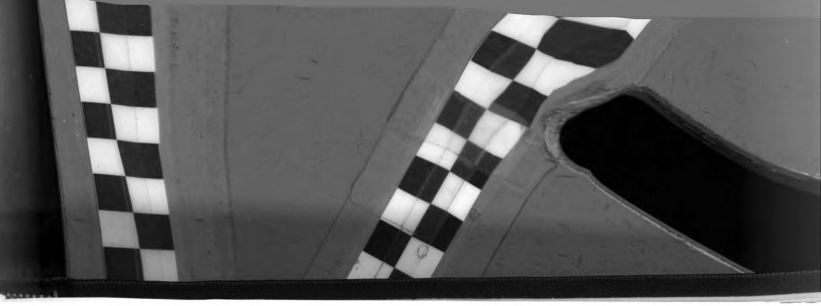

in the second stanza is echoed by "to mouth" and "mouth sucks" in the same stanza; and "sucks" is reflected again by "leech" while the idea of "mouth" is seen again in "lips"--both in the fourth stanza. In the same fashion "shroud" of the third stanza comes back in the "sheet" of the last stanza. But the fourth stanza of "If I Were Tickled By The Rub of Love" curiously effects this linking of words by splitting them. Hence we notice "lock" at the end of the second line and "jaws" at the end of the third, which form "lockjaws." Also "butter" and "flies" separately used in the fifth lines can normally combine to form "butterflies":

> . . . not crow's-foot nor lock
> Of sick old manhood on the fallen jaws,
> Time and the crabs and the sweethearting crib
> Would leave me cold as butter for the flies.[15]

Though there exists this kind of similarity between their use of words, Clark is quite a different poet from Dylan Thomas.

Hitherto the movement in each poem has been more or less from strife to grief and from inertia to greater languor. As a sort of "dramatic" relief, "The Year's First Rain" depicts a situation where the movement is reversed. It becomes now from death to life, from sterility to fertility. This simple poem, which deals with the ordinary change of season--from the dry to the wet season--brings the foreign and the indigenous together and by so doing universalises

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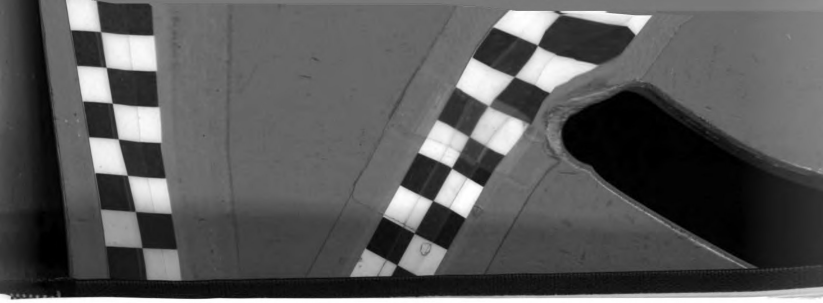
[15] Ibid., p. 14.



both. The idea of waiting for rain smacks of Eliot. In both "Gerontion" and "The Waste Land" we see the possible origin of Clark's lines and idea, that is to say, from the point of view of history.

"Gerontion" opens with

> . . . an old man in a dry month
> Being read to by a boy, waiting for rain.[16]

In Clark we read:

> Rain comes . . .
> After long surcease in desert.

Yet there are these differences that while Gerontion is dying of spiritual thirst, there is only the physical thirst for water in "The Year's First Rain," and secondly that while Gerontion ends up in failure with "thoughts of a dry brain in a dry season," success clinches Clark's poem when

> All alone, earth yawns, limbers her stay,
> Swollen already with the life to break at day.

As for the images of dryness, we see them also in "The Waste Land," a poem of quite a different calibre from Clark's but really "Gerontion" on a much larger scale. In the "Burial of the Dead" one hears of the "dry stone no sound of water"; and in "What The Thunder Said" there are the lines:

> Here is no water but only rock
> Rock and no water and the sand road,
> (ll.331-332)[17]

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[16] The Complete Poems and Plays, p. 23.

[17] Ibid., p. 47.

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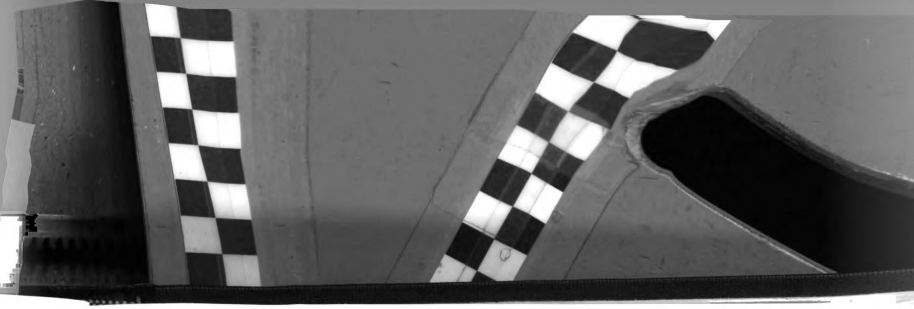

We thus see that while echoing the English poet, Clark is definitely "about" an experience in West Africa. But he has so projected it that it assumes a universal tone.

Clark's two masters converge on this poem. Just as Eliot is found in it, so is G. M. Hopkins found in it also. There is alliteration in "while waiting, waiting inert"; in "All alone . . . limbers . . .," and in "thrusts he strokes . . . swamps . . ." with the six 's' sounds distributed evenly among three words. There are also multi-worded adjectives like "with-kestrel-together-leaf" qualifying "flaps," and also "more than tongue can tell," all of which words form one adjective qualifying "thrusts" at the beginning of the next line. Mr. Beier calls these "double barreled adjectives."[18] There is no doubt that here we have Hopkins come to life again. Almost any poem of Hopkins can be used to prove this; so one may suffice in the circumstance. In "The Wreck of The Deutschland" we see the following lines: ". . . the sodden-with-its-sorrowing heart" (stanza 27); here the strung words qualify "heart," and in stanza 34 we have the following qualifying Christ, the "double-natured name":

> The heaven-flung, heart-fleshed, maiden-furled
> Miracle-in-Mary-of-flame,
> Mid-numbered He in the three of the thunder-throne![19]

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[18]"Three Mbari Poets," Black Orpheus, No. 12, p. 48.

[19]Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins, ed. W. H. Gardner (New York, 1961), pp. 55-67.

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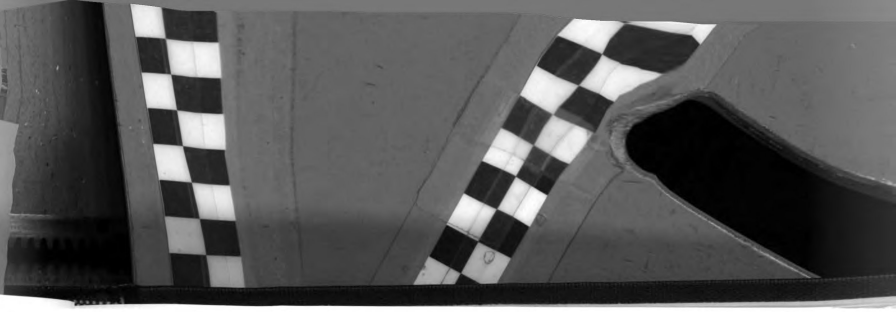


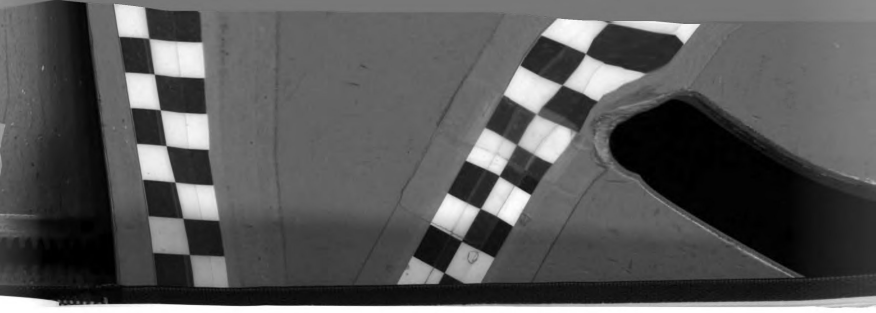
These lines also serve to vindicate Hopkins' addiction to alliteration.

Many a time Clark appears merely lyrical on the surface, but beneath this veneer of light lyricism lies the deep note of a tearful voice. This is what we find in "Return of the Fishermen" (p. 30) and "Streamside Exchange" (p. 31). The first stanza of the former presents the picture of the fisherman coming out from the sea as the job of fishing is done. This is patterned on details of fishing equipment--"pins and needles," and on Hopkins-like alliteration--"Dabble, dabble, dip paddle blades" describing the fishing action. But the coming out from the sea of the fishermen is not done with joy, for "silent you furrow up from the sea." The word "furrow" gives a vivid image of struggling out of the sea. It is the evening time, with the sun setting, and squirrels happily "tick-twit . . . and stow their seeds." But amid the normal run of natural phenomena "low is the squirming down keel." The last stanza shows the Kingfisher, not often the friend of the fisherman, and it is this bird that announces the sorrow of the men:

> Come, said the Kingfisher, you feel
> Beat. . . .

The fishermen are beaten, hence their silence, their chagrin, their sorrow.

"Streamside Exchange" is of the nature of a singsong between a child and a bird. There seems to be nothing serious about the poem as the child asks the bird to sing to



him "a song of all that pass/And say,/Will mother come back today?" But this question is not quite a trifle. The maternal image is of significance in Clark. It has been seen in "For Granny," "Two Seedlings," and will again be seen in "To A Prodigal"; and in most cases the loss of a mother, or the estrangement of a child from its mother is involved. In the same way in this poem the child is assured of the impermanence of his mother's stay on earth:

> You cannot know
> And should not bother;
> Tide and market come and go
> And so has your mother.

The "has" of the last line is confirmatory. "Time and market" still "come and go"--actions in the present tense; but the child's mother has completed her rounds, and is therefore gone forever, hence the perfect tense "has [come and gone]."

William Wordsworth in "The Tables Turned" says that Nature's "love" is sweet, but that "our meddling intellect/ Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things:-/We murder to dissect." Dissection in itself is not bad, but murder may result therefrom. Assuming therefore that dissection is normally good, in this poem it has only succeeded in bringing evil about.[20] Similarly, Clark's "Tree" (p. 32) depicts

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[20] The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth, Vol. IV, ed. E. De Selincourt and Helen Darbishire (Oxford, 1947), p. 57.



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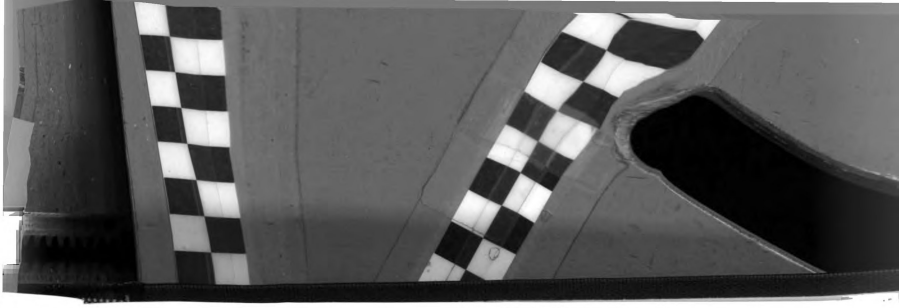

a case where even in the process of curing, a man, paradoxically, causes the "death" of a tree. This is frustrating. One is tempted to ask: Can man ever do well in the world of Clark's poetry?

Another image of sorrow intensifies the gloom of the poem. People lie under the tree "as grass," and the tree provides them shelter with "its bower." So that with its breaking "with a snap," the people are also left without protection.

Commenting on the poetry of J. P. Clark, Ezekiel Mphahlele rightly remarks that the poet piles up "layers of meaning. The statement mounts in urgency toward the end."[21] The poem "Tree" shows this kind of systematic pursuit of theme to the end of the poem. In such a poem Clark exposes the action early in the poem:

> A tree has broken in the lull
> The most bouyant in all the forest.

It is not in the storm that the tree breaks. This is curious, for it goes against the normal. All this is further underlined by the fact that it is the "most bouyant" of all the trees in the neighbourhood. After such exposition, one is led step by step to see how the tree got broken. In its own small way, this is the method of beginning in medias res.

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[21]Ademola, ed. Reflections, p. 10.

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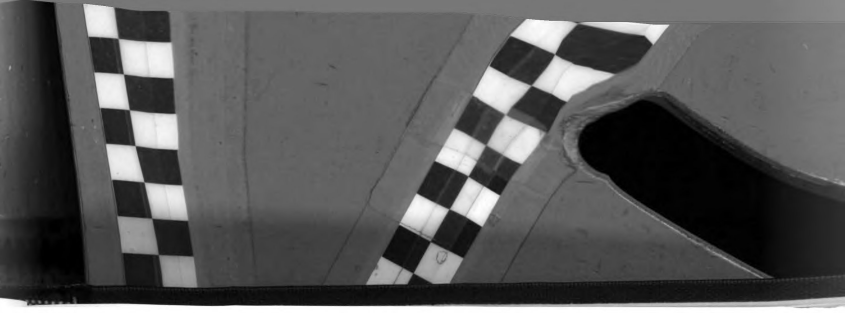

Struggle in despair, silence in thraldom, and death constitute the message of "Easter" (p. 33). To die means to be harvested by God. So God or death is the reaper. The protagonist is like a "seed, cast out in turmoil." The twin seedsof "Two Seedlings" suffered the same fate and were finally annulled. Here the protagonist is further in "thrall" and sits in silence with his "hook-feet" drawn in--a posture signifying dejection. His fate is a fait accompli, and he defeats death, the "reaper," being already lifeless before the reaper knocks on his door to harvest him:

> O! hear the reaper's cry! the rap
> of his crook on the door--
> but the poor
> dupe! op'ning, shall find bats far gone with my sap.

Another possible interpretation of death as the harvest of God may be the Christian's attitude to death, death being a kind of birth into eternity. In this sense still, God, so to say, harvests the souls of men into His kingdom. The disappointed "reaper" then becomes the devil, who would like to claim man's soul, but finds it already taken to heaven. The reference to Easter, when Christ rose again from death and ascended into heaven seems to support this view. If this were so, there should not be the note of failure and disillusionment that rings through the poem. There should not be that "serious concern of J. P. Clark's "Easter," which Obi Wali pointed out.[22] In the final

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[22] "Criteria Other Than Linguistic," Seminar Paper, p. 6.

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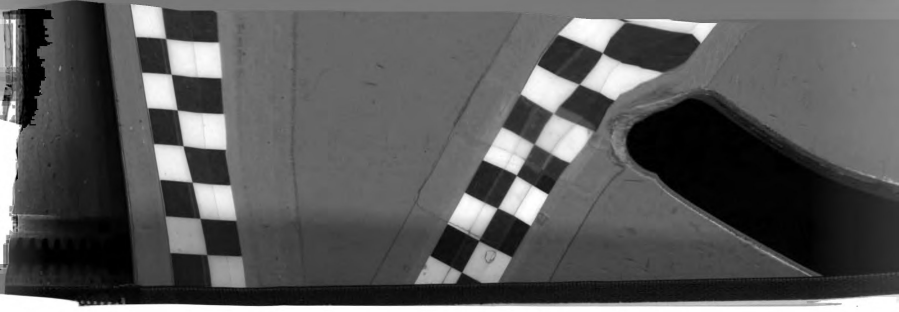

analysis "Easter" remains, like most of Clark's poems, a sad piece ending on a tragic note.

Clark experiments with another stanzaic pattern here, in which short and longer lines alternate. The opening line of each stanza contains only two monosyllabic words, and the closing line of each is the longest in it. The last line of the first stanza has ten syllables, and that of the second has eleven. The rhyme scheme follows the same pattern in both stanzas: ababcddc, and the rhymes are all perfect. This vindicates the consciousness and conscientiousness with which this poet effects his craftsmanship.

The rhetorical question is another method Clark uses to instill into our minds the certainty of his convictions. It generally implies certainty of failure, and the responsibility of each person to realise this. One will be mistaken if he fails to recognize that he is "caught/ like chicken in the storm." "To A Prodigal" uses this method to point out to the addressee in the poem that it is futile to think he "will go suck milk prest/again on your mother's breast." The title word "Prodigal" makes one have the feeling that this poem is addressed to Christopher Okigbo, who as has been remarked in Chapter IV, is a "prodigal" seeking to return to his mother "Idoto." Clark, like himself, after making the point in the first stanza, develops it with examples in the three middle stanzas, and summarizes categorically in the final one.

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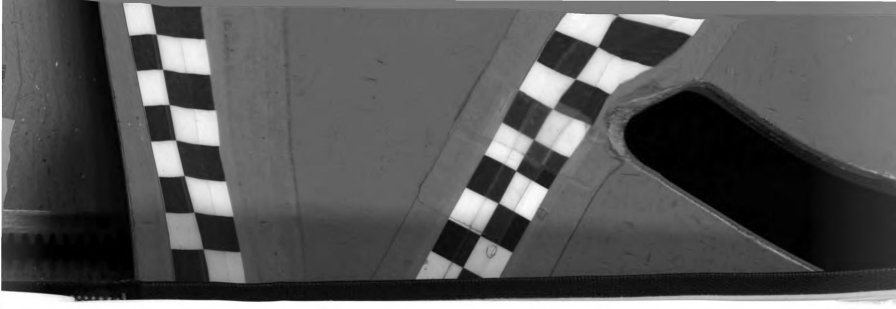

Stanza II recommends that the addressee put his time to plucking "cotton/plumes bloated in the sun and tumble in "basins a-bubble/by the beach." This points to the fact that he should not take life seriously, but rather while away the short time in life like a "frisking" flea. The next stanza continues in the same vein, and introduces the advice that with the world ". . . you dancing cheer/to sink in dimple all your tears."

The analogy in stanza IV becomes more serious. Even the "waves . . . in beds of pearls are sleepless," and "boughs" become "hoarse" when they are "lightning-forked and cleft." If this is so the poet then wonders in the last stanza:

> Dare you then wandering caught
> like chicken in the storm
> seek refuge on a breast
> vain outstretched and now will rest?

Of course, the answer the poet anticipates is no. And if the poem is addressed to a poet like Okigbo, the "breast/ vain outstretched" is of course the indigenous religion which has been despoiled by colonial administrators and missionaries.

The regularity of the rhyme scheme noticed in other four-line-stanza poems breaks down partially in this one. It is maintained in the first three stanzas, each of which rhymes in couplets, but in the last two it is varied. No stylistic reason could be found for this.

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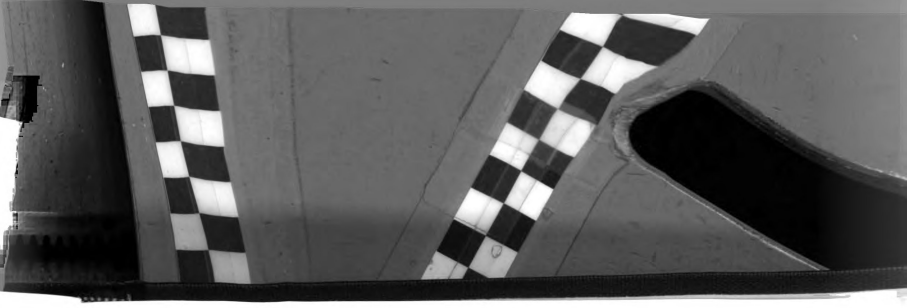

"Outside Gethsemane" continues two traits already noticed in Clark's poetry: the use of symbolic Christian words as titles, viz, Easter and Gethsemane; and the use of the rhetorical question technique. Furthermore, the present poem deals with the theme of the futility of struggling and the vanity of earthly pursuits, which has been handled in "To A Prodigal." The method is exactly the same in both poems and many words or their cognates have been carried over to the later poem:

"To A Prodigal"	"Outside Gethsemane"
Cotton plumes bloated	fluff-balls
a-bubble	billowing bubbles
lightening-forked	thunder's roar/million splinter'd
tears	tears
wandering	wandering
vain	vanity
beach	shore

Gethsemane is the name of the garden where Christ had the agony that culminated in his death on Calvary. It is, therefore, a scene of suffering, but while Christ's suffering and death resulted in exultation and men's salvation, the protagonist of Clark's poem will only end in the "vanity/ of chasing the wind by her skirts," breathing as he does so the "rank mortality/in million-splinter'd spurts."

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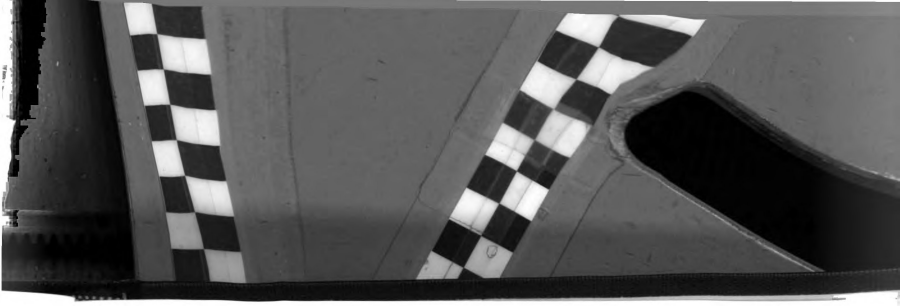

As usual, man is to blame for his woe, for he caused himself this grief that necessitates tears of blood, by his blind and restless pursuits in life. This can be gathered from the third stanza and the closing couplet, which contain, it seems to me, some of the most powerful lines of Clark with respect to the theme of the tragic futility of life:

> Had you hearken'd to the thunder's roar
> and not drowned his rumbles
> in the gross garrulity
> of your tooth; You would not since birth
>
> Have sought pollution of the flood
> with vain tears of blood!

The "thunder's roar" is reminiscent of T. S. Eliot's "What The Thunder Said"--section V of "The Waste Land," where the "Thunder" gives three commands: "Datta" (give); "Dayadhvam" (sympathise); "Damyata" (control).[23] Just as these commands were not obeyed in "The Waste Land," so was the "thunder's roar" not listened to in "Outside Gethsemane." It seems to me that this "roar" is intended by Clark to embrace all three commands in "The Waste Land"--give, sympathise, and control (passion), for we have seen in "Empathy," and will see in "Variation on Hopkins, etc." (p. 39) the lack of sympathy among men, and we will also see the lack of control of passion in other poems.

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[23] The Complete Poems and Plays, p. 49, ll.402, 412, 419.

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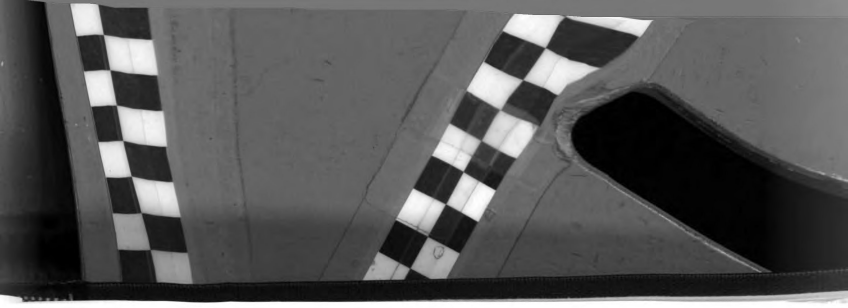

A different stanzaic form is used in "Outside Gethsemane." It is not only consistently used--abcd--but only these rhymes appear throughout the poem except in the final couplet which rhymes differently. In the three four-line stanzas of the poem, the first lines rhyme--"moor," -"shore," -"roar"; the second lines rhyme, "balls," "bubbles," "rumbles," though "balls" does not make for a perfect rhyme with the other words. The third and fourth lines rhyme perfectly. It is needless to point out that this kind of arrangement cannot be a work of blind chance, but that of the wary, meticulous artist who loves, and is involved in, his art.

Sometimes, Hopkins' influence on Clark is solely thematic. So in "Variation on Hopkins on Theme of Child Wonder," which rhymes in couplets but for the ninth line, concentration will be on theme. The poem, as has been suggested, deals with lack of pity, selfishness, greed among men, coupled with the inevitability of death. The world is "so small pity plenished," "self-finished," and "men are 'Paupers' . . . over bald bones." Those who have, rather than stop their greed, will "increase others' need," and these are "soulful sick/Of stench carrion thick." They should not blame these poor "foul'd on filth" if they "turn out styke" (mischievous child), if they revolt against oppression. But even those who are well off should realise that



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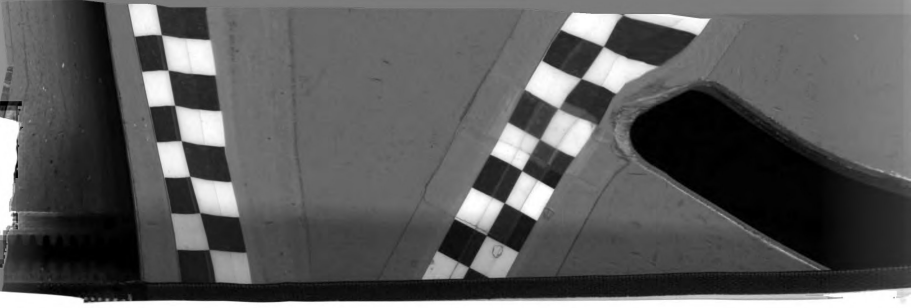

all "grow to die in this place of vomit." This is rather sardonic; the earth is a "place of vomit"!

The views expressed by Clark have been touched upon by Hopkins but in different ways. The sonnet "Carrion Comfort" shows the protagonist's refusal to despair, even if life torments and twists him. Hopkins' "bruised bones" is even echoed by Clark's "bald bones," and "carrion" appears in both poems.[24] In "No worst, there is none," the reader learns that "all/Life death does end and each day dies with sleep," for which Clark's last line in his poem serves as an exact replica. In another sonnet, Hopkins prays that he may have more pity on his own heart, and be kind and charitable to his sad self.[25] This is the theme of pity and sympathy, but of a different kind from that dealt with by Clark.

The "self-finished" world of "Variation on Hopkins" becomes the "earth" which "in womb of night/Is double-torn in doubt" in "Darkness and Light" (p. 41). This poem which has birth images and sexual images, also shows that life is all a restless affair, and we simply "in our unrest/Vex a thing of innocence/Budding on virgin breast." The fact that "light" is "hurtful" to the protagonist indicates he is about some illegitimate act. But he believes that light "should seek out ill." We will hear this repeated in

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[24] Poems, p. 106.

[25] Ibid., p. 110.

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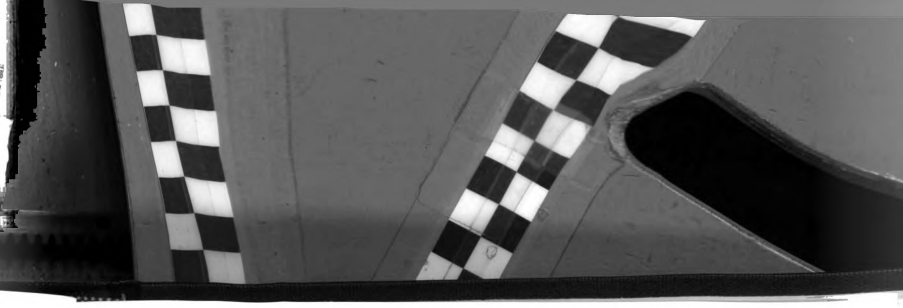

"Ibadan Dawn." The rhyme pattern is regular throughout the poem, with the lines rhyming alternately. "Darkness and Light" is fraught with diverse feelings of the restive world, the evil-ridden world, the world of erotic desires with light seeking evils out. This kind of juxtaposition reaches a clinching point in the short poem "The Outsider" which brings together the image of a woman cooking food, and that of "another spewing urine by the wayside." At the remembrance of these scenes which though forgotten reel "back like tide," the poet wavers "between rage and scorn." Indeed, right from the time he "ran" with his hands over his head, he has been raging at, and scorning, life. This he continues to do in the next group of poems which will now be discussed.

Man and Eros

"Women" are among the "favourite recreations" of Clark, as gathered from the brief biographical information written on the cover of America, Their America, and in fact, as one can gather from sections of the book itself. However, his erotic poems are not to be taken as constituting a history of his sexual life. At least, this author does not intend to see them as such. The line of argument still remains that even in the sphere of love or passion, man, as Clark sees him, is in stress; he is still man in chaos; life



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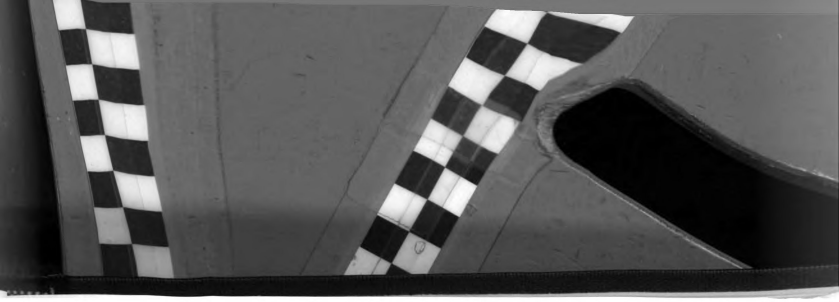

still remains a series of interminable struggles, psychological, mental, physical, and otherwise. The movement in the group of poems about to be considered is generally from admiration and wistfulness, through the raging and whining resulting from unrequited love, and through a witty, satirical, and cynical attitude towards the world of love, to the tragic loneliness and desolation of a dejected soul.

"Agbor Dancer" (p. 12) is all music in theme and in form. As the dancing girl performs her art to the rhythm of the drums, so does the reader follow with pleasure the music of the poem, and in fact, both the girl and the reader become "entangled in the magic/maze of music"--a line itself of exquisite, lyrical perfection. The girl's body has her own music as "in her heart a descant" is awakened by "tremulous beats," for "she treads the intricate/Pattern rippling crest after crest/To meet the green clouds of the forest." Green is the symbol of life and freshness.

All this however only succeeds in creating a darkness that with the last line of the third stanza falls upon the poet's soul. The "virginal habits" of the girl are "too atrophied for pen or tongue." She is wasting away. This is a case of maceration. A sense of loss or misuse--rather, lack of use--falls upon the poet. This is not all. The poet has been "early sequestered from [his] tribe"; he is a scribe

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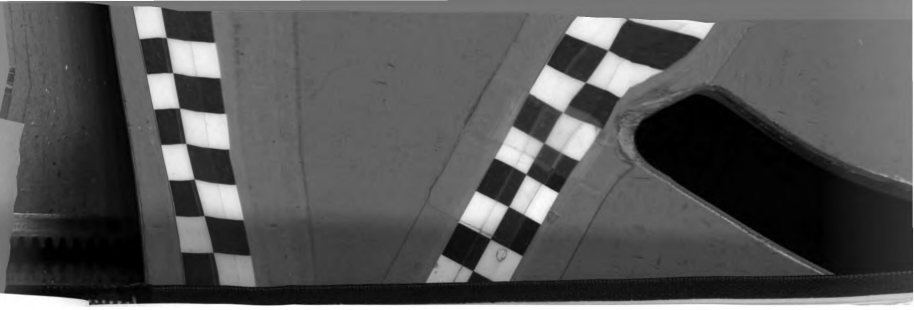

tethered as to lead, to foreign, strange ideas, or persons, and if he could win back his freedom, he "should answer her communal call" for purposes of, maybe, procreation.

Clark obviously implies here a conflict of cultures. The local dancer represents the indigenous culture, and "the throb of a drum" of the first line goes right down "lineal veins to ancestral core," but the lead to which the "scribe" is tethered is representative of the foreign culture. Sequestration "from my tribe" points to this conflict. However, the main point of the poem is his admiration of this local dancer coupled with a wish to copulate with her. And Mr. Okogbule Nwanodi, after Clark, celebrates such a dancer in "Native" where the dancer "thumbed my nerves/as you weave/ your being into frenzy"; and where she danced herself "into goddess," her waist "swinging to rhyme/answering the drum."[26]

Miss Abiola Irele has suggested a different link. She finds a resemblance between this poem and some poetry of the negritude school:

> Car, en réalité, qu'est-ce qui donne
> au poème de Clark "Agbor-Dancer" son
> pouvoir singulier, c'est l'immense
> ampleur des sentiments, l'intense
> communion du corps avec
> la terre, que les poètes de la
> négritude avaient éprouvées et glorifiées
> en des vers. . . .

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[26] Icheke (Ibadan, Nigeria, 1964), p. 7.

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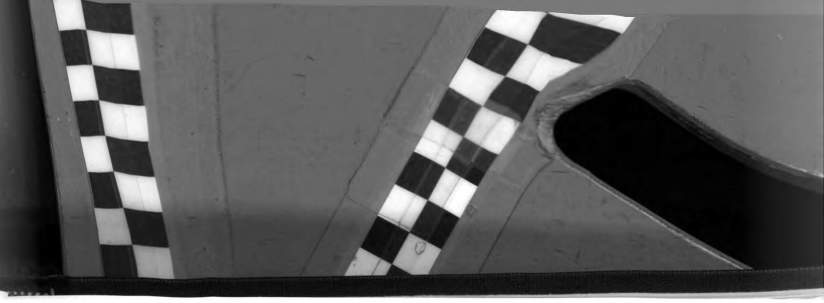

Among the examples given by Irele is this from Sénghor:

> Nous sommes les hommes de la danse
> Sont les pieds reprennent vigueur en
> frappant de sol dur.
> (Prière aux Masques)

The critic continues as follows:

> Aucune différence essentielle avec les
> vers de Clarks qui sont plus intimes
> (moins déclamatiores), ainsi qu'on en
> juger par l'extrait suivant:
>
> See her caught in the throb of a drum
> Tippling from hide-brimmed stem
> Down lineal veins to ancestral core. . . .
>
> . . . Could I, early sequested from my tribe
> Free a lead--tethered scribe,
> I would answer her communal call,
> Lose myself in her warm caress
> Intervolving earth, sky and flesh.[27]

Besides the words which Irele misquoted--"sequested" and "lead-tethered," which should be "sequester'd," and "lead-tether'd," it seems that the comparison is not very appropriate; this writer does not want to judge her opinion as to what gives Clark's poem "son pouvoir singulier," but if there is a poem by Sénghor which Clark's own resembles both in theme and diction, it is "Black Woman," and the poem of Clark's that can be thus matched with it is "Girl Bathing" (p. 13).

This poem, which this writer shall also link with one kind of Pre-Raphaelite poetry, describes the girl bathing

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[27]"Poems From Black Africa (Langston Hughes); Modern Poetry from Africa (Gerald Moore and Ulli Beier)," Présence Africaine, No. 49 (1964), 263-266.

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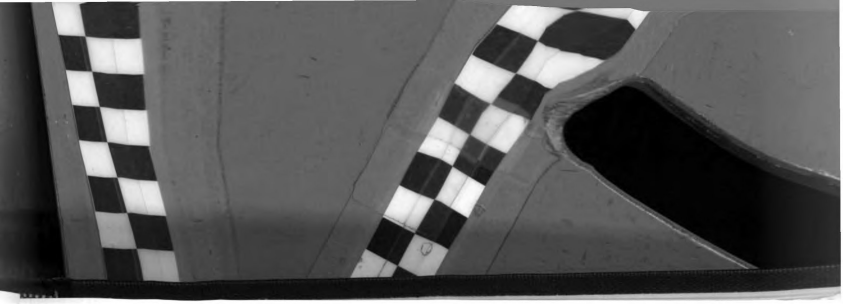

in the water with all the power and passion which the poet can command. Aside from the fact that both in Sénghor and in Clark the body is nude, or nearly so, there are close resemblances in words and phrases. The "sweetness of your hands" in Senghor becomes "deft fingers" and "unguent flow of her limbs" in Clark, and "firm-fleshed ripe fruit" in Sénghor finds a replica in Clark's "the fresh/warm smell of her flesh," and "rearing breast/So ripe with joy. . . ." Even the images built around "pearls," "gold," "skin," etc. are found in both poems. Thus in Sénghor:

> Naked woman, dark woman!
> Oil sweet and smooth on the athlete's flanks,
> On the flanks of the princes of Mali
> Heaven-leashed gazelle, pearls are stars
> on the night of your skin
> Delights of the spirit at play, red gold reflec-
> tions in your shimmering skin.
> In the shade of your hair, my anguish lightens
> with the nearing suns of your eyes.[28]

And then Clark:

> Splash, splash, your teeth flashing pearls,
> in the whirlpool
> You have made, its lively cool
> Waters, lambent through your veins,
> A tonic to the core of your bones.
> And striding back to land neat
> On sands golden at your feet,
> How irridiscent[29] breaks all
> Your porcelain skin to tattoo beads of coral!

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[28] African Heritage, ed. Jacob Drachler (New York, 1964), pp. 129-130.

[29] See the remark on the spelling of this word on page 123 above.



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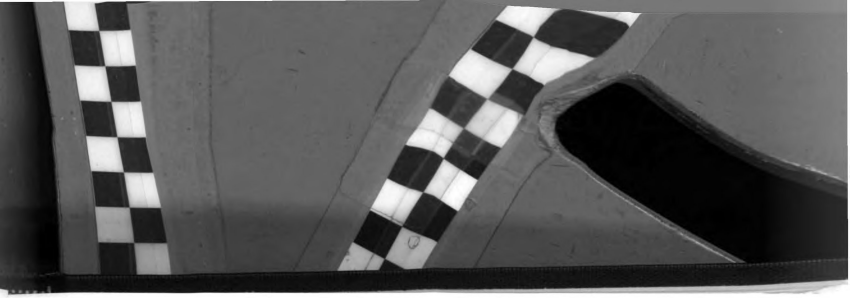


This similarity does not of course make Clark and Sénghor the same kind of poets at all. While Sénghor stresses the black colour of his lady, Clark praises the general physical beauty of the girl without even mentioning her colour, and his poem is more luscious.

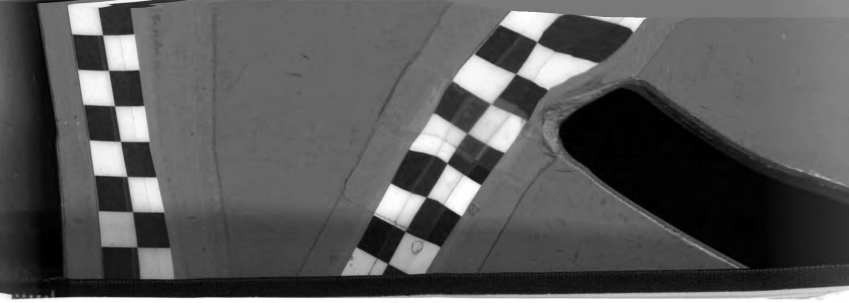
If everything were as beautiful as this girl thus described with all the sensuous and voluptuous images, life, to Clark, would have been more liveable. But it is not so, and besides, such life is "for the blest" only. Thus there is still no rest for the heart that knows and admires this piece of beauty. Thus "Agbo Dancer" and "Girl Bathing" are purely admiration poems pointing the way to what is to come--the winning, raging, and scorning that result from frustrated love adventures. This is what "Olokun" (p. 18) does also. The whole process is surely reminiscent of the love experiences and poetry of the Elizabethans and the metaphysical poets of the 17th century.

"Olokun" presents us with a textual problem right at the outset. In Poems, 1962, the first stanza reads:

> I love to pass my fingers
> (As tide thro' weeds of the sea
> And wind the tall fern-fronds
> Thro' the strands of your hair)
> Dark as night that screens the naked moon.

In the Moore and Beier anthology, 1963, the stanza becomes:

> I love to pass my fingers,
> As tide through weeds of the sea.
> And wind the tall fern-fronds



Through the strands of your hair
Dark as night that screens the naked moon.[30]

The punctuation marks after "fingers" and "sea" here do not make much sense. The 1962 version was used which appears in the book of poems supposed to have been revised by Clark himself. But even in this, the parentheses create a problem. As the stanza stands, if what is enclosed in the parentheses is taken away we have something like this:

I love to pass my fingers . . .
Dark as night that screens the naked moon.

In this case "Dark" qualifies "fingers." But that will be wrong in the context. This author thinks, therefore, that the bracket should close after "fern-fronds," so that there are two analogies within the parentheses. The stanza paraphrased will then read:

I love to pass my fingers
(as tide passes through weeds of the sea,
and wind passes through tall fern-fronds)
through the strands of your hair--
(hair) which is as dark as night. . . .

In this case, the protagonist will be passing his fingers through the strands of the girl's hair. This makes sense.

This is a poem of praise and admiration, and at the same time reflects sorrow. The lady's hair is as "Dark" as night--an asset; the look of her eyes is a "sable vehicle of dream." The man's love for her is greater than any man else can have for woman. But in the face of all these

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[30] Modern Poetry From Africa, p. 85.

So drunken, like ancient walls
We crumble, in heaps at your feet

and when she lifts "us," it is only as "beggars to your breast." One may look on a woman as an ordinary human being, but still be a beggar before her, asking her for her love. If he looks on her as a Deity, he is still her votary. Olokun is the Yoruba "'Goddess of the sea' (a female Neptune)." It was suspected she might have been "a god originally?"[31]

With these three poems the reader is fully prepared for the more tense ones to come. "Why Should I Rage" (p. 19) presents a case of failure in love. The protagonist cannot kindle the fire of love in the lady's heart. By the use of images and analogies drawn from the local environment, Clark rehearses his cry of despair. It is hands over head again for a different reason now:

O passion has spent his fuel
On wet wood. . . .

One can remember how problematic it is to make a fire with wet wood during the rainy season when one is back from school or work to cook his meal! The poem is a song of despair. A man of faith can strike a "cruel/Fig-tree," but the protagonist, choked with "smoke" is "unable in despair/to stifle a tear."

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[31] E. Bolaji Idowu, Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief (London, 1962), p. 14.

It is the same self accusation that resounds at the end of "Olumo Rock" (p. 7). Though the protagonist prays for "my loving-unloved flesh/That fanned so long in flames of passion/Lapping futile for consummation/Turns this pillar of ash," he curses his heart.

> But curst be my heart that stubborn
> As Joan's yearns and wouldn't burn.

His flesh is loving, but unloved; his flames of passion end in futility for there is no consummation. His heart "yearns," but cannot "burn." The reference to Joan of Arc simply points to the fact that when she was put into the fire, her heart flew away in the form of a white dove, unburnt.[32] The analogy is not quite appropriate, for the contexts are different.

The image of burning passion continues, and forms the title of the next poem--"Passion Is A Fuel" (p. 20). While combining the theme of failure in love--passion being a "fuel of driving me a rudderless ship/and your friendship" being "the indifferent cruel sea wherein I drift"--the poem introduces the theme of secrecy in a love affair. Donne gives us the image of a lover's tears forming "seas to drowne me in thy spheare"[33] and as "teare-floods";[34] also Donne

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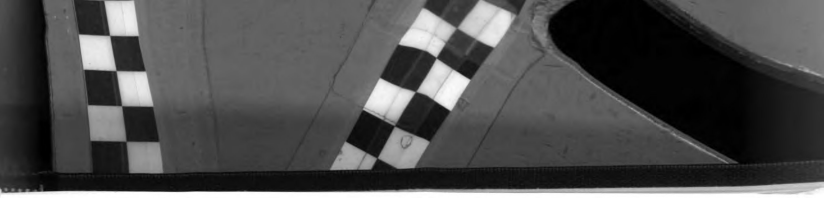
[32]See Alice Buchan, Joan of Arc and the Recovery of France (New York, 1948), p. 225.

[33]"A Valediction: Of Weeping," l.20, in The Complete Poetry and Selected Prose of John Donne, ed. Charles M. Coffin (New York, 1952), pp. 30-31.

[34]"A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning," l.6, in The Complete Poetry, pp. 38-39.



deals with the theme of secrecy of love: "That love hath not attain'd the highest degree,/which is still diligent lest others see."[35] Clark also has the "secret of my goddess." He is bothered that like a bird that lives in a bush full of fire wood, he is still dying of cold:

> but shall I sit on this privileged stool
> and not wear beads of coral?

The image is that of a local chief being enstooled.

It goes without saying, that the images in the first stanza are surely metaphysical conceits. Passion is a fuel, the protagonist "is a rudderless ship." The girl's friendship, cold and fastidious, is "the indifferent cruel sea," and he is merely drifting like Pound's Mauberley.

But here there is a difference. Clark's protagonist wants to be active. His annoyance results from the fact he is denied the fruit of love which he is most willing and anxious to attain. "New Year" (p. 26) shows his last appeal to the girl. The images point to diminution. Another "flood is finished." "Flood" is consistently used by Clark to mark time, and this reflects life in the village near a river, where people keep time by watching the rise and fall of the water in the river. The lover and the beloved are like two exhausted "reeds." The lover becomes rationalistic and logical: sands grow high in leaps daily like "manatees on

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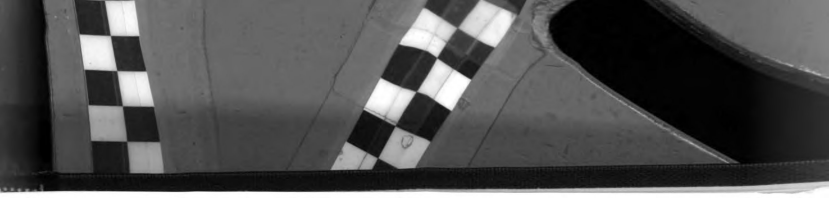
[35] "A Lecture Upon the Shadow," ll.12-13, in The Complete Poetry, pp. 53-54.





spree"; even "sexless water lettuce" enjoy the company of each other. But in sorrowful contrast to these "you and I two reeds swaying on/the banks with the wind of world-blight" will not effect a unification of "our self-split selves." They do not form a pair of "twin compasses" like Donne and his beloved.[36] The "gadfly" of "Cry of Birth" and the "irresistible blight" of "The Water Maid" still pester the protagonist of "New Year" in the form of "world-blight."

The final warning to the lady comes coupled with the lover's mounting despair. Like Eliot's in "Prufrock," the thought of age begins to assail him.

> Insidious creaks of drying joints
> Warn of recessions hard to reach
> I wonder this flood in laps of the old
> Will long bear aberrants on the beach.

The two are really "aberrants" wandering on the beach of love's sea, but never reaching the sea. They stray from the path of normality, and age will overtake them as their "drying joints" grow drier.

With this kind of experience, Clark or his protagonist grows satiric, witty, and cynical. In America, Their America we learn that Clark is bitter and insolent.[37] This rudeness which he shows throughout in this prose work takes another form in "Pub-Song" (p. 22) and in "To A Learned Lady" (p. 22). In the former, where beneath a beautiful lyric

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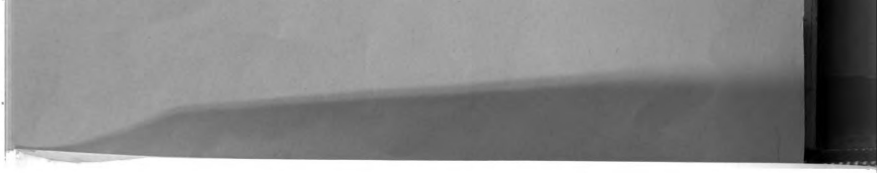
[36]"A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning," l.26.

[37](London, 1964), p. 209.





lies the repulsive stench of wenches in "The house of bawds," the protagonist combines lascivity and callousness with rude witticism:

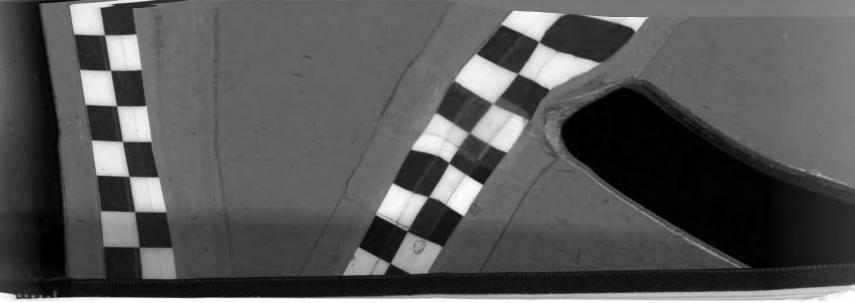
> Now the myth is broken
> And I wild in the open
> What there is left to repent?

The second poem is even more scathing. It is a dangerous rat which as it bites the leg of a sleeping man keeps fanning in order to soothe it. Opening with an appealing tone, this sarcastic song to "my learned lady," develops and ends on an appalling note. Though the "floods" have "spanned" a throne for her, though she has got all the education possible and is therefore high on the social ladder, she is still a "handmaid to my mother." It is a common saying among some Nigerians that

> The termite may soar never so high
> At last it will fall a prey
> To a crawling creature's thigh.

The habit of witty retort and satire shows in Clark's prose as in his poetry; there is often a superficial appearance which contrasts with the weight of the blow registered underneath. Clark finds the vending machine enough for the exercise of his satiric talents.

> A dime
> in the slot
> And anything
> from coke to coffee
> Spews down your throat
> . . . . . .



Now, old Moses
for whom, they say,
Mannas fell in the desert,
did he push a button as this,
and who knows at what price?[38]

As in other instances, the hurting remark is conveyed in a song, fast and moving. Some words and devices have become recurrent in Clark: "floods," wit, satire and as shall later be confirmed, references to the Bible. At this point the following words of Carlo Izzo may be recalled:

> . . . it is true that a lyric poem is, as Massimo Bontem Pelli put it, "an adventure in words," but just as there are characters who get the upper hand of a novelist of playwright, there can be words or tricks of style that get the upper hand of a poet.[39]

In this connexion also it seems that Clark must have had in mind another poetic creed of T. S. Eliot. Eliot defines "wit" as "a tough reasonableness beneath the slight lyric grace" and an "alliance of levity and seriousness (by which the seriousness is intensified)."[40] This is what Clark effects in his lyric-satiric poems and even in his prose.

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[38] Ibid., p. 192.

[39] "The Poetry of W. H. Auden," in Auden: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Monroe K. Spears (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1964), p. 131.

[40] Homage to Dryden (The Hogarth Essays, n.d.), pp. 226 and 229.



"Ring Around the Moon" (p. 28) fittingly brings the survey of love and passion to an anticipated end. The protagonist paints a picture of himself and his situation. He is like a "moon" that "nears a heart/draped in crape." "Crape" is the word--a mourning dress! His heart is as deserted as the moon is by "all her train, save for one star." The image of a "tribal chief" who has "fallen from favour and court/of politicians in power" intensifies the idea of desolation present. The images of blindness shown by a "bat," darkness and shadow shown by an "umbrella," are all apt for the description of a heart from whose gorge of grief we hear a howl like an angry wolf's:

> My heart reflects at noon
> This shadow of the moon
> hugging desolation
> As bats a blasted bough--
> an in my canyon breast howl
> a song and a vow. . . .

This song or vow is made to the "stars" and "echoed by the owl." The owl is a bird of ill omen. The song and the vow remain "unspoken to my love." An adventure crowned with failure!

Man and Nature

Clark has endeavoured to absorb everything into his system. The part played by physical nature in the whole being of his poetic machinery is quite considerable. He not only admires nature, which he describes sometimes with lavish beauty and extravagant imagination, but more importantly underscores the interrelation between natural phenomena and human beings. Clark may bask in sunshine, soar into the sky to commune with the stars or the moon, or dive from there into the depths of the sea, but all the time his mind is with humanity.

"Ibadan Dawn" (p. 27) which combines the alliterative and descriptive diction of G. M. Hopkins with the passion of Spenser and colour imagery of Shakespeare,[41] appears to be a wanton infatuation with the beauty of Nature. The reader sees the "mist-hung curtains, a drizzle-damp," which "drew and fall" apart, and the "fresh burst of blue, freckled dye," and "flakes and flecks"--all of which are reminiscent of Hopkins' "Pied Beauty" or "The Windhover" in diction. These are combined with the nuptial and sex symbols in the words "bride" and "cockerel song." In the midst of these, the morning has a duty to perform for humanity, which is, "to charm earth from vice of night." Compare with Wordsworth:

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[41]". . . the morn in russet mantle clad. . . ." Hamlet, I, i ; 166.



> . . . for I have learned
> To look on nature, not as in the hour
> Of thoughtless youth; but hearing oftentimes
> The still sad music of humanity,
> Nor harsh, nor grating, though of ample power--
> To chasten and subdue. . . .[42]

In both Clark and Wordsworth, nature has the same duty to purify humanity.

As for alliteration, it is one of the greatest influences of Hopkins on Clark. An illustration of this has already been given in another connexion (p. 128 above), but here, it seems necessary to give more from "Pied Beauty":

> Whatever is fickle, fleckled . . .
> With swift, slow; sweet, sour! adazzle, dim, . . .[43]

and from "The Windhover,"

> I caught this morning morning's minion king-
> dom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon. . . .[44]

Hopkins is a master of the art of alliteration, and it can be seen that Clark also has not only mastered this art, but has made it his own. In his prose also, Clark is no less alliterative. Commenting on the "big gothic Grover Cleveland Memorial Tower" at Princeton, Clark says:

> . . . tourist crowds, from outside Princeton
> and beyond the State of New Jersey flock to gaze
> at this famous structure, and the thrill sent
> through them is great indeed . . . when those
> relics of a renaissant Europe, all hidden away
> in the heavenly heights of the tower, break over
> them into some quaint hymn, however out of key.[45]

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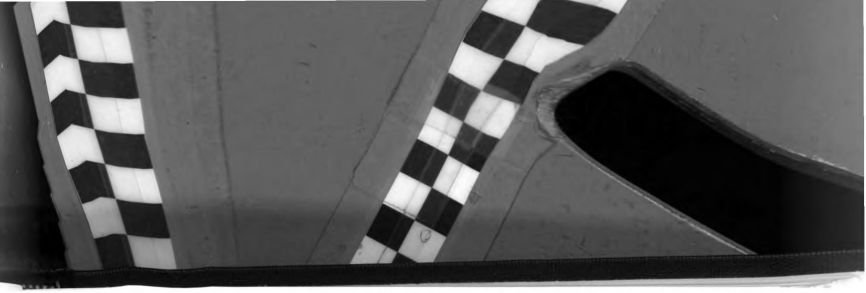
[42] "Tintern Abbey," Section IV.

[43] "Pied Beauty," ll.8-9, in Poems, p. 74.

[44] "The Windhover," ll.1-2, in Poems, p. 13.

[45] America, Their America, pp. 29-30. Italics mine.



In another instance one hears of the abject woman who is "the archetypal image of Mother and mourner," and who for "hundreds of years . . . has kept watch, wept and waited. . . ."[46]

Though a natural phenomenon, Morning, has a dignified duty of natural purification; in other poems, there are found descriptions of nature for the purpose of depicting woe, wail and destruction. "Ring Around the Moon," as seen before, presents the images of a moon draped in black and deserted by stars, and a bat knocking blindly about--all to show how sorrowful the protagonist's heart is. In "New Moon" (p. 30), though the "bowl" is of "silver" and is "high in space," it holds only "darksome/fruit" and it is ominous "of days to come." In the same quick breath, the reader sees in "Ibadan" (p. 31), the commingling of decay and richness--"splash of mist/and gold." This is coupled with the noise of shattering and destruction ". . . scattered/among seven hills like broken/china in the sun."

Then, "Horoscope" (p. 3) attempts an explanation of the influence of stars on human beings by the process of simple analogy. If the reader believes in the fact that the moon causes tides in the oceans by a kind of pull, which makes "oceans pound back mountain force," then he should believe that, "stars" have "control over the destiny/of man, this clay-clot." [The scriptural image of man as mud-made appears

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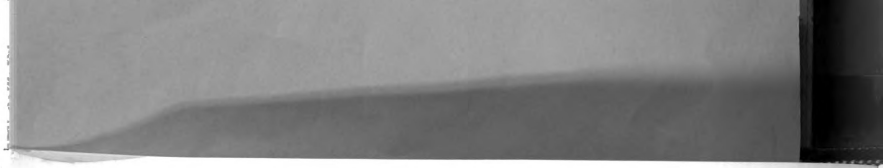
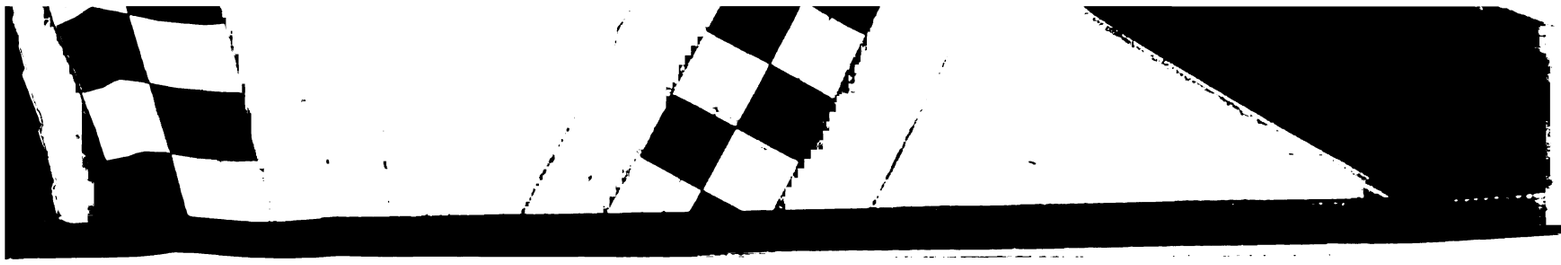
[46] Ibid., p. 68. Italics mine.





also in "Olokun" (p. 18).] The poet affirms this:

> Vain cynic, believe me, the stars
> Even as they in galaxies roll-glow,
> Affect our human lot,
> Day to day make us ebb and flow.

The influence of the stars on the human lot has been noted in connexion with "For Granny." This kind of repetition, not only of words, but also tricks, symbolisms, and images gives the poetry of Clark the quality of unity in diversity.

Quest for Courage

There is the novelty of the commonplace in Clark's poetry. Writing of poetry in general, Professor A. J. M. Smith says that great poetry does not necessarily mean a great subject matter. There can be a great poem written "about" a trivial matter: "A subject in itself may be trivial or apparently unpoetic; it is what the poet does with it that turns it into poetry." He illustrates his thesis with John Donne who wrote "on a flea."[47] What Dr. Johnson said of Congreve's "Mourning Bride" can be said of some of Clark's poems:

> He who reads these lines enjoys for a moment the power of a poet, he feels what he remembers to have felt before, but he feels it with great increase of sensibility; he recognizes a familiar image, but meets it again amplified and expanded, embellished with beauty and enlarged with majesty.[48]

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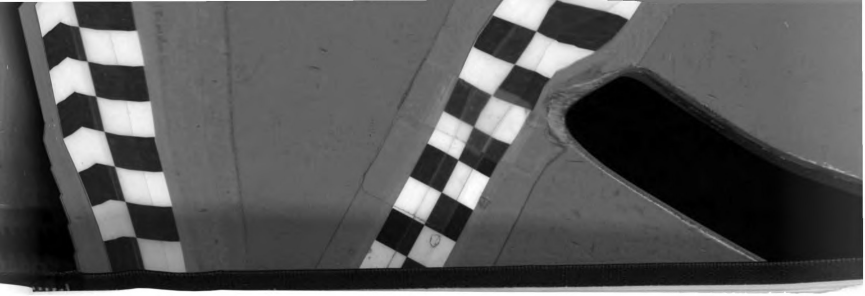
[47] Seven Centuries of Verse English & American (New York, 1957), p. xxxix.

[48] Ford, ed. From Dryden to Johnson, p. 417.





A. R. Humphreys calls this "recognition-plus-revelation."[49] And as for Clark himself, he refers to this quality of poetry by saying:

> An artist if anyting should be an inventor, a creator of new things with use and beauty out of ordinary familiar pieces and material lying around.[50]

This is precisely what Clark does in "Fulani Cattle" (p. 6), and in some others of his poems. The pattern of presentation is roughly the same in these poems. First, there is the admiration of the exhibited courage, faith or patience, with all the predicaments delineated, and after, there is the protagonist's prayer for the acquisition of the same virtue. Thus there is the "secret hope of knowledge" locked in the hump of the cattle, so that without any revolt, they meet their doom in the "house of slaughter." There follows a speculation as to the source of this courage. Was it a result of the habit of endurance instilled into the cattle during the "forging/Of your gnarled and crooked horn"? Or it may be that the "drover's whip" instead of inflicting pain, "arouses shocks of ecstasy?" Or perhaps, having travelled a long distance, the cattle need rest, and euphemistically, this rest is of course to be found in the slaughterhouse: hence death! As for the protagonist's prayer the reader hears:

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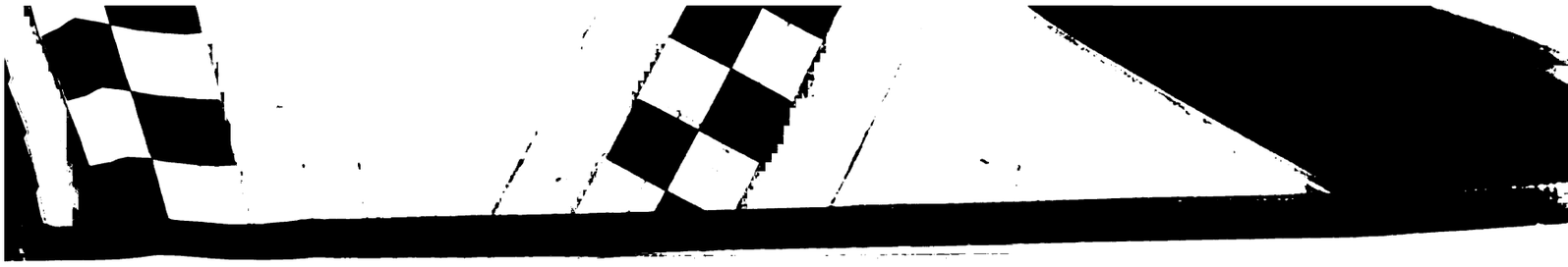
[49] Ibid.

[50] America, Their America, pp. 80-81.





> But will you not vouchsafe to me,
> As true the long knife must prevail
> The patience of even your tail?

In "Iddo Bridge" (p. 33) the bridge becomes an example of courage and patience, for "like a rainbow/You stride, bearing with not a shout/The burden of men on your back." This is a wonder to the poet. Paradoxically, the bridge that bears the men is the "child of man,"--the personification process continues. Like "Fulani Cattle," the poem ends with a prayer to the bridge:

> Teach us to stand in mud
> Though saddled with stone,
> And when with confusion
> Swept, a heart to rise above the flood.

The phrase "With Confusion/Swept" echoes Matthew Arnold's "Swept with confused alarms . . ." ("Dover Beach," 1.36). "Flood" in this poem does not connote time, as it does in some poems previously dealt with.

It is not only courage, but courage coupled with faith which the poet is seeking. Referring to the scriptures in "Of Faith" (p. 40) he remembers that with faith one "can move mountains," as Christ tells in St. Matthew. It is the "giant mind," which, whether "fall night or rain . . . grapples, wrestles," and wrings "resolution/from despair," that has this kind of faith. Unlike the two former poems of this group, but like the next, "Of Faith" is all wonder and admiration, with no overt prayer. But the wish for what one wants is still there, if only implicitly.



Hopkins' "The Soldier" praises Christ as "He [who] knows war, served this soldiering through." Christ, the soldier becomes the symbol of perfection, so that a "Christ-done deed" is excellently done.[51] Without any attempt to link Clark's "To A Fallen Soldier" to Hopkins' (for they are quite different poems at least in theme), it can be seen that the spirit of Hopkins is still functioning in Clark. The fallen soldier is a "fiery soul, streaked across life/ Like lightning in the Sky." Though he lived for only a short time--his "passage" being "like a meteor"--his departure from earth has left an impact that is deeply felt:

> And the brilliant hail of sparks
> And fall-out in your rushing wake
> Left all the world blinded
> And baffled in searing pain!

All these poems "about" quest for courage, faith or patience, have continued the tragic trend that the reader has been treading in the course of Clark's poetry. Why is there need for patience, for courage, for faith? Like Yeats or Auden, Clark is determined to accept life, though tragic it be. "Baffled in searing pain," here below, he is still looking for "a heart to rise above the flood." The heart--the faithful, courageous heart--is all one needs to accept life, if only with some tragic joy, in the face of inevitable defeat. For in life

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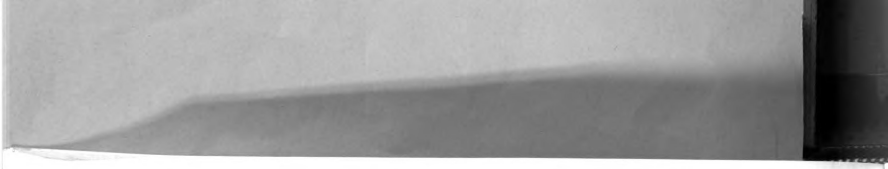
[51] Poems, p. 105.



> Fair and foul are near of kin,
> And fair needs foul. . . .[52]

Faith will help us to avoid the mistake of Auden's Gonzalo, who "by speculation froze/Vision into an idea," and will put us into the receptive disposition to welcome the words of Alonso:

> . . . praise the scorching rocks
> For their desiccation of your lust,
> Thank the bitter treatment of the tide
> For its dissolution of your pride.[53]

Man and Tradition

Clark does not seem to leave any ground untilled. In his study of the human predicament, he explores the traditional religion and belief system of the Yorubas. Even among the deities and spirits, there is unrest; there is hostility. "The Imprisonment of Obatala" (p. 4) makes use of the myths of Obatala, the Yoruba creator God, to portray the social problems among the Gods, and link this with human situations.

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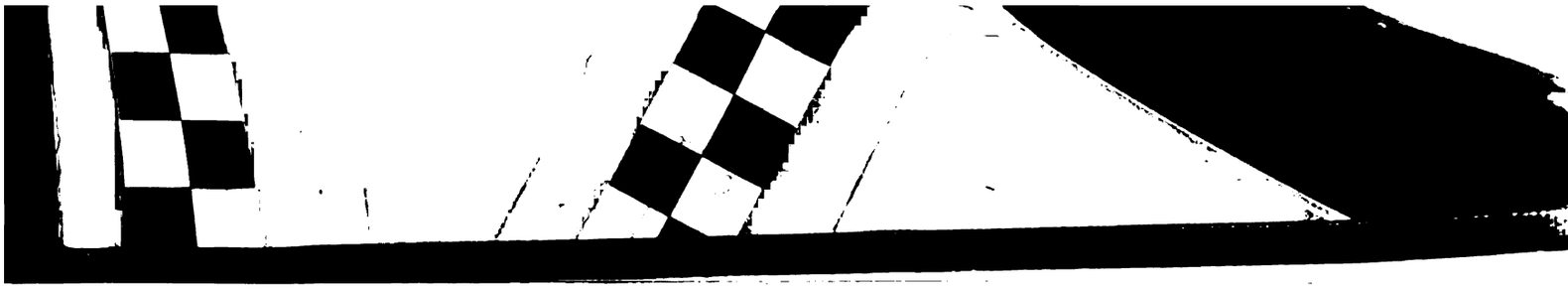
[52]"Crazy Jane Talks With the Bishop," in The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W. B. Yeats, ed. Peter Allt and Russell K. Alspach (New York, 1957), p. 513.

[53]"The Sea and the Mirror: A Commentary on Shakespeare's The Tempest," part II, in The Collected Poetry of W. H. Auden (New York, 1945), pp. 351-404.



Mr. Ulli Beier records the myths about Obatala.[54] The principal duty of Obatala is creation, and aside from originally creating the earth, he continues to be responsible for the shapes of all children born today. He therefore owns the fault of creating the deformed people and albinos, who are sacred to him--a point noted also by J. Olumide Lucas.[55] Beier records also the incidents of the destruction of Obatala by his slave, the loss of his eyes to Eshu "the contrary God," and his imprisonment by the servants of Shango, the God of thunder, who was Obala's friend. These servants imprisoned Obatala when he was visiting Shango, on the charge that he (Obatala) was stealing his friend's horse. But he was innocent, for he meant only to catch the horse that had run away.

The myth of Odudua is also connected with that of Obatala. Odudua was an invading warrior who crossed the River Niger and met a flourishing culture among the Yorubas, which he suppressed. He was unable to destroy the ancient gods, but he had Obatala's name replaced by his own in the creation myth. This invasion is commemorated during the annual festival of Obatala. On this occasion, Obatala is "driven out of the town and received back three weeks later

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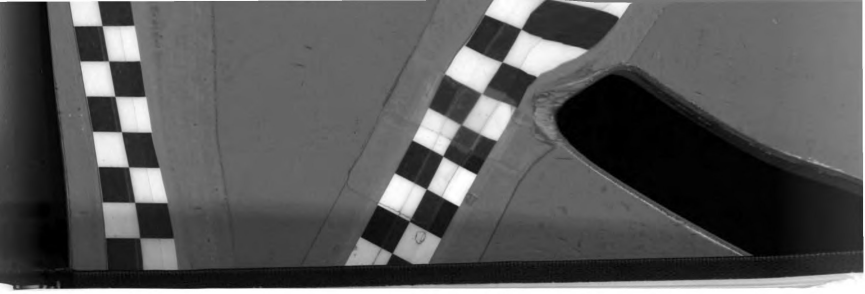
[54]"Obatala: Five Myths of the Yoruba Creator God," Black Orpheus, No. 7 (June 1960), 34-35.

[55]The Religion of the Yorubas (Lagos, 1948), p. 89.



in triumph, or else he is taken prisoner in a re-enacted war dance and again released in triumph." This imprisonment followed by release represents "the conquest and subsequent rehabilitation of the god."[56]

J. P. Clark's poem is based on these myths, especially on the one dealing with the imprisonment of the god. The poet alludes to the war-dance--"they rock the dance/Of snakes," and the first stanza describes the physical process of the imprisonment. But Clark, it seems, intends more than a mere rehearsal of the story of Obatala. Stanza II speaks of "that mischievous stir" between "homestead and stream." What the poet is referring to here is not clear, but what is known is that the stir "wells up in pots long stagnant on stilt" and "brims out to where ancestral eyes gleam." The angry waves that "dam His track" are foiled by "caterpillars" who "break their back." Whatever the case may be, there is the usual stress or strife that characterises most of Clark's poetry. This continues to show in the final stanza, where the "charcoal-coloured ass" kicks "impatient tattoo on the grass." The cry of a child, a cry known to be tragic in Clark, ends this piece:

> But the cry of a child at what it knows not
> Evokes trebly there the droop, mud-crack and clot.

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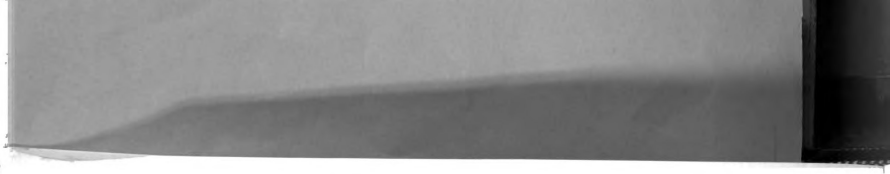
[56]Beier, "Obatala," Black Orpheus, No. 7, p. 35.



The quarrels among the gods smack of the conflict among the deities referred to in Chapter IV (pp. 97-98 above), and the imprisonment of a god also resembles the hanging of gods in fertility rituals, also referred to in Chapter IV (p. 98 above).

"Abiku" (p. 5) is a poem which deals with the spirit world, but it is more "about" a belief system of Yoruba people, than "about" the gods. Lucas tells us that the Yorubas believe that there is a "fraternity" of spirits that enter into the child "in utero" to make him die in infancy. Such a child is Abiku, "born to die."[57] It is a very sad thing for a woman to have such a child, and this myth is a fitting one for a poet that sings the sad note of mournful humanity.

In the poem the Abiku is addressed and pleaded with. The first line shows the child could come repeatedly to the same mother. If the child is tired of staying "indoors," that is to say, living on earth, he had better stay with his "kindred spirits" "on the boabab tree." The boabab tree is "sacred to spirit children (Abiku)."[58] The person pleading with the Abiku argues that though the house be a poor one, some are still willing to remain on earth and live in the home. So the child may no more "then bestride the threshold/ But step in and stay/for good." The poem ends with the

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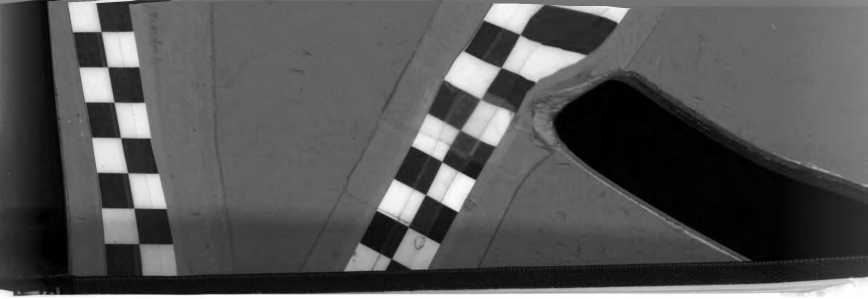
[57]Lucas, The Religion of the Yorubas, p. 149.

[58]Beier, Black Orpheus, No. 7; see the bottom part of the plate opposite p. 35.





reference to the fact that a woman so harassed by an Abiku is worn out:

> Then step in, step in and stay
> For her body is tired.

An illusion is made also to the method of burying such a child when it dies, as it often must, in infancy. Lucas says again in this connexion:

> If, in spite of all efforts, the child dies, its body is maltreated, wounds and blows which are believed to make indelible marks being inflicted on it. Sometimes the body is hacked to pieces, and in every case it must be thrown into the bush. The idea behind such maltreatment is that the Abiku spirit thereby suffers and becomes incapable Of re-entering a human body.[59]

So in the poem we hear of the "knife scars/Serrating down your back and front"; and these "are all relics of your first comings." Actually among the Ibos, the knife cuts are given to the Ogbanje (the Ibo word for Abiku) so that people may recognise it when it comes again. For the Ibo word Ogbanje means one who comes repeatedly.

Another Nigerian poet bases one of his poems on the myth of Abiku, but the attitudes of the poets are quite different. The basic facts of the myth remain roughly the same. Thus Wole Soyinka in his "Abiku" represents the Abiku as speaking. The child is cynical, insolent, capricious, and boastful of his power to foil all the people's efforts to

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[59]Lucas, The Religion of the Yorubas, p. 149.





make him live to maturity on earth.[60] Hence the futility of "your bangles" casting "charmed circles at my feet." He is Abiku, he proudly says, "calling for the first/And the repeated time." All the "ash" spread, "goats and cowries" sacrificed, and the "amulets" hung around him--these to make him live--to him are a waste of time on the part of the people. Lucas remarks that one method of preserving the child "is to provide him with charms and amulets such as rings, anklets, wristlets of beads, jingles, and so on," so that when the spirits hear the sounds of these, they may be frightened away.[61]

Soyinka refers also to the giving of marks to the dead child, and this is to make him identifiable when he comes again. The Abiku brags:

> I am the squirrel teeth, cracked
> The riddle of the palm. . . .

If people "dip" him "deeper still into/The god's swollen foot" because of this, he is still sure to come back. In the last stanza the Abiku philosophises--"The ripest fruit was saddest." This indeed fits the tone of Clark's poetry. The Abikus or Ojbanjes are often known to die when people have begun to hope they will live. This is still life as Clark sees it, and as Soyinka also does, from this particular angle.

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[60] Modern Poetry From Africa, ed. Moore and Beier, pp. 118-119.

[61] Lucas, The Religion of the Yorubas, p. 149.



Clark's use of the indigenous material is quite different from, say, that of Okogbule Nwanodi, for while the latter celebrates this material for its own sake, Clark uses it both for the creation of poetic beauty and as a vehicle for some serious message about life. It is in this sense that Cyprian Ekwensi's words can apply to his work: "For all literature is part of culture and literature can never usefully be isolated from culture as a whole."[62]

"Ivbie"

H. Carey Thomas of Liberia in protest against the vandalism of imperialism wrote the following:

> Be warned:
> That palefaced strangers
> With unhallowed feet
> Profane this heritage our fathers gave.[63]

Clark's most ambitious poem "Ivbie" (pp. 44-51) is a magnificent superstructure erected on this foundation laid by Thomas. "Ivbie" is a poem of defiance and regret: it declaims the inhuman exploitation of man by man, and regrets the inertia of the victims, who could not return a blow for a blow, or scare the foreign hawks from the innocent brood.

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[62] "Problems of Nigerian Writers," Nigeria Magazine, No. 78 (September 1963), 217.

[63] Quoted by Ulli Beier in "Conflict of Cultures in West African Poetry," Black Orpheus, No. 1, p. 19; also in Modern Poetry From Africa, pp. 19-20.



Mabel Segun touched upon this theme in a much less effective way, that is to say, aesthetics-wise.[64]

Section I of "Ivbie" opens with a picture of a people who under the yoke of oppression submit to their fate in silence. Then there follows a catalogue of the vices and misconceptions of the colonialists. Section II, employing awe-inspiring images, expatiates on the injuries done by the strangers, while the third section satirises the "civilizers" who cloaked their economic aspirations in the garb of royal services. Communal gods and the ancestral fathers are put to inquisition in section IV, and in section V the irredeemable predicament of the victims is depicted. The final section exhibits them acquiescing in defeat and in the perpetual sleep of the innocent, as the oppressed in Clark are wont to do.

Beginning then in the middle of things, the poem strikes a note of despair, of inertia, for it is all too late "to pluck out of honey/Fresh milk fangs" with which to bite in a fight. There is no fight, indeed, and there cannot be, for "we stifled our initial pangs." With this expository scene over, one is led to the process of desecration and ravaging in the remaining section of part I.

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[64]See "A Second Olympus," Reflections, p. 67.





The strangers are "from far-fabled country," and have come "into our virgin jungle" lighting the fire of destruction. Under their hacking axes, "our occult groves" succumb, while they walk and watch with "alien care and impunity." But though they have done so much harm to the law, there are some mysterious aspects of the indigenous life which their "eyes so big like sailors" cannot "in the fixity" and "delirium of a glance" probe:

> How can they catch the thousand intricacies
> Tucked away in crannies
> And corners perhaps known only to rats?

There are things so sacred about the indigenous life that all the "wisdom" they have come to disseminate will simply founder on the rock of their wrappage:

> The sanctuary of things human is swathed
> In menstrual rags, not in the market-place.

The market-place is accessible to the stranger, but not so are the "menstrual rags." A horrible image though! The strangers had better take care not to stretch their feelers into the heart of things. The lightning that tears "the ancient iroko" tree "to bits" can also find the stranger an easy prey, for

> Lice, lice, my dear, may infest
> Stately woman's crest.

This is an exquisite image, with words charged to their utmost, which of course vindicates Clark at his best.



The rich works of art taken from Africa to London, and Moscow and New York were not thought of as existing in the continent by the early explorers, and thus:

> Bartholomew Diaz[65] and Sir John
> Hawkins,[66] wondering adrift on
> A log ferry-boat
> Had not thought Cellini[67]
> Dwelt among cannibals.

But the aliens should realize that there are much more than these. There is the "holy-unravelled dust" lying in "the shadow of all trees," and in "the Shrines of Ifa"[68] there are "wood carvings done in blood." The poet explains how they are "done in blood":

> To win their mahogany,
> Twenty thousand men wheeled their axe
> And falling, another twenty
> Received it on their backs.

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[65]A Portuguese explorer who in 1846 "reported that he had rounded the south of Africa." See H. G. Wells, The Outline of History (New York, 1949), p. 779.

[66]Sir John Hawkins (1532-1595) was an English merchant adventurer of the Elizabethan era, who made several voyages to the tropics and dealt in slavery. See James A. Williamson, Hawkins of Plymouth (London, 1964).

[67]Benvenuto Cellini (1500-1571)--An "Italian Goldsmith and Sculptor," "apprenticed" under "the Florentian goldsmith Andre di Sandõ Marcone." He made a salt cellar completed in gold for Francis I of France in 1543; and wrote a "celebrated autobiography." See Encyclopaedia Britannica, Vol. 5, pp. 440-441.

[68]"Ifa (or Orunmila) is the founder of the oracle" in Yoruba. See Yoruba Poetry, trans. Bakare Gbadamosi and Ulli Beier, p. 25.



Clark can be cynical when he chooses. The shallow pride and hollow confidence of the early colonialists, who thought they had within their ken all that there was to know about Africa constitute the target of the poet's attack.

Yet, these are the people, who, part II takes up, in the "unguarded moment" left an impact that is today told in tears and felt with a wail. "Universal void cannot contain/ the terrible immensity" of its "implications,"

> Nor its permanence dissolve
> In the flux-wash of eternity.

The poet becomes a little impassioned here, though he has not for one moment lost control of his art. He goes on to detail further wounds inflicted on the country or continent. Unguent "gums and oils" are drawn "in barrels off to foreign mills"--a reference to raw rubber and palm-oil:

> The soil quarried out of recognition
> As never would erosion
> another millenium.

Analogously this is "blood crying for blood spilt free," and the next four lines contain a conceit very metaphysical in its complexity, and extraordinarily dreary and shocking in its impact:

> The dark flesh rudely torn
> And grafted on to red fetid sore
> Breeding a hybrid lot
> To work the land of sunset. . . .

One feels a little scared to probe these lines, just as one feels afraid to approach one of those "occult groves" that

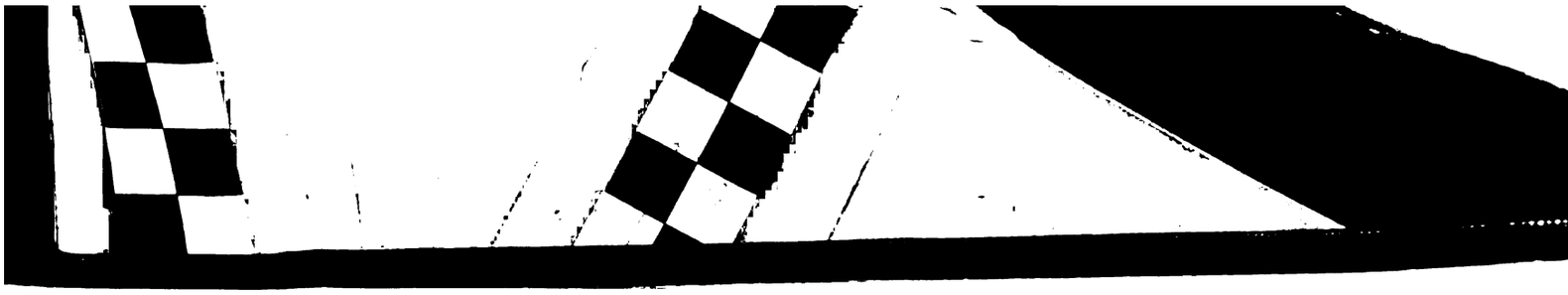




house the sacred things wrapped in "menstrual rags." The lines refer of course to the illegitimate copulation of the colonialists with the native women. The former are represented as "red fetid sore," and the latter as the "dark flesh rudely torn" indicating rape, violence--an Ovidian image borrowed directly, or through T. S. Eliot of "The Waste Land." The hybrid who works "the land of sunset" is of course the hybrid Negro in America--"land of sunset" meaning the West. The woman involved is a "Sweet Mrs. Gamp." The bastard child is even born in a "mission ward," and it is "wisdom-teethed." This is a satire on the claims of the strangers to be inherently "wise." To them, "white blood" automatically connotes "wisdom" shared even by the foetus!

This attitude is beyond the poet's comprehension. If peace at all it be, it really "passeth all understanding," for it seems to him to be "ruse"--fraud, deceit! The strangers have cheated the natives and also the government that sent them out to win colonies and wield political power by planting its flag. Thus, in section III we hear of "the broadways/ Of oriflamme that opening wide should lance/Into the heart of darkness." (One here recalls Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness.") But in the guise of this bringing of "light" to the people in the "dark," the economic drive goes on:

> And Austin Herefords go toot
> Tooting in mad rush for loot,
> Go hooting,
> Blazing wide trails of gold
> Thro' the forest of the night.



Now the land has been tapped empty, eroded and drained hollow. Its life has been sapped, and in a series of elegiac questions, (part IV) the poet challenges the communal gods to an account of their inaction:

> . . . Say, did he brow-beat
> Brow-beat you into our plight?

In desperation he consoles the "children" who have only failed where their gods had been conquered:

> Who falls in mud
> Need not smear another's blood.

Both have fallen; whether one is stained with mud during his fall or with the blood of his murdered brother, it is all the same.

A ghost, an "unlaid ghost," comes to indicate that things were in the past as in the present. Perhaps, it is "unlaid," unsung, and therefore running about because of the general desecration of the land that might have prevented its funeral rites. Like T. S. Eliot's Tiresias,[69] Oyin, who is a man and woman, has experienced all the sufferings:

> Had lived the fear frou-froued in fronds
> The loud despair out in the dark
> We have been through all.

So he warns the present generation against the machinations of the stranger. In a litany of warnings headed each by "Fear him" we learn more of what evils the stranger has been capable of. The stranger comes upon the people in the night,

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[69] "The Waste Land," III.



like a thief, stealthily. He is compared to a "snakebird" that in the market-place exhumes the ancestors for the purpose of insulting them:

> Fear the poison passed out or spat
> Straight on our ancestral seat.

His "corruption" should also be feared, for "dissolving," it "will deluge all the earth." His incursion is like a flood

> On whose repulsive waves
> Two life-buoys alone bob--
> 'Dirt and death, death and dirt. . . .'

It is all these that Oyin (Creator-Mother in Ijaw Mythology, who is also a man) has foreseen, and hence his/her warnings. The tragedy of it all, however, is that men have not hearkened to the warnings:

> I the white bearded woman
> Of night fame saw all
> But men heeded not my hooting
> Placed instead penalty in warning
> And finality in brief omen.

The "bearded woman" is a man and woman, just as Tiresias is, and both have the superhuman power of vision in common.

From blaming the communal gods, the poet passes in part V to blaming men. At this point we may recall what Yvor Winters says of "Gerontion" and "The Waste Land":

> "Gerontion" is the portrait of an individual from whom grace has been withdrawn, and who is dying of spiritual starvation while remembering his past; it is thus a prelude to "The Waste Land," a portrait





of a society from which grace has been withdrawn and which is dying of its own triviality and ugliness.[70]

"Ivbie" is in part, in fact, the African "Waste Land" in a non-spiritual sense. Ennui is the disease the people are suffering from, and it generates other diseases. Even after the timely warning of Oyin they are still deceived:

> So well-fed on sweet quotations and wine
> Were we, with pride, we said;
> 'Forget O forget--to forgive is divine.'

But with all this, what advantage? What boots it? The repercussion of indolence is really heavy on them. Restlessness, and insomnia mark their lives, and the heavy knocks on the door that were heard before in "Easter" (Poems, p. 33) are heard here again, and the order is, "Sleep no more." Their ancestors were better off, for they could sleep.

> Our fathers rightly or wrongly
> Heavily drugged slept at least.

The protagonist feels he is in a Hamlet situation. He cannot sleep, he cannot shut his door. Then he rationalises with the words of the scriptures: "Knock and it shall be opened unto you." But what is the use of opening the door for those crying "out of a violated past"? The dead bones will not fight effectively. But should he fail to open the door, "shall bars not lifting burst of their own?" He

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[70] In Defense of Reason: Primitivism and Decadence: A Study of American Experimental Poetry (New York, 1947), pp. 496-497.



is like Hamlet, talking "round the point." Not he alone, not human beings alone in the land are faced with this dilemma. The River Niger is also "hedged round till tomorrow" and "will go spinning whirlpools." Man and nature are despoiled! There is no end to the sorrow of the soil, for "new kites appear/Swooping in from the West." Like the rope in a tug of war, the protagonist is still tugged and wrung, and finally becomes

> A toy twirled on by complexity
> 'Gnawing at my finger-tips deep perplexity.'

Subdued and completely exhausted, he asks the stranger to "pass on, missile-hurled," in his "headlong flight to fool the world" (part IV). An obvious attack on modern science and "civilization," this. The "market murmur," which the stranger does not care to heed, returns to the protagonist to cause him "magnificent obsession." He assumes the attitude of a cynic, condemns the "headlong flight" of the stranger he cannot equal in the flying contest. He tries to find succour in his low station, being free from the "throttle sound" to which the ears of the stranger are prey. So he would apparently be contented that the stranger

> Leave behind unhaunted
> An innocent in sleep of the ages.

This kind of idealised innocence and self-justification couched in similar words, also ended "Night Rain," a poem that shows man powerless before nature and fate (p. 116 above).



"Ivbie" is a culmination, specification, and fulfilment. It is a culminating point of the whole poetry of Clark before it. In it we see pinned down the ugliness of life, the tragedy that is the existence of a suppressed and cheated people. It is a particularised and detailed illustration of what before has been shown as passing kaledoscopic pictures of life in general. It remains a great poem even if it moves Ulli Beier "less than some of the others."[71] It demonstrates and justifies the sardonic attitude which the poet assumes towards life, and like Wordsworth he may as well ask:

> Have I not the reason to lament
> What man has made of man?[72]

All the other poems of Clark form a fulfilment of the aspiration expressed in his prologue poem (p. 3), and "Ivbie" is the climax of this fulfilment. This poem which begins with "Still a song shall arise/In my heart" is the poetic manifesto of J. P. Clark. It shows not only his determination to write, but to do so even under very adverse conditions. He is to sing out of the position of the oppressed:

> . . . Out of this pit
> Of ash and dust they trampled it
> A flame shall arise.

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[71] Black Orpheus, No. 12, p. 48.

[72] "Lines Written in Early Spring," ll.23-24, in The Poetical Works, IV, 58.



He is the "yam tuber" declared "too late for prize/or price," which, if "buried piecemeal" will rise "again whole" and yield "a hundred fold." This beautiful, if sorrowful, image must have caught the attention of another Nigerian poet, who almost reproduced the very words of Clark. Thus Nwanodi:

> The yam tuber mauled,
> rots and decays
> only to revive--
> twines and leaves--
> with fresh tubers
> that shall feed us.[73]

Clark, not being content with only the local images employed to depict his dejection, resorts to the Bible. In Psalm 137 the reader hears of the weeping beside the "streams of Babylon." The people hung up their "harps" for they could not sing for grief. Yet their persecutors demanded a song from them:

> . . . the men who took us prisoner
> cried out for a song.

And then comes the question:

> What, should we sing the Lord's
> song in a strange land?

In Clark's poem one reads the following:

> . . . For how can pestle
> Sound in mortar a song
> When Babylon of old
> As yet unbroken into odd tongue
> Poured on a bush flaming gold
> Derision and dung.

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[73]"Resume," in Icheke, p. 19.





Here is a mixture of local and biblical images. The atmosphere is similar to that of Psalm 137. There is the problem of singing, and there is the case of oppression. Babylon is given the same stance in Clark. She is the oppressor in both cases. However, in this abject situation of suppression, a body of songs has flowered from Clark's heart, among which "Ivbie" assumes an epical position in tone, gravity, and grandeur.

Conclusion

Not only in his poetry, but also in his drama, which is poetic drama, does Clark deal with the theme of calamity, of the tragic "reality" of existence. The tragic nature of Song of a Goat and Masquerade is illustrative of this. The Raft, which "is not strictly speaking a tragedy,"[74] still deals with an irreparable loss--that of the lives of the four men on the raft.

Anthony Astrachan, however, does not see any logic in the way the victims in the three plays have suffered: ". . . the protagonists are victims of punishment without cause, or punishment beyond their deserts, whether from society, gods or nature."[75] But Astrachan's point of attack

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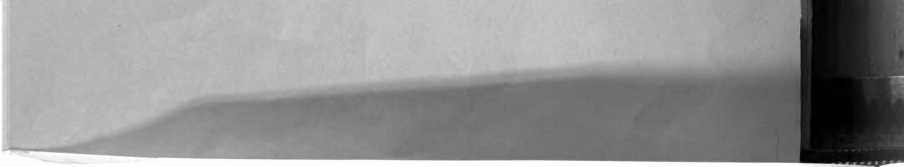
[74]Anthony Astrachan, "Like Goats to the Slaughter: Three Plays, By John Pepper Clark," Black Orpheus, No. 16 (October 1964), 21.

[75]Ibid., p. 24.





seems to be the very thing that confirms the tragic view of life which is characteristic of Clark. If one has an explanation for every misfortune in life, if life is so logical that everyone who experiences mishap finds a justifiable cause for it--if this mathematical precision marks human life --then one would be able to reconcile life with reason, and find no cause to look on life as a labyrinth where men are caught "like chicken in the storm." It is simply the fact that man receives punishment for the wrong he does not do, or he is not aware of, which makes life the grey prison that it is. This is the note that rings through Clark's poetry and his plays. That is why the "masseur" advises towards the close of Song of a Goat that we should not

> . . . venture over much
> Else in unravelling the knot, you
> Entangle yourselves. It is enough
> You know now that each day we live
> Hints at why we cried out at birth.[76]

Clark is a master who is conscious of his art. With all the "immediacy, urgency, and spontaneity"[77] of his poetry, there are many metrical and stanzaic evidences which point to the fact that a lot of industry has been put into the production of his poems. This scrupulosity with respect to his art has not been recognized by some critics, though:

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[76] "Alternative Close," p. 41.

[77] Black Orpheus, No. 12, p. 48.





> In some of Clark's poems, the emotions get in the way of the form, when there is enough form to notice; in most of them, the words get away from the poet and the reader, carrying the meaning with them.[78]

If Astrachan believes in the Poundian creed he quoted--that "great literature is simply language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree,"[79] it sounds a little contradictory for him to rate Clark a lesser poet than Dennis Brutus. In fact, Ulli Beier echoes Pound's words in his remark about Clark's poems: "I should prefer to call them over-charged or over-powered."[80] However, Clark and Brutus are quite different kinds of poets.

Clark himself tells us that he is more concerned with art than with the conflict of cultures;[81] and with Povey he would agree that "one's concern is with literature, not with sociology or history through literature."[82] Clark almost assumes the position of ataraxy as he watches, very observantly, his world slide away irredeemably amidst chaos and oppression. If, as Clark has told us, the true artist is he

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[78]Anthony Astrachan, "Creative Writing," Nigeria Magazine, No. 79 (Dec. 1963), 290-291.

[79]A. B. C. of Reading, p. 28.

[80]"Three Mbari Poets," Black Orpheus, No. 12, p. 48.

[81]America, Their America, pp. 78-80.

[82]J. F. Povey, "How Do You Make a Course in African Literature?" Transition, IV, 18 (1965), 39.



that creates out of the familiar material around him, and if "it is a respectable theory which holds that the poet's function is to make us realize what we already know,"[83] then one has reason enough to call John Pepper Clark a great poet.

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[83]Norman Friedman, e. e. cummings (Carbondale, Illinois, 1964), p. 13.





CHAPTER VI

ETIOLOGY OF CONFLICT: THE POETRY OF GEORGE AWOONOR-WILLIAMS

The trappings of the past, tender and tenuous
woven with the fibre of sisal and
Washed in the blood of the goat in the fetish hut
Are laced with the flimsy glories of paved streets.

("The Anvil and the Hammer")

Introduction

George Awoonor-Williams among the modern West African poets writing in English, is one of the most concerned about the theme of the conflict of foreign cultures and the indigenous African cultures. Conflict of one kind or another has often been the basis of great works of literature. William Empson tells us: "Good poetry is usually written from a background of conflict, though no doubt more in some periods than in others."[1] It is the clash of emotions within the poet which brings him to the brink of frenzy, and only truly great poetry can restore his sanity. Awoonor-Williams is grappling with many kinds of conflict at one and the same time, simply because he as a human being is

[1] Seven Types of Ambiguity (New York, 1955), p. xv.



planted in a mesh of interrelations. There is first the predominant conflict between the old (traditional) and the new (foreign); secondly, there is the clash between the thought of living and that of dying, the here and the hereafter, which leads him to feel that the "resting place" is not "elsewhere" but "is here with us." Again there is the stress between dying and the state of being dead pointing toward the quest for salvation, the meaning of which remains unclear. Finally, there is the Freudian conflict between passion and inhibition. Underlying all this is the welding current of imagery drawn from traditional African life and pointing to the only haven where Awoonor-Williams could from time to time purge his griefs and heave momentary sighs of relief--and this is when, as he does, he stops to celebrate the indigenous themes, rituals, and incantations.

Here is then a craftsman who is disgusted with his present life, and is trying to forge a livable one. In general he is depicting the character of the life that he knows, and this task demands the framework of conflict which he has exploited to advantage. F. O. Matthiessen has pointed out that the

> . . . ability to portray the very character of life demands a mature realization of the existence of both good and evil, an understanding that life takes on dramatic significance only when perceived as a struggle between these forces.[2]

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[2] The Achievement of T. S. Eliot (New York, 1959), p. 68.





It is this "dramatic significance" which gives the poetry of Awoonor-Williams most of its charm and vigour. He fully appreciates the worth of the past and the present, both of which represent to him bloom and gloom, respectively. This is something more than the "reassessment of the past and search for identity" which one critic says "loom large" in Awoonor-Williams' poetry.[3] The past stands for something noble; the poet has always been aware of this and hence his nostalgic quest for it. The identity he is searching is no new identity. He will be content with the old if it is given back to him intact. He would have "our fathers" "sew the old days for us."

With reference to the English-speaking West African poets in general, Gerald Moore says that this poetry

> is not concerned with large gestures, or with general statements about the black race, the cultural situation, the death of colonialism, etc. It is concerned with personal and intense experience; it is often inward, observant, reflective rather than "rhetorical" and "public" in the French manner.[4]

In these words Moore points out what seems to him to be the differences between the French-speaking West African poets like Sénghor, and their English-speaking counterparts.

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[3] O. A., "Rediscovery by George Awoonor-Williams (Mbari Publications 1964)," Black Orpheus, XVII (June 1965), 61.

[4] Seven African Writers (London, 1962), p. xviii.



While it is true that the English-speaking poets are not concerned with Negritude, some of their "personal" and "intense" experiences are connected with colonialism and cultural situations. Referring to some of the poets cited by Moore, we can say that J. P. Clark, as we have seen in the previous chapter, who is the least concerned with cultural conflicts, still finds a place for colonialism in his longest poem, "Ivbie." Clark would have been happy if he were singing the dirge of colonialism. His task is something much sadder. As for Awoonor-Williams, his lines throb with grief for having misplaced his allegiance. In one of his poems, which will be discussed shortly, he reflects in a cool and unemotional manner on the placement of this allegiance on foreign "gods," which may represent Christianity or any other imported religion. The celebration of indigenous practices is rife in Awoonor-Williams, as has been seen to exist in Clark's "Obatala" and "Olumo Rock," though in none of the cases is there any idealization.

The Old and the New

The greatest problem of George Awoonor-Williams is his delicate conscience, which always presents before him the fact that he has offended his ancestors and his communal gods. If he were a little callous, he might have forgotten many oppressive old memories which invade him with pressure and brutality. But herein lies his filial candour and





respect. Thus, in "The Nim Trees in the Cemetery," "wrapt in a thoughtless reverie of memory and regret," he breaks out:

> For haven't I gone astray from old memories,
> desires and ambitions
> And placed my offerings before alien gods
> Whose shrines I saw only in my dreams?[5]

He has left behind--almost forgotten--what he highly prizes; and what the present has for him--"the alien gods"--are not realistic to him. They are only seen in his dreams. He next wonders in an Okigboesque tone whether he has not, like the prodigal son, "asked for my appropriate proportion/And deserted my father's house?" This notion of exile forms the theme of another poem, "Exiles" (p. 11), which will be discussed shortly.

The protagonist is really in an agony of thought and meditation. He balances the foreign against the indigenous to the utter detriment of the former, which has nothing to offer him but "putrid joys that smell of night and spent love's weary sweat." He casts a glance back at his past life only to be convinced that he had "savoured the weary cups of life," echoing Prufrock, who in reviewing the futility of his life says, "I have measured out my life with

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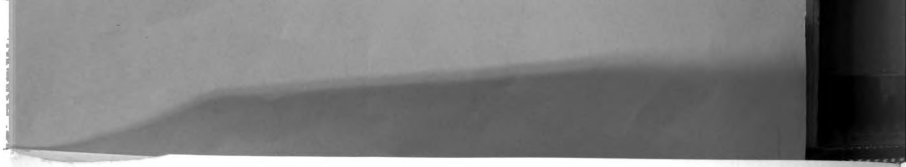
[5] Rediscovery and Other Poems (Ibadan, Nigeria, 1964), p. 8. Subsequent references to this book will be indicated in the body of this study in parentheses.





coffee spoons."[6] A series of agonizing experiences is rehearsed by Awoonor-William's protagonist beginning with the powerful line: "For me most hours have voided their excrements on my garlanded head." He has plunged into a "green, cool sea," and hit his head upon the breakwater. His experiences are such terrible ones that they are often compared to the ugliest things. The "excrement" image is used again in "The Weaver Bird" (p. 16), where the "old shrines [are] defiled from the weaver's excrement," and in "Exiles" (p. 11), where "the dunghill . . . has mounted on their birth-place."

The conflict in the poet's mind is particularly dramatised by the two pictures poised against each other in the last lines of "The Nim Trees. . . ." In the Christians' graveyard we see "gravestones with arms of angels outstretched to the winds"; but, "in the pagan colony," there is "a yawning untenanted grave."[7] This grave is the one the protagonist has "known since birth." Why is it now "untenanted"? Probably because the person buried there has not been given funeral rites necessary for his final repose, so that he has to leave the grave and run about. This is the belief of the local people. The neglect of this duty of burial rites is made

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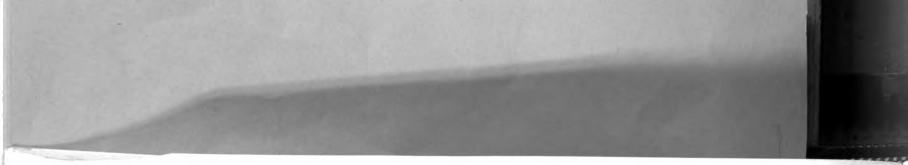
[6] T. S. Eliot, The Complete Poems and Plays, p. 5.

[7] Reminiscent of Shakespeare. See Julius Caesar, II, *ii*, 18: "And graves have yawned and yielded up their dead."





more pronounced by the fact that it is in despite of the living reminder--"the forget-me-not . . . the only flower that blooms "beside the grave. Again there is the fact that the protagonist, whose duty it is to fulfil these rites, has rather wandered into the enemy camp--the Christians' cemetery. Now he is aware of his mistake, and wishes to make amends.

The struggle of opposites is located between two groups in "We Have Found a New Land" (p. 10). This poem asumes a satirical tone as it begins. The target consists of those natives who have not only imbibed the foreign culture indiscriminately, but have also taken delight in abusing those, like the protagonist of the poem, who are faithful to the indigenous culture. As for the former, they are in "three piece"--meaning the foreign suits of clothes, and while in the clothes they are sweating "away their humanity in dribblets." The "we" which the poet uses is simply the courteous, yet sarcastic plural which, while it pretends to show all of them as offenders, clearly shows that the speaker is excepted. The new land which they have found is one in which "our blackness does not matter" and where "our songs are dying on our lips." This is the land of foreign ideas and ideals, which suppresses the indigenous "songs"--poetry, music, etc.



The Dantesque image--"hellgate"--shows that though some follow the foreign ways to please the colonial masters, both they and the so called obscurantists are doomed to the same hell of oppression. The converts attack the one who insists on the native system of dressing--"Come on, old boy. You cannot dress like that." He is regarded as a disgrace to the others; as one "who had let the side down." And for this insult we hear the protagonist:

> These who want to be seen in the best company
> Have adjured[8] the magic of being themselves.

Here identity is the case in point. By renouncing their own culture and taking to the imported one, the people have surely lost their identity. It can be seen that the identity the poet is seeking is the original one, not even a mixture of the new and the old. The "new land" they have found is arid and cannot be a substitute for the old. In the new land their "songs are dead and we shall sell them dead to the other side."

The final thrust at the futility of the people's endeavours is effected in the last two lines:

> Reaching for the stars we stop at the house of Moon
> And pause to relearn the wisdom of our fathers.

The people are trying the impossible. They want to shed their real identity and bury their own culture, so as to

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[8]This writer thinks the word should be "abjured." See OED.

assume strange ones. But like Ezra Pound's Mauberley, they only exhibit mouths snapping emptily in the air; they cannot reach their new "standards," and the past is almost lost to them.[9] It is this past which consists in "the wisdom of our fathers" that they will stop to recapture.

This "new land" which "we have found" is of course where we are exiled to. These exiles are in a worse predicament than Okigbo's protagonist in Heavensgate is in, for while the former have not made up their minds to return home, the latter is already at the gate begging his mother to open the door for him. So in "Exiles" (p. 11), "the return is tedious," and the thought of returning to "face the fences the termites had eaten/And see the dunghill that has mounted on their birthplace," is a dreadful one. The home is reeking with misery, being transmogrified by long neglect into something stinking and detestable. With an envenomed stroke like those that "will land them on forgotten shores," the poet registers an attack on those sojourners who have misled themselves:

> They committed the impiety of self-deceit
> Slashed, cut and 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.

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[9] "Mauberley" (1920), in Selected Poems of Ezra Pound (New York, 1957), pp. 71-77: "Vacuos exercet aera morsus."

These lines are among the best from the pen of Awoonor-Williams. Full of alliteration and assonance, and marked by the power and brilliance of an inspired vision, they depict precisely the sensibility of an enraged spirit. The image of hell continues in "Gateman," and the "lost souls . . . are still at the gate."

Since the old is so unceremoniously denounced, and the new is impossible of attainment in its entirety (as well as being undesirable), a new life is sought which will be a synthesis of both. "The Anvil and the Hammer" (p. 13) shows that this resort is no solution to the protagonist's problem. He is entrapped between "the anvil and the hammer/In the forging house of a new life." The word "forging" is aptly chosen. It connotes both the artifice of smithery which cannot supplant nature adequately, and various nuances of phoniness and fabrication. Though there is some "joy" in the "new songs," he is "delivered" into them by "pangs." But the past and the present are so incompatible that any mixture from the two will be worthless. The past is "tender and tenuous"; it is made of "sisal" and "washed" in the blood of the sacrificial goat. The present is made up of "the flimsy glories of paved streets"--the gift of western "civilization." The new language learnt is the pride of the outlaw only; the people do not even get the quintessence of this tongue. What they get is mere "snatches from their/ Tunes," and when they make their "new flags and anthems,"

they can "listen to the reverberation of our songs" only in the "splash and moan of the sea." Since this new language is, as it is, so worthless, the protagonist turns to the fathers:

> Sew the old days for us, our fathers
> That we can wear them under our new garment,
> After we have washed ourselves in
> The whirlpool of the many river's estuary.[10]

So, in the end, the nostalgia for the old, the past, insists.

In "The Weaver Bird" (p. 16), the rejection of foreign things is dramatised with the technique of allegory, which is not very common in twentieth century poetry, but which is in keeping with the method of West African vernacular poetry. The "bird" image is one of Awoonor-Williams' favourites as we will later see in "I Heard A Bird Cry," but what the bird represents is not the same in all cases. Here the weaver bird represents the foreigners who occupied the land and undertook the responsibility of effecting the indigenous people's salvation. The weaver bird not only settled, but also claimed ownership of the land. The Ibo man in Nigeria commemorates this sad event thus:

> The whiteman I sold some land to settle earlier
> Now owns the land and dubs me page and carrier.

The bird has propagated and is now preaching "salvation to us that owned the house." The sermon it preaches "is the divination of ourselves." Its sermon is ineffective, for

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[10]The grammar of the "many river's estuary" is not acceptable to me, even though the idea being put across seems comprehensible.

"we cannot join the prayers and answers of the communicants." Since their home is occupied by those who have ousted them, they have to look for a new home:

> We look for new homes every day,
> For new altars we strive to rebuild
> The old shrines defiled from the weaver's excrement.

The weaver bird specifically represents the foreign religion whose exponents made it their principal preoccupation to demolish the shrines of the indigenous gods. Here is Christopher Okigbo again. His gods have been driven out of their shrines also, and they lie behind the shrines decaying, without anyone to care for them (see Chapter IV, p. 98 above).

The souls that have been "manacled" in "Exiles" (p. 189 above) reappear in this poem of despair and confusion, "Come Let Us Join" (p. 23). The taking over of the home by foreigners who preach salvation in "The Weaver Bird" (p. 191 above) has created frustration in the people, who as they join the new religious order as though by coercion, regard themselves as lost. They have been shedding tears "since conception." The song they hear is the foreign one, the Christian "gloria in excelsis." Ironically they will join the singers: "Come all ye faithless and bring your drums along." It is no longer "Come All Ye Faithful," the celebrated Christmas hymn. This ironic tone is in keeping with the feeling of a poet who does not believe that there can be a complete unification of the new with the old. Even



though the "ceremony of oneness is near," most of those who are converted remain essentially faithless. Also it should be noted that they will be singing of "lost souls redeemed by the agony of death." This may have a double meaning. In the Christian sense, people are saved by the death of Christ on the Cross. But there could be the possible implication here that the indigenous people in the poem who have left the communal gods for the Christian's God are lost souls.

Awoonor-Williams' concern for the indigenous religious worship is a deeply felt one. Though a part of the whole body of conflict of the foreign and the indigenous, the frequency with which he refers to it borders seriously on unnecessary repetition. "The Years Behind" (p. 24) takes up the theme again among other things. The poem opens with the usual cry of despair. The people have no hope of "high office"; youth is "receding" and old age is fast approaching. Yet they have not been able to realise the tragic situation of the neglected gods:

> On the sacred stone with the neglected embers
> The cock offering has fluttered and gone
> The palm oil on the stone gods has turned green
> And the gods look on concerned and forgotten. . . .

The reader still continues to hear of the "lost souls"; the protagonist's "song falls low among alien peoples." Everything original to him and his culture has been suppressed and neglected. The mingling of his song with the alien's is no efficacious event. He wants the old and nothing less,

and in almost the same words as have been heard from him he pleads with the fathers:

> Sew the old days for me, my fathers
> Sew them that I may wear them
> For the feast that is coming
> The feast of the new season that is coming (cf. The Anvil and Hammer" pp. 190-191 above).

As insistent as the concern for the fate of the local gods in Awoonor-Williams' system is his concern for his "song." Indecision, lack of direction and determination sometimes characterise the poet's people. As has been noted in "Exiles" (p. 189 above), "What Song Shall We Sing" presents the dilemma of choice. Here the people are hard put to it to decide whether they should sing the old songs or the new ones. The tone of this poem seems to be ironic and sarcastic. The speakers must be the converts to the foreign culture, for to them the local songs can only be "the flesh peeling songs/of goose pimples" as against the new songs brought by "the travellers." They would have the "man of huge testicles" drawn away, so that "the people with dirty clothes" can dance. Thus the natives in the villages, probably, are represented here as the object of ridicule. The protagonist agrees to learn "the new songs," but "from afar." This is an offence to his god.

Now it sadly seems that the new songs have gone far to supplant the old ones. In fact the protagonist's "god of songs" has taken to bed. In "My God of Songs Was Ill" (p. 31),

the protagonist and his "god" are in serious trouble. The protagonist takes the "god of songs" to the "fetish priest" to have him cured. The god keeps crying and groaning. The protagonist is only allowed to enter the room "with my back-side." He is the cause of his god's illness, by having "violated" him. It is therefore only his "father's gods" who can cure him, but before this is done,

> My god burst into songs, new strong songs
> That I am still singing with him.

The breach of faith by the protagonist is only a sign of the catastrophe that will follow. The gods will finally be neglected, they will lose all their votaries. The scene of this tragedy is clearly depicted in "Easter Dawn" (p. 35). There are all the physical evidences of opposition and rupture. The church-goers--"dawn marchers"--are singing. Simultaneously "the gods are crying." They want "a burial" and "a final ritual":

> but they that should build the fallen shrines
> have joined the dawn marchers
> singing their way toward Gethsemane
> where the tear drops of glory still freshen the cactus.

The poet, however, keeps faith in the old gods, but is dejected. The gods who "cried again from the hut in me" asking why they have been neglected receive no answer but more defiant demonstration songs of "resurrection" which "concerned the hillock of Calvary."



Everything in connexion with the indigenous gods symbolically recedes: as they are "shedding/clayey tears" the "drink offering" dries up as "in the harmattan." The "cola-nut is shrivelled" and "the yam feast has been eaten by mice." To crown the whole failure of the gods, their "priest is dressing for the Easter service." In fact, even the protagonist, the strongest advocate of the gods, has felt the lure of the changing times. The resurrection songs have touched his "insides." The gods put up their last struggle as in a state of frothy agitation, for with the conversion of the "fetish priest" one might like Okigbo conclude that "the cancelling out is complete":

> Then the gods cried loudest
> Challenging the hymners
> They siezed their songs and drums
> And marched behind the dawn marchers
> Seeking their Calvary
> Seeking their tombstones
> And those who refused to replace them
> in the appropriate season.

The contrast is really dramatic. Why does the poet choose the Easter Day for this event? Simply of course to accentuate the fall of the gods and make the Christians' triumph synchronise with the conquest of death by Christ. As Christ and the Christians rise from death--he from his temporary temporal death, they from the death of sin--the communal gods sink down into the abyss of oblivion.

Passion and Purity

The love poetry of George Awoonor-Williams has never been accorded the recognition which it deserves. It generally gets lost before the popularly acclaimed main theme of culture-conflict. As will be demonstrated here, the poems of Awoonor-Williams dealing with love, lust or passion, contain lines and lyrics that are among the best in his entire poetry. The poet's mind still works on the basis of conflict. Often the man's passion runs in conflict with the girl's coldness or chastity or desire to be pure. Sometimes it is distance and time that are in the man's way, and at other times still, the man's mind becomes a battle ground of conflicting aspirations.

"A Call" (p. 7) combines the theme dealt with in the previous section with the theme of love. There is a clash here between the indigenous name given the protagonist by his mother, and another name, which perhaps is his Christian name, and it is by this latter that the girl calls him. Furthermore, the scene of their meeting is to be beside the "cemetery," and under a "cashew tree." Both the cemetery and the cashew tree represent foreign ideas. In the protagonist's mind are thoughts of "the coloured cowrie" and the "herbs" for conjuring. These symbolize the indigenous life he cherishes. When he meets the girl the actual erotic conflict occurs, and ends the poem: "She stood still beneath

the cashew/And spoke not a word." Probably the boy is mystified, and a critic has characterised "A Call" "a novel mystification of love. . . ."[11]

The silence shown by the girl is astounding, but the protagonist is a victim to other forces than silence. In "To Her Afar" (p. 9) despite his admiration of the girl's profile, his "throbbing" heart is kept throbbing for six whole years. But he still has reason to hope that in the end "the final drum beat shall sound" and they will then "identify with one another." This hope in itself makes his position worse, for the thought that is kept hanging acts like the canker worm. The opening lines of this poem are quite charming:

> Cannot I remember the profile
> That thundered in virgin gaiety
> Refusing the chastity belt of a family
> And watching the heart that watched.

Both in rhythm and in music, no less indeed in evocative power, they show that Awoonor-Williams can reach admirable heights when not fettered by too much sorrow and pining for the past that is draining away. "To Her Afar" ends with the poet hoping for the moment of fulfilment.

Unfortunately time, the enemy, waxes stronger in "Lover's Song." Here it is the wife who has left the man for seven years. Since one does not suspect this from the

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[11] Black Orpheus, No. 14 (February 1964), 60.

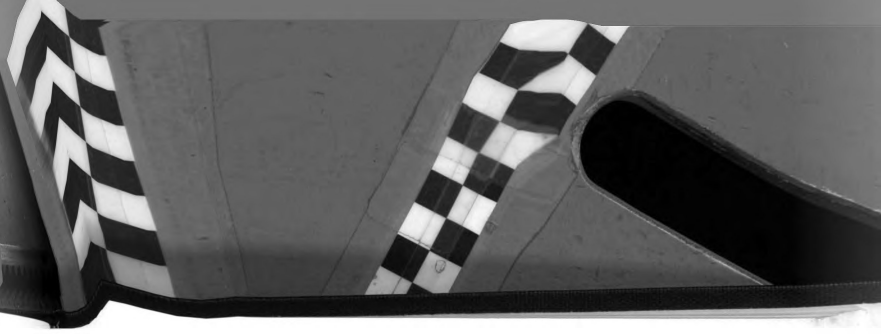


opening lines, the order to call the girl "with the neck like a desert tree" so that "she and I will lie in one bed" sounds rather careless; but the last two lines shed light on the situation:

> If they marry a woman don't they sleep with her?
> Isn't it seven years since you went away?

Who are "they"? This author thinks that behind the scene is the controlling hand of the Christian regulation. Probably the man is ordinarily engaged with the girl for marriage, but according to the regulation of, say, the Catholic Church, the two would not sleep together till they actually get married in the Church. Besides, within the interval, the girl is usually sent away on a training programme. Being thus impatient, the man asks whether "they" who made this law do not sleep with their wives when they get married. This is still a conflict of cultural patterns.

It should be understood, however, that there is no progressive movement of one love story in these poems. Each poem deals with some aspect of the theme, and the situations are quite different. But from time to time one has reason to link poem with poem. The "final drum beat" of "To Her Afar" for instance, is echoed in "The Drum Beat Summons" (p. 7). It is this "drum beat" that the protagonist hopes will bring him and the girl together into a love relation. Here he confesses his love, his "wounded soul" that has made a "limping journey to your house." However, there is still



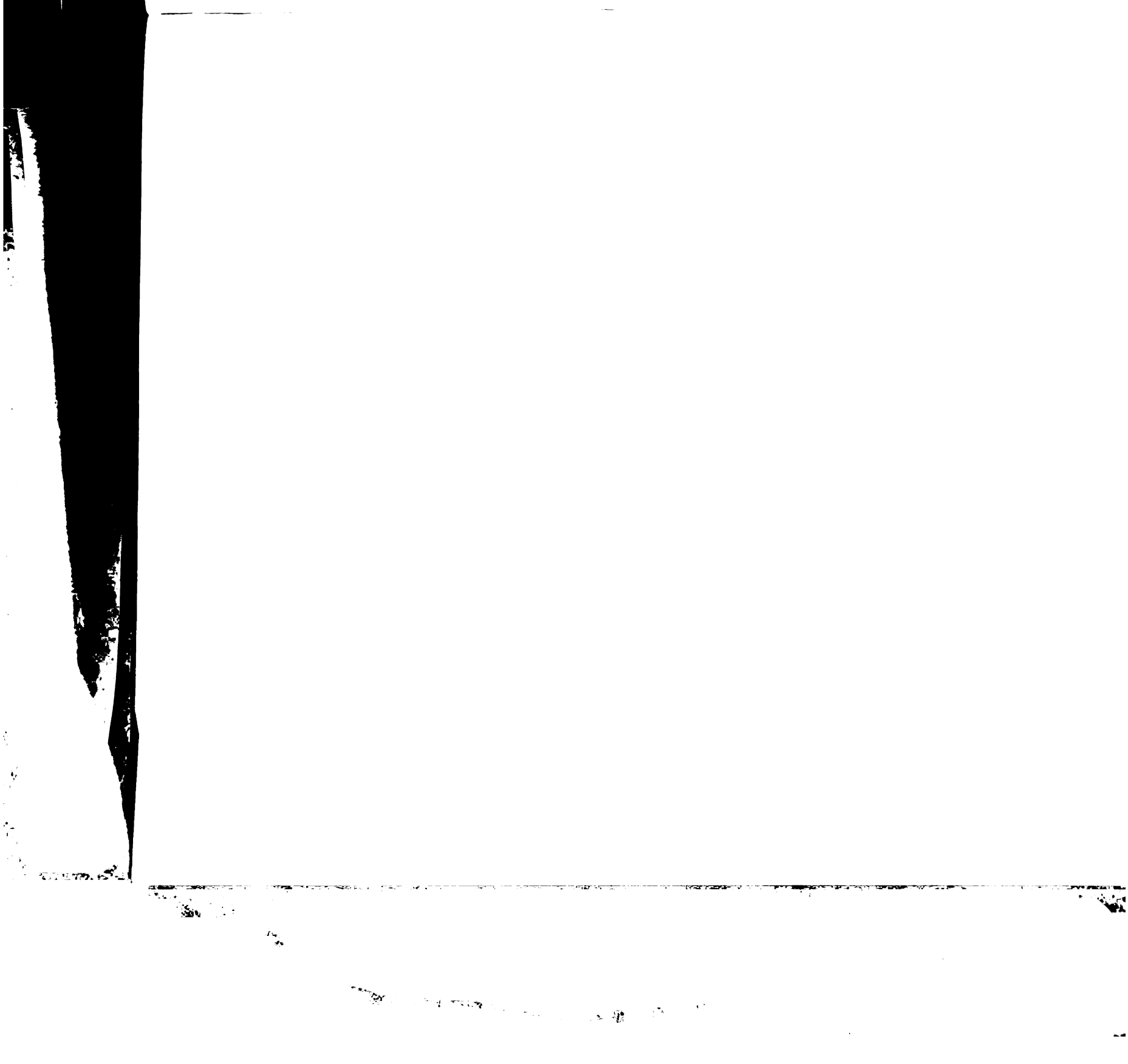
an element of uncertainty. He does not know "whether that smile is in the possession of another one." This poem raises a point that will occur again and again in other love poems--"shall we journey together to the world's end. . . ."

With "her afar," there is no question of copulation. With "her near" there could be copulation but with the bed wet with tears. "To Her Near" (p. 19) presents a complicated case. Christianity forms a third line to this triangular warfare. Because of the Christian regulation against illicit sexual intercourse, "self fulfilment becomes the negation of the soul." The girl is conscious of this law, but the boy is rather callous. What happens and what follows are vividly put before us:

> Howling scenes of the bedded scenes
> and tears come in spasms
> before the calm fulfilment of orgasm
> Quells your heart, chastens my being
> and distraction returns and thoughts fly away
> To other lands, to other faces of other souls
> Lost in the image of non-recognition.

The storm of passion is succeeded by the stress of restlessness which, despite the fact that copulation "chastens [his] being," still comes to pester him. The incongruity of the image is glaring.

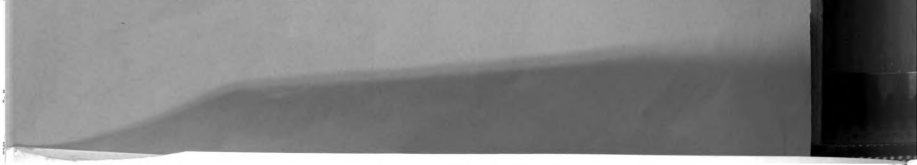
Sometimes one girl triumphs where the other has capitulated, and it is the cruelty and fastidiousness of such a girl that the protagonist has to fight against. "I Was Among the Throng" (p. 21) is rather a pathetic poem.



The man falls victim to a girl who keeps him waiting at the gate. He justifies his coming--"in your gestures I read the call." But when he comes, she goes to her people. His music does not move her to "dance to the sadness of my music," so that he is "still waiting" ad infinitum. Time, again, and now coupled with the hardness of the girl's heart (or could it be her chastity?) has been his fatal foe here. He is always waiting for a time that scarcely ever comes.

While "The New Warmth" (p. 22) still harps on the conflict between the boy's heated passion and the girl's coldness and reserve, making the "foster season" of their love endless, "The Wrath" (p. 32) and "The Flame In My Heart" (p. 33) demonstrate the conflict within the man between the id and ego, and between the id and superego. The former poem shows the protagonist keeping the "nesting crows" within him a check. The crows are of course the urge to self-fulfilment. But the more he tries to reason and reflect, the more the crows flutter with "turbulence," "demanding answers to unforgettable questions." The bird imagery is exquisite. The reader does not only visualise birds locked up in a person's self, but the whole idea of one caging his instincts, his passions, can be objectified by the idea of putting birds in a cage.

The second poem is on the stress between id and superego. The moral question is overtly at issue here. The Clark-like image of passion as a fuel is used. "The flame



in my heart/Burns the many cinders/And I sing no more." This is the flame of love, or it may be the flame of the fire of struggle going on within him. For as he walks "the forgotten shores"--a sign of isolation--"the crucifix of the Church" keeps him company, reminding him "of another joy/And another time." This is the joy of Heaven, and that other time is time outside time; it is even no time, it is the timeless, being eternity. He is worse off still: he has not attained the "promised rebirth" which he seeks in "your laps," and he cannot "expect the sleep promised beyond."

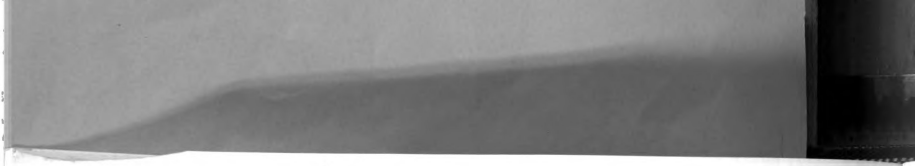
"The Return" (p. 34) resolves the conflict, and returns him finally to the girl, after all the "doubt in my beginning." The love has been "wearied." Its "hot breath"

> Changes its beat for the renewal
> The research, and perhaps the rediscovery.

He returns from the thoughts of Christianity to "father's gods" and will "change the cloths" that are laid on these gods. After he has done this, he will call the girl. There is yet the final obstacle--the attraction of "the psalmists returning from Gethsemane/Singing about the city built with gold." But he cannot be distracted any more. His vote is for Eros, not for the Church:

> Return, my heart did return
> To see the prostrate figure on the shore . . .
> Dear one, hold on, for I come.

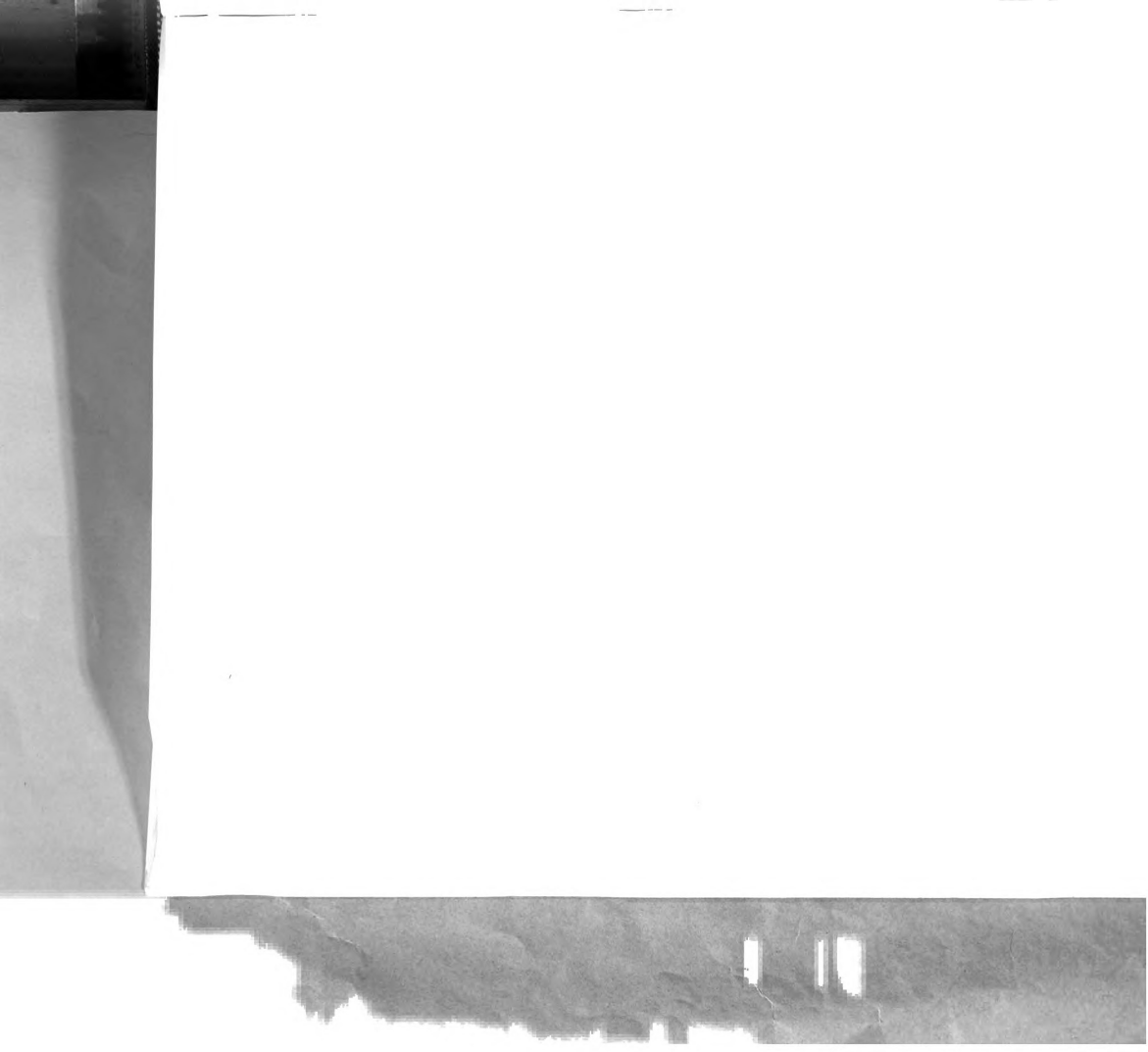
This poem hints of rediscovery after the wearied period of love. What is to be rediscovered is not quite clear. Are they to rediscover their love, or their religious



faith that might have been weakened by their unlawful love affairs, or their fate after death? This question is not even answered by the poem "Rediscovery" (p. 18), from which the whole book takes its title.

The tears are probably tears of love. This poem is highly reflective and meditative. There seems to be a kind of retreat into one's spiritual life. After every other thing has receded at night "there shall still linger the communion we forged/the feast of oneness whose ritual we partook of." "Communion" can mean the Holy Communion, or sexual union. But "oneness" here seems to have the same connotation with "oneness" in "Come Let Us Join" (p. 23) where it refers to oneness of the Christian fold. "To Her Near" (p. 19) shows "communion" and "oneness" as connoting sexual union, for after the "communion" and "the feast of oneness we are asked to wash our hands."

Taking this as our cue, we can approach "Rediscovery" more positively. The "feast of oneness" here is to be taken to stand for the sexual act. Everything else is forgotten, but it remains in their minds. There is a reference to the "eternal gateman." This is the same gateman opening the gate of hell to those doomed. The thought of their fate after death harasses them. This is a process of rediscovering themselves, after being lost in sin. It is these second selves rediscovered that will sing the doxological songs--



"halleluyahs." These "halleluyahs" and the "new chorus of our forgotten comrades" still linger "in the chambers of memory."

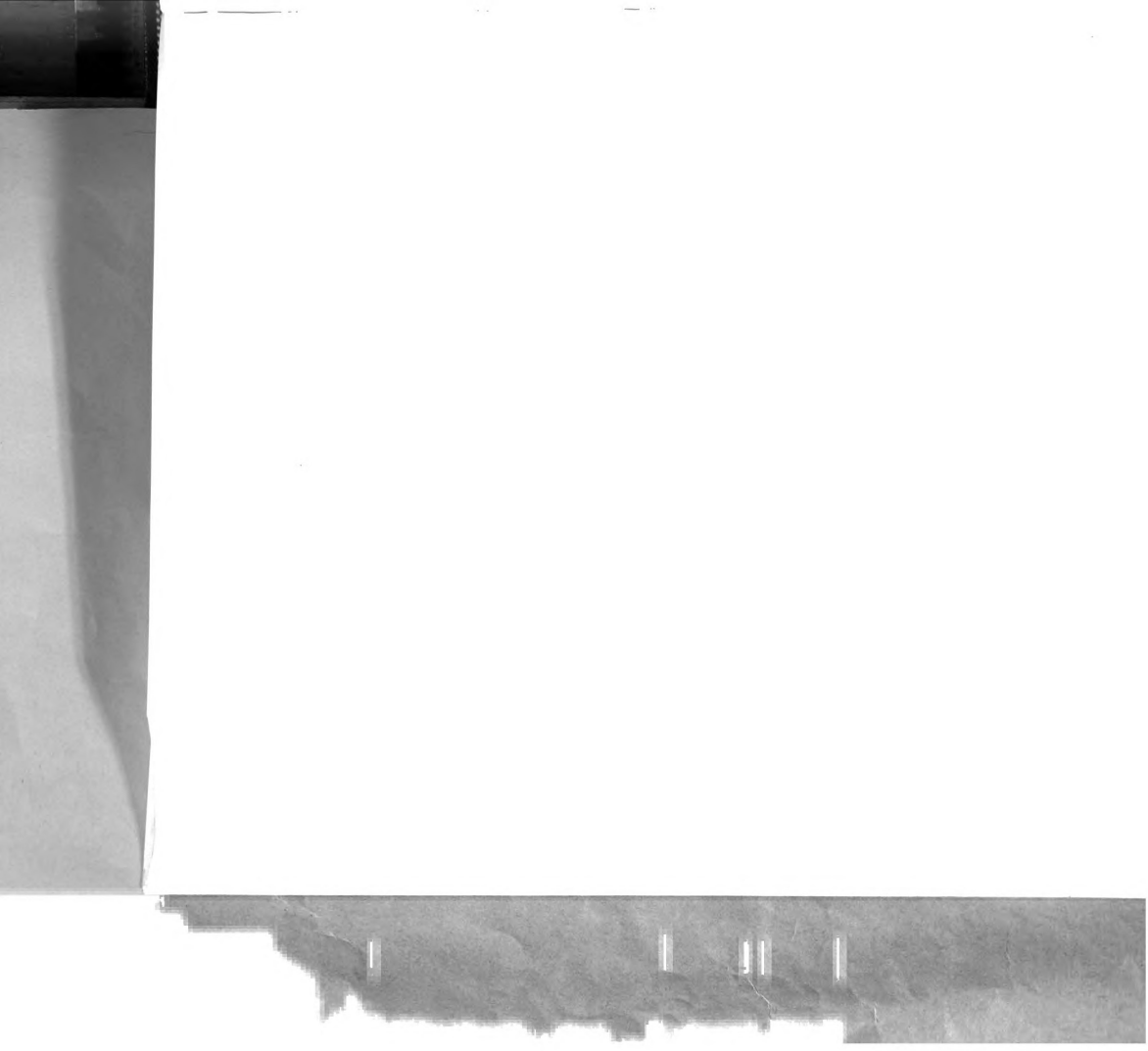
Quite obviously, then, the process of rediscovery entails reckoning with one's inner self to see what one's position after death will be. The conflict of thoughts about life here and the life hereafter, and between dying and the state of being dead constitute generally the point of convergence of the next group of Awoonor-Williams' poems.

Being and Becoming

George Awoonor-Williams sees the life here as that of suffering. Often the soul of his protagonist is "mangled" and "manacled." This is the result of the foreigners who invaded the land preaching salvation to the people, and diverting the attention of the people from the native way of doing things. Then he probes into the question of salvation, evaluating the preacher's view and finding it untenable to him. To him the fulfilment through the native funeral rites appears more genuine. He questions the authenticity of that other place where salvation is allegedly assured, and concludes that the resting place is nowhere else but here:

> Who says that there is a resting place elsewhere
> It is here with us.

This is what he arrives at in the poem "In My Sick Bed"





(p. 29). What follows will show the process of investigation by which this conclusion is reached.

"Desire" (p. 5) is a quest poem plus something more. The quest is for "the message from beyond." This has "the single quest" in which the protagonist has been fixed by the "years" that "roll past." The past is fraught with "travails," and the promise that the future is said to hold is "glories," which the reader is immediately told in a skeptical way are no "glories." Doubting the existence of any "resting place" at the "journey's end," the poet gives a series of awe-striking images of death and loss:

> The pall bearers reek with drink and vomit
> And the dead man wakes up and looks at them
> And dies again.

And shortly after, is heard

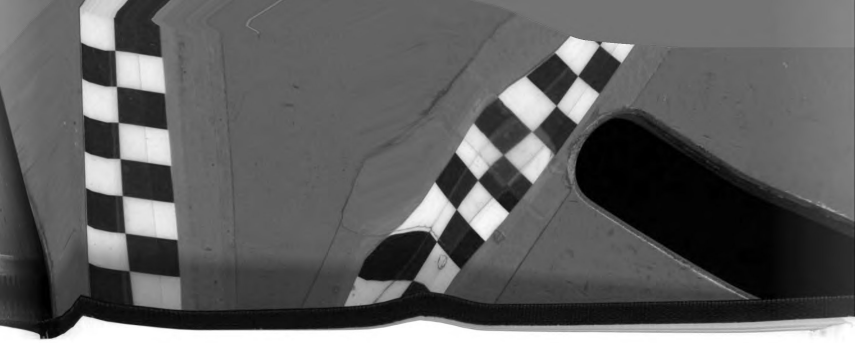
> The wanderers that lost their way homewards
> And chose the scented putrefaction of death.

Life is a wilderness where people wander and miss their way. There is loss here. Death is a final pool where loss is more certain. So for the "wanderers" there is no security either way.

The quest for the future state of man continues in "Salvation" (p. 12). It would be safer to accept the words of the funeral drums of the natives, which say "Doom, doom, doom," for as for salvation,

> We do not need any salvation
> In our beginnings lies our journey's end.





If the "doom" rehearsed by the funeral drums is the final truth of life, there is no need to talk of salvation. The Eliotish line which follows does not indicate that Awoonor-Williams is seeking life from the transcendental point of view that is Eliot's. For Eliot--"In my beginning is my end" and later on "In my end is my beginning."[12] Thus, Eliot hopes for another life which will begin when this ends. But there is no such hope for Awoonor-Williams. Life for him ends at the moment of birth. If so, salvation is unnecessary, and if there is to be any, "we shall find our salvation here on the shore, asleep." One can remember that the "weaver bird" that was "preaching salvation to us" in the "Weaver Bird" has been an object of attack.

Life must therefore be a tedious journey without direction. "The Longest Journey" (p. 20) details the discontentments of life. The reader hears of the "premature wrinkles," the "heart-rending cry of the infant in the night," the "dead drummers' anguish." The picture is clinched by the allusion to the Bible: "By the rivers of Babylon there I sat." This is an exact replica of the opening words of Psalm 137:

> We sat by the streams of Babylon and
> wept, there, remembering Sion.

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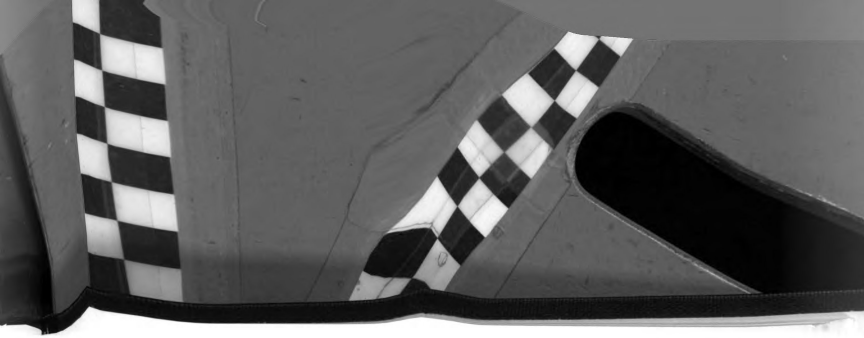
[12]"East Coker," I and V.





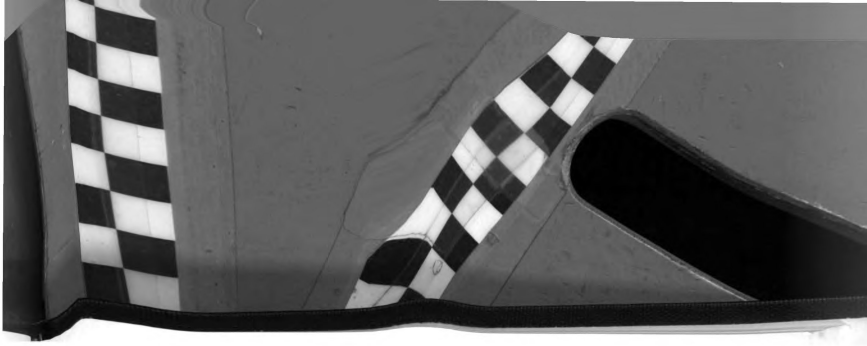
The Israelites were made captives and exiled to a strange land. This is a parallel for the predicament of our poet. His fatherland, nay, life at large, is for him a place of captivity. The theme of exile has been dealt with in this study of his poems. He has been so mangled and crippled that he cannot walk without a "cane."

> Make me a cane so that I can walk
> Can carry my crippled soul across the stile
> and enter the room where they are feasting all night.
> In the doorway I found a heart had been bruised
> By the strictures of life.

It is these "strictures of life" that make life the thorny affair that it is. There is no rest here and none elsewhere. The singing girl of "My Song" (p. 28) sings "about lost souls," "about wanderers," "about gyrating ghosts"--"about me . . . whose life has limped along unfulfilled." Here again, by "rivers of Babylon" he sits, but this time watching his "joyful hours." But these joyful hours are lost forever!

As a kind of refrain after such reflection, the protagonist talks of salvation and the preachers in "March, Kind Comrade, Abreast Him" (p. 25). If life is so ruined and ruining, he wonders "what all this talk of our people and salvation is about/Is it not the hands that smashed the cradle that dug the grave?" Rather than listen to such talk, he would go and "get drunk at the funeral." It is the teaching of the foreigners that angers the protagonist beyond





endurance. They have talked "of the revolutions of the world," and of the socialists. The image of the "beggar boy" limping away is important here. The preachers have not catered to the boy, maybe. But the protagonist accepts him. He will be one with him. The boy will sing "at our funeral." As a matter of fact, the indigenous funeral rites are more important to the poet than all the talk of salvation. So the local funeral ritual is already in conflict with the Christian's idea of burial and life of the world to come.

This note of concern for "rite and the ceremony/the functions unperformed" is sounded in "That Which Flesh Is Heir To" (p. 26). The world to come that is preached is no reality: ". . . our thoughts soar searching for lands that are never there." If there is immortality, it will be sufficiently learned from the "myriad of colours and the dazzle of the rainbow." To show insistently that there is no need for salvation, it is unnecessary to "pray for us at the hour of our death" which is the Christian way, but rather, "we" should "pray for us at the hour of our birth."

So far the state of becoming is shown to be a state full of strictures, of wandering souls that are crippled. As for the state of being, we should not think of it from the Christian's point of view. All that is necessary is the funeral fulfilment for the repose of the dead person. This is what occupies the mind of the protagonist. What will





he be like in the state of being dead? Thus in "The Consummation" (p. 27) "when we make our grand finale/Will there be souls this side of eternity/Who will wish us fulfilment. . . ?" He wonders why we cannot "join the ceremony of our death/And partake of the rituals." So, the protagonist is really bothered about life after this. But he is not concerned with the Christian sense of salvation or damnation; rather it is the indigenous way of funeral rites to effect the fulfilment of the dead, that is of importance to him.

Celebration of the Indigenous Way of Life

In the midst of conflicts the embattled poet has always had one clear point of affirmation. Not only has he always recognised the indigenous way of doing things--of living generally--but he has also been earnestly anxious to return to this way and wear the garment of the old days sewn by his fathers. In moments of doubt, he would find the truth "from beyond" by his native method of divination; when purification is due, it will be effected by the same traditional means. There he feels at home and secure.

The quest pointed out in "Desire" (p. 205 above) is pursued by looking into the "herb pot":

> And I look into the herb pot to read the message
> from beyond.

But he hears "no voice, no ghosts whisper." Also the "village clown," wanting to help him, offers not the foreign



means but the indigenous one--the "coloured cowrie." Awoonor-Williams thus suggests that "the visit to the diviner is very much a living custom over most of Africa."[13] R. S. Rattray evaluates this custom:

> It would not be just to dismiss all this as chicanery. It is the African's way of seeking an unbiased answer for his doubts and questionings, and thus, to ease his mind. It enables him also to place the onus of certain unpleasant but wholesome truths on the shoulders of the spirits and to fix in the same quarter the opprobium of carrying out unpopular but sanitary measures.
>
> It is equally good psychology and policy because, in nine cases out of ten, the soothsayer's wand will bend to the trend of public opinion.[14]

In the poem, however, the protagonist does not even go to a soothsayer; he is at once the diviner and client. He feels entirely involved in the whole system.

Just as the gods are sounded in moments of doubts, so are they palliated with sacrifices where there are problems. In "The Purification" (p. 14) the fisherman has only "catches of weed," for the "sea-god has deserted the shore." To pacify the god, a "sacrificial cow" is needed. The protagonist breaks out in a tone of incantation:

> Anipaye the fish, I shall stay at the net's end
> While you go down.
> While you go down;

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[13] Jacob Drachler, ed. African Heritage (New York, 1963), p. 204.

[14] Ibid., p. 206.



and when the sacrifice is completed, the "cow and Anipaye had gone down."

In fact throughout his poetry, Awoonor-Williams has remained the faithful son of his fathers and their tradition. Whatever theme he writes on, he consistently draws his images from the traditional customs. His poetry is a vivid demonstration of "les procédés stylistiques" which Janheinz Jahn has talked of (see Chapter III above). This is so prominent in his work that it has attracted the comments of several critics, as in the following comment concerning Awoonor-Williams and Mazisi Kunene of South Africa:

> Both have understood and assimilated the cryptic, rather oracular quality of much vernacular imagery. This has given both freshness and weight to their language. . . .[15]

J. P. Clark has quoted these lines and then remarked that "theirs may well be called a concern and quest for the wisdom and wealth of their fathers."[16] In another instance the reader hears of Awoonor-Williams: "His phrasing and imagery draws deliberately on the richness of his Togolese mother tongue."[17] It is no wonder that this should be so, for Awoonor-Williams believes in each person retaining and

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[15] Modern Poetry From Africa, pp. 21-22.

[16] "Poetry in Africa Today," Transition, IV, 18, p. 25.

[17] O. A. "Rediscovery by George Awoonor-Williams," Black Orpheus, No. 17, p. 61.

acclaiming his identity in his living and doings. He once said that his "pet aversions" are "poseurs and hypocrites and righteousmen." One who refuses to be himself, is only a hypocrite, and that is what Awoonor-Williams hates. The poet's quest for the past is free from any sentimental idealization, and therefore has transcended the temptation facing the writers trying to recreate the past which is pointed out by Chinua Achebe:

> Quite clearly there is a strong temptation to idealize it [the past]--to extol its good points and pretend that the bad never existed.[18]

That Awoonor-Williams cannot be charged with the guilt of such idealization has also been remarked by another critic who observes that the "African way of life is not a romantic ideal to him [Awoonor-Williams], it is a reality of which he is still a part."[19]

Of Sorrow and Acidia: "I Heard A Bird Cry"

George Awoonor-Williams, like J. P. Clark, has reserved the most clinching and resounding note of his poetry for his longest and most ambitious poem, "I Heard A Bird Cry."[20] The major theme of the conflict of the indigenous

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[18]"Poetry in Africa Today," Transition, IV, 18, p. 25.

[19]O. A. "Rediscovery by George Awoonor-Williams," Black Orpheus, No. 17, p. 61.

[20]Published in Black Orpheus, No. 15 (August 1964), 23-31.

culture and the foreign one which has been the core of his shorter poems, is emphasized in this poem more than in the others. Also interwoven with this over-riding theme is the resort to the communal gods in moments of crises, coupled with the actualisation of the protagonist's fidelity to his father's gods, borne out by his final initiation into the cult of these gods. Serving as an introduction to the study of this major poem are "Songs of Sorrow" and "Song of War,"[21] of which poems "I Heard A Bird Cry" is an adumbration, even though the determined spirit of war vindicated in "Song of War" is antithetical to the ruinous inertia expressed in the third part of the longer poem.

"Songs of Sorrow" opens with the treatment given to the protagonist by Dzogbese Lisa[22] that has led him "among the sharps, of the forest," where he faces the usual dilemma of being unable to return or to proceed. The same image of excrement which has been observed before continues here in "chameleon faeces" used for describing the "affairs of this world." Here one can notice the difference between the high and the low in the protagonist's society, which is given a tragic overtone in "I Heard A Bird Cry," and consequent on

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[21]The two poems are anthologised in Modern Poetry From Africa, pp. 78-80.

[22]A kind of "divinity"; see J. P. Clark, "Poetry in Africa Today," Transition, IV, 18, pp. 25-26.

the realisation of how futile life is to the low man, he wishes to die--"I can only go beyond and forget." This death wish is given prominence also in the longer poem. The dilemma is reiterated in another image drawn, as usual, on the local environment:

> . . . I have been somewhere
> If I turn here the rain beats me
> If I turn there the sun burns me.

But he then realises, if only sardonically, that only courage can help one continue living in this life of turbulence, for the "firewood of this world/Is for only those who can take heart."

From this point the reader is drilled through a list of his sorrows: he has neither children nor relatives to give him funeral rites at his death; life is merely a "great wilderness," the rain beats him and "sharp stumps cut as keen knives"; "Kpeti's great household" is fallen; the man, Agosu, who has been his only support is dead, and thus figuratively:

> . . . a snake has bitten me
> My right arm is broken,
> And the tree on which I lean is fallen.

The snake imagery recurs in "Song of War" and more frequently in "I Heard A Bird Cry." Because of these woes catalogued he wishes to die--"I shall go beyond and rest"--and, like Clark again, he questions the ancestors. He sends a message to these ancestors through Agosu who has just died:

Tell Nyidevu, Kpeti, and Kove [the ancestors]
That they have done us evil. . . .

Ask them why they idle there
While we suffer, and eat sand. . . .

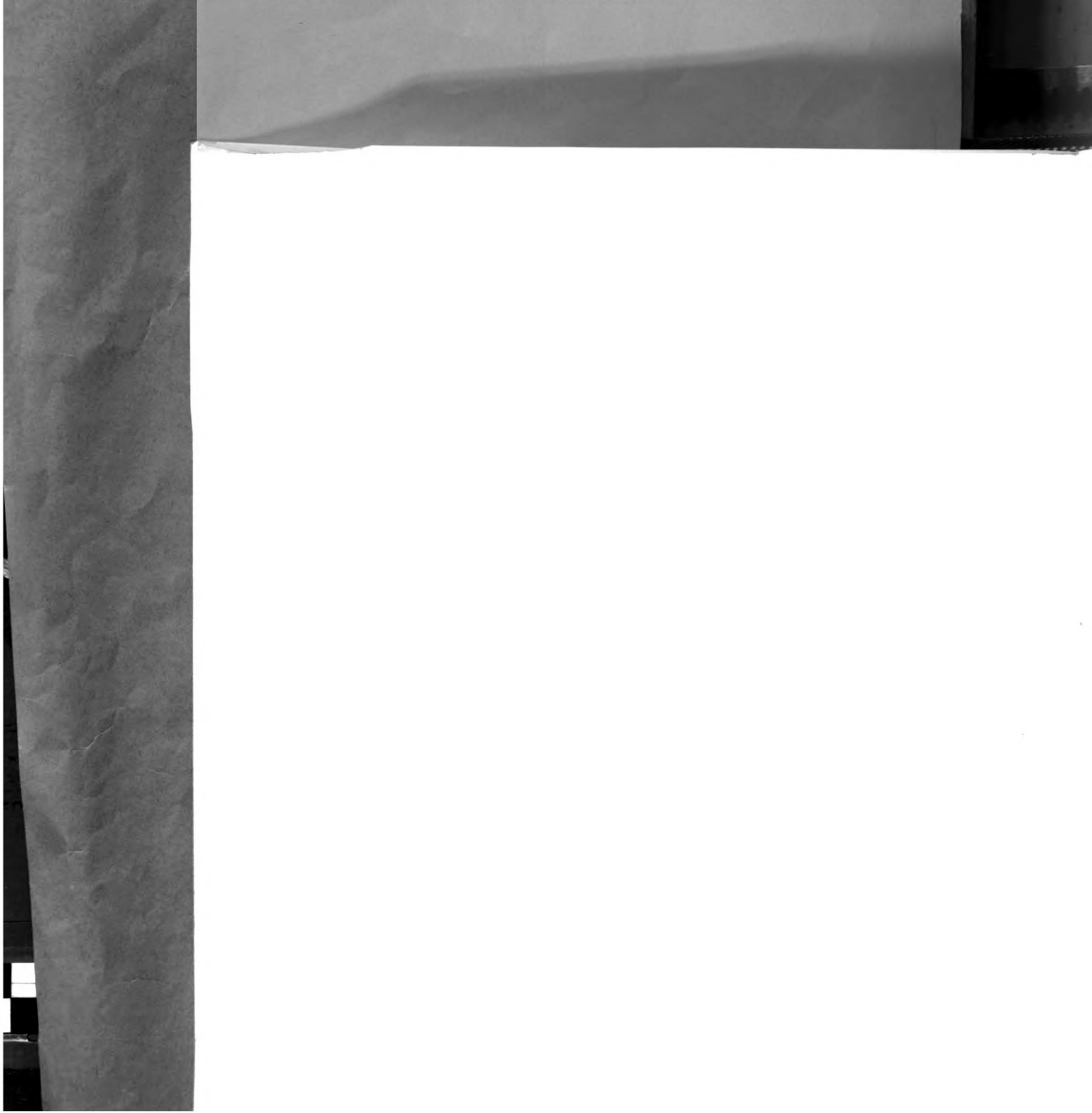
And strangers walk over our portion.

Here for the first time, in this poem, the enemies are mentioned. They are strangers, the colonialists, of course. To send a message to the dead through the dead, and to expect succour from the dead may sound ridiculous, but this is part of the belief system of the people. The poem ends with ire and disgust, which makes the decision to fight to death in "Song of War" a justifiable one.

In the "Song of War" the determination to fight is the theme. The enemies are more precisely named. Though "the white man's guns boom" the natives will march "forward." The white man (a representative name for the colonialists) is the target. He must be fought. The protagonist satirises the cowardly ones among them who, he says, "should fall back/ And live with the women." There is every sign of the offensive being taken here. If the people should sit still and let the white man take their land, it would be as calamitous as the case of a mother who watches a snake bite her child:

Where has it been heard before
That a snake has bitten a child
In front of its own mother?

These lines are repeated in "I Heard A Bird Cry." The snake imagery continues to appear. In vaunting tone, the poem winds up with the resolution:





We shall die on the battlefield
We shall like death at no other place
Our guns shall die with us
And our sharp knives shall perish with us
We shall die on the battlefield.

In another poem, "The Sea Eats the Land at Home,"[23] the enemy-destroyer is represented by sea, which "eats the land at home" and destroys "cement walls" and carries away "fowls" and a poor woman's "cooking pots and the ladles." The images of sea, rain, and storm are also rife in "I Heard A Bird Cry." As before and after, the only resort is "calling on all the gods they worship/To protect them from the angry sea." The woman who is the victim is Aku, who instead of keeping her belongings out of reach of the surging sea, weeps and calls on her ancestors and her gods. She is a contrast to the woman in J. P. Clark's "Night Rain" (Chapter V above), who keeps toiling in the "roomlet," securing her property. Otherwise, however, the two poems have the same tragic overtone expressed by means of water imagery. Though, while Awoonor-Williams uses an allegorical device to depict the incursion of colonialism on the natives, Clark simply portrays a sad occurrence at some sad moment of life. "The Sea Eats the Land at Home" and the two poems which have been dealt with here, provide a very good background to the understanding and appreciation of "I Heard A Bird Cry."

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[23]Published in Modern Poetry From Africa, p. 81.

"I Heard A Bird Cry" can be subdivided into three parts for the purpose of this study: (a) the part that depicts the sorrows of the protagonist, (b) the part that deals with the initiation ceremony, and (c) the part that shows the dire need for war, and the inability of the people to take up arms against their sea of troubles.

(a) The poem begins in the emblematic manner with the picture of a dry tree "in the desert" and the birds that build their nests upon it. In the same picture are the people singing funeral songs, with their "eyes filled with tears." Here then is a picture of desolation, death, and grief. It is known at once that all is not well in the land. The singing voice of the protagonist has "become the desert wind." The protagonist, seeing their tears "running like flood river" and as "bitter as the waters of the sea," asks them why they are weeping. They have covered their heads with their hands, an image which, as seen in Clark (Chapter V above), symbolizes great sorrow and loss. It will be met again in the third part of this poem. To help the people, the protagonist goes "to perform the rites for my Gods/My father's Gods I left behind/Seven moons ago." "Sisal ropes," and "two white cocks/Whose Bloods will cleanse the stools" will be used in this ceremony. Though these rites are performed, the people must be ready to act their own parts in this fight for freedom. They have to believe "in the resurrection of the living." This image parodies the Catholic

belief in the resurrection of the dead contained in the Creed, and is of great significance in the context of the poem. The poor people that are oppressed are living but need to be resurrected from their state of subjection. They have also got to remember "that the green fields/Are waiting for the feet of the striving." This and the image of goats doing "a war dance" which follows after the next three lines, constitute a dramatic anticipation of the third section of the poem, which will show the people unable to strive, and the war impossible of realisation.

The list of the sorrows which have been the lot of the people follows, all being dressed in traditional images. The hut is destroyed by the storm; his father's house has collapsed, the widows are beating the "funeral drums" (perhaps for their dead husbands!), and they "put tears in the eyes of the orphans by the road-side." The earthworm has eaten "our new yams," the "smith shop is on fire." The reader hears again of "funeral songs" and the "songs of the rebel gods." The world is all "heat and restlessness," and "drunken dogs are/Tramping precious things underfoot." This image of "drunken dogs" occurs repeatedly throughout the poem, sometimes varied by "mad dogs." There are "hyaenas" looting and carrying "their loot" away. Oppression is the feature of these incidents, whether by nature or by animals. But these oppressing agents are only symbolically used here.

They stand for the human oppressors. Anguish has made the speaker ask, "What happens before the vulture's head is naked?" As will be seen, the question is answered in the very last few lines of the poem.

Things are proving unbearable for the protagonist. In an analogous way he says that customs can even be breached to salvage the situation. So the reader hears that

> Though . . .
> The prince should not hasten for the stool[24]
> And the young leopard
> Should not be in haste to walk,

when "noises are in the air," that at the moment of crises,

> The young leopard should stand up against the tree
> And the prince should run for his father's stool.

In this way the "turbulent river" can become "calm again." This is planting the idea of the necessity for action which is the theme of the third section. But unfortunately, the people have been dormant, and only weeping. The protagonist's advice is that they should go to the fetish hut--the "sacred hut" where the "gone befores" are waiting for them.[25] Presently, the reader will be led into the process of the initiation, into the "sacred hut."

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[24]"Stool" here means the stool of chieftaincy.

[25]Cf. Nwanodi's "Echoes of the Gone," in Icheke, p. 21.

(b) The protagonist narrates how he himself was initiated into the fetish cult. The celebrants "wound a cloth around" his loins, and gave him "a fly-whisk" and a "calabash" to hold. He and all the others there pledged to the ancestors:

> That you do not thirst for drink
> When your palm trees are prospering.

This shows that the people have cause for action, and have all the necessary equipment for it. But if they fail to act, they will simply be like someone whose palm tree is productive of palm wine, but through laziness fails to get the wine and drink.

Now comes the climax of the whole initiation. The rejection of foreign ideals and the resumption of the indigenous mode of life are dramatised:

> I put down my whiteman's clothes
> And rolled a cloth
> To carry the ram's head. . . .

This is central to Awoonor-Williams' poems dealing with the conflict of cultures. We can remember at this point that the protagonist has been jeered at by the pro-white-culture in "We Have Found A New Land" (p. 187 above), where he is told that he "cannot dress like that," that is, he cannot dress in the native way. The protagonist next sang and danced and put his hand "in the blood pot" according to the custom. There follows the short humorous passage that serves as a comic relief in this grief-pervading poem. The season was that of "burning





feet," the sand was so hot that he could not dance steadily, his feet having been "overpampered" by wearing shoes. So the people around "laughed/And said my feet have blundered." One soon learns that all those who have been detribalised cannot beat the drums again, and cannot respond to the drums being beaten. They are like vultures who are unnecessarily proud, while the faithful natives are like crows jeering at these prodigals. The protagonist regrets his having left the native culture for the foreign one:

> I am the bird on the dung-hill
> The birds flew and left me behind.

The excrement image is used again--"dunghill." So he resolves to carry the "fetish bell" and to invoke the ancestors.

What he will tell them is a re-enactment of the sorrows of the land: that "an evil snake" has bitten him and he could not find "a stick to kill it" with. Here he says for the third time in the poem: "Hush! I heard a bird cry." In each case it is said after a reflection on the woes that assail the land. The next evil in this part is that the "lagoon waters are in storm," and then we hear,

> I broke my paddle in the marshes
> Mad dogs chased me
> And I left my cloth on the dung-hill.

The persistent images keep coming--snake, storm, mad dogs, dung-hill. This technique, as seen in Okigbo and Clark, intensifies by reiteration. Here life is seen as a real struggle. The protagonist is paddling on the roaring



turbulent sea of life. But at the end of the initiation, one should feel that there will be inspiration for action. Yes, the protagonist wears the fervent spirit of the newly initiated: "The fetish drums are beating from Ghost's head," but as for the fetish priests, they are "in trance." Entrancement is the problem of the people. They are sleepy, inactive; they are the victims of ennui.

(c) To prepare for the abortive tone of this section, some calamitous events are noted. The "evil god" is in the water, some natives or the strangers are wearing "velvet" on their heads. These are warned that a "dog/Does not bear a child in public" and that the "fowl-stealing hyaena" cannot steal by day. The fisherman cannot even catch fishes, for the sea is "bad these days," and the wives of some natives "have run away to many strangers." Clark has pointed out this evil in "Ivbie," II (Chapter V above). This is the climactic point of the people's suffering. Retaliation is overdue. If the people do not react they are no better than the "eagle" that refuses to feed "its child," thereby making the child "turn a beggar in the market place." They have guns and gun powder, and they should not spare the powder and suffer the wrongs.

The protagonist has started urging the people to action. The proverbs mentioned in the preceding paragraph are the most effective means of doing so in the traditional way. But there does not seem to be any response from the





people. At this point the speaker regrets having gone at all to ask what the problem is. Addressing them again with the appealing and emotional "Listen, my countrymen," which he has used repeatedly in the poem, he warns them that there will be total destruction, for the "bush fire" does not burn the bush and spare "the bush-rope." The image of life as a "stormy river," with men "rowing a boat to ghost's land" occurs again by way of emphasis, and the image of "journey . . . a long journey" to the other world accentuates the whole picture (cf. "The Longest Journey," p. 206 above). He deprecates both himself and them. Since they are so slovenly, death will be their final choice. He will even ironically wear the "velvet" and a "gold chain" and "walk a chiefly walk"--a satire on the rich among them, whose luxuriance is an obstacle to action.

The memory of the past when men were heroic assails his mind. Then the "mad dogs" could be killed, but the tribal heroes are no more. What he has around him now are mere "trancers." He should have stayed back home cleaning "the bush" that "has crowded the sacred hut," rather than come to the chicken-hearted people who cannot take up a knife and cut the web in which they are caught. Here the hush is heard again--"I have just heard a bird cry."

All evil actions occur in the night: the "monster terrorises people"; the "evil child" is born in the night;



the smallpox god walks the night; evil doers roam about then; and it was in the night that

> . . . the white man deceived the chiefs
> And took the young men to the battle front.

All these should inspire men to action at the break of day, but it has not been so. Lamentable it is that men "are still in their easy chairs," with pipes in their mouths. "They are still under the baodad[26] tree/Telling tales of long-ago." He is not even listened to in public, for he is not rich enough. This is unbearable, and he moans here as in "The Weaver Bird": "Weaver birds came and ravaged my corn field." So for this reason, he wishes to die. Other images of sorrow follow. The image of a "cock laying an egg by the riverside" points at the topsyturvydom of life; and that "a hawk came and snatched it," indicates the totality of the disaster.

This normally leads to frustration. We hear the cry of Ivbie again, as in Clark.

> Some say we must cover our heads
> With our hands, and burst into tears.

Ivbie, it can be recollected, is the placing of the hands over the head as a sign of great sorrow and distress. In fact, Awoonor-Williams' poem is another "Ivbie" minus the latter's defiant power and minus the incisive venom of the Clarkish wit. Both in theme and the use of images drawn on the traditional life of the people, both poems have a lot in common.

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[26]The word should be "baobab."





However Awoonor-Williams' protagonist refuses to cry. Though his clothing be only a "smelling" one, he will put it on and "speak in the market place." He will remind the people of their passiveness at the time "the poor died of hunger on Modui hillock." This is put in form of the elegiac question (which also has been noted in connexion with Clark's "Ivbie"), and transliterated from the vernacular mode of speech:

> I shall ask them, ask them
> That when the sea was sterile
> And the poor died of hunger of Modui hillock?
> Where were You?

If any persons do not want to listen to him, to hear his song, he further says, let "them patch their ear-holes with clay." Repeating the snake imagery already remarked in "Song of War" he cannot believe that a snake can bite a child "in front of its mother." The rich are more to be blamed for this lack of action than the poor men; but the god of retribution will wreak vengeance on them.

From now to the end of the poem the protagonist's disgust mounts higher and higher. Despair characterises his damped spirit. The rich men demand dressing in "whiteman's coat" as a prerequisite for attending the "goat feast." This is an abomination in the land where sacrifices are being offered to the gods to cleanse the land of the white man's pollution. An allusion is made to Christ's triumphant entry into Jerusalem; to His kindness and mercy. Though Christ



wept for the "golden city" of Jerusalem, the protagonist asks not for a golden city. His prayer is simply the poor man's: "That our corn should fill the cobs/And the sea retain her fertility." The land has been impoverished; it is hunger-stricken. Even though the prisoners are released there are still the "tears of anguish/And the agony of hunger."

As the poem draws to a close the reader hears the protagonist's voice cracking, we feel his heart failing. The voice has fallen on dull and deaf ears, the heart is sagging under the burden of oppression, remorse, and anger. A couple of images drawn around the vulture summarise his woe and dejection. The first answers the question asked about the vulture's bald head (see p. 219 above):

> The vulture says, it says,
> Because helpers are not there
> That is why
> I have shorn my head
> Awaiting my funeral.

This is pathetic. Complete disillusionment and resignation to death result from the acidia the people have been suffering from. The vulture represents the oppressed here. But in the next stanza, the "vultures" represent the oppressors. These are the "vultures" that shook the "rafters" of the protagonist's heart's "house." These vultures are flowing toward "the land of my fore-fathers." That is, he wishes they were dead. If they are dead, they can feast, for



It was in the season of burning feet,
And the feast is ready for us.

There is some relief in the end. The hope is that the oppressors are dead, so that the indigenous culture may live. The "feast" is the "goat feast," the feast in the "sacred hut," the feast of the ancestral kind. But the peace expected has not been achieved through any action on the part of the people. This is another point of similarity with "Ivbie," which ends in the same tone. In Awoonor-Williams' poem, it is probably the fore-fathers that are bringing the vultures to their own world, that is they have killed the oppressors.

Conclusion

St. Clair Drake, in discussing various "African Culture traits," states the judgment of the educated elite on them. Among those traits which are "Approved 'if [they do] Not Hamper Progress' are the 'retention of native clothes,' the 'ancestor cult,' and the 'celebration of funerals.'" These are what Awoonor-Williams has been fighting for in his poetry in general. The case for native clothes and initiation into the ancestral cult is particularly made in "I Heard A Bird Cry." Drake points out at the same time that Christianity and Islam are also approved for retention, which does not seem to receive Awoonor-Williams' sanction. Among the "culture traits" that are "Highly Disapproved" is



"consulting oracles for serious decisions."[27] As has been noted in this chapter, Awoonor-Williams approves of such consultation, specifically in "Desire" and more so in "I Heard A Bird Cry," and his views are shared, as seen before, by R. S. Rattray (see p. 210 above).

All said and done, the problem of conflict of cultures underlies most of Awoonor-Williams' work. In discussing the problems facing the modern African in his present stage of "transition," Colin M. Turnbull observes that the urban and the rural dwellers have different problems:

> In the large towns and cities the overall problem is largely one of trying to think and act like a nation, of trying to forget the tribal differences. For the individual it is more a problem of trying to reconcile a hard-dying tribal conscience with non-tribal "fait accompli," of finding some means for justifying the new way of life that has been forced on him.

But as for the rural dweller, continues Turnbull:

> His problem is a different one, because while the urban African has had his way of life changed by the sheer force of circumstance, the rural African still has a certain element of choice--he has to make the decision for himself. It is not a question of finding an excuse or compromise, it is a question of deciding between the old and the new in which the old is still dominant but the new is plainly more powerful. . . .[28]

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[27] Drachler, ed. African Heritage, pp. 183-187.

[28] The Lonely African (New York, 1962), pp. x-xi.



Mr Turnbull has a little overgeneralised the situation. He seems to think that once an African gets into the city or town, he must necessarily seek a via media between the native culture and the foreign one. Turnbull does not think that the urban dweller has a choice. By implication, he cannot even reject the imported culture that is "forced on him"! The truth of the matter is that the urban African tries to select what he thinks useful to him from the foreign ways of life. With this he merges the African way of life. Thus he is cautiously and consciously endeavouring to make a synthesis of the African and foreign ways of life, which synthesis Awoonor-Williams tells us in "The Anvil and the Hammer," is not even realisable.

As for the rural dweller, it may not be wholly true that he has not such conflict to face. The influence of the foreign culture reaches the villages also, though the extent to which he experiences the conflict and how much of the foreign culture he is willing to accept may not be the same as in the case of the urban dweller. Awoonor-Williams has made it abundantly clear that both the urban and the rural dwellers have had each his own share of the bitter cup of experience resulting from this clash of cultures.

With specific reference to West Africa, Turnbull further comments on the Colonialist-African relation:





> In other parts of Africa, however, particularly on the West coast, feelings run much less high [than in East, Central and South Africa] and while the Africans have seen more direct benefits from the presence of the white civilisation, the Europeans, by virtue of their political, economic, and domestic status, have not had to rely on a policy of subjugation. Here at least we might look for some meeting of the two worlds that has found a form of success that does not mean victory for the one and annihilation for the other.[29]

Though this seems to represent the situation faithfully as it is, say in the former British West African territories, the relationship has not been as smooth and sweet as that. There is no direct, overt physical aggression or suppression, but it cannot be contested that in moral, ideological, social and educational, and religious spheres there sparks off from time to time dangerous disagreement and hostility. As has been pointed out earlier in this study, the colonial poets and the modern ones alike have clearly portrayed this conflict in varying degrees. Among them it can be said that George Awoonor-Williams, more than any other, has almost entirely structured his poetry on this strain of oppositional affinity.

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[29] Ibid., p. 114.



CHAPTER VII

LIFE PATHOLOGY: LENRIE PETERS' POETRY

Turning the stained and fated pages
Was like fumbling with soft life
Melted years mouthed into the ocean
Of pages clouded and wet with tears.
("Turning the Pages of My Diary")

General Observation

To John Pepper Clark, life is a scene of tragedy; to George Awoonor-Williams it is full of rabid dogs and oppression; to Lenrie Peters it is diseased in all its parts. In Clark, man is struggling in vain against chaos; in Awoonor-Williams, he is invoking his ancestors and gods for help and protection; in Peters he is sick with the sickness of life and is trying to run away from the surging shark-ridden sea of life. Peters sees life as physically, morally and ethically, and intellectually plagued. There is no assurance of permanent security either in this life of "centuries plagued" or in death which merely "deludes" men. Society is not a safe hospital for the cure of the "gout" of human life. However, like a medical practitioner, which he is, Peters, more than either Clark or Awoonor-Williams, envisages greater hopes for mankind, and from time to time

can see man convalesce momentarily before catching another disease.

In Lenrie Peters' poetry we see the artist who is "fighting chaos with order," for "what is art if it is not fighting the negative bad, facing it with good?" If art is "Philosophic"; if it is "religious" and if it is "science," then indeed, Peters' poetry is art.[1] More than any other modern West African poet so far studied in this work he has successfully combined reflectiveness with lyricism, so that while one cries over the sorrowful sense beneath that scalds, one also enjoys the pleasure of the overlaying veneer of poetic beauty that soothes. Peters, like the others, however, has handled the themes of suffering, death, cultures, and love, but he leaves on them the distinctive seal of his individuality.

Human Insecurity

In his diagnosis of the problems of life, Peters has exploited his experiences as a surgeon, and the poems pass before us as piteous pictures of mankind in torment. The reader sees parachute men descending from the air and suspects there must be something wrong up there. Thus

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[1]Jonathan Kingdon, "Reflections," Transition, II, 6 and 7 (October 1962), 36.



"Parachute Men Say"[2] deals with this sad scene where the breath of the landing men goes away, with their "arteries talking." The men learn "to sustain hope," for the ground seems sunk down to the centre of the earth and out of reach; and when they land finally, it is with a jerk that "puts out the joint." This poem contains the traces of many strands that run through Peters' poetry: the futility of man's attempt to scan the world, philosophic statements like "We are always at the starting point," (which incidentally is reminiscent of T. S. Eliot), and the frequent use of medical and biological images--"arteries talking"--which show the real poet-surgeon at work.

Nature, especially the seasons, is not a pleasant thing to Lenrie Peters. Autumn is often a harbinger of gloom and symptom of sickness, desire, restiveness, and sometimes death. In "Autumn Comes" (p. 7) the very first stanza, employing his usual biological imagery, shows the "veins tingle" and the "blood" cool "with restless prowling." The second stanza goes on in a Dylan Thomas manner to associate human worries with copulation:

> . . . desire insinuates the flea under the pants[3]
> Desire for the fire

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[2]Lenrie Peters, Poems (Ibadan, Nigeria, 1964), p. 6. All subsequent references to this book will be shown in the body of this study in parentheses.

[3]Cf. "I sit and watch the worm beneath my nail," from Dylan Thomas's "If I Were Tickled by the Rub of Love," in Collected Poems, p. 14.



Desire for the warmth
And the freshly made bed
Where joining heads
Two will sow the seed. . . .

Each of these sorrows is preceded by "Autumn" or brought by it. In this poem, darkness stands for gloom or death. Winter is a misty dark season when things are virtually dead, to come to life again in spring; and this winter is ushered in by "Autumn." So it is in the winter that "the crisp crunching air/Drops her curtain of mist/And the sun slides/Apologetically out of sight." Also, with the arrival of autumn "ants hurry," and "sore-throated birds/Think of taking the cure." Not only men, therefore, but animals also are sick, and the thought of the "cure" for all of them haunts Peters as much as it does the victims.

In "Autumn Burns Me,"[4] there are the same kinds of stress among men and natural phenomena. The protagonist is tossed from "summer fatigue" to "a new Bridge of Sighs"--to "Autumn" which "burns me with/primaeval fire." The "heart" of the earth "bleeds," "Great trees fall," and one finds nothing but decay on earth. But in spite of these disasters, the protagonist would still love "in wonder; for autumn is wonder and wonder is hope."

One would normally feel that man should find rest and security in his home. But the poem, "We Have Come Home"

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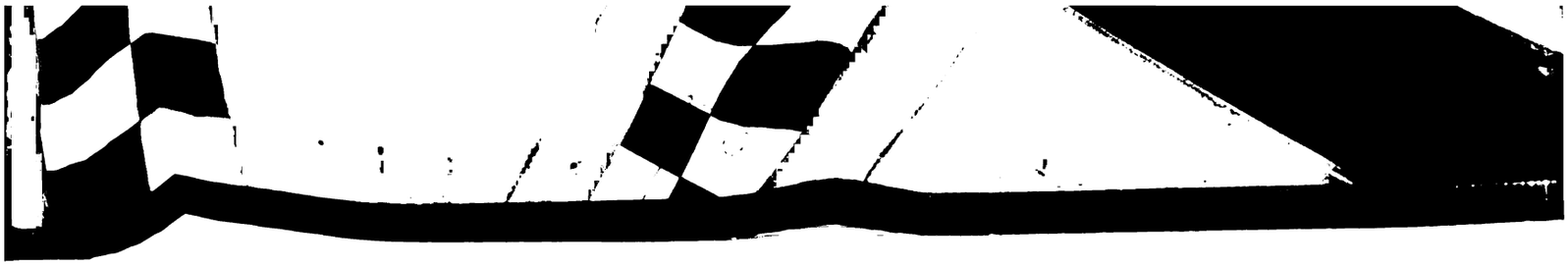
[4]See "Six Poems," Black Orpheus, No. 16 (October 1964), 25-30.





(p. 8), one of the very few of Peters' poems that speak of colonialism, tries to indicate that neither in the war abroad nor at home has the protagonist found enough security. Though the "wars" fought are "bloodless" ones, and though "our boots [are] full of pride," the fighters come home "with sunken hearts," with the "soul" completely massacred. This is a state of demoralisation and deceit. Uncertainty hugs their minds and hearts in the midst of further dangers preached by the "gurgling drums," the howling "forest" and the appearance of the "dark sun"--(an early pointer to Peters as a paradoxer):

> Night threatens
> Time dissolves
> And there is no acquaintance with tomorrow.

The people are still singing the "songs of other lands"; the "death march" violates "our ears," and their "love and tears" are still determined by "the spinning coin"--by lot, by chance. Here, this writer feels, is a reference to the retention of foreign cultures after independence has been won. (Peters' country, Gambia, became independent in 1965.) The poet handles this idea of retaining foreign things--"big cars and air-conditioning plants"--again in his prose work.[5]

The description of the home, the country, is done in lines that are remarkable for their lyrical and imaginative beauty. The "home" is by the green foothills and it is here

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[5] The Second Round (London, 1965).

that they have returned

> To drink from the cup
> Of warm and mellow birdsong
> To the hot beaches
> Where boats go out to sea
> Threshing the ocean's harvest
> And the hovering, plunging
> Gliding gulls shower kisses on the waves.

The music of Peters' poems lies more in the long, open vowels than in alliteration or rhyme. But whenever these two come in, it is with ease and spontaneity. Note "gliding gulls" for instance. It is in this very "home" so well painted, that the reader finds "famine" and "drought," and "tortured remnants" who are supported only be a "sudden spirit,"

> That spirit which asks no favour
> of the world
> But to have dignity.

Here is a quest for human dignity. The sin of injustice is one that Peters has great aversion for.

"On a Wet September Morning" (p. 17) unites the theme of human suffering with T. S. Eliot's philosophical views. The images in the poem are consistently of hate, danger, plague, amputation, and waste. The "vultures hate themselves," "sea gulls lay their eggs . . . under the cracking waves," the "centuries" are "plagued," and the protagonist's feet are "amputated" and buried "in soft sand." His life is that of struggle, of trying to leap out of "a shark's way," a shark with "cutting teeth" that are aimed "at my vitals, not my feet." The changes in the world are such as bring



opposites together, with the "world under the sea," the "sea under the earth," and the "sky in the sea." This unification is so just as "the true life is death," another paradox, so "distinction ends." Shortly, one hears of the "silent yell," a cry of pain, ringing from the past to the present and the future. It rings to

> . . . the farthest end
> Where the amoeba becomes
> The fire, water, and air,

and also "to the other end" where "planets" become "continents"

> Deep in the future
> That is darker and older
> Than the past.

The reference to "amoeba" the "most primitive animal" is a biological allusion;[6] and echoes of T. S. Eliot are heard in the unification of opposites and the unity of time. The reader hears this latter again in "a new present/Which is the future," which can be compared with the following lines from "Burnt Norton":

> Time present and time past
> Are both perhaps present in time future,
> And time future contained in time past.

This is the moment of intuition, the moment in the "rose garden," the ecstatic instant, when Peters' protagonist could be lifted "higher than myself/From the palsied hand of destruction." It is in the timeless moment--the

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[6]See I. F. Henderson and W. D. Henderson, A Dictionary of Biological Terms, ed. J. H. Kenneth (Princeton, N. J., 1963), p. 22.

moment out of life, when unity of being is possible--that he could forget the sorrows of this life. But unfortunately, it is only a moment, not a century, for soon after that meteoric flash, he hears the vibrations of life again--"new awareness" and "care born of feeling," fear, and the "pestilence of thought" that is "cradled in a wet pulsating stone." From that short relieving vision, he returns to the "desert waste" with "rancid taste." This we learn in "In the Vibrations" (p. 19).

According to Peters the taste of life is really sour; the weather is rough; men are drowning in the sea of life, while their neighbours watch unconcerned. This lack of sympathy is the chief message of "They Have Stood Waiting" (p. 28), as it has been of Clark's short but penetrating "Empathy" (see Chapter V above). Peters shows here the pitiable people waiting for others to rescue them with boats, but their hope that will never be satisfied is only like "trusting in the empty hand/Of fate and all her retinue." Ironically, the reader is told that "pleasure boats are not/ for the rescue." The contrast is striking. One group is in a desperate situation, and the only thing that prevents the expected help is the pleasure being enjoyed by the other group. Humanity has denied humanity; but not that only, the heavenly bodies are not any more sympathetic:

> The night sentinels of the sky
> Shiver unconcernedly.



Here Clark is met once more. Indeed in many respects Peters' view of life is as sardonic as that of Clark. Both of them are satiric also, though Clark's biliousness is scarcely equalled by the righteous and sympathetic anger expressed by the gentle friend of humanity, Peters.

So then the victims of this human hard-heartedness have to continue waiting in the "inexhaustible hope" that help which never comes will yet come. For them

> Time is like the smoke
> Which smarts the eyes
> Brings out the tears
> Leaving on the blurred horizon
> The inexhaustible hope.

These lines are beautiful, even if blurred with the tears that have "stained" the pages of his "diary." Hope is characteristic of his sufferers, and only accentuates their predicaments, for the more they hope, the more meagre the chances of its fulfilment grow.

This is one of the paradoxes of life, and to Peters life teems with embarrassing conflicts. "The Mind" (p. 29), for instance, deals with one aspect of this kind of situation. "The mind is the irony of man's greatness":

> At once the cancellation
> And the riddle
> Which shrouds the magnificent darkness.

The same mind in its ambivalent capacity is compared to "the desert winds." The earth is a "desert waste," as seen in



"In the Vibrations" (p. 238 above), an echo of Eliot's "Waste Land" idea. It is a mere empty space with the mind ranging all of it:

> The mind
> Is like the desert winds
> Bloughing[7] the empty spaces.

But this mind is capable of reaching the past, the "ageless shore" to "find the barren senses there . . . shipwrecked on the tides of passion." Even if it is itself a "riddle," it finds the "sum total of existence" and becomes "the explanation and the vision."

Peters' is no mere psychological quest into the region of the mind, but a wrestling with life in its totality. It is no mere abstract speculation on the theme of epistemology, but rather a humanistic concern about life as man finds it. But even though the mystery is not resolved, remaining still "magnificent darkness," man can rely on the capabilities of the mind. This does not reduce his sorrows, however.

It is not like that in the physical world. The chaos of the mental world, the world of the mind, is an internal affair, but when all the aspects of man--mental, physical, and ethical, are involved, the problem becomes more overwhelming. In this connexion, for Peters, unlike William Blake or W. B. Yeats, contrarieties have not led to progression. "There Where the Dim Past and Future Mingle" (p. 36)

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[7]Should be "Ploughing" this writer feels.

demonstrates life as a series of conflicts, and man as no more than constantly poised in dilemma. The present is, of course, the meeting place of the past and the future, and it is here that the past and future, "nebulous hopes and aspirations," converge to plague man. Here also "truth and untruth struggle," the body grows old; it is here that

> . . . all opposites arrive
> To plague the inner senses, but do not fuse.

That is the problem. If after the storm of the struggle of the opposites, there follows the calm of fusion, there will be no grief. But it is not so, and that is why the protagonist holds his head and would "contrive/To stop the constant motion." To die? That is the surest way of stopping this motion-without-progression. It is not only the restless pursuits of men that upset the protagonist. Clark has been upset by such. But Peters adds an extra dimension, comprising the ethical or moral. As has been pointed out earlier in this chapter, the sickness of the world is all around. Thus the poem ends on a note of moral quest:

> There where the need for good
> And "The doing good" conflict.
> There I lie.

The prostrate, dejected, immobile position of the protagonist is emphasized throughout the poem by means of the refrain, "There I lie."





It would seem that the "present" is the main carrier of life diseases. In "The Present Reigned Supreme" (p. 39), we see the present depicted in a bad light. It is like "shallow floods," the "roots" of those living now are merely "sapless." The picture is that of a surface without depth, appearance without substance. The question of morality comes up again:

> Cultivated weeds have grown where we led
> The Virgins to the water's edge.

Everything has turned ghastly. Instead of men living in solid houses, the reader finds "new skeletons" in a "house without a shadow." This kind of home has no security. It is the same house the protagonist has returned to in "We Have Come Home." After he has wandered, an aberrant, over the world, this ghost "house"

> . . . is all that is left
> To greet us on the home coming. . . .

Furthermore, one sees this kind of ugly present in "The Fire Has Gone Out" (p. 41), where there is nothing left but "aching gout." The past was better, for it was "warm," and people were drinking, and there was "Juno with a tune." The good aspect of Juno is alluded to here, that is "a wife goddess rather than a mother goddess,"[8] and with their wives

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[8]Juno is the Roman name for Hera, the daughter of Cronus and Rhea and wife of her brother Zeus. See G. M. Kirkwood, A Short Guide to Classical Mythology (New York, 1959), p. 48.





beside them men were happy in the past in the protagonist's world.

Here again one notices the use of biological images. "Gout" and "arteries" occur. The "arteries stiffen," there is a "cold shroud," and desolation marks the home. This indicates that "death is at the door." As will be seen later, Lenrie Peters is quite conscious of death in his poetry, both as a physical thing and from the point of view of its philosophical meaning.

Sometimes in his depiction of anguish, Peters, like Clark and Awoonor-Williams, concentrates on the figure of a woman planted deep in sorrow where she lives or half-lives, the very embodiment of loss and langour. Clark shows such a picture in "Night Rain," Awoonor-Williams in "The Sea Eats the Land at Home," and now Peters in "She Sat Between the Fire-Stones" (p. 40). Peters' woman resembles Awoonor-Williams' more than she does Clark's, for she is utterly incapable of struggling against the odds facing her. As seen in Chapter V, the woman in "Night Rain" is able to struggle against the spreading water in her room.

In Peters' poem the woman is "wrinkled, bespectacled, and lost." Her loss of a son who was twenty-one has so distracted her that she has lost all mental stability. Her thoughts are "flickering through the flame"--a beautiful but sad line. The only thing she can hold for support is





"darkness"--"And grasped a handful of darkness." Sitting near the fire, the heat which should warm her rather startles her:

> She moved her slippered feet
> Was starled[9] by the heat
> Which was like wild devouring tomorrow
> Bringing its ecstasies and sorrow.

Here the past keeps the present sorrowful, and the thought of the future distracts her the more. She loses the sense of time, and cannot distinguish between yesterday, today, and tomorrow. She cannot remember when she should have "scrubbed the floor." Then in the last three lines of the poem, Peters presents a puzzling remark:

> No matter; When the thought has gone
> Man crumbles into the ball
> Which rolls to prevent the fall.

As in the four lines just quoted before these three, one finds rhymes here. Peters does not seem to set out to make his lines rhyme, quite unlike Clark. But he is a paradoxer, which Clark is not. "Man crumbles" here, but still the fall is prevented! The only thing that prevents the fall is the "ball" which "rolls." The "ball" can stand for the earth which keeps rotating and revolving; and it is these motions that help keep it in place. Lenrie Peters' lines can be lyrical and charged at the same time, and over such lines one has to pause in order to plumb the depth of the poet's mind.

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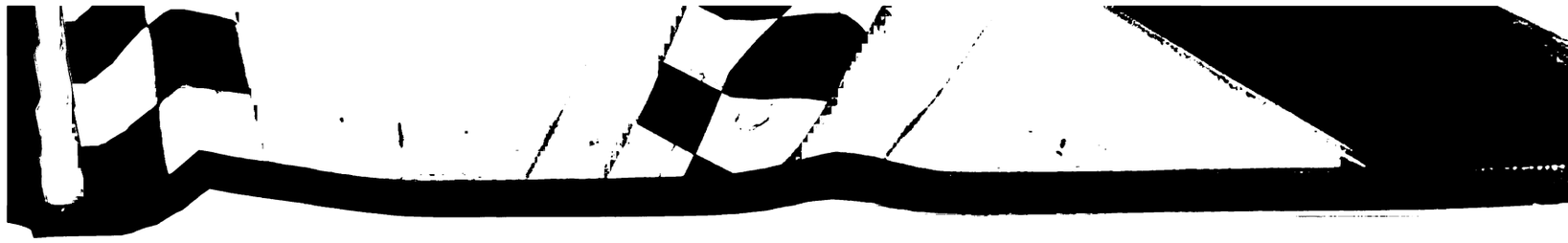
[9]Should be "startled" this author thinks.





While pitying the woman that lost a son, the reader is at the same time asked to pity the protagonist, whose song has been suppressed. "Forgotten Song" (p. 32) depicts the mocking of the efforts of the protagonist, who is endeavouring to resuscitate his forgotten song. On the opposite side of the coin, the reader sees the picture of the protagonist ridiculing what seems to be an inordinate ambition of men to "traffic" with the heavens--"If I Was Asked" (p. 38).

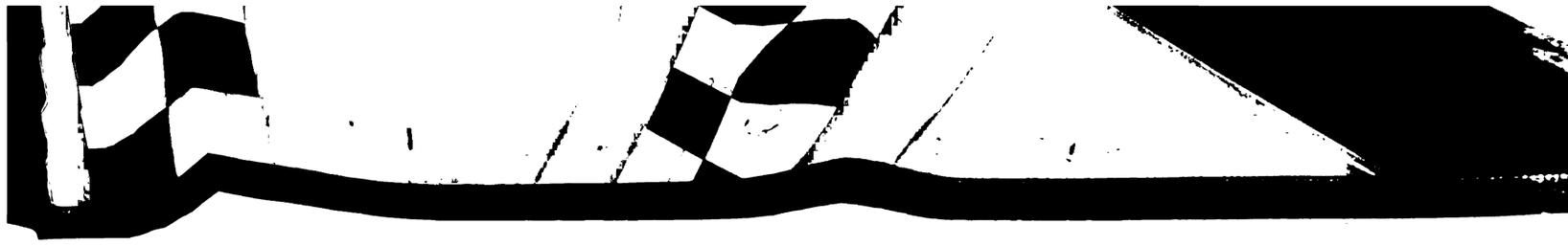
The former poem seems to be dealing with the same theme of the suppression of both the native poetry and the efforts of the natives to exhume it, which Okigbo and Clark have treated. The tone is pathetic. Though the protagonist knows that the forgotten song is "untamed," when the "harsh" derisive "laughter dies," he will revive the song. The first stanza of the song is very revealing. One hears of the song buried "under the egg heap," of the "voice" that "broke"

> Before it learned to speak
> Before the years
> Of bird-footed sleep
> Scattered nerves
> And honey-soaked memory
> Seeped from
> The needled brain. . . .

These lines vindicate beautifully the presence of powerful imagination and luminous vision behind this creation. The poem is humble and shows the protagonist self-confident.

This contentment with the ordinary things around is given greater emphasis in the other poem, "If I Was Asked."





The protagonist would not camp "out in space." He would rather die than meddle with "this confounded puzzle" which would "only represent/My innate discontent." If people hate to live with him, to see his "face," he wishes that they would exile him to a "deserted piece of earth," where he will "represent/The non-progressive element." This is satirical. The progressives, of course, would be those who are prying into "space." If instead of a wild desert, he were offered the whole earth as a reward for "traffic up in heaven," he would not accept it, for the earth is as poor as either the desert or the heavens.

Here one remembers what John Donne says in "The First Anniversarie":

> And freely men confesse that this world's spent,
> When in the Planets, and the Firmament
> They seeke so many new; then see that this
> Is crumbled out againe to his Atomies.[10]
> (11.209-212)

This is a timely statement prophetic of the scientific interest in space today. Such a scientific quest to explore the heavenly bodies, could only make Peters' protagonist laugh

> At what appears daft
> Cows that have jumped the moon.

The disease of the brain is of course madness. But this is a jaundiced way of looking at what many people may term ambition and manifestation of the human capabilities. However,

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[10] The Complete Poetry, pp. 185-197.

our protagonist sees it as unnecessary! He will continue his traffic here on earth, and leave the heavens to themselves.

Social Decadence

John Donne tells us again:

> Shee is dead; shee is dead: when thou knowst this,
> Thou knowst how lame a cripple this world is.[11]
> (11.237-238)

To Donne, Mistress Elizabeth Drury is the very incarnation of purity and virtue, and with her death, the world is bereft of all that is good. Now Lenrie Peters laments "crippled manhood" and in some of his poems goes on to show how this has come about. He selects specific scenes and incidents to illustrate how decayed the society has grown.

"She Came In Silken Drapes" (p. 10) is both an exposition and a satire. A whore is depicted in her invasion against man. Peters goes back to Roman and Greek mythology to find suitable apparel for dressing the lady. She is "'Veiled' Artemis," carrying her sword and "that forbidden thing" which is "less clumsy in a dream." Artemis, as we know is the "virgin goddess of the hunt," and she is an "archer."[12] But the "Artemis" of our poem is "Veiled"; she

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[11] Ibid.

[12] See Kirkwood, A Short Guide, p. 17.



is not the virgin type, but one disguised as a virgin. What she brings is truly poison of the "Coral Snake," which is like "Saturn's mystery." Saturn is the Roman name for Cronus. Cronus married his sister Rhea; "cut off the genital organs of his father"; and from the "blood that fell from them to the ground" the Furies sprang up. In spite of this awful history, Cronus became a good ruler, and when he was reigning, there was no "sorrow, sickness, or old age." People did not have to work, "for the land produced abundance without toil."[13] This is rather mysterious, just as the love which the lady in the poem brings is poison to the man.

In more general terms, this lady is further described. She is a "butterfly/With the voiceless cry." Two implications of flirtation and sneakiness are there. A dreadful tyrant, she is the huntress of "crippled manhood." Other images in the poem are quite fitting to the occasion. She walks in the "mist," for evil wants darkness, never light. Like the current that "feeds by exhaustion," she is a parasite sucking life out of men. All this is betrayal of the real meaning of love, and that is why the poem ends with an apostrophe to "Love." "Love" is now a "lusterless word," misused and "bathed in blood." The protagonist wishes therefore to "wash" "Love" like the "frenzied gold sifter," and to lead "Love" "over the phallic mound"

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[13] Ibid., pp. 32-33.





To the crystal spring
Where I have found
The purest living thing.

This attack on women of this class continues in other poems. In "A Tree Stares Back" (p. 25), which in general ridicules man's lack of courage while even a tree, dogs, a ground-worm react against any assault on them, we notice that

. . . women
Hug, kiss and strangle you
Then leave you like the dead wood
To house a toad
Before you can reach them.

It seems that women contribute considerably to making man a cripple. This very tone is not only maintained, but also intensified in "Clawed Green Eyed" (p. 26). The "Feline of night" has palsied breasts and sells "old boot." "Feline" links with "Veiled" in "She Came In Silken Drapes," both of which connote hypocrisy. She is associated with lameness and exhaustion (another word which appears in the other poem). So one hears of "Coconut bellied" but "Unyielding Copra"; the exhausted gland, fatigued love, "Worm tunneled sod," and "Prostituted fruit of Eve," all used to describe her. The last three lines are thrusts at once at her and at men who use her:

Friend of the falling star
Victim of the lonely bed.

Why "lonely?" Because she is a victim mostly to bachelors,





whose beds should be "lonely." Society is against her and "prudes" hound her for destruction.

Another poem concerned with sex is of a rather ambivalent nature. "Every Time They Shut the Gates," (p. 16) seems to concern a girl inhibited sexually because she is locked up in the convent, or a boy being prevented from making love to the girl there. Another tone in the poem seems to be against those who oppose the restriction: "The lazy crowd makes haste/To put them in their place." Except for this, the general trend of the poem is the complaint by either the boy or the girl. The point of annoyance here is that the authorities, whoever they may be, forbid "love making" after "eight." These are called the "conceited few." The "restrictions" are described as "confused." This writer does not think that the poet is attacking the people who are restricting "love making" in the late hours of the night so much as the critics of this regulation. He is consistently opposed to corruption and scandal throughout his poetry, and so it must be the reckless libertine (girl or boy) who wishes to have unrestricted liberty, that is the object of attack.

It is not only in the area of sexual matters that things have gone wrong with society. There are other ailments which have not eluded the vigilance of the poet. For instance, in the poem "They Still Walk Raw-footed" (p. 27), night "marauders" constitute the pus on the sore of society,





which must be washed off for the sore to heal. These people make use of the night only, walk along thorny avenues to evade capture and recognition. The reference to "the knowing graves" which "heave with despair" may imply the graves of those probably murdered by these robbers. It is regrettable that these enemies of their fellow human beings still live, "still swim life-jacketed" in the very "quick sands"

> Where cruising sharks make their bed
> And wait for the marauders from the land.

The protagonist plainly wishes the sharks would devour them.

No less serious a jibe is thrown at those who abuse moderation and decency. Such is seen in "After They Put Down Their Overalls" (p. 30), where there are those who, as soon as they are back from work, rush to the bars and begin to "swallow the hook of imported liquor." The word "hook" is quite effective. What the hook is to fish, excessive drinking is to man: the fish dies; the man loses his head and sometimes dies. Their thirst is like the "Hyena's." The simile recalls Awoonor-William's use of the word in "I Heard A Bird Cry," (see Chapter VI above), where he speaks of "stray hyenas" carrying "their loot away." The hyena is carnivorous, and so dangerous to other animals.

In the same way the drunkards in Peters' poems are quite dangerous to the community. They are often exhibiting "the arrogance of doubt/As they lie in refined stupor."



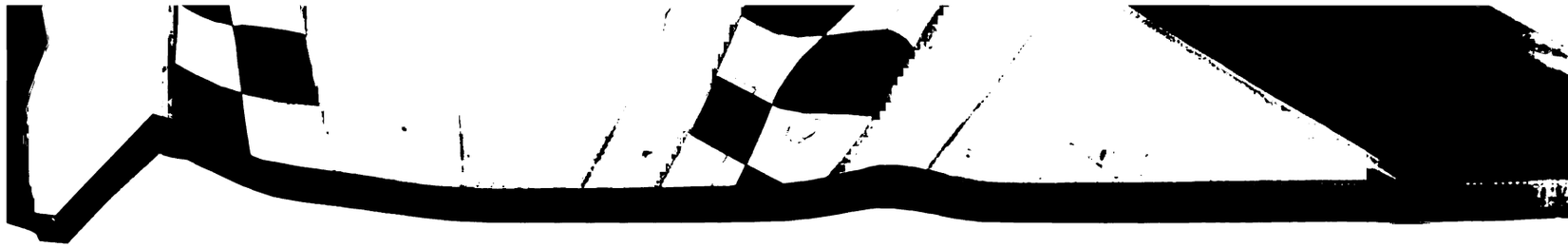
Oxymoron is another favourite device of Peters', which of course still vindicates him as a paradoxer. The abuse of the intellect is another heavy charge the poet brings against these defaulters. When they have drunk too much wine, being thus "hypnotised by the bees," they become "less sure than when they took the potion." The use of "bees" may be appropriate if the poet has been referring to "palm wine" which attracts bees. However, "imported liquor" is not defined. As in other poems dealing with social offenders, there is also a wish here that Nature may prove vindictive on them. It is no longer "sharks," here it becomes the "sun's anger" that should punish them.

Another area with which the poet concerns himself is the political. "Stand Up For Yourselves" (p. 31) is both exhortatory and satirical:

> Tell us what you like
> Not what we ought
> Before the toad-bellies
> Belch us out
> And leave us there to rot.

"Toad-bellies" echoes "house a toad" in "A Tree Stares Back" (p. 25), and "Belch" is carried forward from "After They Put Down Their Overalls" (p. 30). In all these poems these words have sinister connotations. This method of word linkage, as we have seen in J. P. Clark, makes for unity. The protagonist of the present poem is urging the ordinary people to fight for their rights. It is what they need now that they should demand.





Then there is the attack on the tired "professionals" who discuss culture in a "language from the moon." These men "have fed too long" on "green apples," and as such they now dislike "Fruit," and horribly enough, "find more comfort/in the lavatory." Their mischief may bring them not "gold" but "hell." A wish for evil, malediction, closes the poem. This is the method of one who is disappointed by his fellow men who have degenerated morally.

What specific misdemeanour is being attacked in this poem is not quite clear to me. But there is the general sense of trying to save the poor from oppression. In the last poem in this section, however, the poet becomes more specific. "Where Are the Banners Now" (p. 42) is an attack on the society which has fought for freedom and law, but which has in turn abused the same freedom and law. The poet becomes more emotional than before. The patriots have led the people to the "shrine of freedom." Their "slogans" which they "threw about like fireworks" and which "disfigured the alien face . . . have landed like meteorites" to wound their own children. Even the "flags" which have been hung high to signify the "death of our recent history"--the death of colonialism--now "hang limp." Everything points to disorder in the land which is supposed to have gained its freedom. There are the "tattered crowd," and the women who are in sorrow because "their men are made impotent with guilt."

This can be described as the replacement of "foreign colonialism" with "native colonialism." The promises made to the people by the ruling body have not been honoured, and the protagonist demands that the "tablets" be brought again, "on which the promises and the Law stand out in gold."

This is precisely what made S. T. Coleridge disclaim the French Revolution in "France: An Ode." When the Revolution started, Coleridge hailed it, because France was fighting for her freedom:

> When France in wrath her giant-limbs upreared,
> And with that oath, which smote air, earth, and sea
> Stamped her strong feet and said she would be free,
> Bear witness for me, how I hoped and feared.
> (11.22-25)

When, however, the French people invaded Switzerland (in 1798) Coleridge became enraged. For the very seekers after freedom wanted then to deprive others of their own freedom. So, addressing Freedom in the fourth stanza of the same poem, he begged for forgiveness for having supported the French move, and then condemned France:

> O France, that mockest heaven, adulterous, blind
> And patriot only in pernicious toils.[14]
> (11.78-79)

Though there are differences between Coleridge's poem and this by Lenrie Peters with respect to situation, there is the same kind of spirit in both, for both poets show the same kind of annoyance at the betrayal of freedom.

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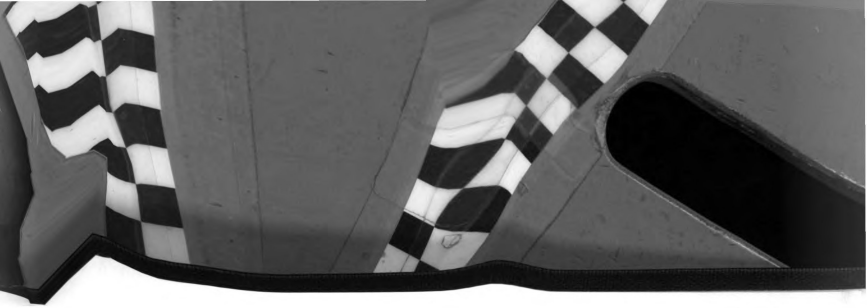
[14] The Poems of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge (London, 1961), pp. 243-247.



Peters' poem is full of passion; it is highly rhetorical, and the poetic qualities have obviously been subsumed under the weight of its political tempo. It is an unusual poem among the poems of our modern poets, but that is not to say that it is not sincere. It is the only one among Peters' poems so far studied in which African natives are attacked. This simply means that the poet is able to carry out his investigation into the social ills with candour. The rhetorical tone which marks the poem is seen throughout the other poems of Peters that have to do with the post-colonial period in his country. These poems will be dealt with later in this study. Now this author would like to turn to the poems dealing with "death."

Shuttered Ambulances

Men fall sick, get injured, and are transported in ambulances to the hospital. If they die in the hospital, they have, so to say, been brought to their death scene in the ambulance. Much of Lenrie Peters' poetry is concerned with such scenes. The struggles of life and the viruses with which the air is infested, the social diseases that attack people, all lead to the "dissolution of the flesh" and to the "Gates of Hell." Peters deals with the theme of "death" from many angles. Death can be horrifying, deluding, and yet one is sometimes asked to seek the shortest cut to the grave.



It does not matter from what point of view one looks at death, one thing is certain, its inevitability.

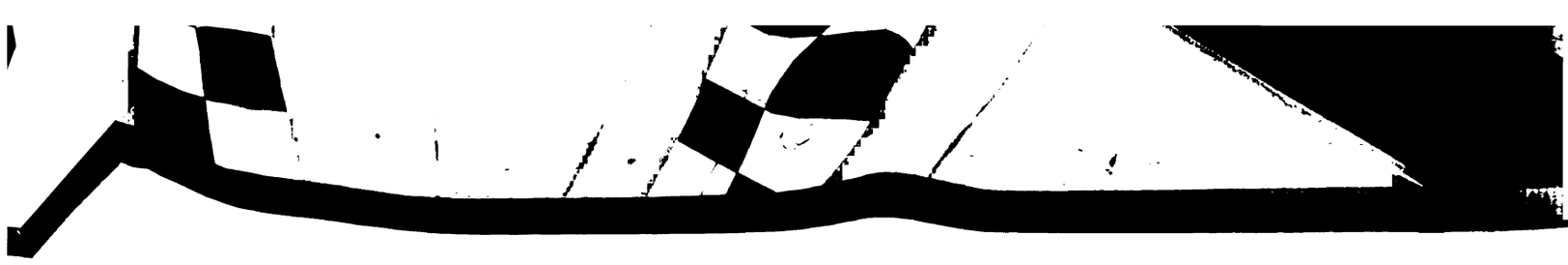
"Autumn Street" (p. 12) therefore stresses this point. In the earlier part of this chapter it was noted that "Autumn" is associated in Peters with sickness, desire, and restlessness. In the present poem it is autumn again, and everything is dying. Trees are "Hair-cropped," "Drowsy," and "Drooping shouldered." The sun's "embrace" is even "dislocated," and there are only a few "Golden tears" that mourn the passing death of summer. The death of nature only points to the death of human beings: "All are waiting." The images of conquest, death, and burial follow from the allusion to the "frenzy of death" of "Summer's canopy," and "Napoleonic Legions/Destined for snow-burial." "Snow" falls in winter; so winter, death and burial are brought together. Coming after these are "old women" who are "stick probing their coffins." They take the "final step"

> In which they see
> Their death fall
> Certain as the leaves.

Since death is such a certainty, those who are spared this year, which is only one of the "new and decaying years," will "wait for another year."

Peters has packed the poem full with disease images. In fact the reader gets two other dimensions to the images: hospital and death. There are such words as drowsy, tears, dislocated, death, burial, ambulances, coffins, and the





usual biological allusions, like "lungs." "Golden tears" is oxymorous. Death is so much a part and parcel of life that every moment on earth is just a moment of waiting for death.

In "Where the Great Tree" (p. 14), the images of death continue to appear, and the reader hears the voice of death calling the protagonist to the other world:

> Over my ancestral dead,
> I heard a voice call
> Urging me on.

He thinks of the journey through life, which is mere "marshes" and nothing but a "sanguine river/Turbulent with hate." This journey is a long one, but it must be undertaken before meeting the "weary dead,"

> Who wait in ashes
> Till we share their bed.

Maybe this is the call to which "I Shall Return" (p. 15) gives an answer. Here the protagonist agrees to "return," that is to die, but he seems to have found of late more energy for living a little longer:

> I shall return
> With unslippered feet
> When I have done with spear and shield
> And lion's tongue
> To show I have destroyed the beast.

He wishes to perform all heroic activities possible, to live his life as a youth and get dissolved "into the wholesome/ Phantasmagoria of love,"[15] to enjoy all that life has to give

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[15]Cf. Pound's "Mauberley (1920)," II: "He had moved amid her phantasmagoria/Amid her galaxies," in The Selected Poems (New York, 1957), p. 72.



Before the retina perish
And the worms flourish.

Life has some "noble greatness" now, and like a youth, he would oppose "false barriers and strife" in life, and exploit his sexual "energies"

Before I knock on the locked
Gates of Hell.

This is a sardonic ending. The protagonist has no hope of knocking on the gates of heaven. This attitude of forlornness marks these poems on death. The wish to die is not a pleasant one; death is only accepted because it is inevitable, and in the next poem, death is seen as the thief that steals the joys of childhood.

"One Long Jump" (p. 23), therefore, deals with the purity and joys of childhood which are lost in one long jump through maturity to the grave. Childhood is a period of wonders when the child's "face" is "Limitless" and complete like a globe, and the language of the child is that of nature. It is a period where the beauty of the flesh is genuine. Intuition rather than reason directs the child, for there are "no didactic analyses/To know that milk was sweet." But all these things are lost in the grave:

Because things get mouldy
In the grave
And milk loses its taste
On the coated tongue.

With death one loses his "bartered birthrite"[16] forever, for

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[16]This author thinks the word should be "birthright."



there is no return to childhood again. This is the profit and loss of growing up which we notice in Wordsworth's "Immortality Ode."

> Heaven lies about us in our infancy!
> Shades of the prison-house begin to close
> Upon the growing boy.
> (Section V, ll.66-68)

Man's early natural life is replaced by the "grinding artificialities." The jump does not mean "progression" but the "dissolution of the flesh." The idea of motion without progression has been noted in "Parachute Men." At death, one should not look back, for he will be upset by the thought of all he has lost. The only thing one should do is to wish that death should come soon:

> It is enough
> To seek a short cut
> To the grave.

But hope for rest in death will be disappointed in "Does Death So Delude Us" (p. 34), which shows that one does not even hope for quiet in the grave. Death may be a delusion in two senses. It leads one into another life where he cannot attain the peace he has been expecting. Death may also delude by foiling all the fond hopes one nourishes in this life. Death puts an end to all the toils of man. The poem opens with the image of a journey. Life is a journey to death. The "absence of light" and the "disappearance of facts" make one think he is out of existence. One who is dead has refused "the sun's welcome hand" and has opted for





"the refuse-littered shore/The lunatic abyss." Then there is no "rose" to sweeten the "faecal air." He also has yielded himself to the "imponderable negativeness" and on his leaving this life, "the secret trap door" is "slammed and jammed," after him.

The face one wears in death is no longer shining with warmth and life, for these have been sterilised, and instead of the "warm embrace, one wears the Modigliani face."[17] This is the face without life and blood, the unnatural face, a face made by the artifice of sculpture. But to live is as bad as to die, and hence the "bitter alternatives." Man is not even allowed the time to continue living in the "dream" of this world. The human heart is denied the chance to "still swell the barren dream." It is "barren" of course, but death promises no assurance of greater substance. The futility of earthly life and the delusiveness of death are both summarised in the last two lines:

> Machines and the machined
> Become irrelevant.

There is separateness here on earth, but the "common flow"

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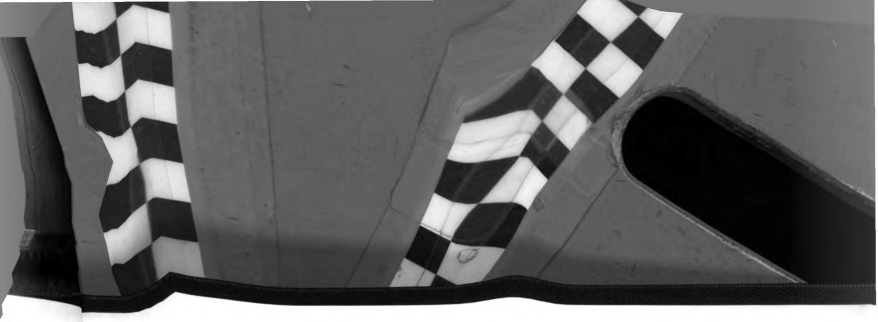
[17] Amedeo Modigliani (1884-1920). He was an Italian painter and sculptor. The characteristics of his sculptured heads are long necks and noses, simplified features and long, oval faces. The elongations and simplifications of the heads shown at the Salon d'Automn in 1912, "reflect the influence of African art." See Encyclopaedia Britannica, Vol. 15, p. 646.





of things will eventually obliterate the distinctions so that the pursuer and the pursued will become one.

Peters is suggesting that life is like a hospital where we are being dressed and prepared for the journey. Nature helps to quicken the journey as well as sickness does. What "fog" does is told in "Fog Strangles" (p. 37). It strangles with "wet hands" and squeezes "through the skin-pores." The image of the "brains of drowning men/Oozing down nostrils" is particularly eerie. In the third stanza comes another picture no less terrible. This is the life of crippled manhood, a life where almost everyone is an invalid limping toward the grave. Here some cranky old women are already shrouded for their final step:

> Rancid old women
> Cough their Haemorrhoids out
> Leave it on the table
> To show the doctor.

Images of disease, wound, injury, sickness, hospital, death, and burial are rife in Peters' poetry. He is a surgeon by profession, and there is no doubt he has seen enough of the stinking scenes of sick humanity.

If one turns the pages of this book of poetry as he turned the pages of his "diary slowly," one also finds "pages clouded and wet with tears." "Turning the Pages of My Diary" (p. 43) summarizes the final emotional situation of one who has seen much of unhealthy mankind. Tomorrow holds no better promises for him, for it only shows "the shimmering

wrinkles of age/And the trenched island of horror." The protagonist has lost his rational powers; so the instinct will take the place of reason. By resorting to biological imagery once more, he ponders over the possibility of his evolution from the "reptile":

> What if I am a recessive mutation
> To the surge of biological motion
> Which raised the mammal from the reptile?[18]

The protagonist is quite confused by the life he has seen, and the thought of death has persisted to the end:

> Then the candle grease and ink
> Insomnia and drink
> Would be just another link
> When I have gone over the brink.

Here he suggests that after his death, this book of poems, this diary of his, which has been written in ink, between sleeping and waking, amid sleeplessness and drinking--this volume will be the link that unites him with living humanity.

A Ray of Hope

As has been pointed out before in this chapter, Lenrie Peters is not very much involved in political matters or in the conflict of the foreign and the indigenous cultures. Where these two enter his scheme of things, he can be found rather as a mediator than as a fighter. However, it seems

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[18]For an illustration of how mammals descended from reptiles, see Alfred Sherwood Romer, The Vertebrate Body (Philadelphia, 1962), p. 35.





that only in connexion with the post-colonial life in his country does he find reason enough to see life as worth living. Throughout the poems to be dealt with in this section, it is all encouragement and no despondency. The cloud of disillusionment that hangs over life in the other groups has been pierced by a ray of hope generated by political freedom. It is then that the gate should be thrown open to welcome friends from all the corners of the globe. One writer says:

> Certainly the poetry of contemporary Africa indicates its emotional climate. That climate is of hope and of faith in a future that is coming more and more into the control of the peoples of Africa themselves.[19]

Such hope is what Peters envisions in the poems that will be dealt with now. Other modern West African poets we have studied so far are not as much concerned with the society of the post-colonial era, as with the harm done by colonialism. Thus they are not to be expected to express the same kind of hope as Peters has expressed.

"Open the Gates" (p. 5) strikes this note of bright expectation. It is a poem that appeals for generosity, for joy, and for virtue. The gates should be thrown open for all that is "good and best" to be brought in; the motherless "child" should be cared for. Tears should be wiped off the eyes, for there is the "new rain" which after a long period

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[19]Hughes, ed. Poems From Black Africa, p. 11.

of drought should of course bring back life. The world of the present is that of "harmony with nature/And strength in goodwill."

To Peters, life is becoming happier, and peace has supplanted war. The protagonist pleads that there should be no more rage and grief at home. It may be recalled that in a poem like "We Have Come Home," there is no security at home. But now in "How Do We Come With Rage" (p. 21), there is already the "altar of peace" to which people come with rage. Everything in the poem is significant of the change from the terrible period of colonialism to the calm of the independence era, which follows after the storm. Very deftly, the poem has been structured on a pattern of contrasts: "new dawn" survives a "bitter storm"; "healthy plants replace/The burnt out embers of hate." The shed "black cloak" is set against the "virgin rain"; and in the sixth stanza, the reader comes to the climactic point of this transformation:

> . . . She offers herself
> Her love for hate
> Peace for war
> Dignity for alien savagery.

All the past was a period of preparation for this regeneration, this "feasting" in the "new world" that is "not darkened" by the "fear of night." It is therefore necessary that the ugly past should be forgotten, so that



Elle peut dire
Comme les aveugles frappes
I never saw his face
The victim of my rape.

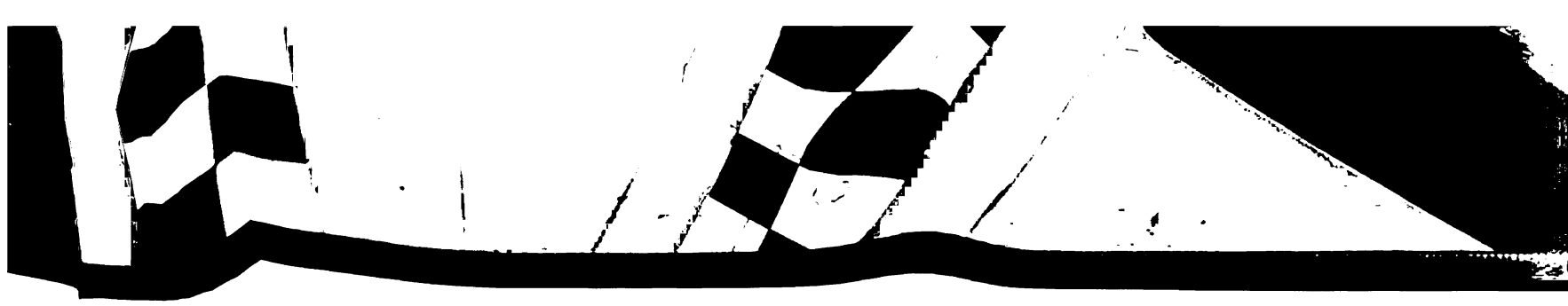
The use of "rape" for the "harm" done to Africa by colonialism began among the poets of the colonial era, and continues till now. However, it may be observed that Lenrie Peters is the least belligerent in the treatment of this theme. Here his duty is mediatory. The remembrance of "alien savagery" is only incidental.

By the use of the conception and birth imagery, Peters continues to make us visualise the unfolding of the "golden age" of hope and happenings which is supplanting colonialism. "The First Rose of the Season" (p. 22) shows the petals of the rose curled like the "foetal head" inside "an egg." The petals will unravel; the child is to be born. Both of these are symptomatic of the "perfect balance,"

Of that which is to come
In the full power
Of subdued fragrance.

There should be nothing explosive or exuberant. Freedom comes with "fragrance," but it is the subdued type, not arrogant, but humble. Yet it is full of power.

Just as autumn has been used in some of Peters' poems to represent decay and death, so is the season of spring used in "When Winter Is Over" (p. 33) to indicate the moment of change for the better, the moment of rebirth after the "death" of winter. It is now "goodbye to the dark



December." Contrasts are also rife here. Spring replaces dark December, and when this happens, "trees burst into laughter/To warm the frozen heart." The cry of the newly born child echoes the "murmurs from beyond/The compost barrier of change." The Wordsworthian tone is noticeable here, as in "One Long Jump" (p. 258 above).

All the seasons are brought together in this poem. As the poet rejoices in spring which has supplanted winter, and as he takes "a fruit" which is "dewy-pitched and young," the thought of another winter haunts him, for he knows "there are two seasons/Before the end of a song." These two seasons are of course summer and autumn. It should be noted that this poem is not specifically alluding to the post-colonial situation. But the general idea of the present joy after the sorrow of the past is noticeable. "The Seagulls Return" (p. 35) deals with the same kind of change on the generalised level. The past is associated with the storm and flood which carried away the birds' nests. Desolation marks their return, but soon Nature--"the sun" and "The Lily" --effects the renewal of life for the birds. While the sun wraps "the leaves in gold," renewing life thereby, the "lily" says "How good to be alive today."



Conclusion

One may wonder that the poet, whose vision of life has been as piteous and tragic as the previous sections of this chapter indicate, can ever find some aspect of life to make him laugh and hope. This shows that the poet has a great power of vision. His perceptive ability opens diverse avenues to his creative faculties, and thus the reader finds various ingredients in the body of his work. Peters has taken the world and life as a whole for his roaming field. He is the least tied to the things "purely" African among our modern poets. Thus, he is the most inclined to use such words as "winter" "snow," "icicles," etc. which have little realistic meaning in the context of African life. David Rubadiri once wrote:

> Our literary young men can now begin to write prose and verse that flows from the wells of the creative spirit, untied by the desire to justify African conflicts by mere surface solutions.[20]

Lenrie Peters seems to have imbibed Rubadiri's in-instruction. However, it cannot be implied that by virtue of this he is a better or worse poet than other modern West African poets. The charm of Peters' poetry consists in a number of things: his power of vision, his choice of flowing open-voweled words, his ability to combine lyricism with

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[20]"Why African Literature?" Transition, IV, 15 (July-August 1964), 42.



heavily charged lines, and also his exquisite use of such devices as paradox, oxymoron, and so on. Above all, one can see behind the poetry of Peters' magnanimity, humanity, and moderation.

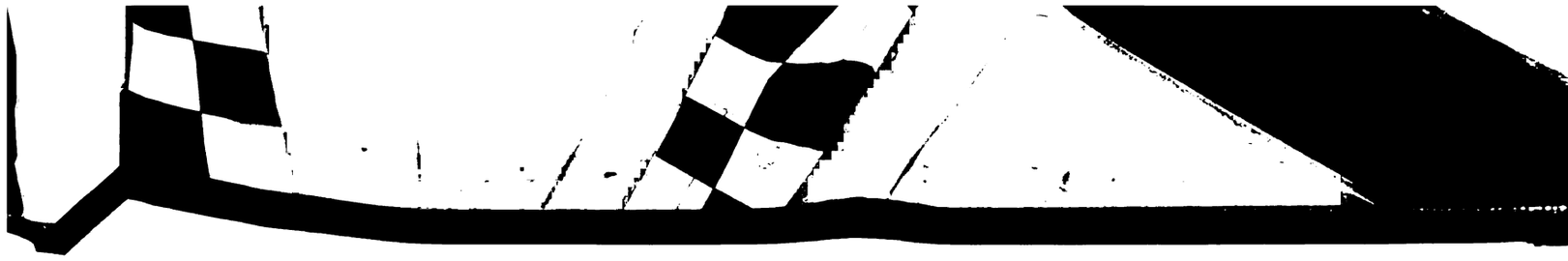
CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUSION

The subject-matter of modern West African poetry in English consists of themes drawn from life as a whole. Christopher Okigbo deals with religious and aesthetic conflicts, cultural atavism and theomachy, while J. P. Clark is concerned with a continuous tragic vision of life in general, and frustrated love adventures. With George Awoonor-Williams may be associated cultural, erotic and philosophical conflicts besides his obsession with the indigenous ways of life. As for Lenrie Peters, his poetry is a pathological study of the social, moral and intellectual aspects of life. Sometimes the themes of the poets overlap, especially in connexion with cultural conflicts, yet the points of emphasis are different with each of them.

These poets seem to believe (and this author agrees) that while making use of their indigenous poetry (vernacular and colonial) and experiences for creating works of art, they can still tap foreign sources of experiences, which are made accessible to them by their acquisition of a second language. In this way, both their themes and techniques have been very much influenced by both local and foreign forces.





Indigenous activities, such as tribal wars, funeral ceremonies, the worship of the ancestral spirits and the communal gods, the initiation into the cults of the gods--these are the debt of Awoonor-Williams to the vernacular poetry. Okigbo's interest in the goddess "Idoto," the sacrificial process whereby eggs and white hens are offered to the gods and goddesses in the groves, and Clark's exploitation of the myths of Obatala, Olokun, Olumo Rock and Abiku, show the two poets as writers of and in their own culture. These materials form the core of much of Yoruba, Ojebe, Akan and Ewe poetry. The life of the local people is tied up with religious activities, myths and the whole problem of human existence. The stress betwen good and evil is fundamental to a people who are conscious of their gods and their worship, and who treasure their ancestral heritage for its preciousness. Such stress and consciousness are handled in different ways by the modern poets also.

In matters of linguistic devices, the impact of the vernacular poetry is no less glaring. Okigbo uses the goat, ram, egg, spear-grass imagery. The images of gods and their shrines are not unimportant in his poetry. The very title of Clark's "Ivbie" is itself an image and a symbol, and it derives from the traditional life. Such other poems of his as "Night Rain" and the prologue-poem to Poems contain the images whose texture reflects the nature of the native life.

Awoonor-Williams' images based on dunghill, snake, mad dog, rain and storm, weaver-bird, coloured cowrie, shrine house, and his frequent use of local proverbs are the significant fingers of the past thrust importantly into the present. Also the incantatory nature of some of his poems and some of Okigbo's is another legacy from the ancestors' poetic method. Even Lenrie Peters, who is the least influenced by the vernacular style, has the occasion to depict the image of a native woman sitting by the fire, distracted by the death of her son, the image of fire-stones depicting something local and reminiscent of the past.

It is surprising, therefore, that Mr. Obumselu should maintain that the "African poem in English is necessarily a memorable ordering of English words," and give only casual recognition to "the debt to indigenous practice found in the works of African writers."[1] The extent to which modern West African poetry has been influenced by the indigenous life and traditional poetry is quite considerable, and it will be a link sadly lost if one should neglect it in his study of our modern poetry. The vernacular poetry is not "modern" poetry, but it has something exclusively its own, rich and attractive, which makes it worth investigating, for sometimes

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[1]"African Literature and Its Background" (Seminar Paper, reported by Rev. Omigbodun, Department of Adult Education and Extra-mural Studies, University of Ibadan, 1965), p. 1.

"the pleasure of surprise may . . . supplant the 'shock of recognition.'"[2]

The poetry of the colonial period is of more historical than artistic importance, though some of it is good poetry. But its influence on modern poetry is slight. Sorrow for the indigenous culture that was being trampled into oblivion, and the insolences and injuries from colonialism, which were handled in a subdued mood by the colonial poets, were given a more explosive and accentuated tone by the modern poets, especially George Awoonor-Williams. The older poets discovered the theme of culture-conflict, which the younger ones have treated with greater poetic insight and searching psychological analysis. The religious conflict which Abioseh Nicol portrayed in "African Easter," for instance, is handled by Awoonor-Williams and Okigbo throughout their poetry; and the quietude of freedom that Lenrie Peters celebrates in his poems, was long before predicted by the poets who were actually caught up in the storm of colonialism.

It is precisely these themes and devices that reflect the indigenous African life and cultures, which make this modern West African poetry African, despite its being written in English and influenced by foreign poetry. The modern West

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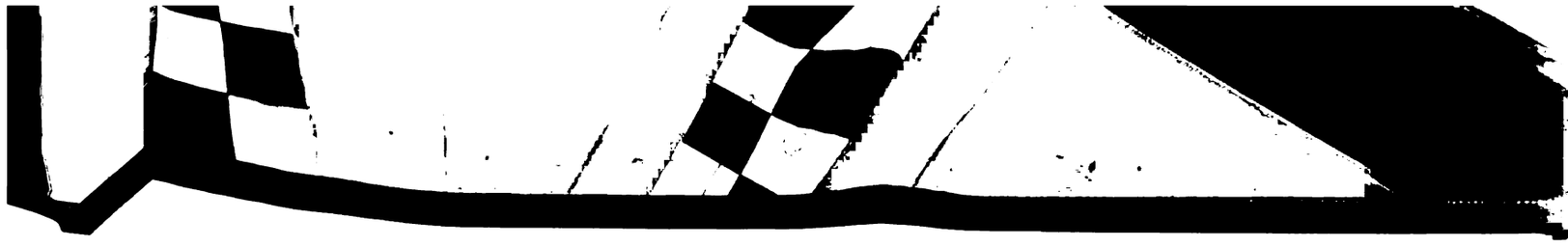
[2]A. J. M. Smith, ed. Seven Centuries of Verse, English and American (New York, 1957), p. xii.



African poets thus cherish the heritage from their past and their traditional cultures. They have well demonstrated that the past is indispensable to an accurate interpretation of the present; and indeed that the present may be the past reborn. This is a fact the student of modern West African poetry in English cannot afford to ignore, no matter how tenuous his ability to grasp this past and understand indigenous African cultures.

However, the modern West African poets writing in English have not neglected the world outside their own countries. They realise that the true workshop of a true poet is life at large, and that life is not circumscribed within any particular environment. The mental growth of these poets has been effected in an intellectual milieu that embraces experiences from various quarters of the human race. Being brought up in the use of English from childhood, and (at least some of them) acquiring other foreign langauges later in their academic life, they are fully equipped for breaking through the frontiers of their traditional culture for the purpose of exploiting other cultures. It is thus no wonder that a poet like Christopher Okigbo has much that smacks of Ezra Pound, and that in Clark we hear the commingling echoes of Shakespeare, Donne, Wordsworth, Matthew Arnold, G. M. Hopkins, W. B. Yeats, T. S. Eliot and W. H. Auden; and also that Lenrie Peters has some traces of Donne and the





metaphysical addiction to paradox, and the philosophical tendencies of T. S. Eliot, and sees the Greek and Roman mythology as another mine where poetic imagery and symbolism could be tapped to effect.

One finds it hard to apply the words of Martin Banham to the modern West African poets:

> There seems to be a constant pattern in colonial territories whereby the beginnings of a literature, plagiarising the tastes, subjects, style and ideas of the mother country . . . are weak and unenterprising and then suddenly they give way to a tidal wave of writing that sweeps all the old imported standards away and begin to create something individual and nationalistic.[3]

The modern West African poets neither plagiarise nor disdain foreign tastes. They do not assent to the creed which endeavours to create poetics turned politics. Individual they are, and do not sacrifice poetry on the altar of political enthusiasm. They take whatever they think useful from the foreign poets and make it their own by carefully working it into their poetic system, and combining the foreign with indigenous elements, create poetry which is of unique importance.

The value of this poetry consists mainly in the fact that it can appeal to foreign readers, and much more to African readers. The English and the Americans, for instance, can enjoy this poetry for a number of reasons. In the first

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[3]"The Beginning of Nigerian Literature in English," Review of English Literature, III, 2 (April 1962), 88.





place, these readers speak the language in which it is written, and therefore, can appreciate the poetry as work of art, whose chief duty is to delight. Secondly, the poetry echoes many English and American poets, who the readers have been acquainted with.

Donald Davie recognises this value of modern West African poetry. In discussing the outstanding place which modern African poetry in general occupies in the whole body of "Commonwealth poetry," Davie says that one of the merits of African poetry is the fact that it appeals to people outside Africa: ". . . everybody must get excited at the mere possibility that there is writing in Freetown which matters outside Sierra Leone. . . ."[4]

Another reason why modern West African poetry may be enjoyed by non-Africans is that it deals with such universal themes as human suffering, death, and love. Its chief concern is with humanity. Furthermore, the foreign readers get to know how the mind of the African works, and how the African writer responds to life situations.

However, there are parts of modern West African poetry which the foreign readers cannot readily understand and enjoy, and these are the sections of the poets' works that are based on indigenous material. It is with respect

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[4]"Enjoy the African Night," New Statesman, December 10, 1965, p. 934.



to such parts that modern West African poetry has much greater value to African readers than to foreign readers.

Besides enjoying the general literary merits of the poetry, the Africans derive extra pleasure from it as a result of their knowledge of the vernacular poetry, the mythology, and the indigenous cultural life in general. They have known, for example, Okigbo's "gods" of the "palm-grove," and Awoonor-Williams' initiation ceremony in the "fetish hut." They have also known that the "sanctuary of things human," as Clark tells us, "is swathed/In menstrual rags, not in the market-place."

The West African poets themselves are aware of their duty to the African readers, for they realise that to "write always as part of one's people, to build the myth that is a people's creative declaration, is to reveal the mind that is more than politically liberated and to recover those root images that foreign occupation has defaced and buried."[5] Such "root images" found in modern West African poetry add significantly to the value which this poetry has for its African readers.

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[5]Anon., "English as Highway Or As Barrier," TLS, September 16, 1965, p. 796.





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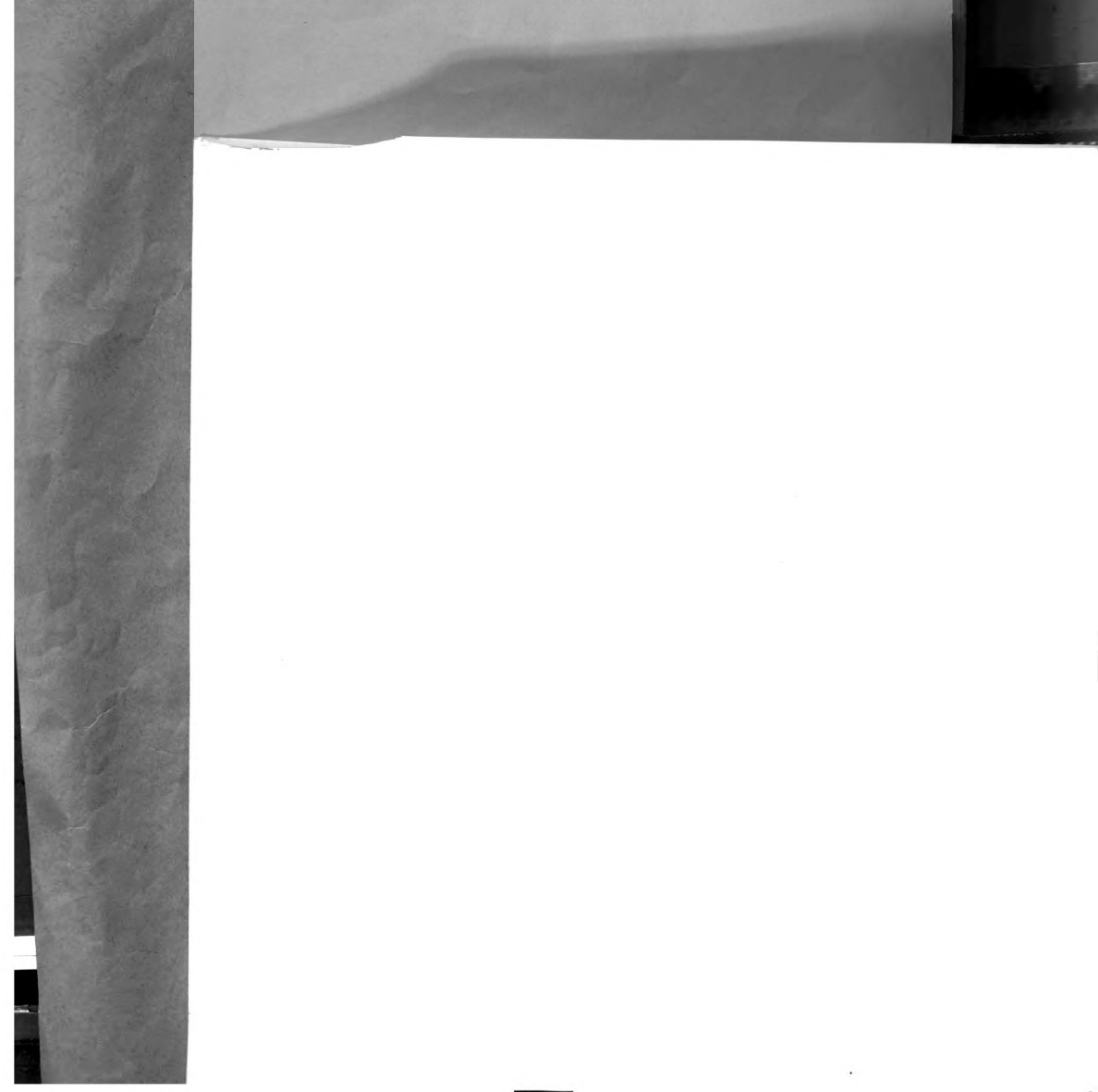

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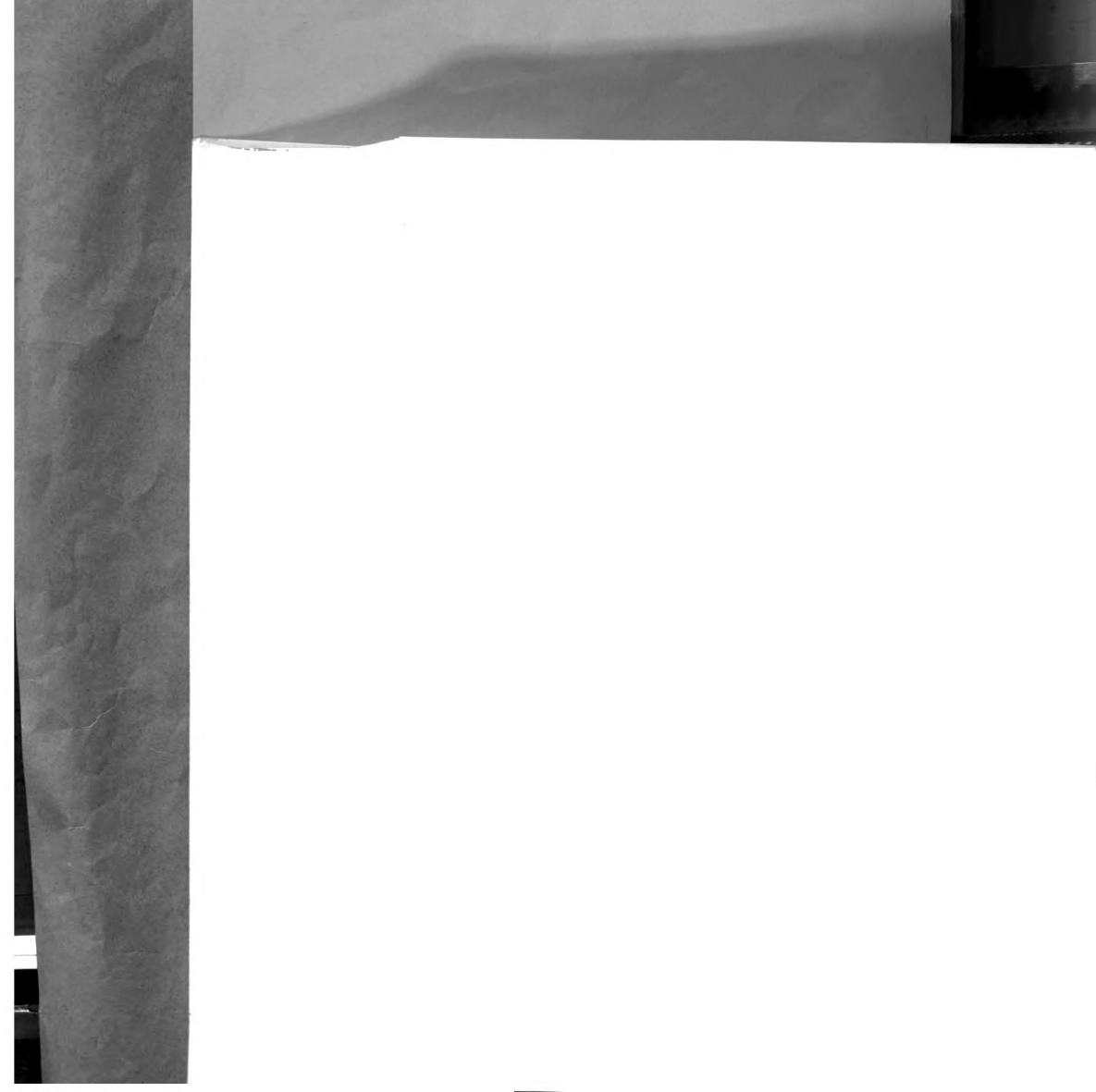

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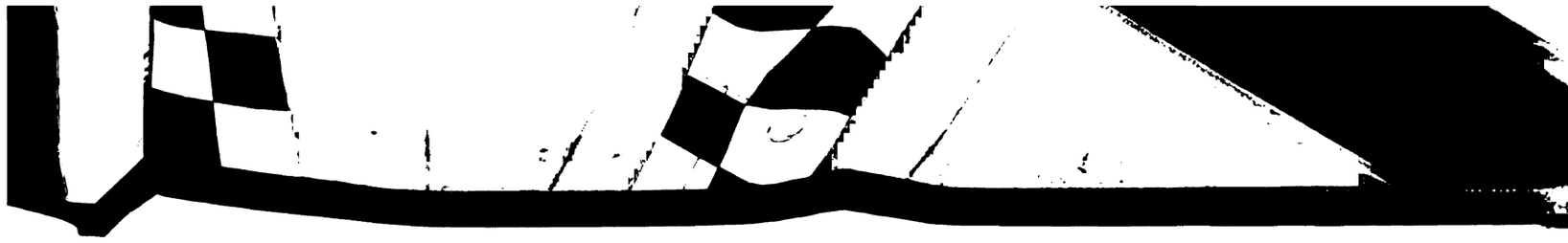

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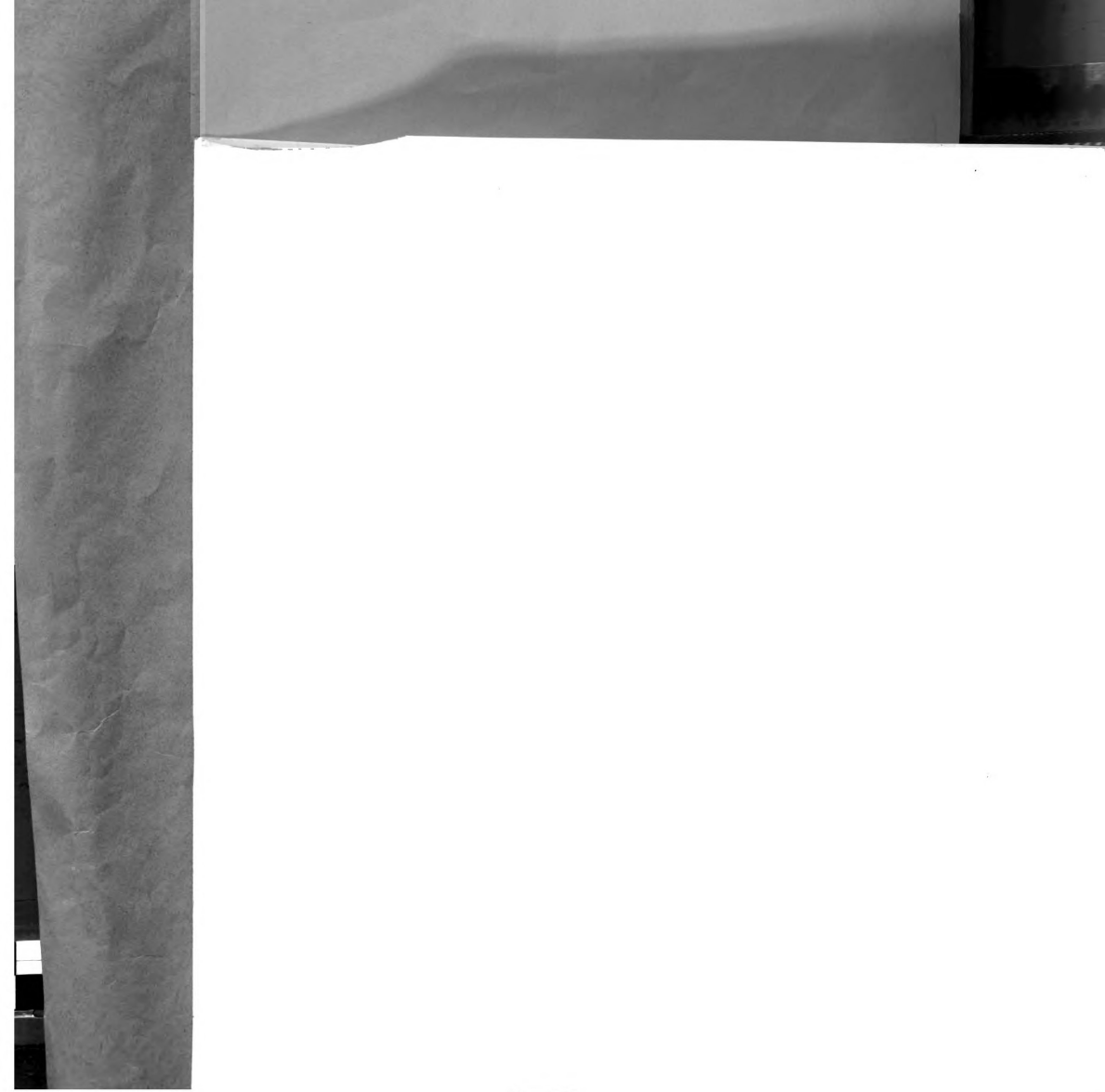

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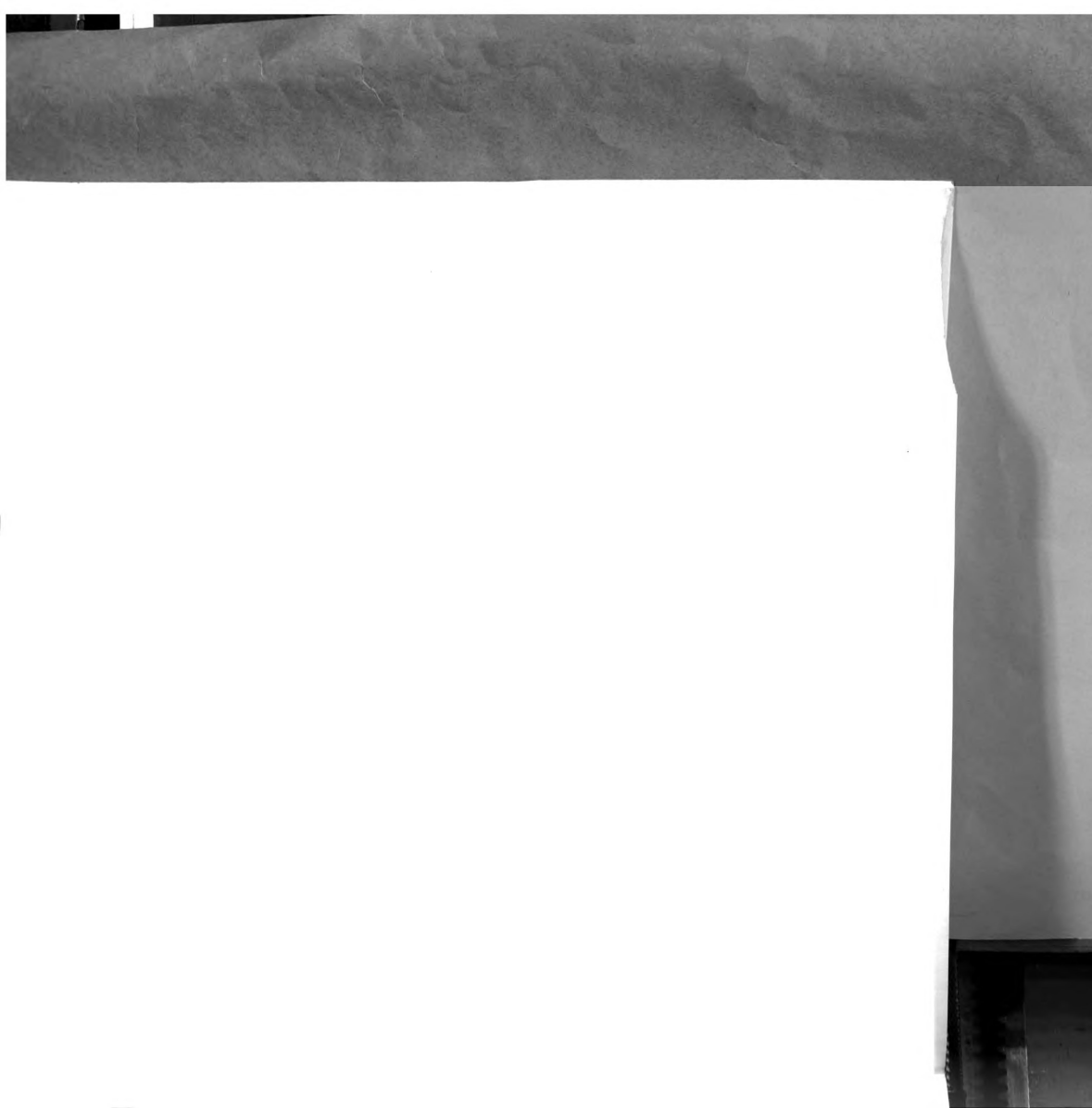

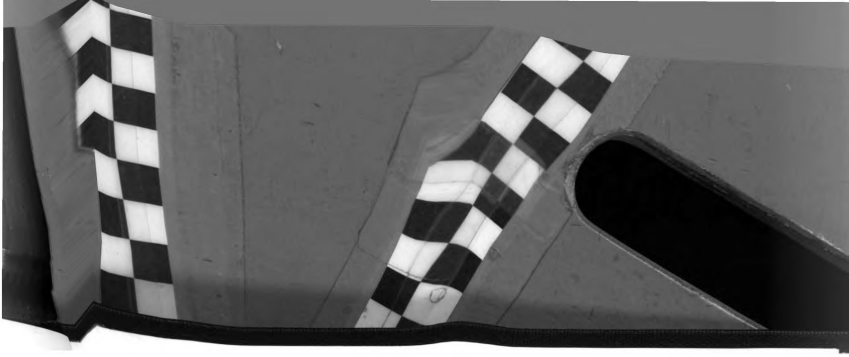

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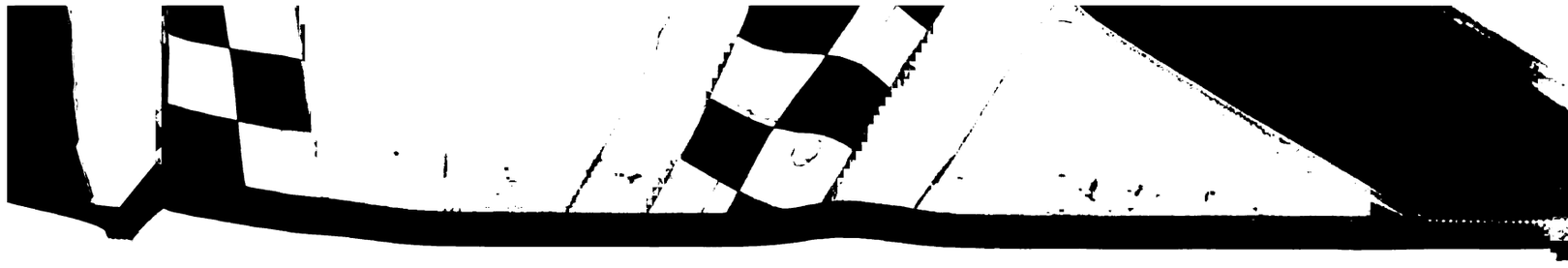

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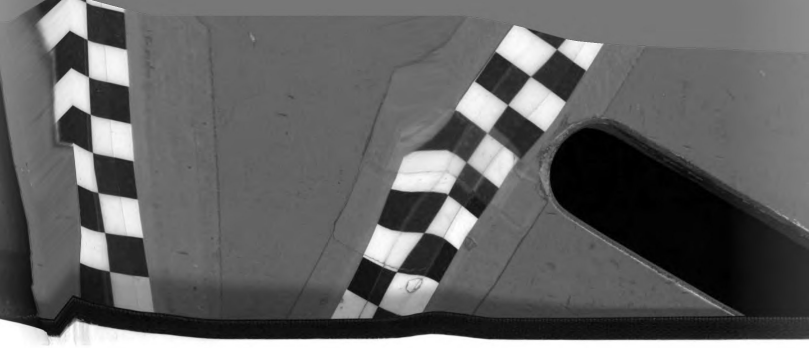



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