

**& this is the pain & the glory...
that, after bidding Africa goodbye,
we still cannot leave her behind...
That even when we know her love
has waned
we can never stop her clinging odors**

Kofi
Anyidoho

Art in a Society in Transition

In his poem 'A Birthday Card' Nigerian dramatist, poet and critic Femi Osofisan, writing under the pseudonym Okinba Launko, captures for us probably the most recurrent paradox in modern African literatures: the writers' persistent attachment to a homeland that history has often denied and contemporary real

ity is constantly transforming into a quicksand; a land reputed to be among the best-endowed in both human and material resources and yet much better known worldwide for its proverbial conditions of poverty; Africa the birthplace of humanity and of human civilization now strangely transformed into expanding graveyards and battlefields for the enactment of some of the contemporary world's worst human tragedies.

This is Africa of the intellectual and the creative writer's hope and despair, Africa of the glory of vanished civilizations and of the pain of mass populations set adrift in a world falling apart and yet still full of so many possibilities.

At the root of this paradox, it may be argued, has been oppression in its many forms, oppression that imposes severe constraints on the creative, productive potential of the land and her peoples. The 1994-95 programme of the Institute for Advanced Study and Research in the African Humanities at Northwestern University, Evanston, USA - with which I had the privilege of being involved - was dedicated to the theme Powers of Expression

and Expression of Power: Cultural Production Under Constraint. It was therefore considered appropriate to devote our first workshop to 'the varied ways in which artistic and scholarly production in Africa contends with claims of power and authority.' Somehow, the focus on prison and exile was inevitable. It is common knowledge that intellectuals and creative artists who insist on fighting oppression often end up in prison, that those who manage to survive prison often end up in exile. Almost all those we invited, all of whom were generous enough to respond to our call, were people who had been personally engaged in the fight against oppression, had personally suffered imprisonment as a result, and were now living in exile, far away from the land and the people to whose cause they had dedicated their lives, for whose sake they had suffered so much. We knew it was a rare blessing to have their commitment to the workshop. What we did not know and were not quite prepared for was the rare privilege of having all these unusually gifted individuals in one place, at the same time, all of them together testifying to shared experiences that were at once revealing, so elevating to the spirit, and yet so profoundly disturbing:

These stories that we are telling are very serious stories. They are stories that some-

times refuse to be told. They are stories which you discuss with people close to you. These are frightening testimonies... these personal stories....

Those were the preliminary warnings with which Micere Githae Mugo introduced her presentation. And as she moved on to argue and to demonstrate how 'exile can negatively affect creativity', her voice rose and fell in a tone that was in part confessional, in part conspiratorial, and ultimately celebrative of the irrepressible spirit of resistance to oppression no matter the costs to personal safety or comfort, no matter the tragedy of death and of separation. Those who had spoken before or were to speak after her, in their turn took us through the same tales of individual and shared agonies, but invariably ending on a note of hope as they spoke on an end, however temporary, to the terrors of individual dictatorships they had known, as they underscored the promise, however tentative, of new beginnings for themselves as well as for their societies.

The Artist as Santrofi Anoma

It is against this brief preliminary sketch that I would like to share with you today my views on The Artist as Santrofi Anoma. Santrofi Anoma may be trans-

lated as 'The Dilemma Bird of Akan Mythology'. Endowed with mysterious treasures of the mind and voice, Santrofi is both a blessing and a curse. Santrofi is a blessing for the clarity of its vision and for the transforming beauty and power of its gift of song. But Santrofi is also a curse for its irritating and irrepressible urge and ability to expose the unsavoury details of society's ugliness. That is why it is often said that the hunter carries Santrofi home and brings misfortune home, but abandons Santrofi in the wilderness and leaves behind a rare treasure. Society is blind without Santrofi's visionary guide, but stands forever condemned by Santrofi's persistent accusations of improper conduct.

This probably explains society's ambivalent attitude towards the artist as Santrofi Anoma. It would appear, however, that such ambivalence need not translate into hostility towards the artist, as we find in several situations in older contexts in Africa where certain institutionalized safeguards tend to guarantee the artist free space to exercise his or her critical assessment of public and private conduct.

The Traditional Bard & the Power of Words

In their introduction to the Kambili epic, Charles Bird et. al. make the following observation about the origins of the bard's authority among the Maninka:

The bard is the master of the word and words are considered to have a mystical force which can both augment and diminish a man's power to act. In this context, the bard's responsibility for controlling words is extremely great. (1974:iii)

A brief look at Mamadou Kouyate's version of the Sundiata epic recorded by D.T. Naine provides a very useful illustration not only of the role of the griot in the society, but also makes it clear that the griot's authority derives from the degree to which the griot can be seen to possess control over the word, both as a metaphysical force and as a political weapon:

...we are vessels of speech, we are the repositories which harbor secrets many centuries old. The art of eloquence has no secrets for us; without us the names of

Perhaps the concept of the true or authentic bard is no more than an ideal, but it is an ideal to which all artists must aspire if their words or works are to achieve the status of fundamental laws by which all society may find its bearings beyond the menace of political (mis)rule.

kings would vanish into oblivion, we are the memory of mankind; by the spoken word we bring to life the deeds of kings for younger generations...history holds no mystery for us; we teach to the vulgar just as much as we want to teach them, for it is we who keep the keys to the twelve doors of Mali...I know why such and such is called Kamara, another Keita, and yet another Sibibe or Traore; every name has a meaning, a secret import.

I teach kings the history of their ancestors so that the lives of the ancients might serve them as an example, for the world is old, but the future springs from the past (Niane 1965:1)

A number of commentators have tended to see declarations such as this one as no more than self-advertisement by an over-zealous griot with an eye on greater rewards from his patrons. Obviously, the griot is a professional who must live on and by his art cannot but stake his claim to authority. However, it is clear from the details of the epic narrative itself that there is much more to these claims than self-advertisement. Very early in the story, we find an episode in which Sundiata's father, just before his death, takes care to leave his son with a very special gift, 'the present each king gives his successor', for, as he puts it, 'In Mali, every prince[king] has his griot'. Nor are we to conclude that the griot's role is necessarily that of a 'praise-singer', as the word is too often (mis) translated. To the old and dying king, the griot's principal role is quite clear: 'Balla Fasseke here will be your griot. Be inseparable friends from this day forward. From his mouth you will hear the history of your ancestors, you will learn the art of governing Mali according to the prin-

ciples which our ancestors have bequeathed to us' (p. 17). Indeed, the rest of the narrative confirms the old king's statement. Balla Fasseke plays the role of the principal educator and counsellor to Sundiata. Indeed, so critical is this role that we are told later that by stealing this 'precious griot' from Dankaran Touman, who had earlier stolen him from Sundiata, the Sosso king Soumaoro Kante had made war between him and Sundiata 'inevitable' (p. 40). Sundiata's final act on the occasion of his proclamation as the first true Mansa (Emperor) of Mali, has a particular significance for the role of the griot and constitutes a recognition for the griot as one whose moral authority may indeed be beyond the reach of royal displeasure:

When Sonkolon's son had finished distributing lands and power he turned to Balla Fasseke, his griot, and said: 'As for you, Balla Fasseke, my griot, I make you grand master of ceremonies. Henceforth the Keitas will choose their griot from your tribe, from among the Kouyates. I give the Kouyates the right to make jokes about all tribes, and in particular about the royal tribe of Keita.'

Thus spoke the son of Sonkolon at Kouroukan Fougan. Since that time his respected word has become law, the rule of conduct for all the peoples who were represented at Ka-ba. (p.78)

It may be said that only a foolish king would ignore the advice or criticism of his griot. But there are often kings who would do so, though they may live to regret it. That is why the tradition is mindful of the potential threat to the person of the poet, especially from a powerful ruler who may not be amused by public ridicule, not even from his favourite griot. Hence the need to offer some protection to the poet through the ambiguity inherent in jokes and proverbial language. In the final analysis, however, the surest guarantee for the bard's presumed moral authority, even beyond that of the king, will have to derive from the degree to which the bard is able to live up to the rather severe standards of professional excellence and discipline society often expects of such an artist.

To acquire my knowledge (Mamadou Kouyate tells us in concluding

his epic performance) I have journeyed all round Mali. At Kita I saw the mountain where the lake of holy water sleeps; at Segou, I learnt the history of the kings of Do and Kri; at Fadama in Hamana, I heard the Konde griots relate how the Keitas, Kondes and Kamaras conquered Wouroula. At Keyla, the village of the great masters, I learnt the origins of Mali and the art of speaking. Everywhere I was able to see and understand what my masters were teaching me, but between their hands I took an oath to teach only what is to be taught and to conceal what is to be kept concealed (p.84)

Edris Makward (1990) urges us to make a clear distinction between the 'authentic griot' and the griot who 'prosper unscrupulously in the cities of modern Africa'; he points out how 'this insistence on the true griot's honesty, trustworthiness and moral distinction appears not only in circumstances (such as the one he cites) but even within the creative process itself, that is, in the text that the griot may be reciting' (p.24). Perhaps the concept of the true or authentic bard is no more than an ideal, but it is an ideal to which all artists must aspire if their words or works are to achieve the status of fundamental laws by which all society may find its bearings beyond the menace of political (mis)rule, (Okot p'Bitek 1986). It is such an artist that we find in the image of the Divine Drummer of Akan tradition, whose authority has deep roots in antiquity, and whose voice comes to us with powers even kings must defer to:

*The path has crossed the river.
The river has crossed the path.
Which is the elder?
We made the path and found the river.
The river is from long ago,
The river is from the Creator of the Universe...
The drummer of the Talking Drum says
He is kneeling before you.
He prays you, he is about to drum on the Talking Drum.
When he drums, let his drumming be smooth and steady.
Do not let him falter.
I am learning, let me succeed....*

Otweadumpon Nyame, the Ancient God.

The Heavens are wide, exceedingly wide.

The Earth is wide, very very wide.

We have lifted it and taken it away.

We have lifted it and brought it back,

From time immemorial.

The God of old bids us all

Abide by his injunctions.

Then shall we get whatever we want,

Be it white or red.

It is God. The Creator, the Gracious one.

Good morning to you, God. Good morning.

I am learning, let me succeed. (Nketia 1967: 30)

Clearly, this artist's words do not derive from any temporal authority, however great. That is why even the Asanthehe must stand and listen when the Divine Drummer bids him do so. And it is in this regard that we may agree with p'Bitek that in African tradition such artists 'are fully acknowledged, admired and feared,' for they provide and sustain 'the fundamental ideas, the foundation of society' (p'Bitek 1986:39).

Such an understanding is crucial to the sense of total devotion with which most true poets would pursue their calling. We may in this case compare them to the traditional priests, who, like the poets, must carry out their sacred obligation, in spite of a life of suffering and self-denial that such an obligation may sometimes impose.

It is however important that we move the artists out of the domain of the sacred and situate them within the framework of a secular social dynamic. Once we do this, a somewhat different understanding begins to emerge about their claims to authority and about how other powers in society relate to the artist. The gift of songs may indeed have divine origins as the poets tell us, but in its creative manifestations, the gift engages both poet and the immediate society in an interactive process that calls for more than religious interpretation or evaluation. This is where we may talk of the politics of the power of song. At one level, we find that the artist's claims to divine inspiration, whether real or fictive, becomes a source of moral justification for keeping a critical

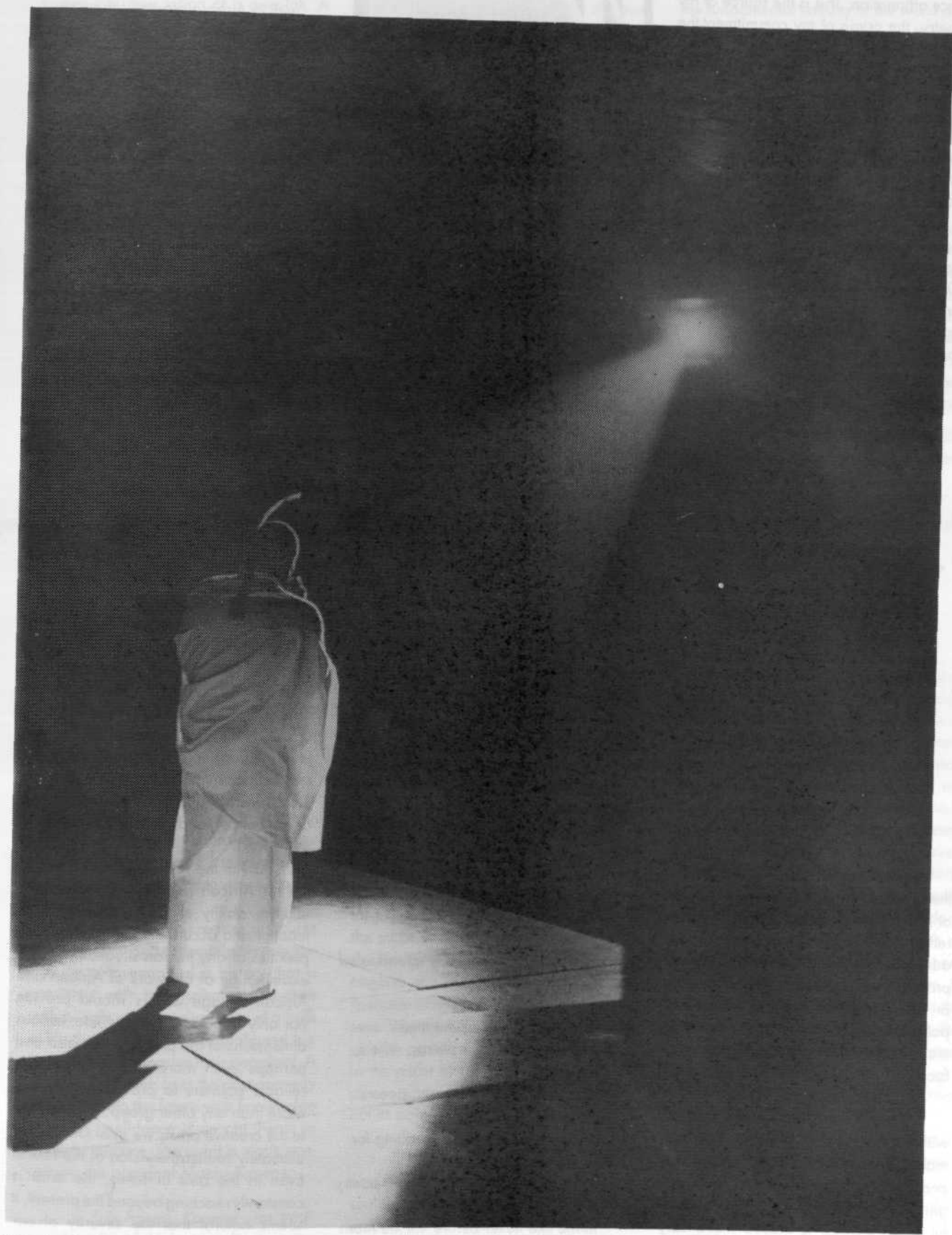
searchlight on the rest of society. For whatever reason, this searchlight is often, though not exclusively, directed at the activities or behaviour of those who have access to various forms of power.

In the final analysis it is perhaps in this moral courage to stand by the truth that we may find one of the most important sources of the poet's often acknowledged threat to powerful individuals and groups in society. It is equally significant that the poets are generally 'not found among the aristocracy of leaders' (Awoonor 1974:19). In such a position of secular power and privilege, they may have the greatest difficulty keeping up their loyalty to the voice of their god of songs, to truth beyond political or personal convenience. This makes it possible for the poet to look society full in the face and claim the right to speak the truth, however unpleasant. And society is obliged to listen, even if with embarrassment or in anger. After all, as the Ewe poet Atsuborta tells us in one of her songs, 'When Ear is there/You do not whisper into Nose'.

The Contemporary Artist as Guardian of Public Conscience

We may now focus on the contemporary artist who believes in the heritage of the poet as 'guardian of public conscience', but who must contend with temporal powers that do not necessarily subscribe to the norms of traditional society in allowing the poet a reasonable free space for dissent and critical assessment of public conduct. Much of the work of the current generation of African poets is marked by a constant interrogation of the presumed vitality and validity of the Word on what some of them see as an indifferent, even hostile world. There is constant tension between the sacred and the mundane in the works of many of Africa's contemporary poets. Kofi Awoonor, for instance, asserts that:

The magical and the mysterious relationships defining only very simple and the mundane have, beyond time and place, their anchorage in words. Our people say the mouth that eats salt cannot utter falsehood. For the mouth is the source of sacred words, of oaths, promises, prayer and assertions of our being, pres-



Narrator 1. Actor, Olu Jacobs in the play, 'The King Must Dance Naked', by Fred Agbeyegbe, National Theatre, Lagos.

ence affirmation. This is the source of my poetry, the origin of my commitment—the magic of the word in the true poetic sense. Its vitality, its energy, means living and lifegiving (Awoonor 1987:16).

Despite this assertion, however, we must recognise that language has the capacity not only to assert truth but also to utter falsehood; that language is not only a creative and liberating force, but also a deadly weapon in the hands of false prophets. Thus the Nigerian poet Odi Ofeimun (1980), for instance, puts a poet on trial in the context of a communal tragedy and comes to the firm conclusion that 'The poet lied'.

For his voice was cold, sandpaperish,
farming no honesty.

Weeping to measured effects, in false fits
he laminated the wind with cat-calls
where there ought to be thunder.

Where his heart should burst
his words were merely correct and sane,
the envy of the gazette-compilers
lacking energy, the human inflexion
to exhume
from their shallow makeshift grave
the memory of those lost
in paths of rain and ruin.

And because he tried to change
the exuberant colours of life
into sallow marks, relieving death
of its hurt, its significance,
the poet lied, he lied hard.

Given this constant tension between the power of the artist's words to be true or false to the perceived reality, we may reflect briefly on some of the strategies adopted by the modern artist either to profit by false pretense or to be true to his or her conscience even in the face of potential dangers posed by those who may consider their words as 'a threat to face'.

As with the traditional griots so it is with the contemporary artists. We must make a distinction between the true artists and those who practise for short-term gains. Insistence on truth, however painful or dangerous, is indeed not a very convenient choice, and it is understand-

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able that there will always be those, even among the artists, who would feel 'compelled', perhaps by an instinctive desire for personal 'safety', to take sides against truth. But perhaps, more than the threat of direct political repression, it is the threat of loss of faith in life that many African artists are probably most preoccupied with. An artist who has no faith in life perhaps has not business assuming the 'voice of vision' for society. And the real challenge for the contemporary African artist is how to point out a viable future for a society that seems to be under so much stress, a society trapped into an extended state of transition into a doubtful future:

An avalanche of the spirit has told
me tales
I did not know were there.
And I have seen life so dead, unreal,
openly savage...
And I have seen vibrant mornings
collapse
into the cloying grimness of sun-for
saken nights.
Grief was not enough...

I am possessed by a many splendoured
truth...

Poetry was there all the time!
In the dark purulent places, where,
sometimes,
the soul pours out its pain, poems
abound,
and dreams are eager, waiting for
dreamers.
Tonight, in our republic of lies, poetry
is born again,
in me like never before: till the morn-
ing comes,

my soul will light up the dark
with its lustrous craving for nectar.
(Afam Akeh, Nectar 1989).

The ultimate legacy of literature is probably its ability to move the human mind and spirit beyond conventional wisdom, beyond so-called reality and into realms formal history has no capacity to recognize, and not enough faith to acknowledge. Such a realm is often mistaken to be the realm of dream. But the visionary world of imaginative literature is not just a dream world, a world of illusion. It is the world of human possibilities and alternatives, a world in which human creativity can overcome persistent despairs and make projections into that other world of desire so often blocked by the savageries of life.

As we move rapidly towards the close of the 20th century, we cannot but realize the need for a careful assessment of prospects for a life of fulfilment for African peoples world-wide. From the historians, the political analysts, the economists, statisticians, medical scientists, and so-called development planners, the facts as they are presented, look very bleak indeed. The current and projected deterioration in the quality of life for the masses of African peoples imposes on us an urgent need for a close examination of prospects for immediate as well as long-term solutions. It is in this regard that we may call attention to the role of the creative artist as a critical assessor, confidence builder, and inspirer to excellence.

Given the severity of the current of life for African peoples, and given the intuitive ability of the creative artist to monitor and accurately capture the complexities of any human situation, a close examination of the work of African and African-heritage writers should provide not only important insights into various dimensions of the problem, but also and perhaps even more crucial, subtle but reliable pointers to probable solutions. More than any other group, it is perhaps to the creative artists we must turn for an ultimately realizable vision of the future. Even in the best of times, the artist is constantly reaching beyond the present; it seems natural that the severity of our present crisis must urge our artists even

farther into their vision of a new life. A close-up on the work of contemporary African writers should confirm that many of these artists are indeed grappling with this fundamental problem of life in much of their work.

One of the most remarkable things about their work is a clear sense that for these artists, survival is not enough. They insist on taking us beyond the tendency to celebrate the mere fact of survival, a tendency too often associated with assessments of African culture. We may recall that when Achebe, for instance, speaks of African literature as a 'literature of celebration', he takes care to indicate that much of that celebration is focused on a life of human possibilities, not just on what has actually been achieved. Achebe cites for us the example of mbari as the quintessential manifestation of what a community of African artists may set out to achieve (Achebe 1990). His example offers an ancient model which we may find to be valid for most of our contemporary artists. They yearn for change and indeed offer us exciting images of that world of desire, even as they take care to indicate, often in horrifying detail, striking images of our record of blunders. Their passion is for change, but it has to be change in the light of what we have taken the trouble to learn about ourselves and about our world, what we care enough to learn from our achievements and our failures. The Ghanaian poet Kwadwo Opoku-Agyemang corrects a common reversal of truth when he insists that 'history does not repeat itself. It merely quotes us/ when we have not been wise enough.'

Theirs is often a creative discourse of re-invention and especially of rediscovery, the re-invention of a history that is consistent with the aspirations of their own people, and the discovery of a faith in life that a distorted and maligned history has tried to deprive their people of. A recovery of models from the past as a way of looking into the future with knowledge and with confidence is an old theme in African literature. The point is made concerning the poetry of Mazisi Kunene:

In Zulu Poems, Kunene uses traditional modes of thinking and expression without advocating a return to the past,

nor does he necessarily glorify the past like the Senghorian school of Negritude.... His poetry depicts a world which is constantly moving forward to a higher state, and this partly accounts for the strong element of optimism that runs through the poems on resistance to apartheid. (Ngara 1990:78).

Less than five years ago, we could have looked in vain to our political analysts and historians for a confident prediction of the possible collapse of apartheid. But over two decades earlier, Kunene had consulted the history and the cosmological logic of his land and had come to the firm conclusion that the collapse of a regime as unjust as that of apartheid South Africa, was indeed just a matter of time. So in *Time Will Come* he could speak of how 'imagination shall overpower the children of the sun/Making them burst forth with our tomorrows' (1970:39). And in *After the Age of Pain*, he could, even in those early years, dare to make fun of the 'Fools that rule from gigantic thrones/Deriving their joy from the words of dry leaves'. He was in no doubt that the age of pain and the season of locusts shall pass:

*The earth will become fertile one day
And the islands will stretch to the horizons
Overgrown with fruits from the weeds.
(1970:38).*

We find this theme and approach, deriving its strength from a deep faith in the future, being revisited by many of our younger poets, and with a vigor and insight that often yield the most spectacular expressions of a new vision of life in the midst of overwhelming conditions of despair (Ojaide 1990). So Afam Akeh of Nigeria can speak of his persistent and 'lustrous craving for nectar', even as he sees 'vibrant mornings collapse/into the cloying grimness of sun-forsaken nights' in the midst of all those 'dead, purulent places where, sometimes/the soul pours out its pain.'

The many splendoured truth that possess this poet is the truth of a creative soul—he shares with other artists from around the continent, and indeed from around the world at large. It is a truth that is anchored in an ancient African faith in

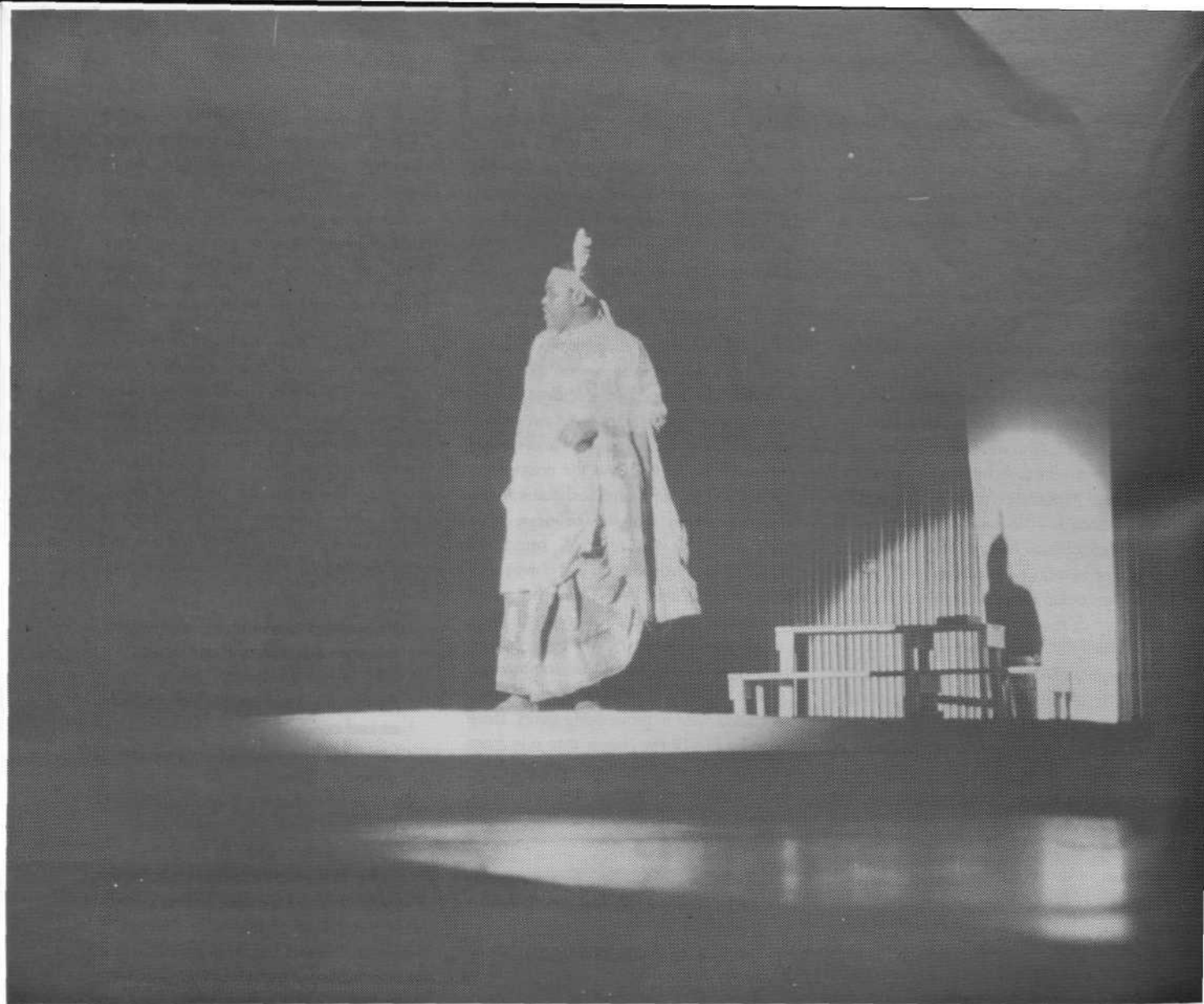
the fundamental validity of the word as a creative and recuperative force. It is also based on an understanding that the word creates, but it also destroys. It is precisely in this regard that we find in much of contemporary African poetry, an insistence on restoring to the word its primal integrity and sacred trust.

As a first step, we find that many of our artists insist on sincerity within their own ranks, and they would denounce not only politicians, those we commonly identify as defilers of the word, but especially those among the artists who would elect to prostitute the word for personal profit. Hence Odia Ofeimun's satirical portrait of the fellow poet who would not live and possibly die by the sacredness of the word as truth:

*He wanted to rise up to the moment
to be on the side of those
who became relevant,
those whose voices spelled out balanced concern—
when his country was dipped like
dishrag
in the blood of her own children...
(The Poet Lied).*

It is to the credit of our artists that as a group, a good number of them would often risk personal liberty in defense of truth. As Kobena Eyi Acquah of Ghana demonstrates for us in his poem *The Man Who Died*, such self-sacrifice may not always be fully appreciated by even those on whose behalf the artist may be fighting the course of truth. Some might even consider it a senseless act: having 'died/ for a cause/... of no personal worth' (Acquah 1984:74). From the other side of the continent, we can take the case of Frank Chipasula of Malawi in his poem *Manifesto on Ars Poetica*, a poem in which he redefines and asserts for us the role of the poet and of poetry in the struggle against the death of social conscience.

*I will not wash the blood off the image
I will let it flow from the gullet
slit by the assassin's dagger through
the run-on line until it rages in the verbs
of terror;
And I will distill life into the horrible
adjectives;
I will not clean the poem to impress the
tyrant*



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Narrator II.

I will not bend my verses into the bow
of a praise song.
I will put the symbols of murder hid
den in high offices
in the centre of my crude lines of
accusations.
I will undress our raped land and
expose her wounds....
I will not coat my words in lumps of
sugar
I will serve them to our people with
the bitter quinine:
I will not keep the truth from my
heartstringed guitar....
I will ask only that the poem watch the
land closely;
I will ask only that the image put a
lamp on the dark

ceiling in the dark sky of my land and
light the dirt.
(Anyidoho et al. 1989:19-20).

We notice here that the poet employs very striking and bold metaphors, preferring the strategy of direct confrontation to that of indirection and allusion. Perhaps those who are familiar with this particular poet's relation to his immediate socio-political context may wonder how he could get away with such strategy of bold accusation and confrontation. It is not difficult to imagine what would have befallen Chipasula and his poem if he were living and working within the repressive society he is so bent on denouncing in such clear terms. There

is a long list of African writers who have ended up in jail because they would not opt for the kind of living death Soyinka identifies for us: 'The man dies in all who keep silent in the face of tyranny' (1972:13).

They say that death is probably the most common reality of our time, especially among African people. We are assured that there are many more children dying of hunger and ill-health than ever before. Indeed, there are many observers and commentators who feel concerned that the 21st century may very well be the century of mass extermination of large segments of the African population. In this regard, it is important that we look

at what our poets have to tell us about the subject of death.

As we look closely at the work of our writers, we note that many of them insist on taking us beyond the despair and the gloom of death, beyond the silence of the grave. I will cite only two examples to illustrate this tendency in contemporary African poetry, a tendency not unlike what we may find when we make a careful study of the funeral dirge traditions from various parts of the continent.

Our first example is that of the Malawian poet Steve Chimombo. Some time in 1987, Jack Mapanje, Emmanuel Ngara and I met in Harare as judges of the African entries for the Commonwealth Poetry Prize. Chimombo's collection *Napolo Poems* arrived with the cyclostyled copy of a poem that, according to the publisher's hand-written note on top of the first page, was not allowed by the Malawian censorship board to be included in the collection. The ill-fated poem is titled simply, *A Death Song*. It is a significant expression of paradox—a death song about the triumph of life. The poem/song is built around the words of an apparently popular Malawian song in which the chameleon comes with a message of death and desolation:

*Look at my homestead.
It is empty. Empty.
There is death at home.*

The rest of the chameleon's song reiterates a determination to abandon home and imitate what Mazisi Kunene in one poem warns us against: 'the death speed of the salamander,' the speed of one running against himself, running against life. In response to the chameleon's message of death, the poet reminds us all of the possibility of life even in the midst of death. 'The chameleon was wrong', he assures us. 'We are still alive', in spite of the devastation, in spite of the savagery, in spite of all the natural and man-made disasters. 'The chameleon was wrong.'

In another poem in this collection, Chimombo promises us a return to laughter and to truth after a decade of silence and of lies:

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*Was it a decade after Napolo
I met you, friend?*

No matter.

*We live to tell the story around the fire
in whispers and behind locked doors.*

*We are going to laugh together again
with empty mouths,
and dead eyes:
grimaces echoing hollowed minds.*

*Review what is left unsaid,
and, after we have parted,
we will know
what it is we wanted to say
before you noticed the dullness in my
eyes
and I, the emptiness of your mouth,
before the art of saying nothing
in a mountain of words
interrupted our conversation...
(The Message).*

The peculiar conditions under which the poets must insist on the integrity of the word as an affirmation of life is an important contemporary example of the various strategies by which the artist can transform and sharpen our understanding of life and of the realities of our existence. The spirit of endurance about which these artists speak is probably their greatest gift to a community under siege, which indeed is the situation of many African

people today.

That insistence on the possibility of life beyond the reality of oppression and a regime of death, is also seen in a recent poem by one of our older writers, Kofi Awoonor. His *A Death Foretold* begins, not with a denial but with an acknowledgement and affirmation of the despair, the frustration, and above all the grief of death. But the real beauty and power of the poem lies in the certainty with which, by deploying various symbols and images of hope, the poet moves us beyond the 'death foretold' into that other realm for which we must continue to struggle, not just for survival, but especially for a life of new meanings beyond our present and future sorrows. It is in these words of hope, words of reassurance, that we may find a blue-print for collective action against the many messages of death being constantly placed before us by the raw statistics of the conditions of our world at the dead-end of the twentieth century:

*I believe in hope and the future
of hope, in victory before death
collective, inexorable, obligatory....*

*Beyond the fields and shout
of youth, beyond the pine trees
and the gnarled mangoes
redolent of childhood and prenatality,
I am affronted by a vision
apparitional, scaly
lumbering over a wall
raising a colossal bellow.
His name is struggle.
He is my comrade and my brother
intimate, hurt, urgent
intimate, hurt, urgent
and enduring.*

*I will not grieve again tomorrow.
I will not grieve again.
(Awoonor 1992: 38-40).*

It is on this note of hope that I wish to conclude this moment of sharing even as we look around and wonder what the basis of our optimism could be. 'The world is old, but the future springs from the past,' says the griot Mamadou Kouyate. Perhaps we lose faith in the future because we are not patient enough with the past. In an article entitled 'Na My Mouth Be Gun' (1986), Ghanaian poet Kobena

Eyi Acquah defines the writer's role as that of priest and prophet. As a priest making intercession for his people, the artist stands not only between his people and the rest of the world; more important, he 'stands between them and themselves...helping his people to be reconciled to themselves, to honestly face the issues and accept the inevitable.' As a prophet he does not call up a vision of doom. Instead, 'as the people face each successive cliff on their national pilgrimage, as the going gets rough and vision grows dim, he is there to remind them of what might (Acquah 1986).

In a particular lucid chapter in *Anthills of the Savannah*, Achebe offers us a most compelling view of life as struggle, pointing out the importance of the role that each of us may play according to our various talents and skills:

The sounding of the battle-drum is important; the fierce waging of the war itself important; and the telling of the

story afterwards—each is important in its own way. I tell you there is not one of them we could do without. But if you ask me which of them takes the eagle-feather I will say boldly: the story.... Why? Because it is only the story that can continue beyond the war and the warrior. It is the story that outlives the sound of war-drums and the exploits of brave fighters. It is the story, not the others, that saves our progeny from blundering like blind beggars into the spikes of cactus fence. The story is our escort; without it, we are blind. (Achebe 1987:113-114)

Often we may not like the story the artist re-enacts for us. But we need not blame the artist for the unpleasantness of the tale, especially if it happens to be the truth. Anyone who turns away from the path of truth, soon runs into a dead-end. And, as the poet puts it, 'History does not repeat itself./ It merely quotes us/ when we have not been wise enough.' So let me conclude by sharing with you a brief but memorable portrait of 'The Artist as Santrofi

Anoma.'

I have been a witness to and a chronicler of my time. One cannot live outside one's time, even if one projects oneself into times future or past. Attempting to see beneath the surface is what I strive to do. I want to be an oracle, a knower of hidden things, the knower of the other side of things; not a conventional oracle who foresees doom, but the oracle of good tidings, the oracle who alerts his people against taking a course that leads to doom. The things we need to do to overturn current hardships are there for us to seize upon. One finger has to point out those things that need to be done. That's the sort of poet I would like to be known as. The poet should be an oracle and a healer. All the more reason that our vision should be one of hope: for restoration of the good we have lost, for attainment of a state of well-being. Only hope can save us. (Ojaide 1994:21) GR

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