The Idea of a Marxist Poem: A Nigerian Perspective

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The paper examines a sample Marxist poem about a guerrilla. The most important distinction it makes is that between the relatively stable semantic meaning of the text, and its political significance. The significance of the poem is a matter of its capacity to enhance genuine revolutionary awareness and intention, and this capacity lies beyond the control of the individual poet who cannot control what the educational apparatus does with it. The radical poem is turned to reactionary use in the educational system; in other words revolutionary meanings serve capitalist neocolonial ends by acting as examination 'fodder' for the reproduction of a privileged class.

To an extent the neutralization of significance in the classroom may be counteracted by adopting a different kind of study of literature, that of 'demonstrative (i.e. creative) criticism'. Alternatively the contradictions that arise within the education system may be avoided by looking to an audience outside the university in the populist type of consciousness raising. However, such a strategy can only be effective if it is coordinated as part of wider national Marxist movement, such as does not at present exist in Nigeria; but without it the Marxist poem is unlikely to obtain revolutionary significance. The relation between what the poet and his audience do verbally and their actual social praxis (which is how 'commitment' is defined) remains incongruent.

I will try to pin down these remarks by taking a particular Marxist poem as my point of reference. This is 'Guerrilla' by Idi Bukar, the Nigerian poet.

GUERRILLA [1]

You learnt to spell political words
the parts of weapons
the colours of the leaves
the angles of shadow

Your engraved bayonet art on a certain cave wall
a helicopter
an x-ray American rifle
a perfect enemy in uniform

You identified yourself
You became invisible

My main argument will be that a lthough it is possible to talk of 'the Marxist poem' on the basis of the content of a text, for a peom to have a Marxist significance contextual factors are involved. Ultimately the Marxist poem can only achieve revoluionary significance in the context of an organised Marxist movement. I assume throughout the paper that such a movement places prime importance upon literacy, the written work being the basis of study, and much more widely disseminable, especially under clandestine conditions.

I begin by attempting to clarify the distinction just made between what a poem means and its significance in social context of situation. I will look first at the meanings of 'Guerrilla' which are relatively stable whatever the situation or reading; U will then look at the most likely actual reading situation in Nigeria, the classroom; and after that discuss it in relation to conscientization.

The poem 'addresses' an imaginary guerrilla, placing him in relation to the poet, as 'you'. It also places the guerrilla in time through the use of the past tense. But it does not place him in space, geographically - a point to which I will return. The poet also relates facts about the guerrilla, who could possibly be dead. These facts would, of course, be perfectly well known to the guerrilla; they are

not information giving except to the reader of the poem; they have the effect of eulogy. The last two lines are not factual; they move into a philosophical placing and characterisation of the guerrilla's life, and this he may well not be (have been) aware of.

Verse one refers to the literacy classes the guerrilla undergoes in the bush or forest. The educated reader (or the reader who has had similar experience) will be reminded of the writings of Cabral or other Southern revolutionary writers. Freire-fashion, the primers select politically and emotionally important vocabulary in the student's life, his weapon, the cover given by foliage and shadow, things upon which his survival depends. The second verse turns to the guerrilla's expressive nature, his drawing. Using what is to hand, the point of his bayonet, he shapes images of a helicoper, an american rifle in 'x-ray' style (showing the internal parts), and of an enemy soldier. The modern bayonet contrasts with the ancient practice of cave-art, and the use of a weapon for creating art brings together a relation between struggle and civilized human relations which underlies the guerrilla's dedication. The drawings are marked on a cave wall where perhaps the guerrilla lodged; but the cave wall reminds us of the way ancient men represented their own enemies in 'x-ray' and other styles in strikingly accurate representational art which may have been a means of contemplating the animals the hunter hoped to kill or needed to evade, and mentally prepared himself for the dangers. The guerrilla's position is parallel. He hopes to capture the American rifle, and on favourable occasions 'hunt' the enemy soldier; and needs to evade the helicopter. The enemy in uniform is 'perfect' in the sense that the drawing of him is perfect (a distinction which begins to show us a difference between aesthetic and moral values). Like the ancient hunter the guerrilla invests all his own powers in studying what opposes him, his opposite. Paradoxically he identifies himself in the image of his enemy; hence his own individual personality becomes 'invisible'. A number of further interpretation of the last two lines is possible. The guerrilla identifies himself in a second sense by leaving behind these traces of his presence. He becomes invisible by his use of camouflage, already mentioned in the first verse, and by his loss of self-importance as an individual. This is a kind of identification through commitment.

Finally, the guerrilla may be thought of as becoming invisible through death or simply by being forgotten as an individual (except in the poem) as he passes into the stream of history.

An omission in this interpretation is the placing of the guerrilla in a specific area. This is left to the reader. He gains some help from other poems by the same poet, if he knows them. In these the situation is often quite clearly Nigeria. In 'First the Desert Came and Then the Torturer' there are poems about the recent military take-over, and about the Bukalori massacre. These poems, like 'Guerrilla', are in the past tense, recounting the history of 'That Country' which bears a resemblance to Nigeria in many but not all the poems. If we understand the guerrilla to be somewhere in Nigeria in this fictive history, we may take him as a kind of forecast to us. The poet takes up a position in the future and 'recounts' what has actually happened to us and what is about to. To him it is history, to us the more or less near future.

So far I have paraphrased the meaning of the poem on one dimension, that of the phenomena represented, and then I have edged towards a second dimension, the interpretive role of the reader where these meanings are less specific. We also need to bear in mind that poetry is in part also emotional speech, and emotional meanings are far harder to express in prose paraphrase than are facts and relations. Yet the emotional meanings in poetry are fundamental to it as a genre.

But emotion also is heavily dependent on circumstances. It is one thing, for example, to perceive intellectually that the poet is expressing admiration for the guerrilla, but it is another to identify with the values being cited. Thus as we consider the emotional meanings of poetry we are still further edged towards the roles of the poet and his audience 'outside' the text; and it's this that moves us into the centre of the problem of 'the Marxist poem'.

When we begin to talk about Marxist poetics we have to distinguish between attempts to 'apply Marxist' to poetry as such and to incorporate the great works of the past in a coherent framework, and attempts

to solve the problem, what is the Marxist poet to do? His aim is not to achieve some supra cultural prestige but to say something which is useful and telling in the particular circumstances he writes in. If he or she is studied by later generations one reason for that study will be this very relevance and adhesion to actual time, place, and event. (A problem with Marxist interpretations of non-Marxist texts is the lengths to which the analyst has to go to reveal this). In trying to speak tellingly, however, the Marxist poet must be concerned not just with the truth of what he is expressing, essential though this is, but also with the position of the audience most likely to hear or read his work. He will aim to compose in a way which is both immediately memorable and also gives scope for deeper reflection and study. He will hope to express and to elicit a revolutionary commitment. The term 'commitment' is not, as is sometimes assumed, a matter of someone's being passionately for this or that set of ideas or future circumstance. It is a term for the inter-action between the writer's text and his own and the reader's actually lived lives, their praxis in maintaining this or that social structure. Committed poetry conveys a sense that what is being said is also being lived, and this is not just a matter of the meanings of the poem on the page. It is how the poem relates to ordinary life 'outside' the poem. Thus Che Guevara's poem to Fidel Castro gains added significance because it is by Che, because it is to Fidel. The same point has been made slightly differently by Berger in his discussion of Van Gogh's last painting [2]. Commitment is a matter of a congruency between life and word for the poet and also for his audience. In what follows I want to enlarge a little on this.

'Guerrilla' is written and it is in English, and so is most likely to be read in the context of schooling at some level. For the poet's work to reach students it is usually printed[3] and the publisher will take the risk of publishing it with an eye on the educational market. The text is thus passed through a middleman, the publisher, then to a second middleman, the teacher or lecturer; and both of these may be affected by a third middleman, the lirerary critic, who interprets and evaluates the poem, and so influences both sales and the kinds of remarks about it teachers will make. The sale of a poetry book under marketable conditions strongly favours the publisher, the

poet hardly expecting to make a living out of writing poetry alone, although he may benefit materially from gaining a reputation in critical books and periodicals; but this should not hide the fact that the relation between the poet and his various mediators is exploitative. And the poet may feel that what he originally 'said' has got lost in the significance it has been allotted in the educational system. He writes to bring home something, let us say, about the logic of the present crisis in the Nigerian economy and quality of life; but he cannot publish and teach and criticise his work himself, not on any scale, at least. He must go through the publisher and the educational system. And these institutions, despite individual dissidents, are neocolonial state apparatuses. The university functions to pass people into the priviledged class. So the poet's work, intended to question the role of that class, finds itself utilised as a part of its reproduction, as 'radical' academic fodder. The actual nexus of the educator/student in the classroom neutralises the content of the poem. The principle of freedom of expression of different ideas reduces all ideas to more 'points of view'; all ideas are thus trivialised. Of course it happens that some individual teachers try to take the poem in its full significance, and try to show their students this. During the class the students may think of themselves as radical in their approach; but they can hardly sustain this belief if they focus their attention on the way the university as a whole functions. We may have radical content perhaps, but reactionary function. This is a characteristic contradiction in the study of literature in neocolonies, where content is very often anticolonialist, but the tendency of the university and the study aims of its students are congruent with the dominant neocolonial ideology of the state.

The dissenting teacher or department may to some extent counteract the dominant ideology by changing the basis of the type of communication involved, so that this dilemma itself is more highlighted. This may be done by abandoning the Western-borrowed notion of literary criticism as a prose genre (which, as we have seen does not cope with the emotional dimension of poetic meaning) in favour of what I call 'demonstrative criticism', in which the response to poems takes the form of replies in kind, imitations, rewritings, and so on. This

is not only more imaginative; it also has an African precedent. Iyasere draws attention to it.

> 'If a critic found flaws in the chief performer's rendition, in either the factual content or the technique of composition, he would not only point them out, but also retell the story from his own point of view, giving it his personal stamp. His recreation of the same story would then form the basis for his criticism'.
>
> (Iyasere, 180:171)

And a page later he says,

> 'The Edos, as in several traditional African communities, regarded criticism as a creative performance'.

The role of the Western and the neocolonial literary critic is that of an informed observer. But surely a critic can help a poet in his work only if he too knows the problems from inside, and can demonstrate his points by producing alternative versions as improvements or to point up a contrast, and so on. While the critic remains a kind of literary anthropologist his judgments must remain suspect, though perhaps profitable to him.

This is not the place to describe demonstrative criticism in any detail[4]; but some comments are needed to show how it relates to Marxism. The basic idea is that the study of a verbal art such as poetry must be done practically through composition (which obviously involves critical reading), and through following a production process, involving the following components (not necessarily to be conceived in linear sequence :

(a) Interpretation of social situation (subject matter)

(b) Composition (technique)

(c) interpretive performance (recital)

(d) Editing/recording (book or tape)

A shift to demonstrative criticism - given the big 'if' that it can be implemented - is hardly revolutionary in itself, but it may begin to approach radical questions as it transfers classroom initiative more to the students, and in confronting the bourgeois objection that 'not everybody is creative'. Everybody needs to be, which is not to say that every student of poetry is going to be a fulltime poet, any more than that every student of fine art is going to be a fulltime painter.

The radical edge of demonstrative criticism sharpens when we look into the first stage of the production process from a materialist viewpoint. Then the student (now as both reader and poet) must focus specifically on the congruence between what the poem is saying and how he/she is actually living, between verbalisation and praxis. The students' position within the university state apparatus cannot then be ignored.

Demonstrative criticism focuses on composition, but part of learning composition is reading and 'prose' interpretation. Here we have to be clear about the relation between this reading and the text of the poem. Poetry is a condensed form of expression and a conversation about a poem should be directed either towards the study of its subject matter through the particular kind of linguistic 'lens' a poem provides, or else discussion of ways in which the technique of the poem might be improved the better to realise that aim. Poetry being a condensed 'portable; kind of communication, a conversation about it is primarily an exchange of ideas over the 'terrain' of the text, drawing out the implications into the explicit, following out the allusions, reinterpretating the paradoxes. Part of this drawing out should be the explication of the actual relation of the reader to what is being depicted and said in the poem. The university students come to an actual classroom in which books are put down, chairs scraped, seating arrangements suggest authority, expensive clothes are displayed, and so on. This atmosphere affects particularly the emotional impact of the poem. For the classroom students it may be merely cathartic, and end with the end of lecture of the recital. The aim of demonstrative criticism is to combat this response. The emotional meanings and 'depth' of a poem are enhanced in situations

of personal risk or crisis when the limits of individual existence are more thoroughly sensed. This allows the poem fuller scope. The guerrilla who reads the poem as part of his study in the bush has obviously a much readier openness to this type of meaning. His reasons for reading the poem differ sharply from those of the typical middle class student, and the guerrilla is in a much better position to criticise the content of such a poem. However, at present, the Nigerian guerrilla is a fiction, so the poem in a sense 'belongs' in the educational system.

The contradictions we have seen in the classroom study of the poem arise because the poet does not control the means of producing the poem. This is worth emphasising as there is a tendency for Marxist poets and critics to neglect this relation between the verbal and the practical. Sometimes we can see the discrepancy in the poet's technique, in the way he positions his audience and himself. Thus,

> 'We need no mourners in our stride
> no remorse, no tears,
> only this: Resolve
> that the locust shall never again
> visit our farmsteads'
>
> (Ofeimun, 1980:42)

Who is this 'we'? All Africans in general? The proletariat? It is a rhetorical rather than a political 'we'. There is nothing concrete, either, in what is being said, no traces of the praxis of a former private secretary to a 'Nigerian presidential candidate', whom the blurb avoids naming. The grammar of the poem may be simple compared to Soyinka's but the last two lines are still consciously literary; instead of dealing specifically with concrete conditions, Ofeimun retreats into Africanistic imagery with what might be taken as an allusion to Kofi Awoonor's 'Songs of Sorrow'. From the point of view of actual radical politics the poet's contentment with 'resolve' alone is suspect. Unconsciously in its evasion of specifics, the poem assumes, relies on, classroom neutralisation. How different in tone is Jacinto's 'It's no Use', where the prospect of political involvement is taken seriously, and 'you' relates directly

to the reader's situation, to the locus of commitment, the relation between books and praxis.

IT'S NO USE

It's no use
Your hiding deep in the dark well of your house
Hiding your words
Burning your books
It's no use.

They'll come to find you
In lorries, piled high with leaflets,
With letters no one ever wrote you
They'll fill your passport with stamps
From countries where you've never been.

They'll drag you away
Like some dead dog
And that night you'll find out all about torture
In the dark room
Where all the foul odours of the world are bred

It's no use
Your hinding
From the fight, my friend.

In a sense the example introduces an unfair comparison because Jacinto's poem comes out of a far more advanced stage of revolutionary struggle than does Ofiemun's, or indeed Bukar's. Even so we have to remember that although the poet has done what can be done to make his audience alive to their actual situation, the determined bourgeois student can still aestheticise it into a cathartic classroom 'experience', and a text to pass the exam with.

Conversely an actual situation of struggle does not necessarily produce committed art. Okafor, looking at the South African situation from the perspective of Nigeria, fails to see this in his response to

Mtshali's work, which in content is not at all revolutionary. Okafor says,

> 'Oswald Mtshali's *revolutionary poems*....could be attributed some responsibility for the events in Soweto, as evinced in Steve Biko's black consciousness movement'.
>
> (Okafor, 1983:108)

This leaves out of consideration Mtshali's acceptance by the South African censors and educational system, and his assimilation to it as a headmaster.

It may appear that one way out of the contradictions produced by the university and educational state apparatuses would be to look for a different audience outside these institutions and write a radical popular poetry in the vernaculars. The Marxist poet himself is still overwhelmingly likely to come from the university however, and especially if he retains his position in the university, his attempts at consciousness raising are all too apt to be sporadic and local [5]. The university and printing complex provides a social structure through which his texts can be disseminated. Despite Ngugi's spectacular gesture the key problem with such work is that the verbal artist does not have the means to follow up his words with actual deeds to solve the injustices and deprivations he has made his audience the more aware of. Valuable as it is to understand the present crisis, it is equally important as an aspect of the analysis itself to have some prospect of rectifying action. And this support and follow-up can only be achieved if the individual committed writer acts as part of a wider revolutionary Marxist movement. Such an organisation can coordinate work in different parts of the country. To do this it will have to rely on the written word (which is silent and may be clandestine), and put out a journal, a part of which will be devoted to literacy, poetry, and other aspects of politically based education outside the educational system and outside the news media of the state. With a Marxist opposition movement the contract between the more populist type of consciousness raising and the more literacy based one is likely to disappear by the very fact of increased

literacy which is fundamental to any Marxist programme, and which will in all probability in Nigeria be in a dialect of English or in Pidgin. Poetry is both aural and written and will form part of the process of Marxist oriented and orienting education, working to raise literacy, and to promote awareness of the answers to social problems, intellectual analysis, and shared premisses. A movement can provide a context for the communication of literature without the contradictions involved in production through the capitalist publishers and educators. 'Guerrilla' in this context would be much more readily comprehensible to a non intellectual audience since education programmes would obviously inform peoples about Cabral and Che, the foco theory, and so on; indeed it might be used in the process of developing this awareness. However, if the poem were recited or sung in a Hausa version in Samaru now it may well be incomprehensible simply because there are no Nigerian guerrillas, and because Samaru villages have no reason to be interested in them. This situation could change, of course, but then the question of consciousness raising outside a Marxist movement will have been overtaken.

Just as we have no guerrillas, so we have no Marxist movement in Nigeria. The history of such movements is not encouraging either from the point of view of organisation and unity among workers and farmers[6]. But there is no other solution than to continue to try to forge such a movement. The role of the Marxist poet now, his commitment, is therefore to act through his art and in his praxis to make the Party. Poetry has had a significant educative role in most cultures in the past, and it should have in a socialist society with its own conceptions of morality, love, heroism, and the beauty of nature. But only when there is a basis for communications of all kinds among people of the oppressed classes in Nigeria as a coherent group can the Marxist poet's work, whatever he may <u>say</u> have material <u>significance</u>.

Notes

1. This poem is forthcoming in the second edition of Bukar's sequence. See Books Mentioned below.

2. Berger, 1973: 27-28

3. Bukar's poems are produced in fact in a non-commercial dissident publication.

4. A more detailed account of how demonstrative criticism works is the subject of another paper now in draft.

5. See Oga Abah's paper in 'Saiwa' cited below.

6. See Madunagu cited below, particularly Chapter 5.

Books Mentioned

ABAH Oga Steve — "The Crises of Urban Street Theatre", Saiwa No. 2 1984, pp. 16-25

BERGER John — Ways of Seeing (Viking, New York) 1973.

BUKAR Idi — First the Desert Came and the the Torturer (RAG Press, ABU, Zaria), 1984.

GUEVARA Che — Song to Fidel

YASERE Solomon — "African Oral Tradition - Criticism as Performance A Ritual, African Literature Today, No. 11, 1980, pp. 169-174.

JACINTO Victor — "It's no Use", Index on Censorship Vol. 8 No. 4, 1979, p. 31. Translation by Nick Castor.

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OFEIMUN Odia — The Poet Lied (Longman, London) 1980.

OKAFOR R.N.C. — "Politics and Literature in Francophone Africa - the Ivory Coast Experience", Okike No. 23, 1983, pp. 105-121.