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BLACK AFRICA

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Abstract:

An Overview: Contemporary African poetry remains implicated in the life of politics and the fate of nations with a fixity of concern not found in Asia or the Caribbean. The end of colonialism was followed in most African countries by decades of native misrule. For three generations, African poets have given voice to a wide range of experiences, always conscious that their use of English links them across regional boundaries, while they present the language with the challenge of dealing with the local in all its uniqueness, in circumstances ravaged by civil war, natural disasters, human greed, and political misrule.

KEY WORDS:

Black Africa , Contemporary , political misrule , Slaves liberated .

INTRODUCTION

From colony to nation in Africa:

“to kill the soul in a people- this is a crime which transcends physical murder.”

E.D. Morel, *The Black Man's Burden*

African poets represent their continent in a habitually tragic light. During the struggle for political decolonization, the Angolan poet Augustinho Neto (1922-79) described it as 'The Grieved Lands' (Moore and Beier 1998:6). More recently, Niyi Osundare describes it as 'a dinosaur left panting in the wilderness' (2006:6). In 'Admonition to the Black World', Chinwezu prefaces a litany of Africa's woes with a chronicle of all the invasions suffered by the peoples of the continent in ancient, medieval, and modern times. The bereavement of African poetry can be contextualized in terms of the two large-scale encounters with Europe from which Africa has yet to recover fully: the Atlantic slave trade, and colonization.

From the latter part of the fifteenth century, the Portuguese and the Spanish, followed by the British, the Dutch, and the French, set up a thriving slave trade between the Atlantic coast of Africa and markets for slave labour in the Americas and the Caribbean. Herbert Klein estimates that this trade transported over nine million Africans to the Americas between 1662 and 1867 (1999: 208-9); John Iliffe puts the figure for the entire period from 1450 to 1900 at over eleven million (1995:131), as does Johannes Postma (2003:35-6). Of these, over five million were exported by carriers from Britain. Over half of the total number was shipped in the eighteenth century. Ten to twenty per cent died in the crossing. By the

middle of the nineteenth century, the population of Africa was about half of what it might have been without the slave trade. Britain, the nation that profited the most from the trade, abolished commerce in slaves from 1807, and slave ownership from 1833. The other slave-trading nations followed thereafter.

Slaves liberated from North America were shipped back and settled in parts of West Africa, which later became the nations of Liberia and Sierra Leone. They produced the earliest writing in English and the first expressions of nationalism from Africa. Poets like Syl Cheney Coker and Lemuel Johnson from Sierra Leone show a preoccupation with their Creole ancestry that differs markedly from the more traditional approach of older poets such as Bai T. Moore. Phillis Wheatley, a slave living in North America, provides one of the earliest examples of an aspiration for culture and poetry modeled on the master culture. 'On being brought from AFRICA to AMERICA' (1773) declares:

Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.
Some view our sable race with scornful eye,
'Their colour is a diabolic die.'
Remember, Christians, Negros, black as Cain,
May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train.

(Wheatley 1988:18)

Her sanguine attitude provides an extreme contrast to the self-loathing voiced repeatedly by Cheney – Coker in 'Hydrophathy'

The plantation blood in my veins
My foul genealogy!
I laugh at this Creole ancestry
Which gave me my negralized head
All my polluted streams.

(1973:3)

African ecological systems deterred large-scale European settlement, except in parts of South and East Africa. Dutch settlers came to the Cape in the eighteenth century, and fought for territorial control with the British settlers that followed. At a conference held in Berlin during 1884-5, the major Western nations worked out a plan for the colonization of Africa. Eighty per cent of the continent was then free of colonial rule. By the 1920s, most of the continent had been carved out between the British, the French, the Portuguese, and the Belgians. Germany lost its territories in South and East Africa after World War I.

The British and the French left the most lasting imprint upon their colonial subjects. Kwame Anthony Appiah distinguishes between the two: 'the French colonial policy was one of assimilation – of turning "savage" Africans into "evolved" black Frenchmen and women – while British colonial policy was a good deal less interested in making black Anglo-Saxons' (1992: 3-4). This difference is reflected in the Africa idealized by the Negritude movement, as in 'Prayer to the Masks', by the Francophone Senegalese poet Leopold Senghor.

The first colonies to become free in Africa were French, followed by the British colonies in West Africa, starting with Ghana in 1957, where Kwame Nkrumah's government was overthrown in 1966, and successive military coups prevailed, until the restoration of parliamentary democracy in 2001. Poets and intellectuals were forced into a pattern of exile and reluctant return that became common to many parts of Africa.

Nigeria, the most populous region of Africa, gained independence in 1960, and became a republic in 1963. Its three culturally distinct communities – the Hausa, the Yoruba, and the Igbo – soon found themselves in a civil war (1967-70): 'What began as a pogrom against Igbo traders in Northern Nigeria led first to Igbo secession and then to a civil war in which Yoruba people aligned with the North to "save the union"' (Appiah 1992:165). The peace that followed was overtaken by successive coups in 1975 and 1983. Parliamentary government was restored in 1999 after sixteen years of military rule.

Independence came to East Africa in the early 1960s. Tanganyika became free in 1961, and merged with Zanzibar in 1963 to form Tanzania. Uganda became free in 1962, but succumbed to a series of military dictatorships that culminated in the ethnic strife and economic ruin that accompanied them under the dictatorship of Idi Amin. Kenya was the scene of violent resistance from the Mau Mau during the 1950s, and achieved independence in 1963.

The regions of white control to the north of South Africa followed a similar pattern of political development. Long- subjugated black majorities gained independence from white minority rule after

varying periods and degrees of conflict. Zambia (formerly Northern Rhodesia), Malawi (formerly Nyasaland), and Zimbabwe (previously Southern Rhodesia, from 1965 Rhodesia) broke free from the Federation forced upon them by Britain in the 1960s, the first two in relatively peaceful ways, Zimbabwe after fifteen years of violent conflict. After independence, all three retained English as the national language. This was a pragmatic choice common to all former British colonies in Africa and elsewhere. It retained continuity with colonial institutions of education and governance, provided access to the international community of organizations and nations, facilitated modernization, and neutralized linguistic affiliations based on tribal loyalties.

Under the leadership of Kenneth Kaunda, Zambia opposed apartheid in neighbouring South Africa, and maintained a liberal atmosphere for the arts, but could not prevent its modest economy from declining to the point where Kaunda's leadership ended in 1992. During the same period, Malawi, led by Hastings Banda, maintained ties with the apartheid government of South Africa, and enforced a domestic policy of authoritarian rule and censorship that lasted until 1993.

The formation of an East African culture in English was the result of a pattern of education common to all the British colonies in Africa. Ngugi wa Thiong'o describes it as the Horton-Asquith model. It was similar in intention and effect to the policy implemented in India after Macaulay's Minute of 1835. It created local minorities whose elite status at home was based on their acculturation into the colonial language, a one-way process with little of the interculturalism found in Caribbean creolization. Fanon analyzed the process in terms of the formation of 'a national bourgeoisie' which was prone to degenerate into a 'get-rich-quick middle class' that was 'not even the replica of Europe, but its caricature' (1961:175).

According to Ngugi, the colonial language and culture created a local intelligentsia that was 'alienated and collaborative' (2000: online). English gave opportunities for overseas travel and education, and seduced a few into expatriation, but the majority were drawn to local politics, administration, teaching, and the media, all of which carried status and power in an indigenous population that was largely rural and unaffected by Western patterns of development. The effect of such mutations is given lively representation into two long poems from East Africa, *Song of Lawino* (1966) and *Song of Ocol* (1970), by Okot p' Biket.

Appiah provides an account of African postcoloniality in terms of the kind of intellectual dramatized by Okot:

Postcoloniality is the condition of what we might ungenerously call a comprador intelligentsia: of a relatively small, Western-style, Western-trained, group of writers and thinkers who mediate the trade in cultural commodities of world capitalism at the periphery... Postcolonial intellectuals in Africa ... are almost entirely dependent for their support on two institutions: the African university... and the Euro-American publisher and reader.

(1992:149)

When this intellectual took charge of the new nation, the excitement and euphoria of freedom quickly turned to ashes. Self-rule was superseded by factionalism, ethnic conflict, unstable governance, military rule, economic decline, corruption in public office, and widespread abuse of human rights. Tanure Ojaide sums it up, in 'We Are Many,' as 'the incubus of power' (1986:72). Appiah's word for African misrule is 'kleptocracy' (1992:150). Corrupt and inept regimes forced writers into a poetics of commitment that shaped postcolonial writing throughout Africa. In 'For Chinua Achebe', Ochia Ofeimun declares:

none can afford the lyrical sanity
of the hermit when his clothes are on fire
(Soyinka 1975:294)

The ideal of 'pan-African' unity promoted by the Negritude movement in the 1930s and 40s did not succeed in uniting post-colonial African nations, because the idea of an African unity was far removed from the realities that separated one tribe or community from another. Appiah explains: 'the new states brought together peoples who spoke different languages, had different religious traditions and notions of property, and were politically...integrated in different- often radically different- degree' (1992 : 161-2). 'Africa' and 'African poetry' are partially tenuous entities: neither race, nor a colonial history, nor post-independence suffice to provide more than a semblance of unity to peoples and cultures as disparate as their ecosystems. Moreover, and as in Asia, many patterns of life continued from before to after colonialism, while other radically new patterns changed the overall quality of urban and rural life.

BLACK AFRICA



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