
CULTURE CONFLICT IN AFRICAN ENGLISH POETRY

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INTRODUCTION:

The fourth edition of 'The Penguin Book of Modern African Poetry' assures that 'poetry has always been foremost of the arts in traditional Africa. It has continued to compete for primacy against the newer forms of prose fiction and theatre drama. Even the African novelists (unlike their Western equivalents) often fill their narratives with songs, myths and dreams. There are some of the poems that come straight from the front line, like those of Mvula wa Nangolo, Makuzayi Massaki or the late Christopher Okigbo, who was killed in action soon after his horn pawed goodbye in 'Elegy for Alto'. Other voices sing of the pains of exile or the anguish of imprisonment. But there is much here that celebrates human love, the abundance of African nature, the surprises of life, the ironies of folly or self-delusion. Laughter resounds as well as tears. No anthology can hope to do more than stimulate the hunger to read and discover more. It must point rather than define, and trust that it has pointed aright'. This article throws light on the select poetry of those black poets who reflect cultural conflict through their poems. As a writer of this article I am sure, it will definitely be a source of information for the upcoming aspirants studying the field of cultural conflict.

- **Oswald Mtshali (b. 1940):** The Africans who were actually dependents on their masters, struggled hard for their own houses to build and live in. Their wishes to be equal as others is reflected through Mtshali's poem – 'Inside My Zulu Hut'. The poet says the Zulu hut is full of possessions, stylish customisations, and transformations that follow naturally from being lived. It speaks of its occupant's daily duties, sense of aesthetics, influence from traditional culture, and practical solutions. The poem shows the various ways the human interacts with his surroundings as well as how nature provides for his self-preserving, intellectual, and creative impulses. Thus his poem attests to both the simplicity and the complexity that help to create any person's

feeling of homeliness. It shows the attachment of African people to their houses. His '*Ride upon the Death Chariot*' and '*The Birth of Shaka*' are other famous poems.

- **Don Mattera (b. 1935):** The poet who has real life experience of exploitation, suppression and depression, expresses his feelings through his poem – 'The Poet Must Die'. His poetry is an attack on the apartheid system in the society. In his biography entitled 'Memory is the Weapon', he says 'Sophiatown also had its beauty; picturesque and intimate like most ghettos... Mansions and quaint cottages... stood side by side with rusty wood-and-iron shacks, locked in a poor, the exploiters and the exploited, all knitted together in a colourful fabric that ignored race or class structures.' Thus 'multiracial fabric' did not conform to the separatist policies of apartheid and so the suburb was destroyed and the people forcibly removed. He expresses this in following words thus:

'The poet must die

His murmuring threatens their survival

His breath could start the revolution;

He must be destroyed.'

'Departure', 'Sobukwe' and 'I Have Been Here Before' are his other famous creations.

- **Mazisi Kunene (b.1932):** This South Africa born poet wrote and published his poetry from very early of his age. His works are famous in his native language i.e. Zulu. Later they are translated into English. His poetry was banned in 1966 as it is full of attacking features on contemporary apartheid system. He is the first poet laureate of South Africa. He is a popular twentieth century African poet and even other European languages. His four collections are still considered as classics and major imaginative creations in African literature. Through the poems such as '*The Echoes*' and '*Elegy*' he explores the cosmology and mythology of his Zulu heritage from a universal perspective. Much of his poetry is imbued with themes that touch on history, family, legacy, and the importance of the ancestors, worded in innovative language and steeped in vision that make his writing unique.
- **Syl Cheney-Coker (b.1945):** Exile, a common form of exploitation, is one of the themes in African poetry. Coker's poetry is tinged with the anxiety of his perennially

- uncertain status, dealing both with exile and with the precariousness of living as an intellectual in Sierra Leone, one of the regions in Africa. The poet himself has spent the majority of his adulthood outside of his country. He has composed poems like *'The Brotherhood of Man'*, *'The Philosopher'* and *'The Tin Gods'*. He is concerned always with how he will be read, his poems are radical and ardent, but also erudite and allusive, which can distract a reader from his ideological project. He has been called as one of the more western-influenced African poets by his critics. His anthology entitled, *'The Graveyard Also Has Teeth'* (1980) is very famous.
- **Leopold Sedar Senghor (b.1906):** He was born in Senegal. He is a devoted poet to the Negritude movement. He started by the French-speaking black intellectuals that looked at accepting the fact that one was black and that the fact came with its own history, values and culture and sought to acquaint all people of African descent with freedom and dignity. In his poem, 'Night of Sine' he looks at the subtleties of his culture and embodies them in the image of womanhood, with soft hands, singing a song, not quite lullaby. Throughout the poem, he emphasizes on the darkness around, in blood, the night that caresses him in the smoke-filled hut and in the great depths of sleep, but he speaks of these in honour of what is heritage is, what Africa in his articulation of the magnificence of Negritude. *'Prayer to Masks'*, *'I Will Pronounce Your Name'*, *'Blues'*, *'What Dark Tempestuous Night'*, *'You Held the Black Face'* and *'Be Not Amazed'* are his other famous poems.
 - **Ben Okri (b. 1959):** Elegies means the poems written to express lamentation on someone's death. Okri's *'An African Elegy'* is but a figurative one. The poet is lamenting the death of a part of himself. The opening stanza of the poem creates a symbolic landscape full of exotic African creatures such wildebeests, zebras, elephants, and okapi, a giraffe-like animal found in the Congo. Swahili are part of the Bantu peoples of Eastern and Central Africa. Duncan makes an explicit connection between the 'marvelous' jungle in which the animals live and the 'mind's/ natural jungle'. 'Marvelous' primarily has a positive meaning here, but it picks up less benign associations as the poem develops. The preparation and hunting rituals engaged in by the Congolese men and women create a strange and ominous atmosphere in which death is omnipresent. Thus Ben Okri has perfectly describes the

cultural atmosphere in the regions in the African outskirts. The poet has contributed with his few more famous poems such as *'The Incandescence of the Wind'*, *'On Edge of Time Future'*, and *'And If You Should Leave Me'*.

- **Wole Soyinka (b.1934):** Nigerian poet, who produced a wonderful poem – 'Death in the Dawn' is a free-verse poem in seven stanzas having thirty-five lines. But we find various lyrical qualities in his poems such as a sense of monologue, an address to the reader as a 'traveller', a narrative account of life as a journey, its introspective conclusion about the self. The title is a paradoxical one. Death might be expected to take place in the evening. It announces the contradictory concepts the poem will explore. Any concept implies its opposite, but in fact two deaths do occur during this dawn. Soyinka provides a prose headnote describing the occasion that apparently gave rise to the composition, the actual setting on a road into Lagos, Nigeria, and a summary of the two accidents causing the deaths of a white cockerel and a human being. Thus Soyinka tries to show African culture, its customs and other features to the reader.

'Massacre, October '66' exemplifies poets views on religion in many ways. Although he identifies as an Atheist, he was raised as a Christian and was surrounded by the Yoruba religion while he was growing up. Wole Soyinka reflects a fine African culture by giving his opinion on religion. He says, 'All these religions are just metaphors for the strategy of man coping with the vast unknown.' Thus, it makes sense that he would incorporate multiple – as many as possible – religions into his poetry, showing respect and understanding for each one.

- **Christopher Okigbo (1932-67):** The style, tone and techniques used in his *'Come Thunder'* are much like modernist poets. But the rhythm in it is non-English. His abundant use of plosive sounds, in words and lines give a pattern to the poem. The poem has an onomatopoeic effect which is in tune with the main motif of the poem. In his poem, *'Sacrifice'* the poet tries to express his feelings and attitudes towards his religious and metaphysical experience in his life. The persona in the poem is trying to appease the gods and the metaphysical or spiritual emotions of his African tradition. *'Heavensgate'* (1961), *'Limits'* (1962), *'Lament of the Drums'* (1964), *'Distances'* (1964), and *'Path of Thunder'* are Okigbo's most famous anthologies. There is much

tenderness in evocation of the poet's physical environment, family relations and the religious denomination. These are the three factors that dominate in his *'Heavensgate'*.

- **Ouologuem Yambo (1940):** *'When Negro Teeth Speak'* is the only poem produced by Yambo. He uses vivid imagery and criticism to send message to the reader about how awful we can treat each other based on something that one person has that stands out from others. Sarcasm is often used throughout the poem not because Ouologuem is trying to create a joke-full situation but to help the reader understand how ridiculous it is put down people for certain characteristics that most of us also have in common. He uses repetition of the phrase 'Hoorah for tomatoes' to show to the reader how much the speaker, after tortured for so long, does not care about what abuse is to come next. The poet's agitation is expressed through the speaker when he says 'People see I have red gums... But who has white ones' to explain to the reader just how ignorant the accusations of African culture are. The speaker uses sarcasm in 'say I gobble up tourists... Boiled or grilled... So I said which is it grilled or boiled' to show that these rumours are so ridiculous that it's becoming a joke to say for the speaker.

The poet claims there that his culture is great and no one insults tourists visiting their country. The tourists visiting Africa see the red gums and the big bellies of fact we all have red gums and the African people have their bellies swollen due to not enough food to eat. These tourists tell stories of how scary of how the African culture is cannibalistic and scary. The poet thus is not ready to accept false charges upon him or his country. The story of an African man getting blamed for his looks tell the reader what kind of uncaring society we live in. The tourists are a representation for the African people constantly being taken over by foreign governments and treated less than humans.

Conclusion:

The African poetry has its roots deep into the history from Spartacus to the present day. Each poet drills the same thing from this or that way i.e. their exploitation, relation between blacks and whites, oppressor and oppressed, colonizers and colonized.

The modern poets still write on the theme which simply means their wounds are not yet healed but are afresh in their hearts. Dennis Brutus in his 'Nightsong: City' still pines for the same. Gabriel Okara's 'Once Upon A Time' indicates the fake faces of the whites and emasculation of the blacks who are pure at their hearts and know very well how to treat others. African poetry is a best source for the study of cultural conflict. It is a way to learn humanity and treat everyone as a human being.

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