



Varieties of English Usage in African Poetry

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Abstract

The richness of African poetry¹, in its diversity, scope, and dimensions, has not yet received the critical attention it deserves. This situation is rather surprising, especially given the fact that the varieties of English in African poetics are vast and compelling. For example, the varieties which I have selected for discussion and analysis in this essay consist of the following variables, including, that is, oral poetry, pidgin English, European colonialism, the Christian religion, African cultural tradition, and war poetry. Some readers may consider the classification I have listed here as arbitrary or inadequate or overmuch; I do not fault them. The important point, for me at least, is the essence or the need to explore this subject further -- if need be -- so we can fully and faithfully understand and appreciate the corpus and beauty of African poetry in its multifarious dimensions. We shall begin, that is, with oral poetry which, I think, is the foundation of African poetry.²

I

The importance of oral verse in the indigenous African cultural mythos cannot be over-emphasized. For instance, oral poetry is employed to celebrate the people's cultural values and heritage, or to honor the memory of the dead ancestors and the legacy they have left behind, or to highlight certain traditional rites and ceremonies of the fatherland. At other times the oral poet writes for didactic purposes, or in order to boost the ethos or morale of the community, especially during war times and other emergent occasions.

Oral poetry permeates the culture of almost every tribe in Africa, but essentially the genre performs the same or similar functions everywhere, especially in terms of subject matter and style of performance. For example, Kwabena Nketia records the following mode of oral poetry of the Akan dynastic mythos.

First there is tradition of poetry which is recited and not sung. The greatest use of this is in connection with chiefship. At state functions

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special poems of praise are recited by minstrels who also act as masters of ceremonies to paramount chiefs. In these poems allusions are made to past successes in war, particularly the decapitation of enemy chiefs and potentates in which these master of ceremonies are interested as state executioners. They are intended to remind the chief of his former enemies or the enemies of his predecessors, to remind him of his power as war leader, and to incite him to similar deeds of bravery.³

In the Edo (Bini) culture in which I was raised, a dynastic oral poetry of a chief or king will normally encompass various dynamic and usually positive variables, including singing, drumming, dancing, the performance of rites and rituals and, of course, eating and drinking and the pouring of libations. The milieu of Edo oral poetry may also center around content and form, celebration and performance, public entertainment and praise, and incantations of various kinds.

Another variety of the Edo oral corpus centers on the didactic function of love and peace as against strife, rancor and violence. This is the aesthetic credo illustrated by the following poem, which is beautifully titled "There shall be No Lion Roar":

Let peace fall athwart
To catch a glimpse of
Dust

Let love hang
Above the bend of the river

Beast of the forest
Quench that firelight
Judge not with those claws!
This earth is good land
Where God lays for His acres
Some pearl with color
Where the blue lamb had bled
Bright blood oozing through the
Gullies of stones and woods.

King of beasts
Let there be no bleeding blood
But integrity and faith

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Let there be no blood
On the long wooden plank.

King of the land
Let faith drum
Wraithlike onto the
Vengeful heart
And like the usual bright day
Bring peace and calm.⁴

In the Edo mythology and folklore, as in most other indigenous cultures of Africa, “peace” and “love” go together, hand-in-hand. The poem’s title, “There Shall be no Lion Roar,” highlights the didacticism of the lyric’s theme, which centers on the primacy of “peace” and “love” over strife and war. This contrasting dichotomy is not without effect: it affords the poem much of its technical virtuosity and variables. The “Lion” represents the violence and destructiveness in nature (suggested by “Roar,” “beast,” “blood,” “bleeding blood,” and “Vengeful heart.”

Conversely, the Lord symbolizes “peace” and “love” offered through “faith” (suggested by “God lays for his acres/Some pearl with color.” This contrast which the poem foreshadows within the same perimeter suggests the denouement and moral choice before man. The answer resides in the latter. Man must embrace “peace” and “love”, not only to redeem his own soul but to protect and promote God’s kingdom. Herein resides the poem’s thesis and central agon.

Although the above theme is not new -- as it vividly re-enacts the orthodox Christian apocalyptic paradigm that those who promote violence over “peace” and “love” will be visited by evil violence and vice-versa -- its re-iteration here refreshes our memory and perspective through the truism of this all-important philosophy about life and the human society we live in.

Another poem which emanates from oral legends and folklore is the “Rain-making Litany” of the Lango of Uganda.

(Recitative)

We overcome this wind
We desire the rain to fall, that it be poured
in showers quickly.
Ah! thou rain, I adjure thee fall. If thou
rainest, it is well

(Response)

We overcome.
Be poured
It is well

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<p>A drizzling confusion If it rains and our food ripens, it is well. If the children rejoice, it is well If it rains, it is well. If our women rejoice it is well If the young men sing, it is well A drizzling confusion If our grains ripen it is well. If our women rejoice. If the children rejoice. If the young men sing. If the aged rejoice. An overflowing in the granary. May our grain fill the granaries. A torrent in flow. If the wind veers to the south, it is well. In If the rain veers to the south, it is well.</p>	<p>Confusion. It is well. It is well. It is well. It is well. Confusion. It is well. It is well. It is well. It is well. It is well. It is well. Overflowing. May it fill. A torrent. It is well. It is well.⁵</p>	<p>this</p>
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poem whose title suggests its meaning through a *mélange* of contrasting images and metaphors -- suggested by a “drizzling confusion,” “this wind,” “adjure thee,” “the wind veers to the South,” “Overflowing” -- the poet establishes the traditional ritual ceremony which must be performed in order to trigger abundant rainfall. In this lyric there is the employment of repetition (e.g., “It is well/It is well”), contrast (e.g., “Confusion/It is well”), and a general appeal to all and sundry -- “women,” “children,” “men,” and “the aged” -- in order to arouse their consciousness about the relevance of the rain-making ceremony.

The poem’s thesis derives from the Lango mythology and folklore that when humans invoke the spirit of an object, say, the sun, the rain, or other natural phenomenon to do their bidding or request, such object must oblige with urgency and spontaneity. In this lyric the spirit and fortune of rainfall is passionately invoked so rain can fall copiously for crops to grow for harvest. Through a combination of recitation, conjuration, and chants the poem produces a rhythmical cum musical effect which can only please or delight.

The structural division of the poem into two parts, that is, the “Recitative” and the “Response” helps to accentuate its lyricism and dramatic effect. Furthermore, the employment of the plural pronoun “we” and the adjective “our” suggests the unanimity of action and co-operation which the poet seeks to establish on all fronts.

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Appropriately characterized as a “litany,” this word effectively suggests the prayerful mood and tone of the poem. The epithet also highlights the spirit of collectivity and togetherness which the ritual ceremony demands in order to achieve a profound success. Other similar epistemological and liturgical images employed toward the same end include “overcome,” “poured,” “We desire,” “Overflowing,” “May it fill,” “ripen,” “sing,” and “rejoice.”

This poem is also remarkable in other important respects. First, it sheds light on not only the Lango oral corpus, but on the African belief system that man can, through faith, influence nature and thus trigger the rain to fall. Secondly, the poem offers a balancing act through its deft employment of thesis and antithesis and through comparison and contrast. For example, the negative images of the poem like “Confusion” and “torrent” are counterbalanced by positive ones like “We overcome” and “It is well.” Thirdly, the poem is comprehensive in content, form, and execution: for example, while its theme centers on the rain-making ritual ceremony of the Lango of Uganda, its strategies embody the deployment of repetition, recitation, and singsong. The overall effect of all this comprises drama, entertainment and delight.

Okot p’Bitek’s *Song of Lawino* and *Song of Ocol*, both of which derive from the Acoli mythological corpus, have been widely praised by critics for their originality, humor, and aestheticism. As G.A Heron notes in his introduction to *Song of Lawino*, “Okot wrote the Acoli version of *Song of Lawino* in a period in his life when he was daily concerned with Acoli traditional songs, both in his research and in his activities in connection with the Gulu festival.”⁶ Of Okot’s craftsmanship, he writes, “*Song of Ocol* is very easy to read aloud. In this poem Okot shows himself to be a master of English free verse”.⁷

If we examine the poems more carefully, we discover Okot’s demonstration of the above qualities. For example, in *Song of Lawino*, Okot, as an illustration of his ability to tap from the cultural principles and precepts of the oral mythological contexts writes:

Husband you despise me
Now you treat me with spite
And say I have inherited the
stupidity of my aunt;
Son of the Chief,
Now you compare me
Because I am like the things left
behind
In the deserted homestead.
You insult me
You laugh at me

And say I do not know the letter A⁸

The epithets “despise,” “treat with spite,” “stupidity,” “rubbish in the rubbish pit,” “the things left behind,” “insult,” and “deserted homestead” constitute part of the language employed by a husband in a traditional matrimonial setting against a wife, especially during a period of disagreement or misunderstanding. By employing these negative and abusive language, the husband seeks to demonstrate both his authority in the home as well as his legitimate right to be obeyed and respected by his wife.

The following lines from *Song of Ocol* do not only confirm the husband’s power and authority, but they shed light on the pitiable denigration of womanhood since antiquity. The passage is unassailable in mood, tone, and dramatic intensity.

Woman,
Shut up!
Pack your things
Go!

Take all the clothes
I bought you
The beads, necklaces
And the remains
Of the utensils
I need no second-hand things.

(SLSO, p. 121)

In retrospect, we can conclude this section of the essay by saying that oral literature -- despite its limitation in scope and content -- offers the poet the unique opportunity to expand the theme of his discourse while illuminating the provenance of his prosodic devices, including repetition, irony, comparison and contrast, and the free verse measure.

II

What Ulli Beier says about the difficulty of finding adequate African oral material holds true for the African pidgin English as well. He writes:

It would seem natural to use traditional African poetry as part of the introduction to poetry in African schools and universities. Unfortunately it is hard to come by ... It is difficult to lay hands on collections of traditional poetry.⁹

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Regarding the few texts that are in circulation, he laments: "It is inevitable that these poems have been lost in translation. ...Many of the subtleties of the rhythm have been lost".¹⁰ The case of the African pidgin English is similar and perhaps even more serious and unfortunate. For example, other than Frank Aig-Imokhuede's *Pidgin Stew and Sufferhead*, Mamman J. Vatsa's *Tori For Geti Bow Leg and Other Poems*, and Ken Saro Wiwa's *Songs in a Time of War*, there are hardly any profound pidgin texts or anthologies in the marketplace for any scholar or student who may wish to pursue the subject further on a more assiduous incentive and inclination.

Ken Saro Wiwa's *Songs in a Time of War* contains only one single poem of pidgin English out of a total collection of twenty lyrics. We shall discuss this single poem titled, "Dis" Nigeria Sef," not only because it is profound in substance and style but because it is centered on the sense of malaise which besets Nigeria since its creation as a nation. Finally, the poem addresses many of the problems on which several patriotic Nigerians have written, including Peter Enahoro (see *How to be a Nigerian*, 1972), Chinua Achebe (see *The Trouble with Nigeria*, 1983) and J.P. Clark-Bekederemo (see *State of the Union*, 1985).

The poem, "Dis Nigeria Sef," is a diatribe against the ills plaguing the Nigerian nation. Specifically these ills include lack of the following: electricity, good roads, justice, pipe-borne water supply, employment opportunities, and effective communication system. The poem runs through a total of two hundred and seventy-five lines -- a kind of mini-epic.

Organized sequentially into a total of twenty-four stanzas of unequal lengths, the following images and metaphors illustrate the sense of anguish and frustration which the speaker feels about the hopeless state of Nigeria: "wahala" (trouble), "palavi" (problem), "don spoil" (in ruins), and "hala" (turmoil).

Others are articulated in the respective stanzas. For example, in stanza one, he writes: "I beg which trouble be dis Nigeria?" (what kind of trouble is Nigeria in?). In stanza two, he says: "I don tire for this Nigeria" (I am fed up with this Nigeria). And in stanza three, he notes: "Me I tire for all your wahala" (I am tired for all of your problem). What all this suggests is the fact that, the speaker, as a patriot and close observer of people and situations, is very much concerned about the rudderless situation of Nigeria. The poem's tone partakes of censure, counsel, and condemnation.

As a monologue the poem illuminates the psychological conflict and turmoil afflicting the protagonist for what, it seems, are the inherent flaws in the country's political system. The title of the poem -- to be sure -- suggests the speaker's complete contempt and disdain with which he views Nigeria both

in reality and in concept. The poem's concluding last two stanzas ruefully dramatize the speaker's sense of sorrow and despair about the socio-political fortunes of Nigeria.

How person no like you still 'e like you
Dis no be grade one confusion?
I tell you, mechanic no be crase man
Though 'e wear dirty cloth
And khaki no be leather
Though 'e make prick to sweat
Dis Nigeria no dey as person see am.

So I beg make una sorry for me small
Because I don confuse well well at all
Sake of dis I-love-I-no-love Nigeria
I TIRE¹¹

There is a moral lesson to be drawn from the poem. First, at the end of each stanza, the poet voices his disenchantment and cynicism about the prospects for recovery in Nigeria. Secondly, the piece is a severe satirical attack on ineptitude, corruption (in high and low places), injustice, tribalism, and aggrandizement. Finally, pidgin English offers an outlet for everyone -- i.e., the professional and neophyte alike -- to voice his opinion on issues of local and national importance. The capitalized last line, "I TIRE," says it all.

III

The injustice wrought on Africa and the Black race by European colonialism is fairly well-documented.¹² The injustice permeates almost every aspect of the human experience, that is, political, religious, and cultural. African poets, on the other hand, have been very aggressive in their individual response to European colonialism. Furthermore, the English language, as the accepted medium of expression, has been vigorously and passionately deployed to meet the respective objectives. Sometimes its employment of linguistic devices has been radical and pungent; at other times it has been muted or exhortative.

True, European colonialism has caused Africa and its citizenry more harm than good. For instance, it subjected the indigenous people to be treated as "hewers of wood and drawers of water," while the continent was viewed negatively as "a land of errors and Egyptian gloom." Furthermore, the European colonialists promoted the concept of inequality among the races of the world. For all of these, they were viewed with skepticism, or cynicism, or apprehension.

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In the area of political marginalization, for instance, several African poets have reacted with anger and denunciation of the colonialist. For example, in the poem "Africa," David Diop denounces the colonialists for their political humiliation of Africa:

Africa my Africa,
Africa of proud warriors in the ancestral savannahs,
Africa my grandmother sings of
Beside her distant river
I have never seen you
But my gaze is full of your blood
Your black blood spilt over the fields
The blood of your sweat
The sweat of your toil
The toil of your slavery
The slavery of your children
Africa, tell me Africa,
Are you the back that bends
Lies down under the weight of humbleness?
The trembling back striped red
That says yes to the sjambok on the roads of noon?
Solemnly a voice answers me
'Impetuous, that young and sturdy tree
That tree that grows
There splendidly alone among white and faded flowers
Is Africa, your Africa. It put forth new shoots
With patience and stubbornness puts forth new shoots
Slowly its fruits grow to have
The bitter taste of liberty'.¹³

The positive images of the above poem (suggested, for example, by "Africa my Africa," and "Africa of proud warriors") are counterbalanced by negative animus (suggested by "The toil of slavery/The slavery of your children"). All this completely illustrates the state of degradation and humiliation to which Africa and its citizenry have been subjected to by European colonialism since antiquity.

In "The Hurricane," Leopold Sedar Senghor similarly repudiates Western colonialism through comparison and contrast and through the symbolisms of "peace" and "the gold of Galam" on one hand, and the "Whirlwinds of passion" and "my lips ablaze with blood" on the other. The dynamics of "peace" and "love", which Africa represents, is in sharp contrast to the violence and destruction which European colonialism symbolizes.

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However, rather than employ invectives and vituperation, Michael Dei-Anang in his poem "Let's Live Peace" appeals to all mankind to pursue the path of peaceful coexistence in their daily relationships with one another:

Where the rivers of time
Are fouled by native stress and strife,
And man becomes his own enemy,
Life is distraught
And its colourful scenes
Are marred and stained
By dark-brown blots of violent blood

Lets live in peace,
For here, like tenants
In thatched huts, we dwell;
Soon, too soon, the tropic storm
Will out-blow the flicking lights
Of human life --
Our huts will fall
In frailty upon the earth
Whereon, they rot,
And we, in foul disintegration,
Will be identified --
With dust.

(WAV, p. 22)

A review of the poems we have discussed thus far in this section of the essay illustrates the fact that the language employed, although generally political, is either patriotic (e.g., "Africa my Africa"), or exhortative (e.g., "Let's live in peace"), or declamatory (e.g., "Africa my grandmother sings of"). At still other times, it is denunciatory and boastful (e.g., "With patience and stubbornness puts forth new shoots/slowly its fruits grow to have/The bitter taste of liberty").

IV

The African poetic landscape is also enriched and illuminated by the spate of apocalyptic images and metaphors which it employs, what Abiola Irele characterizes as a "rhetoric derived from the Bible."¹⁴ Of the African poets who have explored the apocalyptic device, the names of Gabriel Okara and Abioseh Nicol readily come to mind.

Okara's "The Call of the River Nun" employs diverse poetic and rhetorical devices to adumbrate its theological theme of a divine call to the priesthood, which recalls George Herbert's "The Collar." Of the principal theological images and metaphors employed in the poem, the most remarkable are: the

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lyric's title ("The Call of the River Nun" -- which connotes a call to service; "these crouching hills" which suggests the foreboding and challenging decision to be made.

Others are: "your lapping call," which highlights the overwhelming force of the call to accept the priesthood; "my mirrored self unfold," which suggests the mental and psychological toll the contemplation exerted on the protagonist; "the final call that stills the crested mind," which pin-points the ultimate and compelling argument that persuaded a hesitant mind; and "O incomprehensible God!," which celebrates the majesty, dignity, and greatness of the Lord as the supreme creator of the mundane and ineluctable universe.

The name, "the River Nun," which is deified as the supreme commander of all things, is interesting and deserves further comment. It symbolizes the ebb and flow of human life, its vicissitudes, and its contours and pathways which must of necessity be followed or navigated. Further, the name, as a metaphor, is God's means of communication to humanity and the world of nature in its luminous variety and complexes. Finally, the "Call" or command of God is an injunction which must be answered or obeyed. Okara must answer "That final call to Thee" (BAV, p.31). Indeed, all mortals must submit inexorably to the "final call" of death which God imposes.

In "One Night at Victoria Beach," Okara's religious piety is vividly dramatized against a backdrop of an incredibly pernicious weather, symbolized by the "wind," the "waves," the "recoiling hiss," the "curling waves," and the "rushing wind." Theological and epistemological images reverberate again and against in the poem like an anthem.

Pray, the Aladuras pray...

.....
Still they pray, the Aladuras pray
To what only hearts can see while dead

.....
Still they pray, the Aladuras pray
To what only hearts can see behind
The curling waves and the sea, the stars
and the subduing unanimity of the sky
and their white bones beneath the sand.

(WAV, lines 7,12,18,19,28-32, pp. 38-39)

The involvement of almost every part of the human body, including the "eyes," the "hearts," the "bones," the "souls," the "knees," etc, does not only deepen the poem's message, but it suggests the devotion and total commitment of the Aladuras to their religious doctrine. Furthermore, Okara demonstrates, through the poem's structural development and subtlety, his

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remarkable ability to manipulate the English language in order to meet his poetic objective.

The religious poetry of Abioseh Nicol can be grouped into two broad categories, namely, the devotional, such as "Easter Morning," and the moral or miscellaneous, such as "The Meaning of Africa." In these lyrics Nicol respectively professes his profound love of God on one hand, while passionately extolling Africa's greatness on the other hand. Both poems are elaborate and precise in their treatment of subject matter. In "Easter Morning," liturgical images and references illuminate the poem's entire gamut. They include: "Ding dong," "mating bells," "pink light," "tropic skies," "the mezzing," "wet dark tomb," "Easter Morning," and "embalmed."

Others are: "ancestral spirits," "many harvests," "poured libations," "hermaphrodite," "quivering thunderbolts," "mind is unabolished," "wanting to punish," "His dying dispossessed son," "Aramaic agony," "worship and of praise," "ecumenical councils," "the sepulcher," "Christ is risen, Christ is risen," and "The priest may hold the chalice" (WAV, pp. 25-29). Without these references and images, the poem might have lost its theological message about the need for all Christian faithfuls to celebrate Easter. Furthermore, despite the beauty and serenity of nature which Nicol describes, the spirit of Easter, especially the grace and majesty of Christ, is overwhelming:

Easter morning.
Yet you Christ are always there.
You are the many-faceted crystal
Of our desires and hopes,
Behind the smoke-screen of incense
Concealed in mumbled European tongues
Of worship and of praise
In the thick dusty verbiage
Of centuries of committees
Of ecumenical councils
You yet remain revealed
To those who seek you
It is I, you say.
You remain in the sepulcher
Of my brown body.
Christ is risen, Christ is risen (WAV, pp. 27-28)

In "The Meaning of Africa," Nicol employs comparison and contrast to dramatize the perennial rivalry between the traditional Christian order and the neo-African polity. While the former is characterized by the passenger lorry criss-crossing across country with its Christian credo of "The Lord is My

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Shepherd," the neo-African political reality is symbolized by its serenity, the "strong branches," "plenty of love and laughter," and "persistent kindness"¹⁵

All throughout the poem Nicol employs positive images and allusions to highlight the continuing relevance of Christendom. These images and metaphors include the "Lord," the "green pastures," and the "soul." On the other hand, the perennial beauty of Africa and its citizenry is celebrated, as suggested by the following passage:

"This is my Africa" meaning
"I am fulfilled within
Without and roundabout
I have gained the little longings
Of my hands, of my loins, my heart
And the soul that follows in my shadow."
I know now that is what you are, Africa:
Happiness, contentment, and fulfillment.
And a small bird singing on a mango tree.

(SAP, p.99)

In retrospect we can conclude by saying that the dynamic argument of the two sides does not only illuminate the poem's thematic and structural ambit, but it suggests the religious cum political debate that will continue to rage permanently between them in the foreseeable future. Finally, the poem gains in stature and prestige because of the religious imagery employed which of course contributes immensely to its linguistic structure.

V

No other area of African poetry has attracted more critical attention than that which centers on the African cultural tradition. This is the one area which has interested African authors, critics, and readers most intensely, especially regarding its promotion and defense. Lovers and promoters of the African cultural tradition are quick to point to its originality, sanctity, moral virtue, not only in its ability to resist foreign incursions but its ability to continue to uphold the tenets and lores of the indigenous African society.

Consequently, because of all of the above, any attack of the indigenous African cultural tradition has often received instant response -- some of which have included vituperation, name-calling, condemnation or repudiation -- from patriotic lovers of the traditional African culture. Among the authors of this orientation and background, especially those who have written to promote or defend the indigenous cultural tradition, are Kofi Awoonor, Gabriel Okara, and Birago Diop.

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In several of his lyrics, including "The Cathedral" and "Rediscovery" Awoonor scrupulously demonstrates his profound and abiding love for his fatherland. As Ken Goodwin correctly notes:

Kofi Awoonor is a syncretist. He amalgamates all experiences, whether personal ones or the collective experiences of Africa, in order to produce a single vortex of images. Africa for him is a continent and a nation that draws into itself, appropriating and adapting, the whole of human life and history¹⁶

"The Cathedral" discusses the theme of the conflict of cultures, that is, between the European civilization and the indigenous African cultural tradition and the poet's complete preference of the latter. For example, while he employs the positive metaphor "infant corn" to qualify the indigenous African culture, he satirically alludes to the European culture as a "huge senseless cathedral of doom."

Furthermore, the metaphor of "the infant corn," whose "boughs stretched across a heaven" suggests the growth and buoyancy of the indigenous African empire which the colonialists (that is, "surveyors and builders") ruthlessly destroyed on the pretext of "civilization" The use of the image "surveyors and builders," who "cut that tree" of innocence, is ironic and interesting, in the sense that those who are enjoined to promote peace and harmony have turned out to be agents of hate and wanton destruction.

Awoonor expands on the theme of his discourse further in "Rediscovery," where he nostalgically recalls the recapture and revival of the lost African cultural heritage:

When our tears are dry on the shore
and the fishermen carry their nets home
and the seagulls return to bird island
and the laughter of the children recedes at night
there shall still linger here the communion use forged
the feast of oneness which we partook of
There shall still be the eternal gateman
who will close the cemetery doors
and send the late mourners away.
It cannot be the music we heard that night
that still lingers in the chambers of memory
It is the new chorus of our forgotten comrades
and the halleluyas of our second selves¹⁷

Much like Awoonor, Gabriel Okara similarly compares the two cultures in his celebrated poem "Piano and Drums," where he suggests his preference of the indigenous African culture over the European civilization. Unlike Awoonor however, who employs invectives and satirical innuendos to repudiate the European cultural values, Okara employs a genial linguistic tone, thus leaving the reader to draw his own personal conclusions.

When at break of day at a riverside
I hear jungle drums telegraphing
the mystic rhythm, urgent, raw
like bleeding Flesh, speaking of
primal youth and the beginning,
I see the panther ready to pounce,
the leopard snarling about to leap
and the hunters crouch with spears poised,
And my blood ripples, turns torrent,
topples the years and at once I'm
in my mother's lap a suckling;
at once I'm walking simple
paths with no innovations,
rugged, fashioned with the naked
warmth of hurrying feet and groping hearts
in green leaves with flowers pulsing.

Then I hear a wailing piano
solo speaking of complex ways
in tear-furrowed concerto;
of far-away lands
and new horizons with
coaxing diminuendo, counterpoint
crescendo. But lost in the labyrinth
of its complexities, it ends in the middle
of a phrase at a dagger point.
And I lost in the morning mist
of an age at a riverside keep
wandering in the mystic rhythm
of jungle drums and the concerto.¹⁸

While in the above passage the poet employs the images of the "drums," the "primal youth and the beginning," the "hunters with spears poised" to describe the indigenous African culture, the European culture is qualified by the images of the "wailing piano," the "solo speaking of complex ways," and the "far away lands."

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Furthermore, of the poem's structural divisions, the first section (containing 16 lines) is devoted to discussing the "drums," while the second part (which consists of 8 lines) focuses on the "piano." This unequal symbiosis suggests the poet's interest or preference for the indigenous African culture. Also contributing to the poem's meaning and the poet's intent is the use of the rustic image "Jungle," to describe the "drums," while he employs the sadistic and foreboding image of "wailing" to qualify the "piano." In all of these, Okara demonstrates his linguistic ingenuity in handling the intricacy and complexity between theme and style in aesthetic discourse.

As I pointed out in an earlier study, "Birago Diop is the most consistently devoted to the theme of African culture and tradition. It is this singular theme, perhaps more than anything else, that distinguishes his verse".¹⁹ Birago Diop's poems which celebrate the beauty and glory of the African cultural tradition include "Vanity" and "Viaticum." In these poems, Africa is not only glorified, its future promise and prospects are also highlighted.

In "Vanity," a poem which castigates the African elites for ignoring their culture out of ignorance, pride or hypocrisy, Diop argues that the dead ancestors have spread their good will and legacy everywhere for the living to imitate or emulate:

They have left on the earth their cries,
In the air, in the water, where they have traced their signs
For us, blind deaf and unworthy Sons
Who see nothing of what they have made

In the air, on the water, where they have traced their signs (MAP, p.70)
Further, because the elites have refused to heed true counsel, they will be rebuffed or scorned by the dead ancestors on the day of reckoning:

And since we did not understand our dead
Since we have never listened to their cries
If we weep gently, gently
If we cry roughly of our torments
What heart will listen to our clamourings
What ear to our sobbing hearts?(MAP, p.70)

In "Viaticum," Diop illustrates how a mother initiates his child into adulthood and the challenges of life. As a parody of the Christian trinity, the ritual ceremony to be performed involves: "three pots," "three fingers," and "three bloods" (i.e., "dog's blood," "bull's blood," "goat's blood"), and the touching of three areas of the body (i.e., "my forehead," "my left breast," and "my navel"). Other noteworthy facts include: the appearance of the "full moon," the invocation of the respective winds (i.e., the "winds of the North," the "winds of the Levant," the "winds of the South," and the "winds of the setting sun"). Finally is the solicitation of "the Breath of the Ancestors." By enacting all of these processes Diop does not only seek to demonstrate his

knowledge of the African cultural traditions, he also aims to grant credence and authenticity to his discourse.

VI

War poetry has also enlarged and enriched the corpus and canon of the African poetic landscape. The poets who have explored this medium include J.P. Clark-Bekederemo, Agostinho Neto, and Dennis Brutus. These poets have not only discussed the havoc which war inflicts on the human psyche particularly, they have also highlighted its devastation and destruction of people and places generally.

In "Casualties," a poem which was inspired by the Nigerian Civil War, Clark discusses the effect of the war on its victims. Because human lives and properties lost during war are forever irretrievable, both the victims, their friends and relations and, indeed, all concerned are collectively "casualties." Herein lies the moral didacticism of the poem:

The casualties are not only those who are dead;
They are well out of it,
The casualties are not only those who are wounded
Though they await burial by installment
The casualties are not only those who have lost
Persons or property, hard as it is
To grope for a touch that some
May not know is not there.
The casualties are not only those led away by night;
The cell is a cruel place, sometimes a haven,
No where as absolute as the grave.
The casualties are not only those who started
A fire and now cannot put it out. Thousands
Are burning that had no say in the matter
The casualties are not only those who escaping
The shattered shell become prisoners in
A fortress of falling walls

(SAP, p. 200)

The expressions or allusions to "casualties," "burial by installments," "lost/Persons or property," "grope for a touch," "the grave," "A fire and now cannon," "Thousands/Are burning," "those who escaping" and "falling walls," are all images of war which elucidate and illuminate the poem's subject matter. Later, that is, at the end of the poem he employs the epithet "kwashiorkor," a Ghanaian word which also adds depth, meaning and dignity to the English vocabulary. While Clark-Bekederemo's poem discusses the gruesome nature of the Nigerian Civil War, Agostinho Neto's lyric, "Hoisting the Flag," focuses on the war of independence which Angola fought against

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Portugal. A historical poem, that is, it chronicles the various aspects of the war -- some physical and psychological, others couched in propaganda, lies and deceit -- which the colonizing power engaged in.

Consequently, while Neto employs positive images to describe the courage and heroism of the Angolan freedom fighters (e.g., "Men's strength/Striving to raise up high/the flag of independence"), he repudiates the folly and perniciousness of the Portuguese colonialists (e.g., "soldier ants" and "traitors betraying without love").

The poem is remarkable for three major reasons. First, it enhances the thematic and structural dimensions of African poetics. Secondly, it reiterates the age-long and ubiquitous aphorism that nothing of value is ever feasible without hard and perhaps painful labor. Finally, the principle of love and justice, no less than that of patriotism, which the poet adumbrates, is admirable.

If we turn now to Dennis Brutus we can say without equivocation that he is the most remarkable African poet, ravaged in spirit and soul by the Apartheid policy of South Africa, which has now been dismantled. The psychological war of attrition and dehumanization which the Apartheid policy waged against humanity -- and symbolized by wanton killings, exile, imprisonment, isolation, torture, humiliation, and other indignities -- are all familiar scenes and episodes to Brutus. Several poems of Brutus reflect these episodes and phenomena of which he himself was a classic victim.

Dennis Brutus, that is, is one of Africa's most war-conscious poets. Perhaps no other African poet has meditated on the subject of war, or suffered from the negative effects of war, than himself. Ken Goodwin writes:

Banned from writing, confined to one district of South Africa, arrested on charges of breaking these restrictions, shot when trying to escape, sentenced to eighteen months imprisonment, most of it spent on the notorious Robben Island, and living in exile...Brutus is understandably brooding and self-questioning about his relation to the land where he grew up and worked.²⁰

In several of his lyrics, including "A Traubador I Traverse," Brutus discusses the mental torture wrought on him by the apartheid menace. In this particular poem the poet traces the Black man's ordeals through recorded history, and laments the fact that, despite their unpleasantness, he bears his

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pains with equanimity and a sense of candor (“I have laughed, disdain- ing those who banned inquiry and movement delighting in the test/of will”). The poem recalls Blake’s “The Chimney Sweeper,” where the poem’s protagonist “rejoices” against a backdrop of his mistreatment (“And because I am happy and sing/They think they have done me no injury”). The poem, ‘After exile,” goes further to discuss -- in an allegorical fashion -- the nature of man’s inhumanity to man under the apartheid government, using Zulu folklore and mythology, Biblical sources, classical references, Romantic and modern allusions and metaphors to illuminate its discourse. The last part of the poem’s four-part sequence is illustrative of the lyric’s sad, narrative structure.

Today in prison
by tacit agreement
they will sing just one song
Nkosi Sike Kela;
slowly and solemnly
with suppressed passion
and pent up feeling
the voices strong and steady
but with tears close and sharp
behind the eyes
and the mind ranging
widely as a strayed bird
seeking some names to settle on
and deeds being done
and those who will do the much
that needs to be done.(SAP, p.121)

The images “Today in prison,” “strayed bird,” “suppressed passion,” and “the mind ranging,” vividly highlight the ugliness of the apartheid regime. Furthermore, the metaphor “those who will do the much/that still needs to be done” suggests not only the fights that need to be fought in order to gain ultimate freedom, but the challenges of the future -- e.g., discrimination, oppression and other injustices -- that must be addressed in order to redeem the image of the country from the vestiges of the apartheid policy. Another poem which employs negative images and metaphors to dramatize the ugliness of the South African polity is “Nightsong: city.”

Sleep well, my love, sleep well:
the harbor lights glaze over restless docks,
police cars cockroach through the tunnel streets

from the shanties creaking iron-sheets,
violence like a bug-infested rag is tossed
and fear is imminent as sound in the wind-swung bell;

the long day's anger pants from sand and rocks,
but for this breathing night at least;
my land, my love, sleep well.(SAP, p.124)

In this poem it is clear that it is only the "night" that can bring solace, peace, tranquility, and forgetfulness to a troubled land -- a land where "police cars cockroach through the tunnel streets," where "violence like a bug-infested rag is tossed," and where "the long day's anger pants from sand and rocks" (SAP, p. 124).

VII

What conclusion can we draw now from this study which has taken so much of our time and energy? Firstly, the varieties of English which African poetry embodies derive from oral poetry, the colonial experience, pidgin English, European colonialism, the Christian religion, the African cultural tradition, and war. This listing is far from being, exhaustive:

For example, Aderemi Bamikunle in his essay titled "Problems of Language in Understanding Soyinka's *A Shuttle in the Crypt*, cites Eldred Jones as observing a similarity between Soyinka's verse and that of the metaphysical poets. He writes: "In his book *The Writing of Wole Soyinka*, he gives an impression that Soyinka's difficult style is a mark of genius which places the poet on the same pedestal as the English poets John Donne and Andrew Marvell"²¹

Similarly, the Chinwezu critics in their study, *The Decolonization of African Literature*, speak about "addiction to archaisms" by "the Ibadan-Nsukka poets."²² And D.I. Nwoga writes that Soyinka's verse is known for its "Obscure allusions," and "esoteric language"²³

Nor can we ignore the use or prevalence of "standard English," especially as practiced by J.P. Clark-Bekederemo, perhaps what Abiola Irele means by "his conscious assimilation of the idiom of modernism." On this mode he concludes: "Clark-Bekederemo helped to inaugurate a new kind of Nigerian poetry in English."²⁴

Finally another poetic medium which illuminates African verse is the employment of satire, of which there are two kinds, namely, the Horatian or mild satire, such as Senghor's "Prayer to Masks," which lightly jokes that all of humanity wears a cloak of disguise; and the Juvenalian or pungent satire, such as Awoonor's "The Cathedral," which violently repudiates the Christian religion as a bundle of nonsense.

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Nor can we fail to appreciate the “imagist” motifs which permeate some of Okigbo’s verse, as in “Love Apart.”

The moon has ascended between us
Between two pines
That bow to each other

Love with the moon has ascended
Has fed on our solitary pines
And we are now shadows
That cling to each other
But kiss the air only

The images and motifs contained in the expressions, “Love Apart,” “The moon has ascended between us,” “fed on our solitary pines,” “we are now shadows/That cling to each other,” “But kiss the air only” energize and illuminate the poem’s technical structure, as well as furnish much of its poetic and rhetorical details. Without then the lyric would have lost its spirit and soul. In retrospect, we can conclude our essay by stating that the varieties of English usage in African poetry derive essentially from oral poetry, pidgin English, European colonialism, African cultural traditions, religious references, war, and such other varieties like metaphysical imagery, “standard English,” satire and the “imagist” motif. They all collectively enlarge the provenance and milieu of the African poetic paradigm and denouement.

Notes

1. S. Okechuku Mezu discusses “the Origins of African poetry” in the *Journal of the New African Literature and the Arts* (Fall 1960), 16-23.
2. As Abiola Irele notes, “the oral tradition continues to function as a fundamental reference of African expression, as the matrix of the African imagination.” See Abiola Irele, *The African Imagination: Literature in Africa and the Black Diaspora* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 61. Earlier (p. 27), he writes: “the theoretical assumptions that govern the prevailing distinction between orality and literacy need to be seriously modified and the value judgments that lurk within them directly challenged...whatever its capacity for the elaboration of language, writing remains a secondary form, a representation, at a remove from the vital immediacy of spoken language itself.”
3. See Kwabena Nketia, “Akan Poetry,” *Introduction to African Literature*, edited by Ulli Beier (UK: Longman, 1982), p. 23.

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4. See "There Shall Be No Lion Roar," in Irabor Eromosele's *Collections* (Calabar: Wusen Press, 1987), p. 30
5. See "Rain-making litany" (Lango, Uganda), in *The Heritage of African Poetry*, edited Isidore Okpewho (UK: Longman Group, 1985), p. 122.
6. See G.A. Heron, "Introduction, *Song of Lawino* and *Song of Ocol* (London and Ibadan: Heinemann, 1984), p. 5
7. G.A. Heron, "Introduction", *Song of Lawino* and *Song of Ocol*, p.11
8. Okot p'Bitek, *Song of Lawino* and *Song of Ocol* (London and Ibadan: Heinemann, 1984), p. 34. Further citation from this text will be abbreviated parenthetically in the text as SLSO, followed by the page number(s).
9. Ulli Beier, *African Poetry: An Anthology of Traditional African Poetry*, compiled and edited by Ulli Beier (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1966), p. 9.
10. Ulli Beier, *African Poetry: An Anthology of Traditional African Poetry*, p. 9
11. Ken Saro-Wiwa, *Songs in a Time of War* (Port Harcourt: Saros International Publishers), 1985, p. 44
12. See, for example, Walter Rodney's *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (Abuja: Pana Publications Inc., 2005); Simon Lewis, "Graves with a View: Atavism and the European History of Africa," *Ariel*, Vol. 27 (January 1996), 41-60.
13. David Diop, "Africa," in *West African Verse*, ed. Donatus I. Nwoga (UK: Longman, 1967), pp. 111-112. Further citation from this volume will be identified parenthetically as WAV, followed by the page number(s).
14. Abiola Irele, *The African Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 65
15. Abioseh Nicol, "The Meaning of Africa," *A Selection of African Poetry*, introduced and annotated by K.E. Senanu and T. Vincent (Burnt Mill, Harlow, Essex, UK: Longman, 1988), p.98. Subsequent citation from this volume will be included parenthetically in the text as SAP, followed by the page number(s).

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16. See Ken Goodwin, "Kofi Awoonor," *Understanding African Poetry: A Study of Ten Poets* (London: Heinemann, 1982), p.93
17. Kofi Awoonor, "Rediscovery," *A Selection of African Poetry*, edited by K.E. Senanu and T. Vincent UK: Longman, p.210. Further citation from this text will be included parenthetically as SAP, followed by the page number(s).
18. Gabriel Okara, "Piano and Drums," *Modern African Poetry*, edited Gerald Moore and Ulli Beir (UK: Penguin Books, 1976), p. 121. Further citation from the volume will be annotated parenthetically in the text as MAP, followed by the page number(s).
19. See Isaac I. Elimimian, "Negritude and African Poetry," in *Critical Theory and African Literature Today*, Vol. 19, 37, edited Eldred D. Jones.
20. Ken Goodwin, "Dennis Brutus," *Understanding African Poetry: A Study of Ten Poets*, p.1.
21. See Aderemi Bamikunle, *African Literature Today*, No. 16, 78.
22. As cited by J.O.J. Nwachuku-Agbada, "The Language of Post-War Nigerian Poetry," *African Literature Today*, Vol. 17, 166.
23. See D.I Nwoga, "Perception, Style and Meaning in Soyinka's Poetry," *Nsukka Studies in African Literature*, NSAL, 1.1., March 1978, 7, 9, 10.
24. Abiola Irele, *The African Imagination*, p. 175. Clark- Bekeremo's poems which have elements of this craftsmanship, as I explained elsewhere, include "Song," "Night Rain," and "Out of the Tower." See Isaac I. Elimimian, *The poetry of J.P. Clark-Bekederemo* (Lagos: Longman, 1989), pp. 19-27.

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