



The Theme of Africanness in Birago Diop's Poetry

Isaac I. Elimimian

Department of English, Ambrose Alli University
Ekpoma, Edo state-Nigeria

Abstract

The Theme of Africanness permeates Birago Diop's poetic art. In his poetry, Birago Diop celebrates the dead ancestor, the African cultural traditions, and the African topographical landscape, as well as the African cultural objectives and artifacts. Furthermore he draws images and metaphors from the African flora and fauna in order to develop and illuminate his lyrics. It is all of these, and more, that this essay discusses.

Introduction

Of the major African Negritude poets -- Leopold Sedar Senghor, Birago Diop, and David Diop -- Birago Diop demonstrates, more than the others, a keen awareness of the concept of Africanness. His understanding and employment of images and metaphors related to African myth and symbol, rites and rituals, culture and tradition, mysticism and folktales, evidently marks him out as a devotee of the concept of Africanness. All of the foregoing qualities can be found in the two major themes which he addresses, that is, the celebration of the dead ancestors, as well as the celebration of the African cultural and traditional values.

Born in 1906 in the small village of Quakam, near Darkar, he hailed from a family which valued knowledge, learning and writing. Diop is credited with recreating the traditional folktales which he collected during much of his extensive travels in French colonial Africa. Abiola Irele remarks on his writing and the tradition which informs his work:

...writing became for Diop a willful act of recuperating an original voice, for which Amadou Koumba served as a reference, as the comprehensive figure and embodiment of a tradition that Diop felt compelled to reclaim-- less perhaps as a prodigal son than as one who had ventured forth from the cultural and spiritual home and brought a new and precious acquisition, the colonizer's language¹.

Other than his family connections, other events helped to shape and promote his aesthetic and literary interests, including his extensive travels both in Europe and Africa; his orientation as a veterinary doctor; and his association with leading Negritude figures, especially Leon Damas and Leopold Sedar Senghor (along with Aime Cesaire) who were the brain-child of the movement.

I

Of the three themes which Birago Diop addresses in his verse, that of the dead ancestors is predominant. He accords the dead ancestors loyalty, glory, and honor. For Diop, they symbolize the gods of creativity and life, perhaps second only to God, the Supreme Being. In his celebrated poem, "Vanity," Diop discusses the dead ancestors from several perspectives:

If we tell gently, gently
All that we shall one day have to tell,
Who then will hear our voices without laughter,
Sad complaining voices of beggars
Who indeed will hear them without laughter?

If we cry roughly of our torments
Ever increasing from the start of things,
What eyes will watch our loud mouths?
Shaped by the laughter of big children
What eyes will watch our bad mouths?

What heart will listen to our clamouring?
What ear to our pitiful anger
Which grows in us like a tumour?
In the black depths of our plaintive throats?
When our Dead come with their Dead
When they have spoken to us with their clumsy voices;
Just as our ears were deaf
To their cries, to their wild appeals
Just as our ears were deaf
They have left on the earth their cries,
In the air, on the water, where they have traced their signs
For us, blind, deaf and unworthy sons

Isaac I. Elimimian

Who see nothing of what they have made
In the air, in the water where they have traced their signs.

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?²

The first premise of the poem argues that the dead ancestors are not really dead, but rather they live permanently among the living in order to protect them against harm and other inimical forces of the mundane world. Although this is the background of the poem's argument, it is not original; it derives from the African mythological concept that the first order of the dead is to continue to protect and promote the welfare and well-being of the living whom they have left behind on earth. For this reason they are always around the living in order to perform their legitimate responsibilities.

The second premise centers on what the living have failed to understand about the dead ancestors. They should expect to be greeted with "laughter," whenever they seek help or protection from the dead ancestors. To the poet, apparently, the refusal to listen or follow the footsteps of the dead ancestors emanate from pride, ignorance, and stubbornness.

The third premise of the poem's argument focuses on the various ways in which the dead ancestors have established their legacies for the living to emulate. For example, "They have left on the earth their cries/in the air, in the water where they have traced their signs" (MPA, page 70, lines 20-21). Although Diop does not go into the specifics of the respective legacies, the close reader of the text who has a thorough knowledge of the indigenous African mythological tradition, can easily figure out some of the legacies. For example: on "earth" the dead ancestors have bequeathed to posterity the culture of farming and hunting; on "water" they have cultivated the culture of fishing; and on the "air," they have established the tradition of setting the forest on fire in order to guide a victim to safety through following the direction of the wind and smoke.

The final premise of the poem's argument is also interesting: that much as the dead ancestors can be helpful in times of trouble, they can easily be vindictive and punitive against disobedient and recalcitrant individuals. In the African mythical consideration, the punishment which the dead ancestors can inflict include misfortunes of all kinds, disease and even death. It must be emphasized that the punishment for disobeying the dead ancestors may also involve payment of fines, offering sacrifices, and making reparations as may be determined by the local deity, the oracular prophets, and the diviners.

Diop employs powerful images to underscore his argument. For example, the poem's title-word, "Vanity," helps our quick understanding and appreciating of the poet's message; it is vivid, precise and telling. The word is employed in order to highlight the hypocritical behaviour of the living who see nothing good in the work of the dead ancestors. The poet also employs ridicule -- symbolized by such references and allusions as "voices of beggars," "our large mouths," "our ears were deaf," "our plaintive throats," and "for us, blind deaf and unworthy sons" (MPA, pp. 69-70) -- all of which are condemnatory.

Furthermore, the repetition in the poem of such images and phrases like "What eyes," "What heart," "What ear," and "If we weep gently gently," "if we cry roughly of our torments" is designed not only to call attention to the rhetorical structure of his dialectics, but to emphasize the seriousness of his argument. Finally, there is much to admire in the poem from the religious point of view: it recalls the Biblical injunction that we should "honor" our "father and mother" in order to obtain progress, prosperity and longevity which, in any case, is a fundamental tenet in the African cultural tradition.

If we examine the poem for other archetypal echoes and references, we find them in the poet's constant appeal to the continuity of ethos in the African cultural norm, and his deployment of negative epithets and abusive language (e.g., "our large mouths," the "laughter of big children," and the "voices of beggars". In African, culture, these are typical words employed by adults to rebuke stubborn, disobedient and recalcitrant children who refuse to heed the advice of their superiors or elders. In the Western world, such deployment of language may constitute "child abuse" and could lead to serious legal repercussions.

Isaac I. Elimimian

Every now and then, Diop writes with a sense of caution, restraint and indirection, and sometimes with a concealment of meaning. For example, rather than write directly by saying “disobedient children,” he says “And since we did not understand our dead/And since we have never listened to their cries.” This mode of writing derives from the African cultural lores, where, for example, adults or parents address the wards through parables, folktales, and anecdotes. Dr. Samuel Johnson characterizes his work as *The Vanity of Human Wishes*; Birago Diop’s poem might alternatively be described, for lack of a better title, as “The Vanity of Human Behavior.”

Another poem which registers similar visions and images of Africanness is the less-discussed and less anthologized piece, “Breadth,”³ which runs through seventy lines in length. The poem’s title, “Breadth,” immediately guides our imaginative understanding of the underlying meaning: it centers on the fact that the dead ancestor are the moving force, the lifewire of our existence and humanity. The poem’s opening line, “listen to things, which is repeated four times like a refrain, highlights the issue of arrant disobedience with Diop addresses. In order to underscore the role which the dead ancestors play in our life, Diop not only describes them as powerful but goes on to indicate that they are omnipresent:

Those who are dead have never gone away.
They are at the breast of the wife
They are in the child’s cry of dismay
And the firebrand bursting into life.
The dead are not under the ground.
They are in the fire that burns low
They are in the grass with tears to shed,
In the rock where whining winds blow
They are in the forest, they are in the homestead.
The dead are never dead.

(BAV, p. 26).

The issue of disobedience, to which the youths are often prone -- and which is the motivation behind this poem -- is a fundamental subject of discussion in African mythology and folklore. Consequently, parents and guardians often advice the youths -- who may be ignorant of the indigenous customs and tradition -- to desist from disobedience, especially since the dead ancestors, who are watching them, and who operate everywhere as guardian-spirits, may inflict severe punishment

The Theme of Africanness in Birago Diop's Poetry

on them. Also, sometimes in the evening or during the moonlight evening-sessions, lullabies or cradesongs, adults take it upon themselves to narrate stories about the activities of the dead ancestors in order to inculcate moral virtues.

There is no doubt that this poem, more than any other lyric in Diop's poetic arsenal, articulates with passion and sensitivity the predominant role of the living dead in human affairs. Furthermore, as a mark of reverence and honor for the dead ancestors he mentions them several times in the poem, in various modes and tones -- all demonstrating his absolute love, loyalty and reverence for their power and authority.

...
Is the breathing of the dead.
...
Those who are dead have never gone away
...
The dead are never dead
...
Is the breathing of the dead
...
Who are never dead
...
Those who are dead have never gone away
...
The dead are never dead
...
Is the breathing of the dead
...
And the fate of the dead who are not dead
...
That have taken the breadth of the deathless dead
Of the dead who have never gone away
Of the dead who are not now under the ground

II

Diop's verse which celebrates specific aspects of the African cultural tradition are "Diptych" and "Viaticum," lyrics which celebrate important ritual practices whose underlying settings are rooted against a backdrop of Western colonialism.

Isaac I. Elimimian

“Diptych,”⁴ a less-discussed and less anthologized poem of two stanzas, highlights the preparations a village community undertakes in preparation for a foreign war of which it is ill-prepared. In the traditional African socio-cultural setting, a village community usually performs certain ritual ceremonies and sacrifices either to ward off an impending war or to defeat the invading enemy. In this poem the village community is under threat by the Western colonialist invaders (suggested by “fearful of the approach of the Daughters of fire,” line 4).

But as is usually the case in any military confrontation -- whether real or a figment of the imagination -- the political space is often dominated by “Mystery” and by “Rumours.” The repetitive employment of “Rumours” in the poem’s narrative structure strongly suggests that, more than anything else, it is the evil phenomenon of “Rumours” that is being peddled. Furthermore, nothing is mentioned in the poem to suggest the fact that actual fighting -- culminating in casualties or death -- occurred. The cultural element of Africanness apparent in the poem includes not only the performance of ritual ceremonies and sacrifices, but the references to such images and metaphors as the “Calabash dyed indigo,” the “great Pot of Day,” “Forms and colours,” the “tiny sounds, neither hollow nor shrill,” “A Mystery muffled and formless” and the “dark Loincloth pierced with nails of fire.” Apparently there is a lot left unsaid about the “Diptych,” and it may contain anything to everything, includes relics of artifacts, memorabilia, incense, bric-a-brics, inscriptions and various odds and ends such as a is usually found or associated with the ritual shrine of a deity or goddess. By employing diverse images and motifs -- some obscure and abstract, others bizarre or metaphysical -- Diop gives voice, tone, intensity, and meaning to his poetic art.

The image, the “Daughters of fire,” is an allusion to one of several names by which the early European colonizers were known or addressed by the indigenous population, much as the indigenous Africans were viewed differently and addressed as such by the European colonizers⁵. This situation was caused by the increasing mistrust, apprehension, and misunderstanding which developed between the two races, a situation whose effect can be felt today in various facets of life in Africa. The last line of the poem vividly mirrors the fear, agony and trauma which gripped the indigenous people at the time:

Fearful at the approach of the Daughters of Shadow

The Theme of Africanness in Birago Diop's Poetry

The dag howls, the horse neighs
The Man crouches deep in his house.
The savannah is dark,
All is black, forms and colours
And in the anguished Silences made by Rumours
Of tiny sounds infinite or hollow or sharp
The tangled Paths of the Mystery
Slowly reveal themselves
For those who set out
And for those who return.

(MPA, p. 68).

In "Viaticum," a popular poem which relies on the various forms of sacrifice which is performed on an initiate who sets out to meet the challenges of life, Diop demonstrates his complete knowledge and handling of subject matter. Although the word "Viaticum" derives from the Christian religious practice of ministering, Diop adapts it to meet the indigenous African ritual practice of preparing the youth for growth into adulthood.

The symbolism of the poem is clear enough: it is Diop's veiled rejection of the Negritude assimilationist ethos which places French cultural interests above the cultural values of other countries. To demonstrate the fundamental depth and relevance of the African religious practice, Diop develops his subject matter beyond and above that offered by the Christian liturgy. For example, the Christian trinity of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit is developed into an elaborate symbolism of the "three pots," the "three fingers," the "dog's blood," the "bull's blood," and the "goat's blood." The moral to be drawn from this elaborate discussion is the fact that African religious practice is deep and efficacious enough that it does not need the imported Christian religion.

Of interest are the three animals -- the dog, the bull, and the goat. These are the traditional objects of ritual killing and sacrifice in African ceremonial religious practices. Furthermore, the various references to the numerical number three, also illuminate the poem's dynamic structure. In terms of the human body, for example, the poet emphasizes the importance of the "forehead," the "left breast," and the "navel." As for the hand, he singles out the "thumb, the index and the next." These specific references not only show the depth and complexity

Isaac I. Elimimian

of the African religious ceremony, but they suggest the high level of accuracy and exactitude required in order to ensure its success.

In the didactic and moralistic poem "Omen," Diop adds a new dimension to the theme of Africanness. Although the poem has not received the serious critical attention it deserves, the theme of "What constitutes a useful life," which it explores, is important and paramount in African cultural mythos and dialectics. The poem's title is intriguing and telling. Omen is a sign of good or evil. Diop employs the images of the "waves of gold," the "waves of silver," and the "waves of red blood," to characterize the different stations of life. Accordingly, Diop suggests, the great life is symbolized by gold," the good life by "silver," while the bad life is symbolize by the "red blood." The didacticism of the poem is clear: each individual human being designs his own path, his own life. Thus in life, the choice we make will most likely determine our own destiny. In the African cultural mythos, this is a parable which parents or adults frequently tell their youths in order to inculcate in them a sound moral ethos for a successful life. It is noteworthy that the poem is rendered in quatrain, with a repetitive first line of "A naked sun," which suggests the deliberate and measured pace of its lyrical structure.

III

There is much to admire in Birago Diop's poetry. The issue of good moral behaviour, which he discusses will, no doubt, enhance the audience's continued interest in his lyricism. Furthermore, the confidence and safety-net which his poetry promotes, as demonstrated, in "Viaticum," for example, is instructive and illuminating:

The mother said, 'Go into the world, go!
They will follow your steps in life.'
Since then I go
I follow the pathways
the pathways and roads
beyond the sea and even farther,
beyond the sea and beyond the beyond,
And whenever I approach the wicked,
the Men with black hearts,
whenever I approach the envious,
the Men with black hearts
before me moves the Breath of the Ancestors.(MPA, pp. 71-72).

A second area of interest has to do with the fact that Diop's sense of Africanness -- which encompasses his love of Africa, its people, culture,

and tradition -- is deep and penetrating. Thirdly, he demonstrates a thorough understanding of his subject matter, which he addresses through the use of various poetic and rhetorical strategies, including folklore, mysticism, and religious and ritual ceremonies. Finally, as a Negritude poet, his treatment of the French assimilationist policy, which he rejects expertly through effective handling of subject matter, is impeccable. There is love, beauty, harmony, cultural integrity, and a profound celebration of Africanness in Birago Diop's poetry that will not be forgotten.

Notes

1. A. Abiola Irele, *The African Imagination: Literature in Africa and the Diaspora* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 41
2. Gerald Moore and Ulli Beier, *Modern Poetry from Africa* (Hammondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1976), pp. 69-70. Further quotations from this edition will be included parenthetically in the text as MPA, followed by the page number(s)
3. See "Breadth" in *A Book of African Verse*, edited John Reed and Clive Wave (London and Ibadan: Heinemann, 1978), pp. 25-27. Further citations from this work will be abbreviated parenthetically in the text as BAV, followed by the page number(s).
4. In view of the complexity of the poem's title as discussed by Diop, it is important to highlight its meaning, as defined by the *Oxford Learner's Dictionary*, ed. Diana Lea (London: Oxford University Press, 19), p. 410. It describes the word "diptych" as "a painting (technical), especially a religious one, with two wooden panels that can be closed like a book".
5. In his essay, "African Writers of the Eighteenth Century," *Introduction to African Literature* (London: Longman Group, 1982), p. 244, O.R. Darthorne, for example, notes that the white men of the period "could see the African as partly savage and partly noble. The Africans who wrote also saw themselves in just this same way."