

Chapter Twenty Four

ROMANTICISM AS A MEETING POINT BETWEEN THE NIGERIAN POET AND SCULPTOR

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Abstract

There is an inextricable relationship between Visual and Literary Arts, especially Poetry. This relationship was very popular during the Romantic period in Europe; from the late eighteenth to the early nineteenth centuries, such inextricable relationship also existed in tradition African art. However, most modern African artists deny this claim and view such relationship as irrelevant to our immediate academic environment. This work examines Ezenwa Ohaeto's poem; "A song for the Drummers" and Cliff Nwanna's "Drummer" (Oti-Igba) against the background of Romanticist relationship in and line with Igbo folklore. Our enquiry reveals that the view that condemns Romanticism in African academic environment is wrong; rather Romanticism is the bedrock of modern African studies. Both works under discussion were thought provoking, well rendered and innovative. Romanticism needs to be revived in Africa because of its didactic values. This work therefore stimulates and encourages more researches into this area of study.

Introduction

There has been an inextricable relationship between visual arts and literature especially between sculpture and poetry. Works of fine artists have always ignited some sort of creative fire in most poets and in some cases we have visual artists that will write poems concerning their work and life experiences. Michelangelo was a typically example of such fine artist – poet, whose personality and works were documented in his own sonnets and letters. Adams (14) Again, one of Pablo Picasso's notable paintings; "Old Guitarist" appealed so much to an American poet, Wallace Stevens (1879-1955) that he wrote a poem. "The man with the blue Guitar" in 1937, in response to Picasso's painting.

Shelley, another western poet, also had a similar experience. Shelley's encounter with a painting of medusa's head (then attributed to Leonardo da Vinci) in 1819 led to the poem "The aloof and unattainable woman". Adams (18). Among the Igbo of Nigeria, the traditional Uli artists were singers, mural painters and poets. Nwanna (11)

Etymologically, Romanticism is derived from "Romance" which stands for literature in French, Italia, Spanish, Portuguese and Romania. In fact, the French word "Roman" translates

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to ‘novel’. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, Romanticism emerged as a major artistic development in Western art history. Romanticism also produced Romantic literature, which started almost at the same period, they exhibit a nostalgia for the past and the various strains of Romanticism that are evident in the visual art are found mostly in 19th Century music and poetry.

Thematically speaking, Cliff Nwanna’s “Drummer” is reminiscent of Ezenwa Ohaeto’s “A song for the Drummers”. Drummers in African, especially in Igbo Land (where both artists come from) were held in high esteem. Drummers were entertainers, social critics, communicators, historians and culture carriers. However, the status of the drummer in Africa has been eroded by corrosive forces of westernization of the continent by Colonial powers.

Again, both artists derive their inspirations mostly from the nostalgia of the African past. A period when there were no frontiers between the visual and the performing arts. At that time, one finds out that most African oral poets were sculptors who will carve drums and also use it for performance. A typical Sahaelian groit beats the drums as he recounts great events of the past; we can go on ad-infinitum, mentioning socio-religious and political events in African, where drummers play prominent roles.

Ezenwa Ohaeto’s Background

The early beginning and artistic development of Ezenwa Ohaeto started when he was born in 1958: two years before the independence of Nigeria at life Ezinihitte, Mbaise L.G.A of Imo State. His father, Venerable Michael Ogonnia Ohaeto was an Anglican Priest who hails from Owerre-Nkwo Oji, Imo State, Nigeria. His mother, Rebecca Nwogo Ohaeto was a dedicated vicar’s wife. Ezenwa Ohaeto no doubt inherited his literary ingenuity from his father, whose Sunday Sermons were nothing short of prize winning essays. His sisters and uncle Chibuzo also impacted greatly on his early beginnings. While writing on Ezenwa Ohaeto’s funeral Oration, in 2005, his only brother, Iyke Ohaeto states that;

His art of writing being induced by some concomitant extraneous influences at home from his sisters and maternal uncle Dee Chibuzo and during his second degree by his supervisor, professor Donatus Ibeakwedalam Nwoga who was a specialist in critical analysis of poetry. In short his contact with these “gods of the written words” Achebe and Nwoga and entire talents were his major influences. (17.)

The road to becoming a successful writer was not easy for Ezenwa Ohaeto;. His educational career opportunities were severely limited by the early death of his father and the bitter tale of the Nigeria / Biafran Civil war with its devastating effects on the Igbo of the south-eastern

Nigeria, where Ohaeto hails from. Although the Nigeria Head of state, during the civil war era, Col. Yakubu Gowon declared that there was no victor and no vanquished, the Igbos were apparently vanquished and reduced to a state of “nobodies”. The affliction and marginalization of Ndigbo (Igbo people) in their own country continues till date. Uwalaka: (23)

Ezenwa Ohaeto attended St. Augustine Grammar School, Nkwerre, from 1971 to 1975, where he excelled in both literature and all the science subjects. Also in 1975, Ohaeto secured an admission into the prestigious University of Nigeria Nsukka, where he obtained his B.A., and M.A. degrees in English language. The period from 1975 to 1980, after his graduation from Nsukka was a period of artistic uncertainty and literary exploration; a period which could be best described as his “Groping Stage”. A development which Ohaeto aptly captured in the following lines of his poem; Groping

How much Labour lies in that denied chance
Of a publisher’s rejection slip.... We grope
For something anything to lean onto
We grope for swiftness to give voice to our eyes
For what the judge accepts.(35)

However, this period of his life wasn’t without literary achievements. Ohaetao won the first prize in a story competition organized by the English department, University of Nigeria, Nsukka in 1978, Certificate of Appreciation in drama, from English Department, University of Nigeria Nsukka in 1979, amongst many other literary awards.

By 1981, Ezenwa Ohaeto was able to step out of his artistic limbo and beyond the shimmering shadows; hence the year 1980 correctly marked the end of his “Groping Stage” and the beginning of his” middle period”. Ohaeto’s “middle period” was very remarkable as he won the prestigious BBC Arts and Africa award in 1981. the wining of the B.B.C, Award also opened some new vistas for the young Ohaeto as he embarked on a literary journey into himself; a journey which resulted in his looking beyond the sterile Western sheets customarily used by most African contemporary poets and reflected deeply upon the rich cultural heritage of Nigeria. During this period, Ezenwa Ohaeto, literarily celebrated the Nigerian nation, especially his Igbo culture. The journey culminated in his writing and reading his poems in pidgin English; a language which every Nigeria is at home with. Pidgin English also gave Nigerians a wider freedom expression since it was adapted to suit Nigerian situation and convenience. Ohaeto, While commenting on the origin of his pidgin poetry states thus;

.... I have been reading my poems written both in formal
And pidgin English to various audience in Nigeria.

But after each reading of my pidgin poems, I have come
 Away with a sense of satisfaction that the poems touched
 Some inner words and also a sense of over whelming
 Acceptance of pidgin poetry. (11)

Having won the heart of Nigerians with his pidgin poetry, Ezenwa Ohaeto decided to trek further into his Igbo roots hence his “Third and last period was a period of folklore and re-living the past. A past so dear to Ohaeto that his poems of this last period such as, “Chants of a minstrel” “The voice of the Night masquerade” and many other articles and scholarly prints brought the ethno-cultural values of Ndigbo to the fore.

Ezenwa Ohaeto, whose poetry, fictions and articles have been published in various journals and books in Nigeria and Overseas and has been translated into foreign language such as, Germany, Russia and India also got to the peak of his career when he emerged joint winner of the coveted Nigeria National Liquidified Gas (NNLG) prize for literature. Joy they say “is very fragile and it breaks too soon” and that was the case with Ohaeto who died a few months after receiving one of the greatest honours and recognition in the world. His joy and the joy of millions of Nigerians broke along with him.

Ezenwa Ohaeto died as a professor of literature at the Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka and thus the “Nnukwu Mmanwu” went back to the earth through the ant hole where he came from. The “Nnukwu Mmanukwu left but he is still celebrated by millions of Nigerians. He cannot die, he mere embarked on a long travel singing “songs of a traveler”.

Cliff Nwanna’s Background

Clifford Ezekwe Nwanna was born on May 14th 1966 in Lagos, Nigeria, during the period of Nigeria’s political upheaval which devastated the people of south- eastern Nigeria and other people of Igbo extraction. Cliff Nwanna’s parents; Ozo and Ojiefi Benjamin Nwanna, joined their fellow Igbo country men to run back to Igbo land in the south –eastern Nigeria, in order to escape the barbaric killings of easterners in the North and some other parts of Nigeria. This situation made “Ndigbo” to become disillusioned, hopeless and refugees in their own country and culminated into the Brifran – Nigerian civil war which started on the 27th may 1967 and ended in January 1970.

Cliff Nwanna’s early beginning was (also) severely limited by the (after) war developments in Nigeria which adversely affected “Ndigbo” in several ways which include; economic and social deprivation, ethnic rivalry and religious conflicts. His father, Ozo Benjamin Nwanna had to do several jobs at a time, in addition to his carrer civil service in order to make ends meet. His mother, Ojiefi Elizabeth Oyibo Nwanna also had to double her role as both house

wife and petty trader. Nwanna had his primary school education at Christ church Primary School, Enugu and on leaving school he gained an admission into the union secondary school, Enugu (Formally, Boy's High School, Awkunanaw) in 1978. On leaving secondary school in 1983, Nwanna was admitted into the prestigious faculty of Creative Arts, University of Benin; the only University in Nigeria that took visual and performing arts so seriously that a faculty was set apart for only fine arts and theatre arts departments. It is worthy to note that in other Nigerian Universities, visual and performing arts courses were given lesser recognition; a situation where these two areas were lumped up together with a multitude of other courses, sometimes unrelated. Although, the creative art department was reverted back to the faculty of arts, it was after cliff Nwanna's graduation in 1988. Again, the action of the University management, do not discourage the department of fine applied arts who continued to maintain its originally high academic standards.

The period after Nwanna's graduation; from 1988 to 2003, in his artistic career was so similar to Ezenwa Ohaeto's groping stage that one can equally use the same term "groping" to describe that period. The following lines of Ezenwa Ohaeto's poem else where quoted in this discourse, aptly described stage;

We grope for stability, we grope for swiftness
To give voices to our eyes for what the eyes
Sees is what the judge accepts. (36)

Cliff Nwanna's grope for stability had swiftness and to give voice to his eyes led him to the University of Ibadan in 1991, where he obtained a maser of arts degree in African visual art history, form the famous institute of African studies. His exposure to the history of various arts of Africa at the institute, ignite a creative fire in Nwanna who started adapting various traditional forms, sometimes fusing two or more traditional art forms in his works. This stage which cloud also be regarded as his middle stage, witnessed some artistic achievements, as he participated in PACA art biennials in Bamako, Mali, in 2002, and a study tour/ exhibition of six west African countries namely; Nigeria, Benin Republic, Togo, Ghana, Burkina Faso and Mali. The study tour which was organized by the Pan African Circle of Artists took place in 2003 Nwanna also held solo and group exhibitions.

The gains of these numerous experience were consolidated in his latest period; "The Uzu period" which started from 2004 and has continued till date. At his present stage of artistic development, Nwanna now has a definite focus in both his studio practice and Art History. In the studio, Nwanna who works mainly on metal, set out on a mission to re-invent the Awka metal smithing tradition by transmuting its form and content into modern sculpture genre. This recent development is gradually evolving into an art movement and art style known as "Uzuism". "Uzu" is an Igbo word for metal smithing.

On the Art history front Nwanna has thrown all his energies in the direction of “Gender mainstreaming and Romanticism in African Art. Nwanna is presently a senior lecturer in the department of fine / Applied Arts, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. Nwanna is also a poet, art critic of no mean stature and a great enthusiast of professor Ezenwa Ohaeto’s poetry. A look at one of Nwanna’s metal sculpture titled; “The drummer” (Oti – Igba) betrays his unspoken admiration for Ohaeto’s poem especially his “Song For The Drummers” and his desire to reconstruct the past.

Between Ohaeto’s “A Song for the Drummers and Nwanna’s Drummer (Oti – Igba)

Ezenwa Ohaeto’s a song for the Drummers “is a free verse of four stanzas, while cliff Nwanna’s “Drummer” (Oti –Igba) is a metal sculpture. Ezenwa Ohaeto’s poems did not only bear strong artistic influence in Cliff Nwanna’s artistic development but was also a source of inspiration to cliff Nwanna, who wrote in his Biography/Narrative statement thus;

Ezenwa Ohaeto’s “A song for the drummers in particular appealed so much to me that I decided produce a metal sculpture based on the inspiration I got from the poem (12)

Ohaeto’s “A song for the drummers” consists of four stanzas of humorous, satirical and sinewy narration. The theme of Nigeria under years of military rule and totalitarianism (from 1966 to 1999), successive military regimes that were marked by corruption, nepotism and inter and intra- ethnic conflicts. The poet carefully observed the activities of Igbo praise singers and drummers locally referred to as “Ndi- Otimkpu”, during cultural outings.

These praise singers and drummers (“Ndi –Otimkpu”) sing and beat their drums in praise of the Nigerian dictators who oppress the masses, and eliminate any one who dares stand in their way. lines 1-8 paints a picture of the activities of these “Ndi – Otimkpu” who encourage the ruthless dictators by singing praises to them Ohaeto’s “A song for Drummers is also reminiscent of Oliver de coque’s popular highlife song titled; Ana enwe Obodo enwe”

The song was produced in the 1990’s in praise of the Nigerian “Nouveau rich” consisting mainly of drug barons, fraudsters and the corrupt ruling class from the Igbo extraction. Oliver de coque’s song also illustrates the role of these “cheap” praise singers in our society; who close their eyes to the evils committed by their masters. However, Ndi Otimkpu do not debase themselves, by singing these praise, for nothing; hence Oliver the coque justly remarked that “Otimkpu nwere share”. This translates thus; “The praise singers has reward”

Similarly, Ezenwa Ohaeto observes in lines 9-13 that the reward for the cheap praise singing appears to be attractive, hence; contractors, public servants and the Academia suddenly

turned into master drummers and praise singers. In lines 16-20 Ohaeto reminds us of the folly and miserly of such classes of drummers and praise singers in the following words;

After the long carnival when the dust clears
when the bodied quieten we will discover how
frail the hands that beat the drums, we will
discover how empty the barn behind the house. (16)

Similarly, Cliff Nwanna's metal sculpture: "The Drummer" also the negative attributes of the cheap praise singers. Nwanna's Drummer is a free standing metal sculpture depicting a figure playing the traditional Igbo drum, locally known as "Igba Eze" (Royal drum). The work has a linear character; elongated with a head fixed onto the frame. This drummer symbolizes the Igbo praise singers (Oti-Mkpu) in action. He is obviously enraptured in what he is doing and the sculptor also tries to communicate to the audience, the skill and mastery which the drummer has of his art of drumming and praise singing.

The active pose of the figure (mass) projecting into space emphasizes the obvious relationship between mass and space. The "Spatial" composition which Nwanna employed in "The Drummer" (see plate one) also bring to the fore, his pre - occupation which is to create a figure in motion; note the elongated and tensed up body of the drummer which appears to gyrate to the rhythm of his beat, thus lending motion to the whole work. In Nwanna's "Drummer", it appears that details were consciously removed to reveal the use of "Uzu" forms and motif. The body and legs were adapted from "Uzu" motif, Mkpishi" Nwanna (99). The cylindrical drum resonates the prominent working tool of the Awka metal Smiths, while the head of the figure depicts the mask of "Oji Onu", the Igbo satirical mask with the form of a singing bird. The "Oji Onu" masquerade in actual performance is a gossip and praise singing masquerade. The presence of "Oji onu" in Nwanna's work is symbolic because it helps to locate the drummer (praise singer) as mere "Oji onu" "Oji onu" is a satirical expression which states that "the mouth is powerful" but in actually life actions speak louder than words or simply put; "words are cheap".



Plate 1

Title: The Drummer

Medium: metal

Size: 3Feet (high)

Date: 2007

Artist: Cliff Nwanna

Collection: Artist's Collection.

Conclusion

Ezenwa-Ohaeto's poem "A song for the drummers' and Cliff Nwanna's Drummer", focus on the socio-political problems in Nigeria, viz, abuse of power, and the praise – singers who support their evil acts by singing their praise. Both Ohaeto Again both works under discussion addresses the issue of modernity in traditional garbs expressed in Nigerian fast fading socio-political aspects of African visual art, literature and folklore. The work reveals that theme of both works were not only related but is thought provoking, well rendered and innovative.

The relationship between visual arts and literature is in indeed in-extricable, especially in African scholarship.

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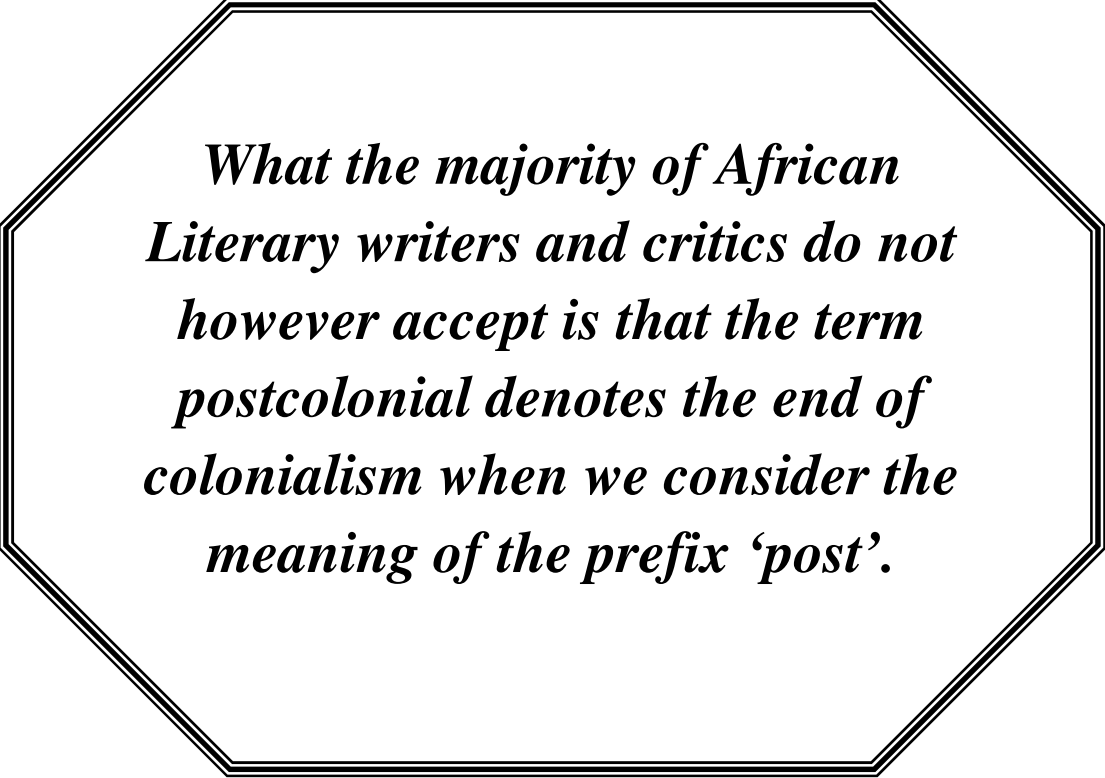
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*What the majority of African
Literary writers and critics do not
however accept is that the term
postcolonial denotes the end of
colonialism when we consider the
meaning of the prefix 'post'.*