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The Critical Reception of Modern African Poetry

“To have any sense of evolving African poetics, one must be aware of the socio-political significance of literary expression and the ideological character of literary theory.”

Thomas Knipp (1985: 117)

The inaugural moment of the scholarly engagement with modern African poetry is best seen as coinciding with efforts at making modern African literature a subject of academic enquiry in the 1960s, the most significant being the Makerere, Dakar and Freetown conferences, all of which were held between 1962 and 1963. The proceedings of the conferences, edited by Gerald Moore (1965), are brought together in *African Literature and the Universities*. The efforts are remarkable in the sense that they generated the enduring problematics in African critical practice, all of which are associated with the task of clarifying the African literary identity: the crisis associated with the medium of African writing; the dilemma of inventing or appropriating a critical idiom and the deceptively simple question of mapping the African literary tradition. Dubem Okafor (2001: 1) sums these up, saying, “African literature is not only a contested terrain, but the medium of its production and of its discussion is, to say the least, cacophonous”. The fact that all other problems ever raised in the criticism of African literature are engendered by these underscores their primacy in the assessment of modern African poetic traditions.

The conflicting critical standpoints with regard to the possibilities of apprehending African literature will represent critical positions, which have attracted numerous subscribers and reflect changing perspectives on African literature. “Changes in definitions of African literature reflect and respond to political and social realities, trends in literary criticism, and changes within the texts themselves” (Barkan 1985: 27). Modern African poetry,

very much like other postcolonial literary practices, is defined in relation to European literary traditions which provide the paradigms, conventions and critical principles that are either appropriated or negated in the process of defining the identity of the newer literatures. Any appraisal of the critical reception of modern African poetry should underscore this problem by revealing why certain paradigms and methods are privileged and others marginalised.

Inventing a Tradition

The first phase of the scholarly investigation of African poetry privileged a Pan-Africanist outlook, one that took the existence of a continental literary tradition for granted. This, in reality, remains the invention of Africanist-anthologists and pioneering critics of African poetry who simply willed the tradition into existence on the pages of such journals of African literature and culture as *The Black Orpheus*, *Transition* and *African Literature Today*, as well as influential anthologies of African poetry. With the obvious exception of Wole Soyinka's *Poems of Black Africa* (1977), whose title reflects its focus, anthologies like *Modern Poetry from Africa* co-edited by Gerald Moore and Ulli Beier (1963) as well as *A Book of African Verse* by John Reed and Clive Wake (1969) operate within a tradition that is pretentious in claiming the African identity for works that do not truly project diverse African experiences. Whereas most of these anthologies merely represent the work of poets in sub-Saharan Africa, they adopt the African identity in a metonymic manner. *Modern Poetry from Africa* anthologises the works of thirty-two poets from sixteen African countries, twenty of whom are from West Africa. Gerald Moore is particularly known for taking an African universe for granted in studying African poetry. This is evident in such essays as "Time and Experience in African Poetry" (1966) and "The Imagery of Death in African Poetry" (1968).

Romanus Egudu's *Modern African Poetry and the African Predicament* (1978) and Ken Goodwin's *Understanding African Poetry* (1982) project a similar outlook, reflecting the critical consensus between indigenous and expatriate critics of African poetry in this regard. The two studies give a largely distorted picture of African poetry. Goodwin is the typical non-African critic with a pretence to an encyclopaedic grasp of African writing. He suggests that his theoretical formulation could explain the pattern the growth of African poetry has taken. His thesis is that most of modern African poets first imitated some European models, so that it is impossible to properly appreciate their work without taking this into consideration. He correlates the achievement of each of the ten poets he studies with the pattern or standard set by their models. But six out of the ten poets—Kofi Awoonor, J. P. Clark, Wole Soyinka, Christopher Okigbo, Lenrie Peters and

Gabriel Okara—are from West Africa. He does not go beyond acknowledging the debt of the poets to a received European tradition within which poets like W. B. Yeats, Gerald Manly Hopkins, T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound are seen as figures to be imitated. His argument, briefly stated, is as follows:

“The first significant stage in the formation of contemporary African poetry in English was [...] emancipation from nineteenth-century cultural imperialism and the voluntary adoption of a foreign, but international, twentieth-century cultural imperialism and the voluntary adoption of a foreign, but international, twentieth-century style. It was a style comparable in many ways with that of the African Francophone poets. [...] The adoption of the Anglophone African poets of an international style was due to their tertiary education” (Goodwin 1982: ix).

Egudu’s *Modern African Poetry and the African Predicament* represents a slightly different tendency in the sense that it recognises the diverse experiences that have shaped the creative imagination of poets from various parts of Africa as generating the tradition. The assumption in his work is that the African experience is thematised in African poetry. For him, African poetry “is intimately concerned with the African people in the African society, with their life in its various ramifications—cultural, social, economic, intellectual, and political” (Egudu 1978: 5). Ironically, Egudu underscores the variety of experiences articulated in African poetry without drawing attention to its implication for the continued validity of the notion of an African poetic tradition. This unproblematic reading of African poetry betrays the weakness of pioneering scholarship.

Tanure Ojaide’s *Poetic Imagination in Black Africa* (1996) maps a wider space for African poetry. It not only asserts the uniqueness of the African poetic imagination but also attempts a clarification of same. Fundamental to Ojaide’s critical project is the assumption that the Black poetic imagination must be differentiated from the Western tradition of poetry so long as the artistic philosophy of African writers is rooted in traditional African poetic traditions: the artistic principles and practices shared by various Black African societies which also provide the common base for modern African poets and poets of African descent. His work thus represents a more scholarly rendition of the ideas of the *bolekaja* critics in *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature* (Chinweizu & Madabuike 1980) in its dispassionate outlook and scholarly temper. It is best read as an attempt at theorising black poetry. He reconciles form with content, seeing both as issuing from the same source. Even though he focuses on modern African poetry of English expression, he makes statements that are supposed to be applicable to a poetic tradition in sub-Saharan Africa and the black Diaspora. The enabling assumptions for Ojaide’s work are stated in the second chapter of the book:

“Modern African poetic aesthetics are unique in possessing a repertory of authentic African features. This authenticity manifests itself in the use of concrete images

derived from the fauna and flora, proverbs, indigenous rhythms, verbal tropes, and concepts of space and time to establish a poetic form. Besides (and unlike in the West), content is more important than form and images do not aim to reflect the senses. Content is not perceived by poet and audience as extra-literary. The mere fact that foreign languages are used could occasionally create discord in discourse but modern African poetry attempts to reflect indigenous rhythms. In fact, an authentic African world forms the backdrop of modern African poetry" (Ojaide 1996: 30).

The discursive site that Ojaide's study occupies derives empowerment from the assumptions of Afrocentric scholars and proponents of black aesthetics who acknowledge shared cultural and artistic principles in sub-Saharan Africa on the one hand, and the black Diaspora on the other. Negritude probably generated the original inspiration for this outlook. G. C. M. Mutiso (1974) states what has almost been taken for granted in the discourse of black art: the essential unity of vision in black expressive culture as evident in an artistic philosophy which privileges functionality and social responsibility. His contention is that "in African societies art has traditionally been highly functional, and [that] the contemporary African writer identifies with this tradition" (Mutiso 1974: 9). Mutiso's claim is a variant of the black aesthetic, which, in a sense, authorises the transcontinental Afrocentric theory of Molefi Kente Asante, and the vernacular theory of Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (1988) as expounded in *The Signifying Monkey*. While each of these projects is predicated on a construction of a black literary tradition and its legitimising claims—cultural or historical affinities—they are at best, products of the efforts of black intellectuals committed to making a claim to a unifying black literary heritage. Molefi Asante (1985: 6) claims that "[a]lmost all Africans share cultural similarities with the ancient Egyptians". Femi Ojo-Ade's sustained scholarly preoccupation with constructing a black literary tradition, as evident in *Colour and Culture in Literature* (1984), constitutes a broader, although less theoretically rigorous, conception of the same tradition. In a significant demonstration of the link between the literatures of Africa and the New World, S. E. Ogude (1983) locates the origin of African literature in English in the slave writings of the eighteenth century. In *Genius in Bondage: A Study of the Origins of African Literature in English*, he represents Phillis Wheatley as "the first creative talent from the African continent to emerge from that dehumanising phenomenon known as the Slave Trade" (1983: 39).

If the earliest approaches to the study of African poetry tended to construct a monolithic African poetic tradition, the paradigm which privileges regional traditions has been more influential in the description of modern poetic production in Africa. This approach resembles the first as it takes the existence of a continental tradition, to which the regions contribute, for granted. The ascendancy of the approach is, arguably, a consequence of the establishment of African literature as an academic discipline. The concern has generally been that of taking the divergences in African writing into account in its appraisal. These divergences are mainly occasioned by

peculiar historical and political developments in the regions. The contention of proponents of the paradigm is that these realities have tended to condition literary production in the regions, so that it becomes possible to draw attention to shared attitudes, techniques or formal orientations. The fact that different parts of the continent experienced different forms of colonialism authorises this outlook, licensing such categories as West African, East African and South African poetry. The isolation of South Africa in the apartheid era, coupled with the peculiarity of her literary production, made it necessary to separate the poetic tradition associated with her. But not every one of the regions has been sustaining a virile literary tradition. This explains why a South African (as opposed to Southern African) poetic tradition tended to represent the modern poetic heritage of the region for a very long time.

The discourse of regionalism in African writing was first empowered by the anxiety of writers like Taban lo Liyong who detected discrepancies in literary productivity in various parts of the continent. But it is flawed by the arbitrariness of the criteria adopted in constructing it. What, for instance, authorises a West African poetic tradition, considering the diversity of her people and the forms of colonialism experienced in the region? Each of the two sub-traditions in West African poetry—the Anglophone and the Francophone—is a product of a unique colonial experience. It would then appear that basic to the adoption of the paradigm is the tendency to survey the dominant trends in the poetic culture of each region. This is largely responsible for reinforcing received assumptions with regard to the canon of African poetry, as representative poets are often identified in each case, especially when such studies are incorporated into comprehensive surveys of the literature of the region concerned. Such works are significant both for the writers they recognise and those they exclude because the paradigm accounts for the recognition of certain poets as representing the literary achievement of a region. Many critics have, for instance, come to see the work of Okot p' Bitek as synonymous with East African poetry. This is the case with Timothy Wangusa's "East African Poetry" (1973). If Wangusa's essay is taken as projecting the state of East African poetry in the early 1970s, the same cannot be said about Goodwin's study which devotes a chapter to the work of Bitek, apparently as the major poetic voice from East Africa. By the same token, the works of Kofi Awoonor, Wole Soyinka, Christopher Okigbo, Lenrie Peters, J. P. Clark-Bekederemo and Gabriel Okara are often taken as constituting the canon of Anglophone West African poetry, while Dennis Brutus, Oswald Mtshali and Mongane Wally Serote have also been taken as the dominant, and therefore, representative voices in South African poetry. This practice has mainly been legitimised by anthologists and critics who, in the bid to reflect the dominant trends in the poetic traditions of each of the regions, settle for "representative" poets, cognizant of the impossibility of a comprehensive literary history.

Proof that the critical study of regional traditions in African poetry reinforces canonical assumptions with regard to the defining character of the poetic tradition of each region is seen in the orientation of Robert Fraser's *West African Poetry: A Critical History* (1986), Adrian Roscoe's *Uhuru's Fire: African Literature East to South* (1977) and Adrian Roscoe and Mpalive Hangson-Msiska's *The Quiet Chameleon: Modern Poetry from Central Africa* (1992). If critics like Roscoe were merely interested in introductory surveys suited for announcing the emergence of a new literature, others, like Fraser, recognise the inadequacy of such an approach in contemporary studies of African poetry. This is not just a way of acknowledging the growth of African poetry but a way of admitting that contemporary critical appraisals of the tradition should be grounded in theoretical frameworks that will at once problematise their enquiry and draw attention to the possibility of theorising African poetry, even if the theory will be generated by the tradition. Fraser's effort in *West African Poetry* is an attempt at interrogating Goodwin's *Understanding African Poetry*. Contrary to Goodwin's claims, Fraser seeks to establish that modern West African poets owe more to their indigenous poetic traditions. He takes the existence of a West African tradition, one that brings together the work of Anglophone and Francophone poets, for granted. His work thus represents a remarkable attempt at defining the character of a regional poetic tradition and is one of the most rigorous studies in this regard. But it suffers from the weakness identified with all studies with this orientation—the tendency to see each of the regions as a homogeneous cultural formation. But Jacob Gordon (1971: 23) denies the existence of “homogeneity of thought or expression among writers of any particular region in Africa” altogether.

Regionalism may be problematised if critics see the possibility of categorising on the basis of language. Anglophone, Francophone and Lusophone poetic traditions in Africa constitute distinct traditions. The concept of regionalism will, in this case, not function as an index of geographical location, as Anglophone, Francophone and Lusophone writers are spread all over the continent. Dorothy Blair's *African Literature in French* (1976) demonstrates this possibility. The case for regional poetic traditions in Africa is, all the same, best made with caution, as it is capable of creating the impression that every part of the continent has really contributed to the making of modern African poetry. Modern African poetry and by extension, African writing in the European languages, is largely writing from sub-Saharan Africa. What is referred to as the African tradition of poetry has equally been sustained by the outstanding outputs of Nigeria, Ghana, Senegal, Malawi, South Africa and the Congo. Any examination of recent anthologies of African poetry, notable among which are Frank Chipasula's *When my Brothers Come Home: Poems from Central and Southern Africa* (1985), Tijan Sallah's *New Poets of West Africa* (1995), and Tanure Ojaide and Tijan Sallah's *The New African Poetry* (1999) will confirm this.

This leads to the evaluation of a newer but no less problematic practice, one that authorises the reading of African poetry as an aggregate of national traditions. Emergent scholarship on national traditions of poetry has the prospect of seeking to legitimise itself on the basis that nation states in Africa offer a more credible basis for the assessment of African literary production. This is, in part, based on the fact that writers are often identified on the basis of nationality. There is indeed a sense in which African poets have been more responsive to the problems, aspirations and challenges within their countries in the last two decades as a way of being relevant within their immediate environments. Critics like Abiola Irele acknowledge the fact that “there has been a movement in African literary studies towards the recognition of national literature in the new African states” (Irele 1990b: 52). Ojaide (1996: 80-81) clarifies this further:

“Unlike in the 1960s when the poets were culturally obsessed, nature-oriented and ‘universal’, today, old and young poets are addressing their national issues more aggressively than before [. . .]. In their desire to effect changes, they use the nation state as their starting point.

The poets are very particularised in their treatment of problems peculiar to their countries. Thus poets from The Gambia, Sierra-Leone, Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, Malawi, Zimbabwe, and South Africa are creating national literatures, making it more plausible now to talk about an individual nation’s poetry as was not the case before the mid-1970s.”

A basic theoretical consideration, which is often overlooked, is the fact that every national literature must, in reality, project the national spirit. Aijaz Ahmad (1994: 244) has argued that “(a) ‘national’ literature [. . .] has to be more than the sum of its regional constituent parts, if we are to speak of its unity theoretically”. It is difficult to take the nation-state as a reliable category for the scholarly exploration of African poetry partly because African nation-states, as constructs of colonial powers, are, in reality, constituted by many ethnic formations. Underscoring the ethno-cultural diversity that characterises African states and consequently hints at the limitation of any critical paradigm that accords the nation state undue privilege, Chidi Amuta (1987: 23) says:

“Without seeking to undermine the communality of kinship ties and historical experiences among the peoples of Africa, what is incontrovertible is that the social and cultural unity of Africa is very much a unity in diversity. Even within the framework of individual nation-states, there are often as many ethno-linguistic groups as one cares to identify.”

An uncritical acceptance of the nation-state as a category for the analysis of cultural production in Africa is thus capable of giving a distorted picture of the African experience. Adebayo Olukoshi (1996: 45) describes the nation-state project in the continent as an extension of the effort at “nation-building” sponsored by the colonial establishment in the process of “obliterating ethnic differences”.

M. J. C. Echeruo's "Traditional and Borrowed Elements in Nigerian Poetry" (1966) would seem to have taken the existence of a Nigerian tradition of poetry for granted. The question that naturally arises is whether Africa's multi-ethnic societies are capable of sustaining national literatures, considering the fact that most of them are, at best, undecided as to whether they should be regarded as nations. The fact that intra-national conflicts and ethnic crises constantly threaten the existence of the countries points to the fact that they may not really sustain literary traditions that are national in character. The problem varies from country to country but it is possible to illustrate with the cases of Nigeria and Cameroon. Nigeria's many ethnic groups regularly assert themselves and have come to see the country as the invention of the British. Thus, central to the Nigerian sense of collective self-definition is an acknowledgement of the diversity of her peoples and cultural values, so that the continued existence of the country is only guaranteed by the continued consent of the constituent nationalities. In this situation, the definition of a shared literary tradition becomes problematic. The Cameroonian experience reveals another dimension of the problem. At the heart of the problem in this case is the crisis engendered by the challenge of accommodating Anglophone and Francophone communities within a literary tradition, especially when the dominance of the latter within the social sphere has meant the marginalisation of the former. This presents a situation in which the emergence of a literary tradition is undermined by the awareness of an essential conflict generated and sustained by the indelible and destructive identities created and distributed by colonial interests. The emergence of marginal discourse in contemporary Anglophone Cameroonian writing is adequate testimony to the inauthenticity of a unified Cameroonian literary tradition. This underlines the fact that the international boundaries that have come to be seen as defining national identities are, at best, convenient instruments of former colonial establishments to allocate spheres of neocolonial influence and manipulation in Africa. In making a case for an Anglophone, as opposed to a Francophone, Cameroonian literature, Emmanuel Fru Doh (1993: 82) says:

"It is obvious that there is an Anglophone Cameroon literature and, like all literatures, it is a function of the trials and tribulations which mark the Anglophone Cameroonian's existence from the earliest beginnings in his encounter with the whiteman until today when he finds himself in a disheartening union with his Francophone counterpart."

Even if national literature is conceived in an unproblematic sense, only a few African countries can boast of a viable literary tradition and certain genres seem to have flourished in particular contexts. It may be possible to talk of the existence of virile national literatures in Nigeria, South Africa, Kenya, Malawi, Zimbabwe, Senegal, Cameroon and the Congo, among others. The novel seems to have flourished most in Kenya, Cameroon and

Senegal, while South Africa and Nigeria appear to have had a normal literary development in the sense that all the major genres have flourished in their literatures. Evaluations of the poetic tradition of each of these countries have, in most cases, been integrated into larger studies incorporating critical essays on their oral, dramatic and fictional literatures. Such works as Bruce King's *Introduction to Nigerian Literature* (1971), Christopher Heywood's *Aspects of South African Literature* (1986), Biodun Jeyifo's *Contemporary Nigerian Literature* (1985) and Charles Angmor's *Contemporary Literature in Ghana: 1911-1978* (1996) demonstrate the possibility of describing the creative tradition of each of these countries, even though they merely project the literature of each nation-state as the aggregate of the contributions of individual writers. Any exploration of the critical engagement with the Nigerian experience is capable of illustrating the problems associated with privileging national traditions in the reading of African poetry. The Nigerian experience is significant not only because it is one of the most developed but also because it is the most influential and consequently, most representative within the African context. Acknowledging the dominant position of Nigerian writing, Nadine Gordimer (1973: 19) argues that "without Nigeria, English-language African literature would be a slim volume affair".

Nigerian poetry is the most developed and has also attracted a variety of critical responses. Informed scholarly opinion recognises the promotion of creative writing by expatriate teachers within university communities in Ibadan and Nsukka as laying the foundation for the development of a Nigerian tradition of poetry. The efforts of people like Martin Banham, Ulli Beier and Janheinz Jahn at the University College, Ibadan and those of Peter Thomas at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka in their early days, are recognised as the main stimuli for the flowering of creative writing in these universities. This way of explaining the Nigerian literary tradition gained currency in the 1970s and consequently inspired the invention of such labels as the "Ibadan School" and the "Nsukka School" which Chinweizu and his colleagues used unadvisedly in the process of clarifying the perceived Eurocentric inclination of early Nigerian poetry. The Ibadan tradition was the first to attract critical attention, being the most influential of its type in Africa. As early as 1962, Martin Banham and John Ramsaran (1962: 372) in "West African Writing" could say:

"Ibadan has become the centre of literary creativity in the country and obviously has an important part to play in the guidance of a Nigerian literature. Poets have particularly thrived in the country."

Critical evaluations of the Ibadan tradition have always drawn attention to the positive impact of such literary journals as *The Horn*, *Black Orphans* and the Mbari Writers' and Artists' Club in the promotion of her literary culture. Peter Benson's *Black Orpheus, Transition and Modern Cultural*

Awakening in Africa (1988), is one of the most ambitious efforts at recording the Ibadan experience. It should however be seen as complementing the reflections of participant-observers, like Martin Banham's "A Piece that We May Fairly Call our Own" (1961). Appraisals of the Nsukka experience, especially Hezzy Maduakor's "Peter Thomas and the Development of Nigerian Poetry" (1980), Emmanuel Obiechina's "Nsukka: Literature in an African Environment" (1990) and Chukwuma Azuonye's "Reminiscences of the Odunke Community of Artists: 1966-1990" (1991) underscore the contributions of Peter Thomas and the Odunke Community, an informal association of writers and artists, to the making of the Nsukka literary tradition.

The privileging of the Ibadan and Nsukka traditions apparently provides a basis for tracing influences in Nigerian poetry. While "[t]he poets of the Nsukka tradition [...] have always in their poetry shown a consciousness of the Igbo tradition" (Nwoga 1982: 39), the Ibadan poets are neither drawn from, nor associated with any geo-cultural section of the country. Thus, while poets like J. P. Clark, Wole Soyinka, Aig-Imoukhuede, Molaru Ogun-dipe, Mabel Segun, Tanure Ojaide, Odia Ofeimun, Niyi Osundare, Okinba Launko, Harry Garuba, Onookome Okome, Femi Fatoba, Remi Raji and Chiedu Ezeanah are associated with the Ibadan tradition, Okogbule Wonodi, Sam Nwajioba, Ossie Enekwe, Obiora Udechukwu, Chukwuma Azuonye, Uche Nduka and Olu Oguibe have come to be identified with Nsukka. Christopher Okigbo occupies a unique place as he is best seen as belonging to the two traditions. The Nigerian experience demonstrates the significance of university communities as bases for writers in sub-Saharan Africa, confirming Adrian Roscoe's argument in *Uhuru's Fire* that "Africa's Universities are unrivalled centres of literary debate and experiment" (Roscoe 1977: vi).

Paradigms and Participants

The foregoing survey of the paradigms for the study of African poetry may create the impression that much has been achieved in terms of the critical appraisal of African poetry. But modern African poetry has not enjoyed adequate critical attention. Evidence that the African novel, for instance, has enjoyed considerable attention is the fact that it is increasingly being subjected to serious re-readings, which, in addition to demonstrating the possibility of applying contemporary theories to it reflect the changing patterns in African writing. African dramatic literature has also enjoyed reasonable critical appraisal, reflecting the diversity of the traditions, experiences and concerns it engages. The rest of this essay will be concerned with exploring the main critical strategies adopted in the study of modern African poetry. Critical method is conceived here in a loose sense that suggests critical focus, embracing the assumptions rooted in contemporary critical

methods and the more traditional approaches associated with older scholars. The motivation for this effort is the need to scrutinise the methods and assumptions that have shaped the appraisal of African poetry. Thus, the purpose is to illustrate, using representative critical studies, the variety of approaches so far adopted in studying African poetry.

The earliest phase in the study of African poetry naturally showed a great deal of interest in its formal peculiarity. Pioneered by European critics of African literature and a few indigenous scholars, the motivation for this critical project was the urgency of appraising African poetry in the light of the European tradition to which they assumed the emergent African poets were indebted. This was the vogue in the 1960s and the early 1970s. Dan Izevbaye's doctoral dissertation, entitled "The Relevance of Modern Literary Theory in English to Poetry and Fiction in English-Speaking West Africa" (1967), seems to represent an intellectual justification of this critical outlook. Fundamental to the preoccupation of studies in this tradition is the notion that African poetry could be read as an extension of European poetic traditions. One of the most objectionable justifications of this critical standpoint is credited to Adrian Roscoe who in *Mother is Gold: A Study in West African Literature* says: "[i]f an African writes in English, his work must be considered as belonging to English letters as a whole, and can be scrutinised accordingly" (Roscoe 1971: x). It is then not surprising that assumptions rooted in European traditions were often transferred to the reading of African poetry in an uncritical manner. This development is best read as a transitional phase, marking the emergence of the African critical tradition. African poetry and fiction suffered most from this approach. It is remarkable that studies rooted in this tradition emerged at the time the study of African literature was just being institutionalised.

The most influential assumptions on these studies are the fundamentals of the New Critical tradition: universalist pretensions and the doctrine of art for art's sake which, in the African cultural environment, are all irrelevant. Many of the studies with this orientation were published in the *Black Orpheus* and the early volumes of *African Literature Today*. A good example is John Povey's "The Poetry of J. P. Clark: Two Hands a Man Has" (1972). As a study primarily concerned with the style of Clark's poetry, it draws attention to the influences on his writing, underscoring the fact that "Clark is a poet who exists between two worlds and two cultures" (Povey 1972: 36). It is the modest offering of a scholar without the necessary cultural literacy for an informed reading of Clark's poetry. Gerald Moore's "Surrealism and Negritude in the Poetry of Chikaya-U-Tamsi" (1979) operates within the same critical framework as it implies the indebtedness of African poetry to the European tradition. But David Dorsey (1988: 27) has rightly argued that "African poetry requires special attention to cultural particulars". It would appear that even when an expatriate critic feels sufficiently prepared to engage African poetry from the perspective of its concern, there is always a tendency to end up underscoring form.

This perhaps explains why most of the influential studies of African poetry by non-African scholars are essentially concerned with form. Stating his intention in *West African Poetry*, a serious attempt at surveying the development of West African poetry, Fraser (1986: 2) says that “the emphasis” of his work “is unashamedly on form”. Non-African critics of African poetry probably feel more comfortable engaging the form of African poetry not only because they may not be sufficiently informed about the experiences that necessitate its creation but also because they are generally inclined to privileging form in the tradition of Anglo-American critical practice. Gerald Moore, John Povey, Martin Banham, and Peter Thomas have been concerned with probing the African poetic imagination to determine the degree of its dependence on received traditions.

The response of African scholars that emerged from the 1970s has reflected a different perspective to the reading of African poetry as it accords sociological data a great deal of importance. Informed by the primacy of commitment, Romanus Egudu, Donatus Nwoga, Lewis Nkosi, Kofi Awoonor and Abiola Irele see the need to do away with an outlook on African poetry that would play down the specificity of reference in African literary expression in the bid to satisfy the universalist criteria of the Anglo-American critical tradition. Thus, their critical outlook assumes a liberal sociological orientation. This is reflected in G. C. M. Mutiso’s *Socio-political Thought in African Literature* (1974), Kofi Awoonor’s *The Breast of the Earth* (1975), Lewis Nkosi’s *Tasks and Masks* (1981) and Abiola Irele’s *The African Experience in Literature and Ideology* (1990a), all of which are conscious of the necessity of evolving relevant critical criteria as articulated by Donatus Nwoga’s “The Limitation of Universal Critical Criteria” (1976), even if this would only mean compromising or adapting the tenets of New Criticism, the tradition within which most of them were trained. Thus, they temper a form of formalist appraisal with some historical consciousness. Irele’s *The African Experience in Literature and Ideology* (1990a) offers a classic statement of the doctrine of this generation of African critics, while Emmanuel Obiechina’s *Culture, Society and Tradition in the West African Novel* (1975) and Romanus Egudu’s *Modern African Poetry and the African Predicament* (1978) represent its application to the criticism of the African novel and African poetry respectively.

The success of each study informed by the liberal sociological approach is largely a function of the critic’s capacity for perceptive criticism. The fact that there is no coherent theoretical formulation to authorise a unity of vision and method has meant that it could accommodate a variety of assumptions as it projects an outlook on literary expression that often reduces critical practice to the correlation of social experience with literary expression. This is particularly evident in Tayo Olafioye’s *Politics in African Poetry* (1984) and *The Poetry of Tanure Ojaide* (2001), a reflection of a critical temper in which the concern of the work, especially when it has political significance, is privileged. The approach has particularly proved

useful in such surveys as Kofi Awoonor's "The Poet, the Poem and the Human Condition: Recent West African Poetry" (1979) and Funso Aiyejina's "Recent Nigerian Poetry in English: The Alter-Native Tradition" (1988). But it is capable of reducing the critical task to sociological exposition with little or no insightful reflection as is the case with I. I. Elimimian's *The Poetry of J. P. Clark-Bekederemo* (1989). It strives in most cases to reconcile context with text in a bid to balance the social impulse for poetic inspiration with artistic method. It is this method, more than any other that betrays the poverty of initiative in the criticism of African poetry. Some of the finest studies in this tradition, like Okechukwu Mezu's *The Poetry of L. S. Senghor* (1973) and Tanure Ojaide's *The Poetry of Wole Soyinka* (1994) blend sociological information with some technical exploration. Studies that concentrate on individual poets are often more focused, thorough and confident. But they all seem to recognise the primacy of commitment in modern African poetry, an assumption that informs their taking the centrality of thematic pre-occupation for granted. This in part explains why theirs is still the most influential method for the study of African poetry, having shaped the critical practice of such contemporary critics of African poetry as Aderemi Bamikunle, Ezenwa-Ohaeto and J. O. J. Nwachukwu-Agbada. The approach has tended to give a false sense of accomplishment to indigenous critics of African poetry as it is not grounded in a coherent theoretical framework.

The Structuralist critical project associated with Sunday Anozie may not have made much impact on the criticism of modern African poetry but it represents a major attempt at indigenising a Western critical methodology. The primary motivation for the effort, as Anozie (1989: viii) argues in *Structural Models and African Poetics*, is not to "furnish the critical direction" for African literature as such, but a way of demonstrating that "the criticism of African literatures could use more method, and a more vigorous ordering of sense". Frank Uche Mowah (1991), following the example of Anozie, in "Toward a Structuralist Study of African Poetry: An Examination of the Poetry of Wole Soyinka and Okot p'Bitek", attempts a structuralist reading of modern African poetry. Both scholars do not acknowledge the fundamental contradiction in adopting a method that does not take the strong affinity of literary expression to social reality into consideration. By discountenancing the human agency that facilitates the production of poetry, Structuralism severs the essential link between literature and history, making it irrelevant in the African context. Appraising Anozie's critical project, Irele, in "Sunday Anozie, Structuralism and African Literature", says:

"The aims and principles of the structuralist method are universalist in their orientation. For the whole point of the method is to establish the general character of the human mind in its symbolising functions" (Irele 1988: 161).

The radical wing of the sociological critics, which is largely constituted by critics immersed in the Marxist critical tradition, represents a vocal,

although less significant, presence in African critical practice. This critical tradition, mainly represented by the work of critics identified with the Marxist insurrection in Nigerian critical practice from the late 1970s and their disciples, imposes the cliché-ridden critical vocabulary of Marxism, with all its exaggerated claims to relevance, on African poetry. This development was associated with the critics operating within the Ibadan/Ife axis in the late 1970's: Biodun Jeyifo, Femi Osofisan, G. G. Darah, Niyi Osundare and Ropo Sekoni. This critical tradition derived inspiration from a 1974 essay of Omafume Onoge entitled "The Crisis of Consciousness in Modern African Literature: A Survey" which later published in Gugelberger's *Marxism and African Literature* (1985). But the work of Chidi Amuta, Emmanuel Ngara and Udentia O. Udentia demonstrate its applicability to African poetry. If Georg Gugelberger's *Marxism and African Literature* (1985) is a ground-breaking effort at making a case for the viability of the Marxist critical project in the African terrain, Amuta's *The Theory of African Literature* (1989) is an eloquent follow-up, presenting a confident, coordinated and passionate demonstration of the possibility of the method in a sense that would suggest the irrelevance of any other perspective. His reading of Ofeimun's poetry provides an opportunity for him to parade the familiar critical vocabulary of Marxism, which immediately draws attention to its weaknesses and strength. Not only does it prove too predictable and, therefore, unchallenging, it also foregrounds the main problem with this strategy: its self-righteous intolerance of other possibilities of reading. The lack of dynamism in African Marxist critical practice is apparent in the manner it reduces every form of poetic expression to political statement, thereby making each critical exercise incapable of yielding new insights.

Emmanuel Ngara's *Ideology and Form in African Poetry* (1990) and Udentia O. Udentia's *Art, Ideology and Social Commitment in African Poetry* (1976), are among the very few book-length studies of African poetry in the Marxist tradition. They are unique in the sense that they reflect the preferences of their authors. Ngara's study, which complements his work on the African novel, provides a broad introductory survey of modern African poetry, one that explores the achievements within the Lusophone, Anglophone and Francophone traditions. Ngara dispenses with the too familiar practice of categorising writers as products of regional literary traditions and privileges authorial ideology, reading the work of each poet as the unique product of a definable creative vision. Making a case for the Marxist critical framework in the African environment, he says:

"There is no necessary contradiction between Marxism and Afrocentrism in literary criticism. While Marxism originated in Europe historically, it is a truly revolutionary theory which is well suited to the task of liberating African literature and criticism from Eurocentricism" (Ngara 1990: 7).

He further states that "a Marxist analysis of African literature cannot but emphasise the historical and social conditions which have given rise to

African literature" (*ibid.*). Udentia, whose study is more conventional in its periodization, argues that "the revolutionary aesthetic method" has the capacity to "domesticate a universal critical criterion to suit the temper and subjectivities of the African literary process" (Udentia 1976: xi).

Marxist critics generally exaggerate the relevance of their method and play down the fact that it is not indigenous to Africa. As Thomas Knipp (1985: 116) argues, "literary theory (as a whole) is an import into or an imposition on traditional Africa—part of the legacy of colonialism". Even though Marxist critics would always labour hard to make a case for the anti-imperialist orientation of their method, their critical project cannot be said to represent an authentic tool for the appraisal of African poetry, the claims it makes with regard to its goal notwithstanding. Many African scholars practise Marxist criticism without a critical evaluation of its relevance. Its presence may, therefore, constitute a barrier to the quest for alternative methods of explaining the uniqueness of the African reality in the face of the urgency of stimulating the production of relevant critical knowledge.

Other Possibilities

The foregoing has highlighted the trends in the scholarly engagement with modern African poetry. Much as there are isolated cases of investigations rooted in such critical traditions as Psychoanalysis, Feminism and Semiotics, a clear pattern is yet to emerge to authorise an informed critique. The insignificant presence of the feminist perspective in the canonisation and criticism of modern African poetry contrasts with the experience in the criticism of the African novel. This reflects the marginalisation of the female voices in anthologies of African poetry. Stella and Frank Chipasula in the Introduction to *African Women's Poetry* stress the fact that its "exclusive focus on women's poetry is a necessary first step towards reversing the objectification of women and rendering visible the invisible poets themselves" (Chipasula 1995: xvii).

The colonial establishment, through the machinery of colonial education, provided the facility for the emergence of modern African writing and this equally conditioned its critical reception. Ironically, the growing decolonisation of the African poetic imagination has not been matched by a corresponding re-evaluation of the tools for its assessment. The process of recovering from the corrupting influence of the colonial engagement should naturally involve a gradual restoration of values and traditions which were either discarded or marginalised as the Western presence became increasingly significant. This viewpoint derives inspiration from the consciousness that African literary scholarship in the postcolonial era must be responsive to the challenges of the age by taking up the responsibility of clarifying the process of collective self-discovery.

The scholarly enquiry into literary production in Africa has, in particular, not been sensitive to the necessity of re-evaluating categories and critical methodologies adopted in the appraisal of African literary production to ensure their appropriateness in view of the peculiarity of the African literary experience. This becomes necessary as no informed appraisal of cultural production in the postcolonial world can overlook the place occupied by the culture of a people. "Critical standards derive from aesthetics. Aesthetics are culture dependent. Therefore critical standards must derive from culture" (Okpaku 1967: 53). The first step is to recognise the danger of adopting or adapting assumptions and paradigms developed in other cultural environments which would easily engender the error of empirical thinking as has been the case in the criticism of modern African poetry. Chidi Maduka (1988: 186) is right to have warned that "[a]n uncritical assimilation of foreign theories is inimical to the African's justifiable quest for cultural identity". The foregoing review shows that critics have not paid adequate attention to the fact that some of the assumptions informing the privileging of such social units as the nation-state in the description of literary traditions are both questionable and invalid, so long as ethnic formations are by far, more influential socio-cultural units in contemporary Africa. Most African states are, at best, constructs of the colonial powers that would cease to exist if the constituent nationalities fully assert themselves.

Ethnic formations constitute significant cultural units in the African context. The assertion of ethnic identities within the context of nation-states in Africa in recent times is adequate proof of their influence not only in the sphere of politics but in the making of the cultural identities of various nation-states. In the context of literary criticism, the suppression of the ethnic factor has taken the form of erasing the ethnic presence in the literary history of individual countries. At best, there has always been a vague reference to oral traditions, a label that neither properly designates the complex literary resources of diverse people groups nor reflect their nature. Identifying and clarifying ethnic traditions in African literature may be a major step towards developing a viable alternative to dominant but not so relevant methods in the clarification of the African literary experience. The survey has, no doubt, exposed the insensitivity of critics of modern African poetry to the necessity of developing an ethno-cultural approach to the study of modern African poetry. Such an outlook would go beyond the facile exploration of the recourse to the oral which has, more often than not, underscored modal variation to the neglect of such major factors as the ideological import of poetic form, artistic philosophy and social utility. Albert Gerard (1981: 31-32) has argued in *Four African Literatures* that "African literature ought to include within the compass of its definition the ethnic literatures of Africa". But an informed outlook would also recognise the necessity of situating such literary traditions, as this paper proposes, within the growing discourse of postcoloniality. This at once acknowledges the conditioning impact of the colonial experience on modern African poetic traditions and

enhances the formulation of a relevant critical tool. The essential link between colonialism and modern African writing cannot be denied.

“If colonialism changed forever the course of Africa’s political and economic history, it also profoundly altered its literary destiny. To date, colonialism represents the single most disruptive factor in Africa’s history. It is to this epochal intervention that Africa owes the emergence of its contemporary nation-states. Modern African literature also owes its existence to the phenomenon of colonialism” (Williams 1998: 16).

This critique of the critical reception of modern African poetry has drawn attention to the urgency of producing relevant knowledge in the criticism of African poetry, especially as the critical engagement with African poetry stands to benefit from the critical assumptions associated with the emergent postcolonial literary theory, which recognises the peculiar socio-cultural experiences in the postcolonial world.

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ABSTRACT

This essay probes the production of critical knowledge in African literary studies with particular reference to the study of modern African poetry. It surveys the major paradigms and methods in this regard, exploring the viable alternatives and possibilities for reading the tradition. Modern African poetry in the context of the essay refers to African poetry in the received European languages—English, French and Portuguese—but for practical convenience, its focus is limited to modern African poetry of English expression and, to some extent, Francophone African poetry in English translation. The study assesses significant efforts made by African and non-African critics with regard to defining the tradition of modern African poetry. The notion of critical reception in the study is, consequently, so inclusive that it accommodates practices as diverse as canon formation, the formulation of critical criteria and the construction of African literary geography.

RÉSUMÉ

La réception critique de la poésie africaine moderne. — Cet article analyse la production de savoir critique dans les études consacrées à la littérature africaine, et plus particulièrement à la poésie africaine moderne. Nous nous pencherons sur les principaux paradigmes et méthodes, en explorant les différentes possibilités qui permettent de lire la tradition. La poésie africaine moderne dans cet article fait référence à la poésie africaine telle qu'elle est reçue dans les langues européennes — anglais, français et portugais — mais, pour des raisons pratiques, l'objet d'étude de cet article se limitera à la poésie africaine francophone dans sa traduction anglaise. Nous mettrons en relief les efforts significatifs mis en œuvre par les critiques africains et non africains pour définir la tradition de la poésie africaine moderne. De ce fait, la notion de réception critique dans cette étude est tellement large qu'elle accommode des pratiques aussi diverses que l'élaboration de canons, la formulation de critères critiques et la construction d'une géographie littéraire africaine.

Keywords/*Mots-clés*: critical study, critical trends, poetry, translation/*étude critique, courants critiques, poésie, traduction.*