

## **Poet-Performers in Contemporary African Poetry**

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### **Abstract:**

African Literature, especially, African poetry has been passing through a transitional period, trying to assert its own identity. African poetry is a vast ocean comprising two genres: one is based on rich ethnic cultures and oral literatures (now called oratures) handed down orally-for many generations with additions and re-creations and after colonization written down in hundreds of African languages. The other is influenced by western traditions and written down in European languages; and is called by some writers as "Euro-African poetry". The poets of the former category freely borrowed themes, techniques and ways of expression from oratures and ethnic cultures in their attempt to make themselves more communicative to their compatriots. This newly transfused blood has given new vigor and vitality to African poetry. Over the last four decades there have been serious attempts at collecting, translating and publishing these orally transmitted narratives, songs, proverbs, riddles, tales, lyrics, heroic and epic poetry. Oral literature is both a reservoir and a creative expression of cultural values, hence a vehicle for propelling a society along its moral path. Poetic recitation is common at gatherings of ethnic groups. There are still many prominent genres of this popular poetry especially in rural areas; and it is an expression of life and a means of social communication.

**Main text:**

African Literature has been passing through a transitional period. The fetters of colonialism are being broken and African Literature, especially African poetry, is trying to assert its own identity. African poetry is a vast ocean comprising two genres: one is based on rich ethnic cultures and oral literatures (now called oratures) handed down orally-for many generations with additions and re-creations and after colonization written down in hundreds of African languages. The other is influenced by western traditions and written down in European languages; and is called by writers like Ngugi Wa Thiong'o as "Euro-African poetry" that "signifies the neurotic state of the colonized" (Chiwome 35). In the post-colonial/neo-colonial period some of the poets have been aware of the need to "deconstruct the colonial reality in order to rehabilitate African poetry" (Chiwome xii). With this intention many of the new generation poets like Osundare, Anyidoho, Mapanje, etc. turn back to their roots. For, as Osundare says, "in the intricate dialectics of human living, looking back is looking forward; the visionary artist is not only a rememberer, he is also a reminder" (Osundare x). These poets freely borrowed themes, techniques and ways of expression from oratures and ethnic cultures in their attempt to make themselves more communicative to their compatriots. This newly transfused blood has given new vigor and vitality to African poetry.

The recent tendency in African literature is an overemphasis on tribal/ethnic cultures and oratures, which most of the writers consider superior. Over the last four decades there have been serious attempts at collecting, translating and publishing these orally transmitted narratives, songs, proverbs, riddles, tales, lyrics, heroic and epic poetry. Oral literature is both a reservoir and a creative expression of cultural values, hence a vehicle for propelling a society along its moral path. Poetic recitation is common at gatherings of ethnic groups. There are still many prominent genres of this popular poetry especially in rural areas; and it is an expression of life and a means of social communication. Poems are recited at the 'dare' (village meeting place), weddings, chief's court, religious rituals and funerals. These poems mirror their problems, fears, hopes, wishes and aspirations. These lyrics are highly didactic. They are used to teach the young to participate in community activities, to lessen the tediousness of hard work at farming, to encourage people at hunting and at war. Hence, the post modernist criticism that black writing reflects "petty realism and trivially detailed painting of local color" (Nkosi 77) is unjust. Black writing should be understood in the colonial and neo-colonial situations. The present day poets like Osundare, Anyidoho, Mapanje, etc. nostalgically turn to these oral recitations for familiar themes and expressions, although Wole Soyinka, Kofi Awoonor, J.P. Clark, Okot P'Bitek and Kunene are the pioneers

in this field. So, the present day poetry has taken new roles, new topics and is beginning to find new forms.

The 1980s and '90s witnessed the rise of some prominent stars in the horizon of African poetry. Niyi Osundare, Kofi Anyidoho, Jack Mapanj'e and Chirikure Chirikure are some of the promising and talented pace setters for the younger generation of poets. These oracular poets are quite distinct from the older generation of Euro-centric poets and they have been successfully trying to decolonize African poetry as suggested by Chinweizu and others in their famous book *Towards the Decolonization of African Literature*, Niyi Osundare, who won many international and national awards, is the greatest living Nigerian/African poet and is considered to be one of the literary greats in the mould of Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka. Dr. Osundare was a professor and chairman of the department of English in the University of Ibaden, Nigeria, for many years and since 2001 he is a University Research Professor in the University of New Orleans and has surprisingly survived the recent Katrina disaster. A self-proclaimed "practitioner of the poetry of the performance," Osundare burst into the poetic scene with the publication of *Song of Marketplace* in 1983. Since then he has published ten volumes of poetry, a book of essays and Numerous articles on literature, culture and society. In his latest collection, *The Word is an Egg* (2002), he says: "words are like butterflies, they keep on flying in our stomach. But when we want to write they start dodging us and become shy." He further says: "uttering word is like breaking an egg. You cannot put the pieces back together again." In his poetry English and Yoruba are intertwined and in Yoruba 'word' is the medial link between humans and the Supreme Being. During the Abacha years in Nigeria writing poetry was dangerous as Osundare condemned the execution of the writer Ken-Saro-Wiva in 1995. But in Africa, art is a weapon for liberation and therefore a writer is a warrior and a priest in the traditional society. And he performed those roles well and in the poem "The Stars Did It" he wrote these prophetic words:

*We will rip down the stars today And give them a second eye We will then hold them in our hands And make them shine our will.*

He was concerned about the suffering and deprivation of the people. But he rightly nurtured the hope that the day was not very far when the oppressed would overthrow the oppressors and the exploiters of black colonialism/neo-colonialism.

Osundare's second collection of poems, *Village Voices* (1984), is symbolically a new African voice. He tried to demystify poetry and make it accessible to ordinary men. So he started a concerted, coherent and consistent use of oral tradition to enrich his poetry through the use of a rich source of imagery - simile, metaphor, symbolism, personification and other linguistic

devices. From the beginning he rejected the poetry of his predecessors as too intellectual, erudite and elitist and desired to produce a kind of poetry that was close to traditional oral poetry. Osundare himself confessed that his poetry is mixed with drama. As audience is the most important element in poetry-performance, he always has that sense of community - a community of singers, hearers and composers - in his mind when he writes poetry. In an interview with Ogoanah in 2003, he accepted that "the use of phonological puns is a basic feature" of his poetry due to the influence of the rhythm of oral poetry, his love for music, and his admiration for musical poets like Hopkins, Whitman, etc. The main strengths of his poetry are vivid description, powerful imagery and relentless sarcasm. In order to allow the voice of tradition full scope, Osundare adopts a poetic posture that the modernists would call the posture of impersonality, especially in his earlier poetry. His poetic voice is subsumed under the communal voice as he speaks through various personae from the rural areas who adopt various forms of traditional art to denounce the national capitalist system.

Kofi Anyidoho is another distinct voice in African poetry who tries to perfect the performance mode of poetry from the dramatic oral roots. He is Professor and Chairman of the Department of English and Director of School of Performing Arts in the University of Ghana, Legon, and has published six volumes of poetry, a play, and co-edited many books on poetry, drama and prose. He too won many international and national awards, including BBC Arts and Africa Poetry Award. Like Osundare, Anyidoho too speaks with the voice of the revolutionary who is concerned with the problems of post-independent Ghana/black colonial Africa. He advocates a transformation of society. His poem "Dance of Death" encapsulates his revolutionary ideals most succinctly. He openly declares his support for revolutionary change and calls upon his compatriots to be prepared to make the supreme sacrifice of death so that the nation may be born anew:

*The birth of a new nation  
Calls for sacrifice of souls  
And our hearts are filled with  
A passion for life by baptism of death.*

He is forced to take this stand as peaceful means have failed: "Our minds have labored in vain/ Preparing blue-prints for revolutions of peace." In "A Harvest of Dream" he expresses a wish that their dreams will be fulfilled:

*Uncle Dem any a shall come back home  
With the bread basket of which  
He sang through life across the hunger of our graves.*

Uncle Demanya is probably an allusion to the Ghanaian hero and revolutionary, Kwame Nkrumah, who is seen as a redeemer. His poetry, best seen in performance, insists on the redemptive transformation of the lives of the black people all over the world. In his latest collection of poems *Praise Song for the Land* (2002) he says: "I want to sing a praise song/ For the Land/ I must sing a praise song /For our people." For him poetry is no longer a textual art bound to the written/printed page. It is fully liberated from the distancing effort of print technology. The primary influence in Anyidoho is Ewe oral poetry. Though rooted in the tradition and culture of the Ewe people of Ghana, the major themes and concerns of his poetry have been public, political and social. His lyrics are unique. They are a combination of a number of devices - repetition and parallelism, use of refrain and the use of images, which are intelligible to all the people of the continent. The lyrical quality of his poems is often compared to another great contemporary Ghanaian poet, Kofi Awoonor, who has published a few famous collections of poems but is currently involved in diplomatic and political affairs.

Jack Mapanje and his contemporary Malawian poets - Steve Chimombo, Felix Mnthali and Frank Chipasula - constitute other significant new voices in African poetry. Mapanje now lives in New York and teaches creative writing and literature at the University of Newcastle. He is considered to be one of the most highly regarded poets of Africa. He won the Rotterdam Poetry International Award in 1988 and African Literary Association Award in 2002. He has published four volumes of poetry and edited/co-edited a number of anthologies besides playing an important role in the development of new African writing for the past two decades. Like Osundare and Anyidoho, Mapanje too is very indignant at the prevailing neo-colonialism, because of which he had to suffer a lot. His poetry - beginning from *Of Chameleons and Gods* (1981), has been protest poetry, written under a lot of pressure. In his first poem "Kabula Curio-shop" itself, he vehemently criticizes the attitude of the leaders like Hastings Banda. But as a Ph.D. in pragmatics and a Professor in the University of Malawi, he had mastered "the art of meaning without saying." Although the ordinary people could see through the symbols, dictator Hastings Banda and his men took six years to understand them. Mapanje was imprisoned in 1987. His prison experience intensified his poetic utterance in the later collections - *The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuya Prison* (1993) and *Skippping Without Ropes* (1998). *The Last of the Sweet Bananas* (2004) is his latest collection of poetry.

Mapanje's poetry is full of imagery, acute observation and a strong sense of his own roots and values. Satire, although used in a very cryptic fashion, is the main weapon in his poetry. In fact, satire is a common feature in African orature. Mapanje extensively uses myths and oral traditions and relies on the Malawian reader's knowledge of various myths to decipher the

meaning of the poems. His contemporaries too tried to do the same and thereby helped to keep those indigenous culture, faith and traditions alive.

Chirikure Chirikure of Zimbabwe is a very talented performance poet, musician, storyteller and newspaper columnist. He writes exclusively in Shona and has published many collections of poems besides educational books for children. He has edited a number of leading anthologies and won a number of awards. *Rukuvhute*, *Chamupupuri* and *Hakurarwi* are his famous collections. Some of his collections have been translated into English and some of his poems are prescribed in Oxford University. His poetry reflects the Zimbabwean post-colonial predicament. He blends humor, anger, text and music to achieve a pointed wicked, risky satire that always finds its mark in contemporary Zimbabwe. As he is one of the most powerful satirist, he is threatened by the ruling class. Symbolism is another key device in his poetry. He draws material from age old Shona tales, music and language. For, he says, "nobody can destroy these manifestations of our culture." Both in performance and in print he focuses on the worsening plight of the Zimbabwean people. About the situation in Zimbabwe, Chirikure says, "it is complicated, a fraught mess... there is a lot of sickness; poor health and AIDS problems have crippled the country. As an artist you find yourself dealing with a lot of issues" (Nordiska). His poem "Pfumo Roruzhinji" ("The Spear of the Masses") deplores the economic plight of the masses in whose name the war was fought. With a subversive humor he says: "The one who, while others had gone to a beer and work party,/ Furtively went and raped the bride,/ Should stand up, we want to see him." In "Zuro, Nhasi Namangwana" ("Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow") he mocks the intellectuals and politicians who had a lot of revolutionary ideals when they were students; but as they left the Universities, they joined the elite class, gave up their ideals and surrendered their souls to the agenda of capitalism (Chiwome 110). This forced him to believe that socialism is a "myth." Hence, he calls for social and moral reforms by appealing to Zimbabwean history and culture.

Among the Shona poets of Zimbabwe, Silas Taviringana's voice is distinct in its own way. In his poem "Mwari Musandipi" ("Lord Don't Give Me Money") he satirizes the gospel of poverty that was preached by colonialists:

*I know Lord that if I don't get these (land, money,etc), I shall find repose in yours arms... That's why I implore you L ord not to give me money; If you give me you will have forsaken me.*

Even after independence the neo-colonialists preach the gospel of poverty to keep the poor in their place. Such prayers consolidate the utter poverty of the homeless and prepare them to accept their lot. In the last line he takes a dig at the rich too. In another poem "Heaven,"

Taviringana criticizes the concept of heaven which is used by the oppressors to turn away the minds of the suffering from reality with the illusion that heaven is for the poor. He comes to the conclusion that preachers and politicians, who are hypocrites, cannot bring good news.

The new poet-performers discussed above use poetry to communicate with each other and to create a sense of identity and self-esteem. Poetry for them is a means of cultural self-assertion in the face of a hostile settler culture. In the neo-colonial era poetry serves also to remind African leaders of their obligations to their people. The future of African poetry seems to be bright. The new poets have given ample evidence that they can take African poetry to greater heights by appropriating techniques from oratures and ethnic cultures which will enable them to propagate the cultural heritage of the continent and construct and deconstruct new possibilities. But it cannot be ignored that most of the leading poets of the continent are forced to flee to Europe or America mainly because of the hostile attitude of the neo-colonial, anti-intellectual, "untutored tyrants" as Presidents and Prime Ministers, who cannot digest the revolutionary ideas advocated by these writers.

A real flowering of African poetry will, therefore, be possible only when Africa is free from these Presidents /Prime Ministers, who have virtually turned the whole continent into a "modern wasteland," and when real democratization and humanization can create a conducive atmosphere for the return of the 'exiled poets' to re-establish their roots.

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