WEST AFRICAN POETRY

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THE three European languages used along the West Coast are French, English and, to a much lesser extent, Portuguese. There are probably at least twenty-five African languages, of which the most widely used is Hausa. Hausa, however, is mainly the language of the Northern territories and the fringe of the Sahara, while the literate peoples are chiefly at present on the coast-line. Their commonest means of communicating ideas are accordingly French and English or the patois of these two languages. It is understandable therefore that most anthologies of West African poetry are in European languages, either as translations or as the originals written by literate and educated Africans.

The accident of history determined to what European power a nation was assigned. So that within the past hundred years, the Woloff have been Gallicised and the Yoruba Anglicised. How deeply down does this go and how much is the indigenous talent smothered? Some, casting an eye on the former German colonies, might be tempted to say that Europeanisation was superficial since there are not many Togolanders or Cameroonians who demonstrate any great attachment to Germany. The Germans, however, were never intent on training Africans for leadership or for making them good German citizens. The English and French tried—in varying degrees and for varying purposes—to do this. The Europeanising process has therefore penetrated deep in those subjects on which education has been concentrated successfully; but 'negritude' has not been completely overwhelmed. It is this negritude or 'Africanhood' which gives the West African his confidence and his desire for independence instead of assimilation.

Denis Osadebay writes:

> "*Let me play with the whiteman's ways*
> *Let me work with the blackman's brains*
> *Let my affairs themselves sort out*
> *Then in sweet rebirth I'll rise a better man*
> *Not ashamed to face the world.*"

The stronger and more embracing influence of French culture—though concentrated only on a few—has led those Africans

affected by it to be more French in thought, than, say, an Ashanti is British. By the same process however, it has produced a greater reaction against the imperial power. The result is that French West African poetry is more fluent but more violent. It has made Africans emphasise and praise those features which make them different from the French, for fear of losing their emotional and physical identity. Senghor, the great Senegalese poet and politician, writes in his poem 'Femme Noire',

> "*Femme nue, femme obscure*
> *. . . . Sombre extase de vin noir*"
>
> —*Naked black woman . . .*
> *Dark ecstasy of black wine*

and Mandessi (D. Diop) in 'Rama Kam',

> "*Ton corps est le piment noir*
> *qui fait chanter le désir . . .*"
>
> —*Thy body is the black spice*
> *which makes desire sing*

both emphasising the desirable nature of the black skin. It is irrelevant that Mme. Senghor is white, because when Africans talk of white people critically they usually and unconsciously exclude the ones they love.

The valuable aspects of French colonial policy can easily be overlooked. France has often given of her best to the intelligentsia of her colonies. If anything, she has tried to give too much and to make the chosen over in her image. The resistance this civilising mission has engendered shows itself again acutely in David Diop's poems, for example in 'Celni qui a tout perdu', translated by Miss Margaret Peatman in Dr. Bassir's useful anthology:

> —*My women were beautiful*
> *Swaying like palms in the evening breeze.*
> *My children swam in the wide deep river . . .*
> *. . . Then one day. Silence . . .*
> *No sun shone on my empty cabin;*
> *My women pressed their lips*
> *To the hard thin lips of the cold-eyed conquerors*
> *And my children put off peaceful nudity*
> *For uniforms of steel and blood. . . .*

All West African poetry is not the poetry of protest, however. The River Senegal has its Left Bank, and on this the poet sings

to his ancestral spirits who are ever present, surrounding him. Birago Diop writes:

> "*Ecoute plus souvent*
> *les choses que les êtres*
> *La voix du feu s'entend,*
> *entends la voix de l'eau*
> *écoute dans le vent*
> *le buisson en sanglots.*
> *C'est le souffle des ancêtres.*"

which I translate:

> —*Listen more often*
> *To things than beings:*
> *Hear the voice of fire;*
> *Hear the voice of water;*
> *The sobbing of the trees in the wind*
> *Is the breath of our forefathers.*

It is generally true, however, that the black French poet regards it as his duty to be committed. Jacques Rabemananjara, the Malagasi leader and poet, is emphatic on this, and strongly feels that poets and writers should be in the forefront of the struggle against colonialism and prejudice. It is not without significance that most of the leading coloured French poets, like Rabemananjara himself, Leopold Senghor from Senegal, and Aimé Césaire from Martinique, are politicians. A Congress for Negro writers was postponed in 1958 because the French delegations had to return to their respective homes in order to campaign for the de Gaulle referendum.

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Poetry by West Africans from British territories has a longer history, because the early European settlements were mostly on what is now English-language territory. Thus from Ghana, about two centuries ago, Capitein was writing Latin verse in Europe. Ignatius Sancho in England and Phyllis Wheatley in America were other outstanding examples of West Africans who were known in their day for their poetry. This was poetry which did not derive much from Africa, however, as these writers had been removed quite early from their childhood surroundings.

The British at one time tried rather half-heartedly to draw the educated African completely from his background. A combination of some wisdom, some malaria and a little lethargy

fortunately put a stop to the attempt. Because of this perhaps, the reaction of the British West African is not so violent against the colonising power. But some violence is there. Crispin George, in 'How Long, Lord', writes:

> "*Why so much misery in this mundane sphere,*
> *Such wretchedness and so much cause for fear!*
>
> . . . .
>
> *Shall man deprive his kind of Nature's dower*
> *To satisfy unblest and transient power.*"

Denis Osadebay echoes these sentiments in what a West African might be tempted to call plainer English in 'Blackman's Trouble'.

> "*I no get gun, I no get bomb,*
> *I no fit fight no more;*
> *You bring your cross and make me dumb,*
> *My heart get plenty sore.*
> *You tell me close my eyes and pray*
> *Your brudder thief my land away.*"

But fortunately he has given him his land back in West Africa, and now, robbed of the major impetus in Negro writing, the poet sings of more personal and traditional things. Even the issue of racial intermarriage, raised by Efua Morgue, the Ghanian woman poet, in 'It happened', is not so urgent.

> "*We saw not ourselves in tints*
> *We only knew that we were there*
> *Making a song and a garden.*
> *Know you, races of earth,*
> *Two of your colours met*
> *And gave each other all*
> *As earth reeled blindly past*".

The voice of protest in British West African poets is often mixed with nostalgia and is written by expatriate Africans in Europe like the late Dr. R. G. Armattoe, the well-known Ghanaian man of letters. On his return to Ghana, however, Armattoe suffered much disappointment, and his poems became very bitter.

Another aspect of writing in the four West African territories is the way in which it has been influenced not so much by wide reading in English literature, as by the setbooks of poetry in the school-leaving certificate examinations. The 'Anthology of Modern Verse', Palgrave's 'Golden Treasury', and 'Church

Hymnals' are all creditors to West African poetry. Yet this does not always detract from the quality of the verse. It gives West African poetry an archaic ring, but sometimes endows it with a strange power. And when poetry is written about things African, spontaneity breaks through. Kwesi Brew writes in 'The Woods decay',

> "*O there are flowers in Tamale*
> *That smell like fire*
> *The Harmattan winds twiddle and toss them*
> *But they never blink a colour.*
> *I see the cross on the hill*
> *And your hair scattered on the grass.*"

* * *

The poetess in West Africa is a rare figure. This reflects the state of women's education, which until recently—apart from a few areas like Freetown, Cape Coast and Lagos—has always been seriously behind that of men. The few women poets usually come from educated families and are themselves usually outstanding in more than one respect. There was Gladys Casely Hayford from Sierra Leone and Ghana, who was educated in England and taught at her mother's school in Freetown. From Ghana there are Efua Sutherland (née Morgue), a teacher, with a rich haunting imagery, and Joyce Addo, a broadcasting official. Nigeria has Mabel Imoukhede, a graduate of Ibadan University College, whose poems sometimes show intense introspection. The woman poets write about love—love of country, of persons and of self.

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Midway between personal poetry and traditional verse is the epic ballad. This is invaluable, as it is the product of the poet's imagination acting upon known country and known customs. Or it may be based on folklore which the poet develops. It is this field that Adé Babalola has successfully developed with Yoruba folklore in Western Nigeria. His work is not a translation of folk poems. He has used them as basis for his verse, incorporating explanations for the non-Yoruba reader, and packing into concise writing the usual diffuse rendition of folk-tales. There are descriptive pieces of Village Characters like Beauty, Kindness, a Genuine Gentleman, and the Trouble-Lover.

Of this last-named, he writes:

"*He is fond of marrying wives of other men . . .*
For instance, he once married Shango's wife,
That is, the God of Thunder's spouse,
But in his house she made him ill at ease
By belching fire from her mouth whene'er she spoke."

The middle line is explanatory, the rest being the product of the poet's background of Yoruba mythology and the Cambridge Tripos.

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Translations of traditional poetry have great appeal. First, for those who completely understand the background and meaning; and secondly, for outsiders who can sense their rhythm and vigour. Naturally, the second class of reader will be in the vast majority; the first will have access to the poem in its original language. Let us content ourselves with treating this class of poetry as non-indigenous readers who may be of any race. Some patience is needed to do this because names of places and characters appear repeatedly, usually without explanation, since they will all be known to the tribal audience.

Traditional poetry was entirely oral until the past fifty years. Poems usually recount royal and religious history and customs. On special occasions these may be recited at great length. There are also poems which are recited or sung on special occasions, such as harvest time, funerals and while marching to war. They are couched in the form of prayers for the task in hand.

The Kru fisherman from Liberia may recite to his gods while at work, pleading that they should keep his eye wakeful, his hands quick, and his strength supple, that he may catch fish for his people to eat; this fishing net that he has woven with a cunning granted him by the gods, he prays will be kept untangled even in the middle of the swaying water-weeds.

Before the Mende professional musicians in Sierra Leone begin their story (Yomeh) to a chief and his warriors, they recite an introduction. "*I know the Yomeh, as a woman lover knows the night; as an alligator knows the river; as a guinea fowl knows the bush . . . as the deer knows the forest.*" Then the story begins.

The dominant aspect of traditional verse is rhythm. This rhythm is notably present in the individual writing of French African poets, as Professor Guberina has shown. The beat of traditional verse may follow that of the drum, the xylophone

or the stringed instrument. The most fascinating aspect of drum rhythm is its attribute as a vehicle for the language of the talking drums. Without understanding a single word of Yoruba, the rhythm and sound of the drums impress themselves in this poem, quoted by Lasebikan:

"Jò báta—bata o gb'ônà àbàtà
Jó báta—-bata o gb'ônà àbàtà
Ojò báta—bàta
Ojò báta—bàta
Opa b'ò ti mo jò lailai."

It can be freely translated:

—If you dance with irregular steps
You will end up in the marsh
If you persist in dancing in this irregular manner
You will never be a good dancer.

The place of the drummer is an important one in most African societies. Apart from the prosaic duties of announcing deaths and declaring war, the drums recite the nation's proverbs and poetry. Such poetry follows certain traditional patterns. First the drummer announces himself and then rouses the different parts of the drum, like the skin and the drumstick, humouring them in turn with humility.

"I'm learning," he beats, "Help me to succeed."

Then one by one, playing his lonely drums before dawn on the morning of the Adae festival, he addresses the various deities and officials—the Earth, God, the cock, the witch, the court crier, the executioner, all past drummers, and the god Tano. For example, to the Witch, the drummer beats pleadingly in Akan,

Condolences to you, plunderous witch
Ampene Adu and Ampena Adu Oseewaa
It was Ntikorakora that killed the defenceless one.
Do not kill me sir, do not kill me madam
That I may laud your name on the drums
early in the morning. . . .

The chief and people in their huts wake from sleep and listen with the pleasure and understanding with which, for example, Western Christians would listen to carols on Christmas morning.

In drummed traditional poetry, as quoted above, lines are repeated twice or more, probably for certainty in being understood, to give the drummer time to get ready for the next phrase, or for metrical and musical emphasis. This has undoubtedly had

its effect on current poetry.

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One of the fascinating aspects of nonsense verse in West Africa is the swift and spontaneous way in which it is sometimes composed. I remember the poem which was fitted onto Reville for me one morning by a Creole relation in Kaduna.

King say we nor for kill condo
We nor for kill condo
We nor for kill condo
Bram! Bram!
Arata cobah po.

The king proclaims
Never to kill lizards (repeat)
Bram! Bram!
The mouse covers his chamber-pot.

Then there are the poems introduced into folk tales when the principal character sings, either because he wants to or because he has been turned temporarily into a bird. Others are swiftly made up to praise or derogate some personage or event. This spontaneous versifying in the West African background has found its way to the West Indies and United States through Negro settlers.

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The future of individual poetry in West Africa is a considerable one. With the increase of literacy in and mastery of English and French, words will become sharpened instruments; the technique and skill of use will be increased and the chances of originality and finish in the product accordingly made greater. It is necessary for poets to receive encouragement by publication, appreciation, criticism and financial reward.

As one would expect, Negro poetry sings first of the fight against injustice and oppression. As the battles are won, one by one, it is beginning to sing of the things which surround it: the dark forest, the village changing into town, the self-sacrifice demanded of all, and the black image of the Christian and Moslem god. Soon it will sing more clearly, with the individual voice of the poet searching for his truths and sharing this search with millions all over the world. It may then thank Europe and America for giving it tried and tested languages and insight, and thus perhaps be able to forgive them for the agony that this acquisition entailed.