

AFRICAN POETRY

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PART I : Early 20th Century African Poetry

Like the novel and drama already studied, modern African poetry combines two literary traditions: the traditional oral African and the modern written Western. In our study of modern African poetry, we will deal with the two first generations often described as pioneers and euro-modernists respectively. Emphasis should be placed on how history and African poetry are related in order to demonstrate the fact that the poet is conditioned by the burden of history. In each of these two generations, like in the latter ones, there is a historical consciousness which affects the thematic preoccupations. It is worthy of note that the degree of artistic awareness of the poets affects the aesthetic considerations as in the poetic form.

The pioneer poets include Dennis Osadebay of Nigeria; Michael Dei Anang, Gladys Casely-Hayford, and R.E.G. Armattoo of Ghana; and H.I.E. Dhlomo and Benedict Wallet Vilakazi of South Africa. Jaheinz Jahn describes them as writing “apprentice literature” because they generally lacked a sense of poetic craft. They were influenced by missionary hymn books, Biblical references, Greco-Roman allusions, and Victorian diction. Attention should be paid to the ambivalence easily noticed in the poetry of the era. Writing in colonial times, these poets approved of colonialism without reservation as in Osadebay’s “Young Africa’s Thanks.” They generally ignored loss of indigenous culture, forced labor of “natives,” unfair taxes, siphoning away Africa’s natural resources, and suppression of local freedom. They dealt with themes of race, Christianity, and heroism.

The Second Generation of modern African poets came of age at the end of colonialism in the late 1950s and the 1960s. Educated, they were very much aware of literature as an art form with many of them taught by European teachers in African universities affiliated to British institutions, as in Legon (Ghana), Ibadan (Nigeria), and Makerere (Uganda). These poets had their models from Europe and the United States: T.S. Eliot, Gerald Manley Hopkins, W.B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, and the French Symbolists. For this reason, there is copious use in their poetry of paradox, irony, allusiveness, and difficulty of diction. They expressed their individuality as well as the universal with Leopold Sedar Senghor, Lenrie Peters, Kofi Awoonor, Christopher Okigbo, Wole Soyinka, and J.P. Clark as examples. With the historical grievance of slavery and colonialism, these poets condemned colonialism and expressed their African identity in a racial/cultural conflict paradigm of African versus European. The Francophone poets used the ideology of Negritude and the Anglophone ones posited African Personality to affirm their blackness or Africanity. Negritude is a movement of African and Caribbean poets that started by black intellectuals, including Leopold Sedar Senghor of Senegal, Leon Damas of French Guyana, and Aime Cesaire of Martinique, to advocate black culture as a means of fighting European denigration of Africans and their culture. They dealt not only with issues bordering on culture conflict but also the confusion the Western incursion brought upon the African identity as expressed in Gabriel Okara’s “Piano and Drums.” It is ironic that this generation of African poets used Western modernist techniques while advocating African culture. It is generally said that these poets paid more attention to form than content; more poetic style than making meaning.

Required Text:

Gerald Moore and Ulli Beier, eds. *The Penguin Book of Modern African Poetry*, 1967.

Other Readings:

Ngara, Emmanuel. *Ideology and Form in African Poetry: Implications for Communication*. Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1990.

Discussion Questions:

With reference to early African poetry, examine how colonialism altered the African identity. In what ways do these poets express themselves in a period of transition? What techniques characterized early modern African poetry? Students should use these questions as sources of reflection in their diaries or selected paper for this unit.

Part II : The New African Poetry

These poets are generally highly educated and exposed (many Ph.D. holders) and studied their literary elders, some of whom taught them; unlike the earlier generations that had no formal education in African literature. They include those who came of age from the mid-1970s, a period characterized by declining economies due to the declining economies and have witnessed civil wars, military coups, apartheid, military/civilian dictatorships, and other forms of social, economic, and political instability. The new African poetry continues to be inward-looking especially because it is a reflection of the dire economic predicament of most African countries which has exposed more than before the intolerable gap between the rich and the poor, the haves and the have-nots. The poets indulge in self-criticism, especially the political corruption, and see Africans as mainly responsible for their own problems and not Europeans. Left of center, they play down the place of material culture in their communities for socio-economic issues. Their poetry equally foregrounds how the poets preoccupy themselves with mundane, real socio-economic problems of society and using traditional poetic techniques to express the contemporary condition. In fact, many of the poets, including Kofi Anyidoho, Jack Mapanje, and Tanure Ojaide studied their respective ethnic literatures, which they absorb into their poetry.

The new African poetry attaches much importance to communicating a message and so uses simple language. In their poetry, form is not rated above content as in the preceding generation. The poets use almost the syntax of prose as in the oral tradition. In the attempt to “decolonize” African poetry by shedding Modernist and other Western influences, they are often criticized for ignoring craft at the expense of urgent meaning.

Generally, the poets are more daring in thematic explorations with many female poets expressing what would have been taboo in earlier generations. Themes of love, ecological and environmental issues, and global issues are addressed in the new poetry. There is a growing radicalism in themes and style as younger poets in the continent or living in the West seek alternative ways of making poetry relevant and fresh. African poetry is without doubt conditioned by the historical strains of the continent and the new African poetry gives expression to the pressing postcolonial concerns, especially issues relating to the failure of government in its ability to formulate people-oriented policies that will sustain the hope of independence.

Required Text:

Tanure Ojaide and Tijan M. Sallah. *The New African Poetry: An Anthology* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1999).

Other Readings:

Ngara, Emmanuel. *Ideology and Form in African Poetry: Implications for Communication*. Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1990.

Tanure Ojaide. *Poetic Imagination in Black Africa: Essays on Modern African Poetry*. Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 1996.

Bodunde, Charles. (2001). *Oral Tradition and Aesthetic Transfer: Creativity and Social Vision in Contemporary Black Poetry*. Bayreuth: Bayreuth African Studies.

Discussion Questions: Discuss the socio-economic issues and their implications as well as the use of oral poetic techniques in the new African poetry? In what ways are contemporary African poets making their writing relevant and interesting?