

THE AFRICAN  
LITERARY  
TRADITION—1

AMA ATA AIDOO

Above all  
is poetry

In the vast field of African oral literature, the folktale is after all only one form of the prose material, and probably the lesser part of the whole, for poetry covered every aspect of a man's life

WHETHER OR NOT we would like to admit it, the attention of the world at large was drawn to the literature of this continent only in 1958 with the appearance of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. This is shocking but it is true. However it does not mean that nothing existed before then, traditional or modern. In fact the situation is parallel to that hackneyed story of the writer, who struggles for many years without getting a single manuscript accepted. Then the moment he has had one thing published which gets acclaimed as a masterpiece, he also gets the same publishers who had not thought his stuff worth their attention struggling with each other over the publishing rights of all his old manuscripts. And so it has been with African Literature.

But even here one has to take note of certain reservations. As yet, most people are only ready to recognise the literature of this continent written in the modern European languages, which in its earliest forms dates from about the beginning of this century, and not much before. On the whole it is part of the tragic story of African peoples that as yet, to say they had any kind of creative compositions which are unrelated to their Western European experience sounds, if not heretical, at least a little too defensive.

Hitherto, whatever people knew in the way of traditional African literature was confined to the folktale. This applies not only to the non-African but to the literate African as well. The situation was the outcome of the interaction between three possible factors: a universal ignorance of the African culture milieu, a narrowness of approach to the concept of literature in general and the fact that the telling of folktales was the only form of verbal art which

was able to hold its own before the onslaught of Western European culture. Up to the present day the telling of folktales is a major social activity among many African peoples. For example, here in Ghana, in the rural areas, certainly among the Akans, many people still belong to story-telling groups. Notable among these is a group of which Mrs. Efua Sutherland is a member and with whom she has been working for some time.

BUT IT SEEMS THAT the folktale was not everything. With more facts coming to light through research, we are learning that in the vast field of African oral literature, the folktale is after all only one form of the prose material which in turn is only a part, and probably, the lesser part of the whole. Over and above all is poetry.

In the first chapter of *An Apologie for Poetry* in which Sir Philip Sidney makes a case for the true reverence for poetry as is due to this noble form of art, he says: "... among the . . . Indians where no writing is, yet have they their Poets, who make and sing songs which they call *Areytos*, both of their Ancestors deeds and praises of their Gods."

Of course one must be cautious about taking everything that Sidney says especially as he was writing in the 16th century and it was before the major Elizabethan discoveries. For instance one wonders which "Indians" he was referring to. But the important point he makes is that poetry is a practised art among all peoples, whether or not they have evolved a system of writing, and in fact, Dame Poetry is "the first Nurse, whose milk by little and little, enabled them to feed afterwards of the tougher knowledge." And he quotes from a formidable list of peoples ranging from the Greeks, to the Scandinavians and the "Indians" ending with, "our neighbour Country Ireland." If we could possibly guess how insular the English were in the 16th century, we would appreciate Sidney's revolutionary broad-mindedness! At any rate, it does not seem as if anyone has had any occasion to refute the main point in his argument. It has simply been ignored.

There is no doubt that in the manner in which Sidney speaks of it, poetry, was a form of folk art. And as folk art, it was purely functional. It could be recitative, in praise of the ruler or incantatory in invocation to a god. It has been a medium through which a people have preserved their history as well as a vehicle for social sanction. But it does not matter what purpose was behind the production of any poetry in any society; it always had a social content. It invariably related to the life of the community which produced it. And what sounds quite strange in an era like this, it nearly always was anonymous. Two outstanding exceptions are the Psalms and *The Song of Solomon*.

However, between the 12th century and 1966, man's concept of poetry has changed, especially in relation to its function. First, individual geniuses took it up and practised it. But this would hardly have caused any serious harm if the intellectuals had not got interested. And unfortunately, they did. They took it away from the people, raised — or perhaps lowered it to the status of an academic discipline, analysed it, defined it, categorised it and froze it . . . And now, any child can tell you that a poem is *written*, by a *poet*, and is the "spontaneous overflow of his emotions, recollected in tranquility." And of course a poem rhymes! When it does not, it is not a poem, it is "free-verse." Certainly, anything which lies outside this definition is not poetry.

And certainly, much of traditional African poetry lies outside it. The greater part of it is oral; more often than not, it is anonymous, and it hardly ever rhymes. But the few examples of folk-poetry from Western Europe which are still extant are not much different either. I refer to the *Iliad* of the Greeks, the *Nibelungenlied* of the Germans, the *Chansons de Geste* of the French, and apart from the Ballads, *Beowulf* of the English.

OBVIOUSLY, AS IN OTHER NON-LITERATE SOCIETIES, poetry as an artistic form, was more performed among the peoples of Africa than prose. In fact, there seems to have been a surfeit of it. It covered every

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aspect of a man's life from his birth to his own funerals, in the form of songs, praises, libations, incantations and funeral dirges. And most of these forms were typical of most tribes. For instance, on closer examination, one discovers that Praise-poetry occurs quite frequently. As a genre, it is found in many forms: there are, for instance, the *geerar* of the Somalis, the "heroic recitations of the Bahima of Ankole," the *Muboko* of the Tswanas of Bechuanaland, and the *Izibongo* of the Zulus, *Apae* of the Akans of Ghana and the *Oriki* of the Yorubas of Nigeria.

From his lucid treatment of the genre in *Funeral Dirges of the Akan People*, we learn from Professor J. H. Nketia that: "the dirge is made the culminating point of the preparation for the funeral as well as the beginning of public mourning. Grief and sorrow may be personal and private, nevertheless, Akan society expects that on the occasion of a funeral, they should be expressed publicly through the singing of the dirge." And speaking about his father's funeral in *Blame Me on History*, Bloke Modisane write:

" . . . friends, neighbours and acquaintances . . . sat round the room in a circle, night and day, and sang through the requiem hymnals, the sad songs of the *tebello*, the wake, which most of the mourners knew off by heart." Modisane is from South Africa. There is no attempt here to say that this depersonalisation of grief through an organised performance of weeping is peculiar to Africa. For after all, it is known to be a custom among many other peoples including the Hebrews, the Irish, and the Greeks of Corfu, that is if we are to take Lawrence Durrell seriously.

A poetic form which is found in Africa but not in many other places is drum-language. Here again, it is highly functional. It is always present in the celebration of birth as for instance, among the Yorubas, and death among the Akans. In fact, the poetry of Oriki is expressed through special drums. And drum-poetry is so involved that even in traditional society it was always understood only by the initiate.

AT THIS POINT, ONE can hardly restrain oneself from asking the obvious question: that since culture, past and present equally, defines a people, is it likely that anyone would want to emphasise a cultural aspect of himself which is extinct? And anyway, since he does not know much about it in relation to himself, and perhaps there is no avenue open to him for finding out, is it possible for him to be interested whether or not others have it? Here I refer specifically to the process which has been going on in literary criticism which has resulted in the consideration of poetry and indeed other aspects of literature as being synonymous with the written word.

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