

*Kofi Awoonor*

## TRADITION AND CONTINUITY IN AFRICAN LITERATURE

We must make certain assumptions about the principle of continuity which seems to be at the heart of a great deal of our literature. By this I mean that the African writer creates within a cultural tradition, a tradition that defines its own esthetics and functions. For literature and art in tradition were not limited in their role to a utilitarian system per se, but expressed the continued endurance of a certain theological order. More important the art forms of the traditions had as their primary impulse a concern with a fundamental process of integration and survival, integration as opposed to a dichotomised process of evil and good, beautiful or ugly, and, furthermore, opposed to what I may call an itemistic concern, a fragmentation, and, therefore, to the destructive absolutism of a one-dimensional totality.

The traditional artist is both a technician and a visionary. There is no division between the two roles for him. His technical competence enables him to select and utilize material: words, wood, raffia, or whatever, which in themselves carry a spirituality or an innate essence. It is from here that the transformation into the visionary realm is primarily fed. Forms and motifs already exist in an assimilated time and world construct, and so he serves only as the instrument of transforming these into an artistic whole based on his own imaginative and cognitive world, a world which exists and has meaning only within the larger world. In this process, he releases the ambiguity of the larger communal world in the dynamic impulse of the details of the medium which will bear his stamp. He is not a visionary artist per se, like the European artist who projects into space and time structures which simply were not there before. There is no otherness locked in the private psyche of his vision. Individually, of course, there are perplexing

moments when forms and motifs achieve a power over him, creating fear and apprehension for him. But the ultimate shaping spirit of the wider world construct of the community returns him to a resolution, to an integration (which perhaps was briefly threatened but never really in danger), to a restoration of calm and quietude which is necessary for the widening of the circle into waves that ultimately will constitute the only human progress. In this, the proper reality, therefore, is part of the process of the transformation, fundamental to a combined physical and beyond physical totality, defying fragmentation, defying time, defying space. And man, therefore, is defined by the tree, by the beast, by the deity, but is never all powerful because there is no room for that kind of absolutist horror. The transformation, the artistic process, entails a primary exchange of energies through what we might call the magical projection. Shocks, surprises, dislocations into irregularities, basic splinterings, and all kinds of mercurial transmogrifications are essential aspects of the inner dynamics of the total process. Anyone who has read Amos Tutuola's books will understand exactly what I am saying.

Everything is irreducible because everything counts. The process therefore also encloses a self-generating ecstasy, moments of delirious madness, the breaking of the formalities of the perceived reality. The models of this lunacy exist in the artist, the carver, the storyteller, the poet-cantor, the music maker. The crises of these models are overstepped, they are conquered, subdued if need be, for the calm integration, the making of the units into one total whole, the reassemblment of the fragments, and, therefore, the restoration of the real life.

The danger and the joy are part of the same indivisibility. Raymond DuChamp-Villon's remark, "The sole purpose of the arts is neither description nor imitation but the creation of unknown beings which are always present but never apparent", stood on its head and reunderlined for the artist of the African tradition (the continuing tradition to which I believe a lot of us belong) will mean the recognition of the pattern of transformation as the energetic, lunatic, ecstatic process that restores the felt and the long recognized beings to their proper world, and creates the reunification of all things in a primary universal construct.

In an essay in the *American Scholar*, Volume 32, No. 4, 1963, Wole Soyinka, writing of Amos Tutuola specifically, discovers:

...a largeness that comes from an acceptance of life in all its manifestations; where other writers conceive of man's initiation only in terms of photographic rites, Tutuola goes through it as a major fact of a concurrent life cycle, as a progression from a physical insufficiency through the Quest into the very psyche of Nature. The *Palm-Wine Drinkard*, as with Fagunwa's *Ogboju Ode* and universal myth, is the epic of man's eternal restlessness, symbolized as always in a Search. ... For Tutuola involves us in a coordination of the spiritual and the physical, and this is the truth of his people's concept of life. The accessories of day-to-day existence only become drawn into this cosmic embrace; they do not invalidate it.

If we accept the premise that Tutuola is a writer whose art rests and has meaning only within the larger world construct of Yoruba thought and ontology, then we will understand Soyinka's statement here to be in a direct reference to the whole process of art in Africa.

In his novel *The Interpreters*, Kola, Sagoe, Egbo, Bandele, and Sekoni, the protagonists, represent a composite or combined artistic sensibility that seeks to infuse a moral balance into a fastly disintegrating world of man's waking hours, and each struggle of this combined artistic impulse, is toward that restoration which I referred to. Kola, in his person, carries the urgent energy of the artist as he seeks to create on his great canvas the reassembled folk psyche, peopled by deities and men in a unified community. This search is at the centre of his restlessness. It marks his dissatisfaction with a continuing line of surrogates.

Sagoe, the apostle of voidancy, of the extended joke, almost totters on the brink of cynical destructiveness. Yet he expresses the inner progression, towards that reintegration of the sacred and the profane, the agitated and the serene, the vulgar and the sublime. What struggles in his bosom is a wounded and a fragmented humanity that has suffered and continues to suffer the affront of a total immorality, the immorality that rejected and excluded all other possibilities.

But it is Egbo, the Ogun character, who in his creative urge, the reincarnation of Ogun himself, stands at the centre of the universal conflict, astride the non-dichotomized world. In an essay entitled, "The Fourth Stage: Through the Mysteries of Ogun to the Origin of Yoruba Tragedy," that appeared in *Morality of Art* edited by D. W. Jeffers, published by the University of Leeds, Soyinka attempts to link in the restorative role of art the placid essence of Obatala, the god of creation,

and the creative urge and destructive instinct of Ogun. The link here lies in the tenuous, quivering trance of the transitional abyss before which Egbo, like Ogun, hesitates. But the mystic chasm summons him to complete the essence of that dread power, the act of immersion, predicated upon the attainment of the tragic climax, the calm of release which is the Obatala self-awareness, as it asserts itself in its creative control of the universe. This is aesthetic joy. The struggle is not, Soyinka points out, as in the Nietzschean original oneness but entails the restoration to the original womb, the serenity of release born out of suffering, and the contained fragmentation. So of Ego in *The Interpreters* he wrote, "The spectre of generations rose now about him and Egbo found he would always shrink, although incessantly drawn to the pattern of the dead. And this waiting near the end of the journey, hesitating on the brink, wincing as he admitted, was it not an exhumation of a better forgotten past?" I submit that this doubt, this hesitation, is at the heart of the movement toward the resolution.

Bande in *The Interpreters* is Obatala, the authority of Ogboni: just, balanced, enduring, and yet retaining the capacity to undergo a needful, even if limited, suffering and alienation in order that the restoration should be complete. It is not for nothing that his voice is the ultimate voice of the novel. It is he who restores through the serenity of his person all the fragmented energies of his friends and of the world to a state of calm which is a precondition and prelude to the progression and the expansion of the human circle. In the process, therefore, there are the contradictions that exist within the same mythic continuum, expressing both a limited tragic spirit and a limited cosmic essence. The gulf and the bridge of inevitable separation will be bridged through the ritual sacrifice, in its ultimate and primary role. That is why Soyinka rejects a total tragic vision, the doom of repetition, which the Western tragic concept or outlook from the Greeks right down to our present time, entails. In the same essay he states;

Yoruba myth is a recurrent exercise in the experience of disintegration, and this is significant to the isolation of Will among a people whose mores, culture and metaphysics are based on seeming resignation and acceptance but are, experienced in depth, a statement of man's penetrating insight into the final resolution of things and the constant evidence of harmony.

And so the suffering and the pain are negated only in the restorative moment and are yet not rendered oppositional as this leads to the fragmentation and the truncation that I talked about. There is futility only in the context of fulfillment. The accompanying rites of music, the ritual, the sacrifice, providing the ingredients of the archetypal restoration, part of the transformation based in that numinous territory of transition in which ancestor, living, and the yet unborn unite to express the only cosmic reality. Maṅ, Ogun, the protagonist of the abyss, dares, and in his day-to-day living underscores the elemental restorative scope of his artistic and therefore ritualist role. Poetry, dance, carving, represent in their finished states the serenity which is the enduring aspect of the resolved crisis of our divine person.

Let me quickly cover the relevance of what I am saying by reference to my own prose poem, *This Earth, My Brother*. What most reviewers of this work seem to be professionally unaware of is that I have used, taken, and utilized motifs from Ewe cosmology or ontology: motifs that are existing, extant, active. To any casual reader it should be quite clear that the work does not concern itself with the politics of the Nkrumah era, contrary to what a lot of people have said, in fact, in comparing my book to Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* who regard us as the eloquent critics of the excesses of Nkrumah's rule, a compliment I do not deserve or wish to share with Mr Armah. I wasn't talking about that. I was concerned with a total ongoing historical process of fragmentation and decay. It's true the hero of my book is a lawyer and, therefore, he's the most removed person from the primary area of that cultural impulse; he's the one who makes the journey; he's the one who assumes the role of the archetypal hero. He is, in fact, the Ogun essence through whom the restoration will be achieved. He epitomizes alienation, ennui, angst, but these are the preconditions that are attendant upon his search and the restoration and the awareness.

Theoretically the book attempts to create a fragmented world of opposites, and any careful reader will note that as we move toward the end of the book, the fragmentation dissolves and the so-called "a" sections vanish, and we move into a unified area of both poetry and prose, if you like those terms. Unified, because there is no longer any dichotomy in the person. The images of dunghill, the field of butterflies, the woman of the sea, who is very, very central, are all part

of this process of transforming the mundane and the spiritual, uniting the fragments, thus muting the edges of the agonized sensibility that is predicated upon the returning balance towards the end. There is too the return of the primal good nature of the anthropomorphic female essence, the woman of the sea. She eliminates the dichotomized conflicts and the palpable contradictions. She is the Earth. She is

Africa. But where do all these come from? One critic, Richard Priebe, in a recent article in *Ariel*, has suggested that to understand African literature one must also examine the concept of liminality, (borrowing, I think liberally, from the work of Mary Douglas, particularly the book *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, published in 1966) establishing a firm place for the so-called marginal persona. This means that all artists in the African society are people who exist on the periphery of the community; they do not exist in the centre. And in this, correctly I believe, he sees this artists as a priest, as a mediating agent between men and gods, a man who dares the dangerous frontiers of insanity, relative anguish and despair, in order to achieve for man the restoration. Much as I agree with this idea of liminality, per se, I also think that liminality connotes a predeter-mined boundary, a boundary which has been responsible for the dichotomized ethical and visionary constructs. And so when we place man on the periphery, we have removed him, therefore, from the centre of human activity. Accepting the theory in its most broad-based sense, we must guard against the possibility of demarcations. For man the visionary is also man the non-visionary. Man the ethical being is also the abstract or man the physical being. If we use a circle, therefore, as our construct, the hero of *This Earth, My Brother* stands at a wider periphery, liminal yet central. His burden, also defined by his responsibilities beyond such characters that crowd the whole canvas in their brief and tormented appearances, marks him as the one who states for them the need for the restoration.

Chinua Achebe as a writer, I suggest, stands on the other side of what I am saying, the other side of the same system. His art is derived not only from the ritualistic structure, as specifically basing itself on a continuing survival motif, but also on the basic assumption or presupposition that we know that if this home is threatened, we shall proceed to a new ground and build for ourselves a new place of human

habitation. In other words, things actually did not fall apart; the centre held, for it was only Okonkwo who decided to commit suicide; Umuofia refused to commit suicide; Umuofia still stands. And in his *Arrow of God*, Ezeulu, the priest, half-priest half-man, half deity, refuses to eat the yam and therefore imposes hardship upon the community. Thus he was the one who had stepped aside. And, as Achebe puts it, when they brought in the harvest, they brought home the harvest in the name of the son, which critics have decided means that the Christian religion had won in the end. But it is not a victory for Christianity. It was victory for Unwaro.

Tradition, therefore, stands at the heart of this literature. In our work we have assayed consciously or unconsciously to step out on the long journey of the restoration that I have spoken about. Our concern is not with that regime or that singular condition. It is, as in the work of the poets, the griots, the carvers of the older traditions, a process of fragmented world, of seeing the world from the African view, of making the African landscape physical and mythic, the point from which to see the world. That is why after all his wanderings, Amanu, the protagonist of *This Earth*, returns to that aboriginal landscape in order to fulfill his destiny. Any critic who does not see him within the context of that construct of Ewe mythology or ontology in which such images of the river, the dunghill, the sea, the desert, the drum, and the passion of love itself, being the eternal, elemental invocations of the ultimate ritual of his own and the communal restoration, better leave the work alone. In a book called the *Myth of the Bagre Among the LoDage People* just put together by Jack Goody there occur these lines:

In the beginning was god  
the god of the inanities,  
and their gods,  
the god who comes,  
the god with the mark between the eyes  
the god with the white and black stripes,  
the god with the white arse,  
the thieving god,  
the lying god,  
the troubling god.