

THE TRADITIONAL AFRICAN ARTIST AND HIS SOCIETY

A Comment

by Edward C. Okwu

One of the interesting points to emerge from the last Denver Conference of the African Studies Association was that the whole debate on the sort of relationship which existed between the traditional African artist and his society was far from over. It was the second plenary session of the Committee on African Literature, and Emile Snyder of Indiana University had presented his paper on "New Directions in Modern Writing". From the discussions that later ensued one got the impression that there were, perhaps, more areas of disagreement than otherwise. Some of the participants, the most articulate of whom was Kofi Awoonor, the Ghanaian poet who earlier in the day had made a presentation on Ewe traditional poetry, vigorously contested what they said was the common mistake of regarding the traditional African artist as having lived harmoniously with the rest of his society. Indeed, what did one mean by "traditional"? Was the term not being used in a pejorative sense to imply the inferior concerns of those artists of old? Not so, said the group, among whom were Daniel Kunene and Phyllis Jordan, both of them South African critics. The traditional African artist, they maintained, was at peace with his society in the sense that there was no attempt by either side to question the basic values of the group. And the term "traditional", far from connoting anything pejorative, was being used in a historical sense to distinguish that period from the contemporary, but could also be used to show the distinction, in form and content, between the oral literature of the past and the current tendencies in modern African literature.

It seems to me that perhaps the ultimate significance of that debate lies in its having demonstrated, once more, some of the problems one encounters in the attempt to establish a tradition of African literary criticism with its own criteria and an integrity of its own. In what way, if at all, is literature a product and a mirror of a given society? Does a reciprocal relationship exist between an artist and his society, and in what way does a literature derive its norms and criteria from the society of its origin? Are there aspects of traditional African literary practice which can inform current tendencies in modern African writing which, so far, have largely been influenced by Western literary theories and standards? It is in the light of these questions that one can begin to appreciate the other debate on how "committed" an African

writer can be to his society. Needless to say, attitudes range from a view of art as the exclusively private vision of an artist grappling with his own privately-perceived intimations of humanity, to an insistence that art cannot, with any justification, exile itself from the very society of its nurture. If the premise is accepted that it is necessary for African literature to maintain continuity with its past traditions, then it becomes immediately relevant that we should clearly understand the nature of the relationship between the traditional African artist and his society.

In brief, Kofi Awoonor's argument [and I hope I can restate it as faithfully as I can] is that to maintain the "myth" of a mutual understanding between the traditional (I lack a better term) African artist and his society, is to succumb to a post-colonialist propaganda. Such a view, he says, has the unlovely effect of implying that those artists were not analytical and critical enough to question the nature of their society, and lacked the originality and individuality to tackle the problems of alienation and self-fulfillment which are the proper concerns of the truly liberated artist. The truth, he argues, is that traditional African artists were alienated individuals who sought to give expression to their artistic visions in a basically hostile environment. He cites as examples the case of Unoka, Okonkwo's artist-father in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and three Ewe poets who have sung what he calls poems of abuse and the dirge.

It is my opinion that this view of the African past is inaccurate and distorted; and, as I will attempt to show later, it illustrates a type of complex which has afflicted many of our modern African writers. But before I offer my refutation it will be necessary to make a few observations. Firstly, one would concede the fact that it is becoming increasingly unsafe to speak of Africa in general terms. Indeed, the Denver debate offered an illustration of this point. As the argument gathered momentum, it was left to an all-African cast to bring it to an impasse, and the impression given was that perhaps what obtained in one place did not obtain in another. As more and more facts about the continent come to light, the previous notion of Africa as an unbroken and undivided unit is being abandoned. It seems to me, however, that without question one area where Africans maintained remarkable uniformity was in their world view which, depending on local conditions, was given different variations on a theme. As we shall see, this world view very much determined the role and position of the artist in relation to nature and society. Secondly, most students of African history now agree that even before it came into contact with Western civiliza-

tion, Africa was not necessarily a model of the frictionless society. There were conflicts, doubts and disagreements. But I do submit that even where these things existed they did not lead to a total disenchantment with the society and its values, something which is implicit in the idea of alienation. Indeed, conflicts, doubts and disagreements, where handled constructively and imaginatively, are of the essence of literature but do not necessarily lead to alienation.

It should be borne in mind that, basically, alienation means a feeling of dissociation, a sense of incompleteness and loneliness which, depending on its intensity, could drive the victim to total skepticism, self-exile, or outright insanity. As a cultural phenomenon it drives a man to an overwhelming sense of normlessness, or, where these norms exist, to a sense of their uselessness. As a psychological phenomenon, a personality split occurs in the man between what he conceives as his essence (his human possibilities) and his existence (the naked facts of his living). In either case, he invariably turns into an outsider living, so to speak, in the winter of his discontent, by his own personal code of ethics; indeed, he ends up operating by no coherent standards at all.

One may safely argue that this type of illness did not exist in traditional African societies for the simple reason that their cosmic view was one that integrated nature, society and man into a harmonious whole. As Willie Abraham in *The Mind of Africa* says of the Akan society of Ghana, using it as a paradigm of the African society, "the Akan thought very much about the world, not, indeed, as the world *inside* which he found himself, but as the world of which he formed a part. For him the world was metaphysical..."(1). Between nature and the society there were established mechanisms for maintaining or restoring balance. And within the society of individuals certain standards of behavior and inter-personal relationships existed which held the confidence of everyone. There was no splitting of reality into sometimes conflicting categories which necessitated a life-long search for synthesis and meaning. The synthesis and the meaning were already there, and the artist, or anybody for that matter, saw it and appreciated it. He did not suffer a traumatic crisis of self-identification (that new infirmity of our confused minds).

Perhaps this explains why traditional African art was purposeful; and, of course, nobody should offer the hackneyed suggestion that purposefulness and beauty are necessarily mutually exclusive. It was only natural that in such a society art,

nature and life should co-exist in harmony, informing one another. After all, there was no dissociation of the imagination from the intellect, each one suspicious of the other, no dichotomy between the realm of ideas and the realm of action. Again, this might explain why art was such a pervasive activity in the society, a way of life which, to a greater or lesser extent, everybody knew, enjoyed and participated in. It was part of the very texture of life, whether as proverbs ("the oil with which words were eaten") or as stories, as songs (lyrics or dirges) or as sculpture. One can picture Okot p'Bitek's Lawino singing her poetic song of lament as she goes about her household chores. Occasionally, a particularly gifted individual achieved distinction as a performer and was accorded recognition as such by the rest of the society; and so you had quasi-professional praise-singers, satirists, humorists or sculptors. I say "quasi" because such an individual might also be expected to perform his other roles in the society - as farmer, father, elder, or diviner. Indeed, the reason why Unoka was such a miserable failure was not that the society had anything against his musical art as such, but that he had singularly failed as a man to provide for his family and meet his other commitments. As a matter of fact, his artistic performances did not give any indication of alienation on his part because, even while he was derided as an unsuccessful farmer, he retained a basic identification with the society. "Sometimes another village would ask Unoka's band and their dancing *egwugwu* to come and stay with them and teach them their tunes. They would go to such hosts for as long as three or four markets, making music and feasting. Unoka loved the good fare and the good fellowship..." (2). In any case, the whole idea of citing a mere fictional character as a historical fact is questionable. After all, in the same story we are told of one of Unoka's creditors who practised the same art but was also a successful farmer:

Okoye was also a musician. He played on the ogene. But he was not a failure like Unoka. He had a large barn full of yams and he had three wives. And now he was going to take the Idemili title, the third highest in the land. It was a very expensive ceremony and he was gathering all his resources together. That was in fact the reason why he had come to see Unoka. (3).

In *Arrow of God* we see Edogo as a highly gifted sculptor yet an active participant in the affairs of the clan. And then there is the major character, in Nkem Nwankwo's *Danda*, highly committed to his art yet loving everybody and loved in return. That Unoka failed, therefore, was not because his society rejected him as an artist or was hostile to him, a situation

which might conceivably have driven his art to the edge of alienation, but because he was not sufficiently a man, a fact which he himself, alas, recognised. Okoye had come to demand the two hundred cowries he had lent to Unoka more than two years before and, being a great talker, had skirted round the subject before hitting it finally.

As soon as Unoka understood what his friend was driving at, he burst out laughing. He laughed loud and long and his voice rang out clear as the ogene, and tears stood in his eyes. His visitor was amazed, and sat speechless. At the end, Unoka was able to give an answer between fresh outbursts of mirth.

'Look at that wall,' he said, pointing at the far wall of his hut which was rubbed with red earth so that it shone. 'Look at those lines of chalk;' and Okoye saw groups of short perpendicular lines drawn in chalk. There were five groups, and the smallest group had ten lines. Unoka had a sense of the dramatic and so he allowed a pause, in which he took a pinch of snuff and sneezed noisily, and then he continued: 'Each group there represents a debt to someone, and each stroke is one hundred cowries. You see, I owe that man a thousand cowries. But he has not come to wake me up in the morning for it. I shall pay you, but not today. Our elders say that the sun will shine on those who stand before it shines on those who kneel under them. I shall pay my big debts first.' And he took another pinch of snuff, as if that was paying the big debts first. Okoye rolled his goatskin and departed. (4)

What we are saying, in other words, is that the type of conflict which existed in traditional African societies was not the type which bred a race of alienated artists. That there was conflict explains the source of those Ewe poems of abuse which Awoonor talks about and which, in my opinion, simply illustrate the type of rivalry which could conceivably exist between competing poets. Moreover, the African attitude toward death was essentially not nihilistic - another pet attitude of the alienated outsider; in any case, it was not seen as such a terrible flaw in the order of things so that even an Ewe dirge cannot be cited in support of the case for alienation.

Several writers have pointed out how the figure of the outsider is basically part of the heritage of the West. There is a certain tendency in Western thought, a subject-object I-Thou polarization, an obsession with the splitting-up process both conceptually and physically, which made inevitable

the ultimate emergence of the outsider, like a Frankenstein monster fated to be the ruin of his creator. Although some writers would see its origin in the Christian doctrine of original sin and the symbolic expulsion of Adam and Eve - both part of Western mythology - it is essentially a post-Hegelian phenomenon which took on a frightening dimension in Freudian psychoanalysis. As Willie Abraham says in developing this theme:

The splitting of the atom by Rutherford in a way became prophetic. In art, Picasso had already pointed at atomism, in dismembering the human body, and putting the bits together again like some nightmare of Empedocles. Peace and calm belong to synthesis not to analysis. In the post-Victorian analytic age, peace and serenity had already gone. The torture of modern music had already set in, with licentious exploitation of cacophony. In literature succulent imagery gave way to the poetry of the locomotive and of scrap metal. In history, the Weltanschauung was being abandoned for Namier's particularism.

As regards man himself, the position was the same. Freud had torn him to shreds, discovering in him not clay in which was encased the living breath of God, but an interweaving of elements imbued with impersonal natures. (5)

Writing about the outsider as a historical problem and reviewing the contribution to the debate of Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West*, Colin Wilson, well-known for his book *The Outsider*, says that "the outsider is the result of Whitehead's 'bifurcation of nature', and Spengler's *Decline* is a study of civilization in which the Outsider has become the representative figure. The bifurcation of nature is the cause of the decline of the West." (6)

This is a regrettably brief account of a rather complex phenomenon and only serves to place it in its ancestral home. As Western society evolved, a new dimension was added to the inherent tendency towards "bifurcation". A mythical notion of "progress" was conceived which purported that it was possible only through an active cultivation of the scientific/materialistic ethic. It was possible to extract from Nature, sprawling like a patient etherized upon a table, the almighty scientific principle; and armed with this unflinching formula, the scientists could get on with the serious business of "creating" pleasure and the good life while the artists, the parasitic ones, could get lost in their worship of the Music.

It is not surprising, therefore, that in such a situation artists should develop an acute **sense of hopelessness**. They saw the whole thing as a travesty, a loss of meaning and values. If society had lost or bastardized its values then it had no more claims over art which could now proclaim its independence and worship only its own idols. If the Divine principle had lost its potency and life shown to be meaningless, then art could be set up as a rival principle of creativity. What is significant for our purposes here, I think, is that very soon the reaction of the now exiled artists developed into something of a powerful secret guild excluded to all but the initiated. It became fashionable, indeed imperative, to proclaim oneself an outsider, the injured party. There was even a sense of martyrdom, and just as society was doomed, art was to be a rite of purification. Criticism, which since the days of Aristotle has preferred the descriptive line of least resistance, meekly obliged and officially labelled the new phenomenon the "literature of modernity".

As young African artists, university-trained men, began to grow on this diet of modern Western literature they got the message. Soon they acquired all the tools and the trappings - the apocalyptic vision, the arrogance, the exclusiveness, and above all, the image of the *enfant terrible*, alias "the outsider". The late Christopher Okigbo is said to have once told his audience that he did not write his poetry for non-poets.* At the 1967 African-Scandinavian Writer's Conference in Stockholm, Lewis Nkosi reportedly reacted cynically to the subject of commitment:

First, I suppose that the sound of the adjective, a positive adjective like 'committed', is better than that of the negative 'uncommitted'. 'Uncommitted' is soft, effeminate, languid, lazy. By all means then, let us be committed! But if we agree that the writer should be committed, the question is: what should he be committed to? Already there has been much talk about gun-running and holding up radio stations...It would be far more prudent for us here to take a less exalted view of our function. I am not even sure, in fact, that we are absolutely necessary to society. (7)

Nobody will deny the fact that an entirely different and

*Christopher Okigbo, it will be recalled, died in 1967 fighting on the Biafran side in the Nigerian civil war. I find his life history and his later poetry suggestive of the exile's complete return.

Western-inspired intellectual milieu has asserted itself in modern Africa; and the present situation in many African countries can hardly be said to inspire the confidence of anybody, let alone the sensitive artists. But it is our contention that on the intellectual and cultural level we have tended to take for granted the decadence of culture and the ultimate futility of social norms and values. And the immediate cause of this, as we have tried to show, is the cultural dialectic of the Western world which is reflected in its literature and by which, in turn, we have been influenced. It should be borne in mind that we are ourselves products of an educational system which aspired, ill-advisedly, to train an educated elite, far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife. Sometimes unwittingly and sometimes out of sheer admiration, and because our education predisposed us to, we have come to accept the assumptions and attitudes of these Western writers. We thus behave like the unfortunate schoolboy who was so dazzled by the erudition of his bespectacled white tutor that he concluded that spectacles must be a sign of learning, (and he went) and inflicted harm on his eyes so that he too might wear spectacles. The same attitude can be seen in the aesthetic standards accepted as imperative by our modern writers. Haunted by the air of superiority surrounding the accomplishments of Western artists by whose cultural imperialism we have grown, our whole effort has been to use their very standards to demonstrate that Caliban is as potent as Prospero.

What we are saying, in other words, is that the attitude of our modern African writers is what invites the criticism that modern African literature is only a minor appendage in the mainstream of Western literature. And I wonder if it should necessarily be so. I think that it is necessary to begin to close the gap which exists in our intellectual and literary history. We seem to have accepted as a fact the notion of the divorce of art from life as if it is only in exile that art can thrive. Thus we pride ourselves with not being "absolutely necessary to society" as if what the society expects of its writers is to indulge in "gun-running and holding up radio stations." It is unfortunate that at a time when Western intellectuals are now seeking a rapprochement between art and life and are frantically attempting to achieve a new synthesis, we are vigorously promoting the need for a separation and seem to be pleased with it.

Footnotes:

1. W.E. Abraham, *The Mind of Africa*, (University of Chicago Press, 1962), p. 46.
2. Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, (New York: Mcdowell, 1959), p. 5.
3. *ibid.*, p. 7.
4. *ibid.*, pp. 7-8.
5. Abraham, *op. cit.*, pp. 19-20.
6. Colin Wilson, *Religion and the Rebel*, (London: Victor Gollancz, 1957), p. 104.
7. Per Wastberg, ed., *The Writer in Modern Africa*, (Uppsala: The Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1968), pp. 45-46.

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