

## **OLD WINE IN NEW BOTTLES: REDISCOVERING TRANCULTURALISM IN AFRICAN POETRY**

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### **Abstract**

*The new postmodernist wave of transculturalism described as the hybrid out-growth of two preexisting cultures distinct in form and process from both multi and inter culturality in that it supposes a peaceful and lasting mien, has taken over as the most topical cultural and literary focus of study. It succeeds postcolonial studies and literature in contemporary and popular canonizations. Incidentally, despite its touted position as a new field by contemporary scholars, this study attempts to prove that transculturalism has been present in texts from Africa, especially poems. By studying a few selected verses of African poetry, this paper shows that literary transculturalism is a common feature in texts decades old and is not as avantgarde as we are made to believe.*

**Keywords:** Poetry, Africa, Transculturalism, Postcolonialism, Literature

### **Introduction**

Literary movements and eras accompany mankind in almost every age and dispensation. Human and societal institutions, political dispensations, natural occurrences and upheavals are some of the major factors that change and shape the tenor and inclination of societies and epochs of human existence. Literature as expression faithfully chronicles and reflects these changes and peculiarities of humanity; indexing for posterity's retrospective contemplation and study. In this present era of modernity and post modernity, contextual elements necessitating prevailing discourses that arise from globalization, financial crises, hyper capitalism, space travel, the hyper information age of internet broadbands, ethnocentric warfare, global terrorism, xenophobic movements, renewed religious fundamentalism, emphases on multiplicity and heterogeneity, transculturalism and so on, all in the wake of mass migrancy and neo nomadism have brought into practice new creative literacy expressions that have shifted focus from postcolonial and diasporic studies to transnational and transcultural literatures. Simply put, no matter the pace and texture of humanity's changes, literature has doggedly played and is still playing the role of escort and elucidator.

Transculturalism, the current cultural and literacy wave has been succinctly described by Fernando Ortiz as quoted by Yolanda Onghena as:

The product of a meeting between an existing culture or subculture and a migrant, recently arrived (culture), which transforms the two and creates in the process a neoculture, which is also subject to transcultivation [...] (182)

Ortiz's definition is easy to comprehend and could be seen as a mix of peoples and their ways of living which subsequently coagulate in an identifiable cultural matrix and hybrid. Modernist mobility, including physical and virtual (necessitated by mass migracy and fluid internet connectivity dynamism) has greatly influenced and eased intercultural interaction and diasporic migrations. Arianna Dagnino is of the view that the writers of this era (transcultural writers) who are mostly active participants in their dynamic transition have more source material at their disposal. They thrive in the freedom they find themselves in and make use of the opportunities inherent which have materialized through cultural deterritorializations and reterritorialization because cultures have become more fluid and intermingled as a result of complex and dynamic permeations. Their use of English Language has eased their access to the wider world of Anglo-American dominion and powered by the impetus and historical trajectory of postcolonial peculiarities and agon, their variegated experiences greatly enhance their literary influence. Expectedly, these writers differ in their expression and sensibilities especially from counterparts who have none of their special historically influenced ontologies. Importantly, however, Dagnino quickly notes that "... acquiring a transcultural orientation does not mean... (they) disown or ignore the culture (they) ... are born into and the effects of that particular culture in ...(their) cultural make-up and sense of identity" no matter how hybridized they and their works have appeared (132-134).

Transculturalism, transcultural literature, and its study is a new wave; appearing novel and avant-garde as scholars such as Dagnino and her ilk would want us to believe. But a closer look at the trajectory of literary history will prove this perception wrong. Transcultural writers and texts are not new to literature. At the base literary level, one simply has to consider historical intertextuality where one can easily espy the presence of "texts" belonging to an older age appearing in new tents on the one hand, and at the other colonial/postcolonial cultural instances where colonial's literature often feature evidence of an outgrowth from a confluence of cultures. These broad examples are instances of transculturalism

in literature having been in existence well before this new “wave” of literary and cultural interest. Clearer comprehension and discourse that will follow as this paper’s position will capture decade’s old and pre-existing transculturalism in literature (poetry) especially for Nigeria and Africa as a good case of “old wine in new bottles”.

### **Rediscovering Transculturalism In Nigeria Poetry: Relevant Literature And Empirical Evidence**

Poetry is the most expressive and meaning laden genre suitable for this study especially as regards Africa, given the outstanding statuses poets have attained in Africa’s literary history. Practitioners of modern poetry in Africa have been critiqued albeit positively as blending traditional forms (orality, orature) in their contemporary versifications. According to Isidore Okpewho in *The Heritage of African Poetry*, notable early African poets such as Leopold Senghor advocated anxiously “that African culture (with its spiritual qualities) should join hands with European culture to save human civilization from total collapse” (17). This view is further buttressed as he exemplifies Nigerian Pol Ndu’s instance in “Afa”:

...which echoes...tradition of divination poetry (among the Igbo) is a good model for those Modern African poets who want to combine the best of the African oral tradition with the techniques of modern European poetry in their attempt to deal with the complex issues of today. (22)

Okpewho also highlights the conscious efforts of African poets to maintain indigenous flavour in their works. The impact of abuse in Ewe tradition employed by Kofi Awoonor in “To Stanislaus the Renegade” is felt, and the conscious application of actual African words is seen in the Zairean poet Antoine Roger-Bolamba’s “Portrait” as he says “I have my gri-gri/gri-gri/gri-gri”. Even Atukwei Okai, Awoonor’s Ghanaian count by man’s application of “Hei”, an indigenous exclamation in his “Elevanyo Concert” is of the same significance traditional as oral influence as Wole Soyinka’s free use of Yoruba curses in “Malediction” (23). Other conscious and structural applications of African traditional elements according to Okpewho includes the realm of music. Even with the difficulty of reflecting the effects of African music in their poems, they nevertheless attempt to come close. Malagasy’s Flavain Ranaivo employs the *hain-teny* folk call and response pattern in his “Choice”. This also appears in J.P. Clark’s “Streamside Exchange” which echoes the Uhrobo song tradition. Strong rhythm, a feature of African traditional songs also appear in Senghor’s “Relentlessly She Drives Me” and “Prayer to Masks”; while Christopher Okigbo

explicitly composes some of his poems for 'Slit drums' and 'Flutes'. In furtherance, Okpewho States:

Other poets have gone further to imitate the sounds of some of these instruments in the poems, Nnamdi Azikiwe does so in an early (1928) nationalist poem titled *Drum Language*, which begins: 'Godogba, Godogba, Godogbam gba!' The tomtom drums the secret news... (24)

Reiterating this stance of African poets combining elements of the traditional and indigenous with English Language and its appurtenances, K.E. Senanu and T. Vincent in their introduction to *A Selection of African Poetry* talk about these experimentations highlighting the foreign influences of Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot in Okigbo's verses as comparable to "the elaborate verse line that Senghor had borrowed from people like Claudel (that) enabled him to incorporate into his poetry, the rhythms of the music of the (indigenous) Khalam (11). Senam & Vincent also re0echo the Ewe tradition evident in Awoonor and observe Okot p'Bitek Acoli and Luo influences who they said "started by collecting folktales and songs in the vernacular". It is their opinion that;

"perhaps the outstanding characteristic of ...modern Africa Poetry is... the search for techniques from native tradition as a means of extending and authenticating their sensitivity" (12).

More critics are supportive of this view. Babtunde Omobowale's chapters, "Anglophone West African Poetry" in Ademola Dasylva and Oluwatoyin Jegede's *Studies in Poetry* "starts with Abiola Irele's quote culled from "The Development of Contemporary African Literature":

Writing by Africans in the European languages dates back to the very beginning of active contact between languages and the civilization which lay behind them have come to assume such a significance on this continent as to have created a *new literary culture* alongside the oral tradition within which literary expression has been largely confined in Africa from the immemorial. (III) (Emphasis mine)

The trajectory we have been traversing in thin paper hinges on the creation of that 'new literary culture', borne out of the clash and intermingling of indigenous and foreign cultures. The dynamism and resourcefulness in the search and practice of creativity on the part of African poets expressing their responses to socio-political vagaries by bending the English language to suit their needs, has as Omobowale magisterially concludes, made Anglophone West African poetry assume its present hybrid form; "a combination of traditional as well as western poetic cultures" (122).

Discussing the Nigerian scenario, Oluwatoyin Jegede's "New Poetics in Contemporary Nigerian Poetry" believes that what can be referred to as contemporary, current or present Nigerian poetry is actually a hybrid; a mixture of poetic forms combining indigenous and foreign elements and techniques. The tag "modern" is mainly to highlight its written form in differentiation from the also existing oral poetry in Nigeria. Modern Nigerian poets who naturally have developed western techniques inevitably bend backwards often in oracy in their evolution of the hybrid and unique form of verification they practice.

In so doing, they effectively "bridge the gap between oracy and literacy through a combination of western and indigenous techniques in strange but existing manner" (134). Ezenwa-Ohaeto's *Contemporary Nigerian Poetry and the Poetics of Orality* provides the exemplifications of Oodia Oodia Ofeimun, Chimalum Nwankwo and Ada Ugah as the younger poets of the eighties and showcases the orality and hybridized nature of their verses. The prologue of Ofeimun's *The Poet Lied*, 'I have come down/to tell my story/by the same fireside/around which/my people are gathered...' For Ezenwa-Ohaeto, "recalls the tradition of fireside tales in a traditional environment" (57). Chimalum Nwankwo's expressions are couched in fresh application that speak of the influences of oral tradition and orality; more evident in his poetic structure and elements and in his words such as 'rain', 'goats', 'paths', 'children', in "Salutation";

I have seen accolades pouring like rain/ And have heard goats shrieking  
for shelter /But so many paths lead to the aerial zone/ For when seven  
colours greet the great eye /So vast the hues so terrible the light /Children  
will see the path to the aerial zone (p.3)

More felt is Ada Ugah's Idoma oral heritage in his "Invocation". It places the poet persona in the Idoma poet- cantor and raconteur tradition sure of his craft. "Who but the balladeer/knows why rivers meander?/ Who but the initiate/knows the secret path of the gods?" (Ezenwa-Ohaeto, 66)

Perhaps two most obvious examples of a merger of traditional and western elements bringing forth a hybrid of verses albeit further back in history remain the celebrated poems of p. Bitek and Okgibo. A cursory glance at their verses will prove the point of this essay. First is his adoption of address as a rhetorical device taken straight from the Uganda Acoli tradition. The characters of 'Husband', 'my clansmen' and 'Brother' which appear on pages 34, 35 and 37

respectively, which Lawino the persona addresses herself in a typical indigenous device traditional oral poetry. Again, the use of phrases as refrain to emphasize important ideas is also a borrowing from Orakwe, for example on page 44 we encounter this;

You kiss her on the cheek/ As white people do,/ You kiss her open-sore lips/ As white people do/ You suck the slimy saliva/ From each other's mouth/ As white people do.

Furthermore, according to G.A. Heron in his introduction to p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino and Song of Ocol*, "The most important influence Acoli songs have had on *Song of Lawino* is in the imagery Okot uses" (7). This enhances Afrikanness for African readers and produces freshness for every other reader. The traditional images are rife throughout the poem especially on pages 60, 66-67, 76-78, 98, 101, 115, and 120. There, one finds grinding stones *oywelo*, *lucoro* and *kituba* as flimsy firewood; *odure* as abusive nickname for small boys who hang around cooking pots or fire, elephant dung as simile; herdsmen and cattle; *nanga* and *orak* as music and dance; buffalo as comparison; *okwik* birds and *lajanawara* grass; spears and so on. Again, Heron maintains that p'Bitek's poem contains so much of orature that "... even its method of composition is similar to that of traditional songs" (5) and that "... Lawino's own words echo the words of a traditional song" (7). To buttress this, Heron refers to the lines "Beg forgiveness from them/ And ask them to give you/ A new spear/ A new spear with a sharp and /hard point/A spear that will crack the rock" (119).

Christopher Okgibo's leanings and borrowings from traditional elements have a peculiar function in his poetry that of possible interculturality between the colonizer's and colonials culture and lifestyle. This is probably and possibly exemplified by the poet's own deliberate fusion of elements of both cultures in his verses perhaps to indicate that very possibility. His famous "The Passage" illustrates this:

Before you, mother Idoto naked I stand  
Before your watery presence,  
prodigal Leaning on an oilbean, lost in your legend.  
Under your power wait I on barefoot Watchman for the watchword at Heavensgate.  
Out of the depths my cry give ear and hearken.

The fusion of traditional elements (mother Idoto, a river shrine and the naked mode of supplication) and western (the christian mode of prayer at the end, and the idea of watchman waiting for the watchword from Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*) is

a perfect hybrid of cultures. For Okey Umeh in his *Poetry and Social Reality: The Nigeria Experience*:

This (Okigbo's) faithful maintenance of the solid traditional base while still remaining open to any good that might come from the West is the essence of Okigbo's home coming. It is the essence of his call for a return to the traditions. (67)

Romanus Egudu in his "Defence of culture in the poetry of Christopher Okigbo" "Points out this marriage yet again of Catholic and indigenous religious symbols in "Lustra" (iii) fingers of penitence/bring to a palm grove/vegetable offering/with five/=== of chalk;" emphasizing the traditionality of "vegetable offering" and "five fingers of chalk" as native items of sacrifice. Again, in "Lustra" (i), we encounter "Here is a new laid egg/ here a while hen in midterm" as items required in traditional Igbo rites of purification (20). In discussing "Lustra" further, D.S. Izevbaye notices Okigbo's inclination towards the renunciation of Christianity as a sole option:

Although the offering are all traditional ones, they possess the Attributes of moistener and whiteness which have been associated with the goddess. Also like the goddess, the attitude is 'native'. It will be noticed that in the line, "whitewashed in the moondew" a common Christian moral attitude has been purged from the word "whitewash", which is now reinvested with a non-Western, traditional ritual meaning. (10)

As we have seen so far, most modern African poetry contain in varying degrees and in different applications, content and structural evidences of dependences and borrowing from the traditional indigenous and oral institutions of orature. Through the technique and concept of historical content and textual analysis, we have borne witness to these glaring features that have transformed African Poetry to hybrid forms making them convincingly transcultural.

### **Conclusion: Old Wine In New Bottles**

What this paper has presented is a well trodden path in the study of modern Africa poetry. It does not in any manner claim a new discovery both in the poetic practice of modern African versifiers. It is almost a tepid re-discovering.

However, its novelty and relevance lies in the fact that it serves as an effective rebuttal; a conscious reconditioning and repositioning of minds and a referral of

sorts to the fact that the supposedly critical wave of transculturalism (especially in literature) is not as novel as it is currently touted; especially to African scholars and thinkers. Transculturalism has been in existence on the African literary canvas decades before this postmodern space we are in presently. This is evident in the critical and historical content of common knowledge using African poetry as examples in this paper. Therefore, the “old wine of transcultural hybrids in African literature and poetry is merely being re-clothed and repackaged in the new garb and bottle as new wine-twenty-first century post-modern “transcultural literature and studies”. To all intents and purposes, the previous forms, contents and essences remain basically the same.

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