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Orality, Literacy, Modernity and Modern African Poetry

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Abstract

This paper attempts to locate and situate how Modern African Poetry turned the corner from a beginning encapsulated in poetic lines which are influenced and modeled after Western style and poets, to embracing forms of African oral traditions. The game changer for modern African poetry is p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino* which privileges his people's oral tradition forms as manifested in songs, proverbs and oral poetry over conventional western poetic forms. Osundare's *Villages Voices* equally concretises the achievement of the modern African poet in using the hands of literacy to drag orality to the podium of modern poetic manifestations. The efforts of p'Bitek and Osundare are singled out for praise for their abilities to locate the critical interface between orality and literacy in a better understanding of the consequence of the fatal collision between African oral tradition and western education which births modern African poetry.

Keywords: African Poetry, oral traditions, proverbs, poetic forms

Introduction

Modern African Poetry is a term relatively used to cover written poetry produced by Africans from the period when western education rode on the back of colonialism into Africa till now. The history of this kind of African poetry is relatively short when compared to the existence of traditional oral poetry in African societies long before the advent of colonialism. Unequivocally, it can be safely submitted that poetry as a literary genre did not come to Africa on the hunchback of colonialism. Invariably, modern African poetry refers to African poetry written in the languages of the colonisers, that is, English, French and Portuguese as the nuances permit.

Just as it is in other parts of the world, poetry in Africa has always being an important part of the peoples' lives in the areas of education, entertainment and other artistic expressions. African languages like languages everywhere serve as repositories of the peoples' oral tradition; thus, African oral poetry is manifested in different ways through songs, praise poems, abuse poetry, Ifa oral poetry of the Yoruba, traditional dirges of the Akan and the performance-driven poetry of the Ewe of Ghana, Zulu communal poetry and the religious chants of many African pre-literate societies.

A Tale from Two Tongues

Modern African poetry may be likened to a euphemism for African poetry written in foreign languages. The colonial factor and the realities of a multilingual society have made it inevitable that African writers write in languages (foreign and colonial) of which they are not native speakers or original owners. In an attempt to fore ground the language issue as it concerns African writers, Bernth Lindfors avers:

One of the ironies of multilingualism in Africa is that the extraordinary number and variety of languages in most sub-Saharan nations make communication across ethnic and international boundaries difficult in anything but a colonial tongue. The writer who chooses to express himself in an African language will be addressing his message to a relatively small audience, merely a fraction of the total literate population in his country (2007:23).

The influence of colonialism is no doubt pervasive in Africa but the aftermath of colonialism is more visible in its destructive influences on the culture of Africa. One of the greatest signifiers of cultural expression on which colonialism launched its biggest assault is language. Language as a repository of culture and tradition suffered the most under the colonial invasion. Gifted with a new tongue-the language of the colonisers-the African is stripped of his culture as it [culture] is virtually destroyed in the historic head-on-collision with colonialism. As products of colonial education, modern African poets who themselves are a signpost of colonial manifestations in character and outlook, are left with not much of a choice than to board the colonial-language vehicle in their literary journey across the continent and beyond. Hence, colonial languages have become by default, the language of modern African poetry.

The vexed and controversial issue of language in African literature has been addressed by my many celebrated African scholars including but not limited to: Achebe (1975), Djebar (1999), Kunene (1992), Ngugi (1986), Wali (1963). But despite the cacophony of contributions on the language question, there is no agreement and the matter has refused to die. However, the modern African poet emerges from the colonial experience luckier than Shakespearean *Caliban* or even worse, J.M Coetze's *Friday*, whose tongue is cut off as a testimony to the brutality of colonialism. Much better than Caliban and Friday, for the lost tongue, modern African poets got a new one, stuck to the stump of the severed tongue; a testimony to their connection despite their individuality. Even though the language issue is not the main focus of this paper, it is imperative to acknowledge that the issue of African artistic expressions in foreign tongues remains a burden on modern African poetry and its practitioners. On the powerful influence which colonialism wields on African literature, Simon Gikandi writes:

Modern African literature was produced in the crucible of colonialism. What this means among other things, is that the men and women who founded the tradition of what we now call modern African writing, both in European and indigenous languages, were, without exception, products of the institutions that colonialism introduced and developed in the continent, especially in the period beginning with the Berlin Conference of 1884-5 and decolonization in the late 1950s and early 1960s (2007:55).

The dichotomy of style between the first (those whose poetic lines are influenced and modeled after Western style and poets like Elliot, Pound and Hopkins) and second (those who have their poems divorced from the stranglehold of Western poetic style, by relying heavily on traditional African poetic techniques) groups of modern African poets has "led to a reexamination of the relationship of Africa's newly written literature to the traditions of the West" (Rand Bishop, 2007:415). The second group of poets in the mode of African oral artists has become the cultural signpost of the people and the watchdog

of the society, by elevating its art to engaging in socio-cultural, economic and political commentaries. With the obvious influence and reaction to the criticisms of Chinweizu, Jemie and Madubuike (1980), the latter poets have invested more in African culture by setting to decolonize African poetry, as the Chinweizu group charges. For these "new" poets, the root becomes the supplier of the muse and the poetic raw materials. By rejecting the Western poetic conventions, the second group of poets seems to say "they should not be expected to be the literary clone of an earlier generation" (Tayo Olafioye, 2000:9) as they set out to not only find their own style, but to also sing in it. The importance of this achievement according to Donatus Nwoga is that, today:

Most African writers have said that in the process of finding their own voice they have had to go back to their roots to the point where the external influences have become mere catalysts to self discovery (1979:44).

Consequently, it is the intention of this paper to focus attention on the tripartite issues of orality, literacy and modernity in the poems of Okot p'Bitek and Niyi Osundare; two leading figures in the comity of contemporary African poets. For any scholar to do an appreciable study of any genre of African literature, an excursion into the world of African oral tradition may become inevitable. Oral tradition underlay most works of African written literature, especially poetry. In today's literature, to put it in the words of Chika Nwankwo:

> ...no serious critic of African literature can *afford to relegate oral tradition to the background in understanding the text,* since all have now come to recognize the facts of oral and written poetry as a synchronic rather than a diachronic reality (1990:315, emphasis mine).

Okot p'Bitek: African Oral Traditions as Muse for Poetic Expression

The choice of p'Bitek from among his contemporaries is a deliberate effort to recognize his place in modern African poetry as one of the first to really attempt and achieve a break from Western poetic influences, by embracing and privileging traditional African poetic style, as exemplified by oral literary forms. Unlike his contemporaries who relied heavily on Western poetic styles and images, the poetic pen of p'Bitek unleashed a volcanic creativity derived from the impact of his people's culture and tradition, on an appreciative literary world. His *Song of Lawino* is a study in cultural nationalism and a stinging attack on European cultural imperialism. In praise of p'Bitek, Isidore Okpewho says of the poet, "Here, truly, is an African writer who has a feeling for the peculiar lyricism of his people's poetic traditions, and I do not think the lucidity of the English compromises the poetic intensity of the original" (2007:85). Though *Song of Lawino* is not a total rejection of Western culture, it attempts to undermine it by identifying its corrosive influence on African peoples and cultures. p'Bitek's rejection of Western literary forms raises the stake for the employment of African traditional poetic forms. This argument holds water with Okunoye (2008:90), who asserts in *The Postcolonial Lamp* that:

> The recovery of indigenous poetic traditions almost always derives impetus from the invalidation of the epistemological bases for the appropriation of European literary forms.

p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino* which he started writing in 1954 (Ojaide, 1996) was originally written in his Acoli language of Uganda as *Wer pa Lawino* before being translated into English language as *Song*

of Lawino. The poems of *Song of Lawino* are musical and rhythmic; two attributes of African traditional songs, which are meant to be lively and charged since they are usually performed. By including these features of African traditional songs, p'Bitek has been able to reach many and also win admirers for himself across the spectrum. The originality of *Song of Lawino* can be located in the fact that it does not fit in form with any Western model of the long poem like an epic poem or a narrative poem. The originality of p'Bitek's poetry also lies in its being a derivative from Acoli songs and in the poet's ability to use a contemporary issue of importance like culture contact, to produce the prototypes of a 'Lawino' or an 'Ocol' as imagery and symbolism of a people fighting the peril of cultural imperialism. The poet's use of images is conspicuous and concomitant on the strength of traditional songs from which the poem derives it accolades.

Song of Lawino can be divided into three sections. The first five chapters portray a rejected woman who is spiteful of her rival, Clementine and her husband, Ocol. From chapter six to eleven, Lawino the persona focuses less on her personal problems and becomes an unrepentant advocate of her people's custom and tradition, which are being threatened by Western cultural and neo-colonial imperialism. The poem's last two chapters seem to be a marriage of the first two, and an attempt by Lawino to win back her estranged husband, Ocol. However, the poem foregrounds an uneducated woman's efforts at fighting cultural imperialism as represented by her own educated husband. Lawino's husband, Ocol is a typically educated African, who sees himself as the epitome of progressive ideas and modernity. To people like Ocol, as a result of their newly found status, everything and anything African or traditional is backward and primitive, and can only be made better by Western beliefs and ideas. Ocol is the archetypal African who basks in the euphoria of a new language; one that Ngugi identifies as "the language and all the others *(African languages)* had to bow before it in deference" (1986:11, emphasis mine). p'Bitek's poem is a dialogue between two cultures: African and Western.

Lawino represents a rejected African woman with a caustic tongue and this forms the basis for her recourse to abusive language, directed at both her rival, Clementine and her husband, Ocol. The poetry of abuse is a prominent feature of traditional African societies where it is deployed in exposing misconduct by making the victim of the abuse an object of ridicule, butt of jokes and lampoon. Many modern African poets have adapted in their poems, the principles of the tradition of abuse to correct the ills of postcolonial African states. Such poets include: Kofi Anyidoho, Kofi Awoonor, Niyi Osundare, Tanure Ojaide and Okot p'Bitek. In p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino*, the influence of this African poetic tradition is noticed. As a tradition of verbal combat which relies on obscenity and the portrayal of physical oddities, abuse becomes a lethal weapon in the hands of Lawino and by extension, p'Bitek. In chapter two titled: "The Woman With Whom I Share My Husband", Lawino abuses Clementine, her rival thus:

> Her breasts are completely shriveled up,
> They are all folded dry skins,
> They have made nests of cotton wool
> And she folds the bits of cow-hide
> In the nests
> And call them breasts! (39)

At the height of the abuse, Lawino resorts to speculation in continuation of her onslaught on her rival:

> Perhaps she has aborted many!
> Perhaps she has thrown her twins
> In the pit latrine! (39)

Even Ocol her husband is not spared from her abusive attack because he has sunk in her eyes from the height of marital glory and respect, to the pit of infidelity and disrespect:

> Perhaps you are covering up
> Your bony hips and chest
> And the large scar on your thigh
> And the scabies on your buttocks (50)

The use of the word 'perhaps' in the two extracts above, implies that Lawino's statements are not founded on truth or any iota of empirical evidence; they are merely the ranting of a rejected and enraged wife. But this style is another attribute of the traditional African poetry of abuse, where people resort to spreading dirty gossips against their enemies, in a bid to exert a pound of flesh, from the one at whom their opprobrium is directed. According to Heron, Lawino's use of overstatement foregrounds p'Bitek success in taking "African poetry from defence to attack" (1967:15); a development which earns him a prominent place in the development of modern African poetry.

p'Bitek's poem uses the persona, Lawino as a signifier for the resistance of a segment of the postcolonial African populace to western cultural imperialism manifesting in many educated Africans casting a look of shame on their own cultures. Recognising *Song of Lawino* as a literary canon fired at westernisation, Lindfors identifies the role of the persona in the realisation of this goal:

In registering her complaints against her husband and his "modern woman", Lawino strikes out at the nasty habits and illogical practices of Westernized Africans, contrasting them with the natural dignity of traditional ways" (2007:27).

Continuing, Lindfors opines that Lawino's "song is a hilarious put-down of African "apemanship" (p'Bitek, 1973:1-5) and a defense of the integrity of indigenous culture..." (2007:27). Lawino has no apology for her hostile attitude towards Western culture and ideas as she takes pride in her beauty and sexuality and for this reason, she promotes the traditional dance of her people which the white colonialists condemn as immoral because it exposes human nakedness in a way. With comfort and pride, Lawino says:

> It is true
> I am ignorant of the dances of foreigners
> And how they dress
> I do not know
> Their games
> I cannot play,
> I only know the dances of our People.
> I cannot dance the rumba,

My mother taught me
The beautiful dances of Acoli.
I do not know the dances of
White people.
I will not deceive you,
I cannot dance the samba!
You once saw me at the dance
The dance for youths
The dance of our People.

When the drums are throbbing
And the black youths
Have raised much dust
You dance with vigour and health
You dance naughtily with pride
You dance with spirit,
You compete, you insult, you provoke
You challenge all! (42)

The dance of the Acoli people is romanticized and promoted as the healthy dance of a healthy people. Lawino then, attacks the Western dance for being to her, a dance of shame and immorality. Lawino describes the white man's dance:

Each man has a woman
Although she is not his wife,
They dance inside a house
And there is no light.
Shamelessly, they hold each other
Tightly, tightly,
They cannot breathe! (44)

p'Bitek as a cultural nationalist compares the dances of Africa and Europe in order to show the one with the predilection for corruption and immorality.

Despite the fact that Lawino champions the cause of African culture, she is not however, against white people following their own ways:

I do not understand
The ways of foreigners
But I do not despise their customs (41).

But her anger is kindled towards Africans like her husband, Ocol who love to follow the ways of the white man at the detriment of their own culture. To her, this category of people has left substance to chase shadow:

Listen Ocol, my old friend,

The ways of your ancestors
Are good,
Their customs are solid
And not hollow
They are not thin, not easily breakable
They cannot be blown away
By the winds
Because their roots reach deep into the soil (41).

To the persona, the collaboration of Africans with outsiders to destroy their own culture will not succeed despite the combined strengths unleashed.

Furthermore, as a postcolonial writer who prefers internal criticism, p'Bitek uses Ocol to warn Africans of the dangers of neocolonialism and overdependence on foreign products. Many years after the physical Empire built on colonialism had crumbled on the continent, the Empire is still fighting back by reinventing itself in different mutants of neocolonialism. The means of productive economic power remain inside the metropole to the almost total exclusion of Africans, who rely rather heavily on foreign goods and products. Ocol, as an illustration of this ugly reality in contemporary and independent African countries, presents a pathetic and frightening spectacle:

Aaa! A certain man
Has no millet field,
He lives on borrowed foods.
He borrows the clothes he wears
And the ideas in his head
And his actions and behaviour
Are to please somebody else.
Like a woman trying to please her husband! (116)

The poet does not leave Africa stranded without option(s) in confronting its problems; p'Bitek through Lawino leaves Africa with hope. Accordingly, all hope is not lost yet, as Africa can still redeem itself, if certain concrete steps are taken. Through *Song of Lawino*, p'Bitek submits that Africa must deliberately and consciously look towards her glorious past and her rejected culture, in order to be able to stand on her feet and regain her dignity. Ocol, who epitomizes Africa's rejection of her ancestors, must go back to them in humility and:

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.
Ask for a spear that you trust
One that does not bend easily
Like the earth-worm
Ask them to restore your manhood! (119).

The success of p'Bitek in bringing out the richness of the African language in *Song of Lawino* is commendable. His poem according to Lewis Nkosi espouses "the strength and dignity of oral poetry, the organic nature of language in a community in which the *use-value* of objects is still paramount..." (1981:150). p'Bitek's other achievement is that his tradition of employing traditional African literay forms in modern African poetry now has a large followership, which includes Okello Oculi (Nwoga, 1979), Kofi Anyidoho and Niyi Osundare (Ojaide, 1996).

Niyi Osundare: The Modern African Poet as a Folklorist

It can be safely stated that Osundare represents a new band of African poets who employ oral tradition and the folklores of their societies in the production of poetry. He is an enigma and a 'new' face of modern African poetry, leading some poets who have charted a radical departure from the poetry of poets like Soyinka, Clark and Okigbo; they [who] have been attacked for their perceived elitist and Eurocentric poetic sentiments. It is interesting to note that while the Okigbos who possess 'just' university first degrees in their kitty are so enamoured of Western poetic conventions that they have received some knocks from critics, the job of bringing simplicity, folklore and traditional poetic devices to modern African poetry has fallen on the 'new' poets like Osundare and Ojaide who are in possession of PhDs from some of the best universities in the world. It is in recognition of the radical consciousness of these 'new' poets that Oyeniyi Okunoye praises them for demonstrating:

...in varying degrees, a consciousness of indigenous African poetic traditions which they retrieve through translation and modeling of their poems on traditional forms (2008:90).

The 'younger' poets' leaning on orality to reach modernity has given their poetry the toga of authenticity and also earned them respect. The language of their poetry is the language of the people; a language that is not esoteric or elitist. For Osundare, the use of folklore in his poetry is not accidental since a peep into his background reveals that, he has a close affinity with folk people having grown up at Ikere-Ekiti, a rural-urban community in Ekiti State, Nigeria. Raised by a drummer-father, songs, music and chants became a part of him very early in life. Little wonder, Osundare's poems swim in the rhythm of music and perpetually sing the tunes of orality, even as they dance to the drumbeats of nature. As a modern African poet, Osundare signposts the poet as a hybrid persona in a postcolonial society, who is caught within the nexus of orality, literacy and modernity. In order to properly situate the proclivity of the poet for oral literature and folklore, we shall be focusing among his numerous volumes of poems on *Village Voices*.

It is noteworthy that Osundare prides himself as the conscience of the ordinary people and employs their communal memories for the weaving of his craft. In 'I Wake up this Morning', the poet does not hesitate to announce where he stands on the societal landscape:

I wear courage like a shield
and see, refusing to hide,
those who pour poison
in the village stream

I wear courage like a shield
telling kings their fart
chokes the village nose (1)

He sees himself as the voice of the voiceless and powerless, and intends to fight their cause. However, for him to perform his task creditably well, he must equally assume the position of a town crier like Okigbo in "Hurrah for Thunder". The poetic town crier that he is, Osundare is ready to shout himself hoarse in the communal interest:

I have borrowed the earful clamour
of the towncrier
gain the unkillabe (sic) clarion
of the gong
cushioned my throat with the velvet feather
of the dove
charged my words with the fiery urgency
of the thunder
when I sing ears shall bend my way (1)

Since the poet has assumed the position of the town crier and the conscience of the society, he must position himself for identifying any threat to the well-being of the ordinary people, who are greatly disadvantaged in the scheme of things. In "Eating with all the Fingers", the poet accuses the privileged class of eating with their "ten fingers", thereby clogging "their throats/their greed chokes the land/with sprawling dirt" (15). But like a typical town crier, he fires a warning shot that it is his job to cry out:

we will raise our voices
and tell the world
we will not be watchers
of others eating (15)

In continuation of his town crier role, the poet announces that while the majority is suffering deprivation and poverty, some are fattening on the sweats of the people and the fruits of the land. The people are not even sure of hope, but in contrast, their leaders have more than enough that they even throw away:

Somewhere, not more than
a hungry shout away
chicken legs dance
at the bottom of simmering pots
blazing the tortureome smell
of festive kitchens
senior service children
pamper corpulent cats
with corned beef
laughing heartily at our yawning ribs (60).

As a result of this painful and unjust disparity of wealth, the poet shouts:

Let no-one tell us again
that fingers are not equal

for we know
how the thumb grew fatter
than all the others (60)

Osundare is not a rural-dwelling town crier who, in rural servitude, parrots the message of the king to the people; he is a modern town crier and social commentator on the ills of the society. This reality is apt because in the words of Uriel Okunrinmeta:

> The African literary artist, who has now become the modern town crier, plays a significant in contemporary society...The literary artist, just like the *alore* (*lookout*), keeps watch on his society and sends signals to alert the or caution the society about events or incidents that can affects its peace or welfare (2008:38, emphasis mine).

By refusing the position of an onlooker, the poet throws his hat in the ring by engaging the government and the failed socio-economic and political policies of the postcolonial African state like Nigeria. Unlike the rural town crier, who parrots the message of the king, Osundare as a modern town crier gives the message of the people to the king(s) in a unique reversal of responsibility.

Osundare is well known for his use of the Yoruba oral poetry forms of *ijala, oriki* and *ofo* in his poetry. As a literate poet, Osundare's recourse to orality is not far-fetched. In the words of Ojaide:

> Orality makes poetry very lively, especially with the qualities of direct address exclamation, and dialogue...it is highly entertaining, more especially with the intellectual delight from proverbs, praise-names, epithets and allusions (1996:45).

These Yoruba poetic devices are evident in such poems as "I Wake up this Morning", "A Dialogue of the Drums", "Not in My Season of Songs", "Search for a Wife", "Dying Another's Death" and "We Have Waited So Long". *Village Voices* is enriched with proverbs with which Chinua Achebe says "words are eaten". The poet's use of proverbs is not only profound, it strikes a chord with his image as a people's poet. Osundare is not unmindful of the intellectual pricelessness of proverbs in the traditional society. After all, his people (Yoruba) have a saying that foregrounds the venerable place of proverb in communication: *Owe l'esin oro, oro l'esin owe, ti oro ba sonu, owe l'afi nwa* (Proverb is the horse of thought and whenever thought is lost, proverb is called in to rescue it).

These proverbs are spread across the volume and they include: "When the target of a proverb/ feigns the ignorance of an alien/Tell him to chide the cowardice/of his hands" (5); "Sigidi thirsty for a dance of shame/craves a festival in the rain" (9); "He whose forehead is twin/With a hanging cliff, Let him not peer into other people's faults" (10); "We say a child is foolish/his mother says 'As long as he doesn't die'/what death kills a child faster/than arrant folly?" (12); "When cutting a tree in the forest/ it is the wise who watch/where it will fall" (16). Praising Osundare for his poetry, Nwachukwu-Agbada opines that:

Like a typical traditional bard, Osundare employs forms of folklore in varying proportions. Apart from the songs (*orin*) which still retain part of their original Yoruba structure, proverbs (owe), curses (*epe*), incantations (*ofo*), riddles (*alo apamo*) and myths (*itan*) are largely reworked, and in most cases built in snippets into the lines (1996:79-80).

In line with Nwachukwu-Agbada's assertion, a discerning look at the poems in *Village Voices* reveals that poems like "The Bride's Song" and "Dying Another's Death" are borrowings from Yoruba *ekun iyawo* (bride's song) and *ofo* (incantation) oral literary forms.

However, in spite of the celebration of Osundare for his use of orality and folklore in a simple language which is accessible to many, he has not been spared his fair share of criticisms. One of such critics, Wole Ogundele (2008) accuses Osundare of promoting obscurantism by employing Yoruba oral poetry, whose simplicity he says is exaggerated. According to Ogundele, some Yoruba oral poetry genres such as *ofo, iyere ifa* and *ayajo* are deeply anchored in ritual, with an accompanying esoteric language that is not accessible to all. In furtherance of his criticism, Ogundele does not see how an Osundare who belongs to the privileged class of the sophisticatedly educated can claim to be using the language of the ordinary people or the marketplace; if not just in theory only. In his general opinion, Ogundele declares that:

> In Nigeria, a poetry that is really accessible to 'all', and truly of 'the market place' would be, if not of primary orality, at least of secondary orality; it certainly would also not be in *Revised Standard English* (2008:150, emphasis mine).

In furtherance, Nkosi equally raises doubt and reservation about:

> whether the oral tradition and the poetic forms within that tradition can be made to yield models which can be mechanically repeated under new conditions of literary productions (1981:151).

Ogundele's criticism of Osundare is unfair and after a closer look, appears more like a mere academic exercise of the critic striking the writer as a fair sport; after all, isn't the critic a terrorist? In Yoruba oral tradition, there exist a clear demarcation between what is entertainment and therefore accessible to all, and that which is sacred and on that account, off limit to the non-initiates. The marriage of orality to literacy has helped to blur in certain regard, the gap that used to exist between what is sacred and profane in the Yoruba oral poetry genres that Ogundele mentioned because the transmission of what used to be oral to the written form, has helped in the removal of the air of sacredness from many African oral texts. In spite of his prominence as a modern poet, Osundare is certainly the wrong writer on whom the charge of obscurantism can be placed by any critic. In fact, it is the accessibility of Osundare's poetry that confers the toga of prominence on me, in the comity of modern African poets.

Therefore, both p'Bitek and Osundare as leading lights of the promotion of African oral lore in modern African poetry must be praised for the respect, criticisms, praises and critical literary scholarship their efforts have engendered. There is no doubt that the introduction and inculcation of oral folk styles into modern African poetry has gained a higher level of accessibility and acceptability for African poetry among the people, than the case used to be. The ability of both poets to identify with the people in their struggles, by crying out loud against perceived anomalies in the society, draws comparison with the role the oral artist played in pre-literate African societies. The two poets who are the focus of this paper have attempt to locate the critical interface between orality and literacy in a better understanding of the consequence of the fatal collision between African oral tradition and western education which

births modern African poetry. Their poems deliberately acquiesce to Ngugi's (1986:7) call for cultural nationalism when he says of the new path Africa Literature must follow, which is the task of:

> ...how best to make the borrowed tongues carry the weight of our African experience by, for instance, making them 'prey' on African proverbs and other peculiarities of African speech and folklore.

Also noteworthy of observation and acknowledgement are the important roles the aforementioned poets have played in elevating orality to the centre of their poetic expressions despite their earned competence as educated writers. p'Bitek and Osundare are arguably more than other poets, promoters of the fusion of African oral poetic forms with modern literary convention by breaking away from the pigeon hole of Eurocentric poetic manifestations which have little or no place for African poetic forms in all their ramifications. Both poets bring to the light in their poetic expressions, the marriage of convenience which births beautiful poetry, which is possible when orality meets literacy in the courtyard of modernity. Both poets have borrowed richly from the oral traditions of their people and have promoted orality through literacy, and it is for these reasons that the two poets can be called modern African griots of modern African poetry.

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