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ISSN (Online) : 2455 - 3662
SJIF Impact Factor :3.395 (Morocco)

EPRA International Journal of
**Multidisciplinary
Research**

Volume: 2 Issue: 4 April 2016



Published By :
EPRA Journals

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THE HAUNTING IMAGES OF THE WEST IN CONTEMPORARY GHANAIAN POETRY

Asangba Reginald Taluah¹

¹Lecturer

Department of Interdisciplinary Studies
University of Education, Winneba
College of Agriculture Education
Ashanti Mampong, Ghana

ABSTRACT

Many literary artists and critics in time past have affirmed the significance of tradition as a source of inspiration in creative works. Though the driving force in molding a creative work such as a poem is innate, a true artist must have knowledge of a given tradition or traditions to excel in the enterprise. In quite recent times however, much of the poetry by budding poets tends to imitate Western forms in lieu of the traditional. This paper is therefore an attempt to address the effects of foreign traditions on the creative abilities of the Ghanaian youth. It traces the antecedents that are most likely to have caused the negative outlook towards most indigenous traditions in Ghana to the embrace of Western traditions. It also examines some pertinent issues in the educational system in Ghana and the impact of the English language as the language of instruction and its effects on the culture of the creative arts.

KEYWORDS: *Image, the West, Creative Arts, Tradition, Innovation, Contemporary*

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Ghana is notably one of the developing nations that has diverse cultures but has also assimilated diverse other foreign cultures, the most notable being the cultures of Britain and the West as a whole. From the early years in formal education, we are groomed under western canons and hardly formally examine our own traditions. In the nursery schools, we are taught rhymes as “London Bridge is Falling Down”, “Baa, Baa, Black Sheep” Row, Row, Row Your Boat”, “Old McDonald had a Farm” and the popular tongue twister “Peter Piper” and a host of other rhymes and tongue twisters. From the lower primary to the Junior High School, we hardly encounter any of the creative arts. In the Senior High school however, we are somehow fortunate to come across the creative arts in core English classes where literature is an aspect. The very few privileged to have a better grasp of the creative arts, as far as poetry, drama and prose are concerned are students

who take up Literature as one of their electives. Yet, the literature is sub-divided into two: African and Western Literature respectively. In the tertiary institutions, it will be virtually impossible to graduate from the Literary class without coming across Shakespeare, Milton, Homer and Virgil and later Italian critics and theorists like Petrarch, Dante and Boccaccio to mention but a few.

We sit in Ghana, under African skies but we are taught little of our own traditions. We think literature and we think English and consequently the traditions of the English. Perhaps the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis which states that, “language determines taught” should not be taken lightly at all. The struggles of many students in their early and sometimes later stages of education to understand the English language in itself makes it very difficult for students to understand Literature, let alone have interest in studying Literature or practicing it. The argument is quite simple. Literature is an elevated

form of language, and the fact that one cannot understand the intricacies of the language in which Literature is expressed automatically means that the Literature cannot be understood, let alone appreciated. For instance, the Ghanaian nursery child battling with English phonetics may have problems pronouncing the words: peter, piper, picked, peck, pickle and pepper in isolation. How can such a student then pronounce these words in fast succession as in the case of the tongue twister “Peter Piper”? The point we are driving at is that not only has the West, Britain to be specific left Ghana with a language but the use of it has had a downturn in the Creative Arts as we will portray.

At the post-graduate level, the situation is not any different. What is generally learnt in Literary Theory is from the West. We trace Literary Theory from its ancient roots in Classicism as in the writings of Plato, Aristotle and Horace through to Petrarch, Dante, Boccaccio, Philip Sidney and John Dryden to Jacques Derrida. You take a critical look at these names and you simply cannot neglect the tempting question: Why this trend? In Studies in Literary Theory, we do not come across anything that is African, not to mention Ghanaian. Though we are taught African Literature, it dates just a few decades. What should be taught in Literary Theory of African origin is simply nonexistent because the genius of the African past was not put on record. Nevertheless, it is an undeniable fact that, at the time Homer was constructing *The Odyssey*, somewhere in Africa, a story teller was also busy relating his stories. And perhaps, more likely than not, at the time Virgil was producing his *Aeneid*, somewhere in Africa, a griot was skillfully weaving tales in complex forms. The difference lies in the fact that, while others put their thoughts in records, others for so long a time performed theirs. As T. S. Elliot maintains, “every nation, every race, has not only its own creative, but its own critical turn of mind; and is even more oblivious of the shortcomings and limitations of its critical habits than of those of its creative genius.” (“Traditions and the Individual Talent”, 1006)

Hence, the fact that most of the poetry from Africa today is written is a deviation from the norm because African poetry transcends the pages; it is more of a performance and in some instances, involves more than just an individual as evidenced in Call and Response patterns. More so, much of African poetry follow strict patterns of rhythm as compared to rhyme as is especially common with the sonnets of the West.

Many of these instances abound in the teaching and learning of the English language and Literature in particular. The consequences are that:

very few students in Ghana grow with the interest in the Creative arts. Personal experiences also reveal that students usually coil back when the word Literature is mentioned. They equate Literature to reading, and reading is what most students dread to venture into. The few students who venture to study Literature or perhaps have interest in producing literature tend to have Western models on the grounds that much of the Literature they have seen or learnt is that of the West.

A critical examination of the creative arts and poetry in particular in recent times reveals a rather lackadaisical attitude to the Ghanaian or African indigenous traditions. We look more to the West as the base of our literary traditions as though our traditions do not hold these art forms. An investigation of the poetry of most Ghanaian poets who sprang after independence, 1957 reveals a sturdy borrowing of indigenous traditions in a fuse of western forms. However, for nearly fifty years down the line, the influence of indigenous Ghanaian traditions as evidenced in Ghanaian poetry is almost non-existent. For instance, the collages of images, metaphors and poetic devices in general, in recent Ghanaian creative arts point to the West. Recent poets in Ghana are drawn to spoken word and quite recently the haiku of Japan. Rhyme is cherished in lieu of rhythm, but many a linguist concur that the attribute of rhyme has more to do with the language involved and not the prowess of the poet in question.

Where then lies innovation when the creative arts are geared toward the West to the disregard of indigenous traditions. We seem to be dancing to a tune that is alien to us, a tune that others have mastered its dance movements. Hence, the arts that are produced do not stand out and cannot stand the test of time.

This study focusses on imagery because it is first and foremost one of the driving forces in poetry and it is also the most conspicuous amongst the host of others. Hence, much emphasis is placed on poetry as compared to prose and drama on grounds that the employment of condensed expressions in poetry thrives on imagery to trigger our imagination to recall and recreate a poem to our understanding through our senses of imagination. Perhaps this assertion by Roberts and Jacobs in *Literature: An Introduction to Reading and Writing* says it all.

In literature, **imagery** refers to words that trigger your imagination to recall and recombine **images** – memories or mental pictures of sight, sounds, tastes, smells, sensations of touch, and motions. The process is active and even vigorous, for when words or descriptions produce images, you are using

your personal experiences with life and language to help you understand the poems you are reading. In effect, you are recreating the work *in your own way* through the controlled stimulation produced by the poet's words. Imagery is therefore one of the strongest modes of literary expression because it provides a channel to your active imagination, and along this channel, poets, like all writers, bring their works directly to you and into your consciousness. (680)

Contemporary as used in this paper refers to recent and budding Ghanaian poets who began their poetic journey around the year 2000. Hence, the likes of Kofi Awoonor, Kofi Anyidoho, Atukwei Okai, Ama Ata Aidoo, Kwesi Brew, Mawuli Adjei and their contemporaries are not considered in this paper as contemporary Ghanaian poets.

The West is normally implied when European countries are meant. However, our discussion limits the bracket of the above classification to mean countries that Ghana has had contacts with, with regard to education or Literature and Literary Theory in particular. Hence, countries such as the United Kingdom, Italy, Greece, France and the United States of America (though the latter is not properly of the West) are the countries implied as they have connections with Ghana as far as Formal Education, Literature and Literary Theory are concerned.

2.0 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The main objective of the study is to examine the images employed by contemporary Ghanaian poets in their poetry. Other objectives include:

1. To address the effects of foreign traditions on the creative abilities of contemporary Ghanaian poets.
2. To trace the antecedents that are most likely to have caused the negative outlook towards most indigenous creative arts in Ghana to the embrace of Western forms.
3. To examine the relationship between tradition and innovation and their role in the creative arts as evidenced in the poems of former and contemporary Ghanaian poets.

3.0 THE STATE OF THE CREATIVE ARTS IN GHANA

The fact that most Ghanaian poetry before the coming of the European were orally performed and transmitted and only later transliterated, translated and improvised is evidence of the Western poetic canon. The situation can be attributed to no other reason but the fact that though Ghana has diverse literary traditions, very few have been

documented. Ghana can boast of about fifty (50) languages with much more dialects. And every language group has diverse forms of arts, of which poetry is no exception.

The nature of the academic systems however, demand that anyone willing to learn Ghanaian traditions that date back from independence will have to undertake an independent research. As reiterated earlier, very few of the diverse oral traditions from the diverse languages have been documented. And what at all could be a driving force for one to learn indigenous traditions? You look at all angles and you will find out that there is no motivating force at all. One, there are many who are not aware that their communities have literary works of great value. There are others who simply find the exercise unnecessary since a few people will appreciate it. Yet, there are others who believe that the indigenous traditions are sub-standard.

I remember quite well that it was not until my later years in the tertiary Institution did I get to know and also understand; yet disgracefully that my people or ethnic group have works of great literary value. This epiphany, I give my sincerest respect to one of the torch bearers of Ghanaian poetry, the late Kofi Awoonor, who in his Creative Writing Class with me as a student said simply that there were great works of literary value back in our communities and Kofi Anyidoho and Mawuli Adjei who later became co-supervisor to my M.Phil thesis rekindled my desire to delve into the oral traditions. Perhaps, I couldn't have been much convinced until I ventured into it myself in my M.Phil thesis titled *The Context and Poetics of Kasena Dirges and War Songs*, where I sought to ascertain the literary nuggets in these poetic forms of my ethnic group, the Kasena of North Eastern Ghana. It was quite a revealing experience. And if with time to come, I ever boast of my literary prowess, I must confess this research encounter enlightened me.

One of the legacies that the West has left in most African countries is language. And this has mostly been the case as a result of colonization in some decades past. The notable languages are English, French and Portuguese in order of number of speakers. Hence, in most African countries today, the language of the colonizer has become the national as well as the official language. The situation in Ghana is not any different as the English language is the official as well as the national language. Consequently, in all aspects and levels of education, the language of instruction is English. Though some Ghanaian linguists in some years past proposed in their research findings that it is most appropriate to teach pupils in the lower primary, from the Nursery

to third grade in the indigenous language of the community and the English language adopted later in primary four, the proposal has scarcely prevailed. What is however most fascinating in recent times is that many a Ghanaian pride themselves in having their children speak the English language in lieu of their indigenous languages.

It was only after independence (1957) that Ghanaian Literature sprang. And some of the notable torch bearers of the creative arts in Ghana include the late Kofi Awoonor, Kofi Anyidoho and Atu Kwei Okai amongst some other notable poets. One significant fact worthy of note is that these early literary pioneers saw in their early careers the significance of tradition in crafting the creative arts. They embraced their traditions, and carved niches for themselves. Let us examine quite briefly the works of earlier Ghanaian poets as Kofi Awoonor and Kofi Anyidoho.

A critical examination of the poems by Awoonor and Anyidoho reveal great insights of Ewe oral traditions, as they are themselves sons of the Ewe land. The employment of traditional African images and metaphors, refrains, folk songs, fables, idioms and proverbs in most of their poems give credence to the rich Ewe oral tradition. In his prefatory notes to *PraiseSong for TheLand*, Anyidoho maintains quite frankly that:

...it has become obvious to me that the word as print can no longer carry the full burden of my voice. It certainly cannot deliver my voice to all the people I call My People. Beyond all the fine arguments we offer in honour of the printed word, there always remains one stubborn truth-the majority of My People, even now, live in a world of primary orality.” (16)

Since African's literate population as Anyidoho maintains is believed to be not more than 10%, he considers that the dominant poetic world of Africa should be the world of the ear witness in lieu of the eye witness. Hence, in his collections: *Agbonoxevi: Poetry in Ewe and Bobobo songs* (2001), *GhanaNya: Anglo-Ewe Nyayito & other songs* (2001), *PraiseSong for TheLand* (2002), and the quiet recent collection of poetry *The Place We Call Home and other Poems* (2011), Anyidoho choose to accompany the printed word with the true oral word in voice recordings. In the forward to *PraiseSong for TheLand*, Awoonor celebrates the oral word as a true conduit of poetry thus:

The value of this new volume, *PraiseSong for TheLand*, which combines print with sound, is the ultimate homage the poet pays to the intimate and elemental force of voice, the first

instrument of poetry. Song, chant, call it what you wish, is the primary vehicle of all poetry. Print is the recent stepchild. Without the magical force of the original vehicle, poetry is less sacred, less ample as the ultimate expression of human creativity. (11)

Quite apart from the knowledge of Awoonor and Anyidoho and their contemporaries of the importance of the oral word as typical of the African tradition in general. The poem “Akpagbe” (103 -106) and “Husago” (109-113), both in *PraiseSong for TheLand* are characteristic of African folk wisdom and song respectively. Kofi Awoonor's "I Heard a Bird Cry," (*The Promise of Hope*, 227 -244) is also characterized by traditional folk wisdom and proverbs. The third but last stanza comes with the proverb thus: The vulture says, it says,/ Because helpers are not there/ That is why

I have shorn my heard/ Awaiting my funeral (*The Promise of Hope*, 238). The poem titled “Fokoko” a family tribute, by Anyidoho presents a proverb thus: *the lame panther/ is no playmate for antelopes* (*PraiseSong for TheLand*, 67)

Several other poems by former Ghanaian poets are interspersed with proverbs and metaphors that evoke images of traditional Africa or the respective language groups in particular. The value placed on proverbs and other idioms rooted in tradition are revered by traditional Africans in general. In fact, they are a mark of genius. Benzie is very conscious of this fact as he opines:

The Gold Coast tribes, for example, value their proverbs greatly. They are to them literature, practical philosophy, advice, and law. They are literature because of the pithy sayings, struck out like bright sparks from the hammer and anvil of life. They are idiomatic and arresting. They are practical wisdom as all proverbs should be. They are philosophy, because in many of them an explanation of life's rules and its exceptions to rules are attempted. They are laws because an apt proverb quoted at the right moment in a case can turn the scale of justice. (*Learning our Language*, 124)

Note the image Anyidoho evokes in the poem “PraiseSong for TheLand” (*PraiseSong for TheLand*, 53) The eloquence of dirge singers / is a searchlight through nightmares/ it is a walking stick in the cripple's hands/ a key to secret doors that lead/ into/ treasure caves of the soul of life. In another poem titled: “Portrait II” in stanza ne, lines 1-4, Anyidoho evokes quite unique traditional images thus: She came in a stampede of ancient memories/ Gathering the tremulous dawn in her eyes/ Her

tongue trembled with ancestral secrets./ Her voice a catacomb of countless mysteries. (*The place we call home and other poems*, 28)

The poem “Ancestral Roll-Call” by Anyidoho, characterized by invocation and traditional African motifs also portrays traditional images as in: I am but a child with an infant tongue/called in haste to invoke/ Our ancestral Roll-Call of Honour: (*The place we call home and other poems*, 9) Stanza four, lines 1-3

In all, these examples give clear testimony of complex images expressed in metaphors, proverbs, fables, invocations and other sententious aphorisms that resonate with traditional African experiences. Remarkable poems like *The Cathedral*, *The Weaver Bird* and *Rediscovery* amongst a host of other poems by Awoonor and other notable poems by former Ghanaian poets equally echo similar images of the traditional Africa.

Today however, you see clearly that most youth have lost their bearing. The assertion that art must transcend time cannot apply to most of the arts the youth are engaged in. The old adage says it all. If you do not know where you are coming from, your destination is quite as blur as your beginning. Many shy away from their oral traditions to embrace western forms, because, growing up, what was portrayed as Literature was from the West. Hence, the reality being that, the youth are seriously attempting to replicate or perhaps imitate what the youth in the West are doing. Consequently, diversity is misplaced and innovation misguided. Many Ghanaian youth are searching for the way out. But until we find the path that will lead to the way, we may as well be searching and searching to eternity.

Nketia notes that, “[t]he study of verbal expressions... is important not only for a clearer understanding of problems of meaning in a language, but also for a deeper understanding of a people’s life from which their meaning is ultimately derived” (*Funeral dirges of the Akan People*, 1).

One may ask: why not have these oral traditions translated and included in the educational curriculum? It would be a step in the right direction, yet, this attempt will not solve the problem in its entirety. To a great extent, care has to be taken in this translation process, since there are no translations into English of oral traditions that will effectively echo the essence of the oral forms; considering the performance contexts. For instance, the rhythm in oral traditions can hardly be maintained in translations.

What then is the way forward? There is the dire need to rekindle the interest of the youth in the oral traditions. The educational curriculum should

also include and highlight the importance of oral traditions. Oral traditions from diverse communities when harnessed and well documented will serve as a source of reference. Significantly also, for the youth in Ghana and many other countries that still have their literary works in oral traditions, to distinguish ourselves in this multicultural world requires that we relearn the wisdom of our ancestors as found in our oral traditions. “In Tradition and the Individual Talent”, T. S. Elliot echoes these sentiments thus: “Tradition is a matter of much wider significance. It cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour.” (1006)

Most of the former Ghanaian poets as portrayed earlier followed their respective oral traditions to innovatively stand out. Quite recently however, you will find some Ghanaian youth experimenting with the Haiku, sonnet and other unique foreign form. But when you bother to ask them of the forms that are also typical of their people or communities, you will be sad to know that they know next to nothing of their creative arts. Oral performances are deemed by most as substandard as compared to what is recently held in high esteem, Spoken Word, when in reality Spoken Word is the Grandchild of Oral Performance. Hence, images, metaphors and the style in general of Spoken Word in Ghana tend to be alien.

The point should be made and clear that it is not wrong to experiment or perhaps indulge in these foreign art forms. We live in a globalized world, and as such, cultural assimilation is the order of the day. Yet assimilating others cultures when indeed your own culture is barely known can be disastrous. T. S. Elliot’s assertion is worth quoting at length:

We dwell with satisfaction upon the poet’s difference from his predecessors, especially his immediate predecessors; we endeavor to find something that can be isolated in order to be enjoyed. Whereas if we approach a poet without this prejudice we shall often find that not only the best, but the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously. (“Tradition and the Individual Talent”, 1006)

4.0 ANALYSES OF CONTEMPORARY GHANAIAN POETRY

On the notes of the Ghanaian currency (apart from the two cedi note) is a visual image of the ‘Big Six’, the first black prime minister and first president of Ghana, Dr. Kwame Nkrumah and his five immediate contemporaries (together called the Big Six). That visual image carries with it symbolic undertones. It evokes freedom and justice, the very

tenets of Ghanaian independence and alludes to the independence struggle. This image and what it evokes can easily be digested by Ghanaians in particular, because it is most common to them. Another image closely related to this image is the Independence Arch, which appears on the notes of the Ghanaian currency beside the portrait of the Big Six. These images serve to complement each other and therefore serve as vivid images of the Ghanaian independence struggle.

In like manner, the nursery rhyme “I see the Moon” perhaps suites every growing child as the images conveyed therein are universal. I see the moon/ And the moon sees me./ God bless the moon/ And God bless me.

The visual images of the “moon” and “God” are unique not only to the European child but the Ghanaian child as well. Generally, every child grows with the knowledge of God, the divine and creator of the world and all that is in it. The image of the moon is equally an image any growing child who learns to recite this rhyme can visualize as its occurrences and patterns are universally known by all and sundry. This rhyme, though not originally Ghanaian conveys universal images common to all. However, one typical nursery rhyme that carries contrary images as the rhyme cited above is “London Bridge is falling down”. London Bridge is falling down, /Falling down, falling down/ London Bridge is falling down/ My fair Lady.

The image of the “fair lady” as in a pretty lady is a universal phenomenon everywhere in the world. However, the visual image of “London Bridge” and its consequent kinesthetic image of “falling down” are alien to the Ghanaian child. The point is that very few Ghanaians will ever have the chance of seeing the popular London Bridge. And most of those who would have been privileged to see this Bridge, did see it only after they had sung and memorized this rhyme.

say
tin
wey
man
don'
take
'im
eye
don'
see
for
wel
sef
i
don

Haven met Shakespeare at the tertiary level; I quite remember that I tried experimenting with rhyme. The end results were senseless pieces. I guess I was quite smart at the time as I had to let go with my fruitless attempts. I remember once, a colleague of mine will pride himself with rhyme. In his usual poem he will begin as such: “From Zero/ To a hero”. One will simply wonder if there was no better image or metaphor perhaps to convey the concept of Zero. Concepts and apt images abound in their numbers, but because my colleague was bent on creating end rhyme, he simply crafted an expression to carry on the rhyme even if the message of the poem was jumbled by the rhyme. It was only later that I came to a clear realization that a poem thrived on imagery and metaphor and that rhyme was only secondary to factors that make a poem stand out.

More so, I had earlier written my poems centered on Western images like the “Rose” and the “Lily”. Today, I wonder if I would be able to identify a lily if I see one. The problem is that where at all am I going to see this Lily on Ghanaian grounds. Yet, I cherished the images cited above simply on grounds that we learnt they symbolized beauty. Once, a song had used the image of the Lily to describe Jesus, the Christ as in “He is the Lily of the Valley”. In my quite recent poem titled “The Winter of Our Land” the visual image of snow and its kinesthetic effect is portrayed as such: When the kapok tree behind my home,/Starts to shed its dappled leaves; Like drops of snowflakes in the winter lands, (*look where you have gone to sit: New Ghanaian Poets, 74-75*)

The comparison of dappled leaves of the Kapok tree to drops of snowflakes may be to the point. However, that visual image implied may perhaps fall out of comprehension for the intended audience who may not have seen the drops of snowflakes. Another budding poet, Bernard Okoi Jackson, in his poem “Na Waa!” chooses a style that is typical of the American poet e. e. cummings thus:

bokoo
 plenty
 pass...
 abi?
 na
 waa oo!

(*look where you have gone to sit: New Ghanaian Poets*, 24) At a first glance, this poem is innovatively crafted. However, the poem in its entirety is a visual image that echoes the poetry of e. e. cummings in diverse respects. The genius however lies in the fact that the language it employs is uniquely African. It is what is popularly known by linguists as Pidgin English.

Nana Fredua-Agyeman in his poem to the late Kofi Ghanaba titled "Finding My Voice" begins his poem in the first three lines thus: "Last night the sax played. / In the stool house / A spirit died." lines 1-3 (*look where you have gone to sit: New Ghanaian Poets*, 23) The auditory image of the playing Saxophone is typical of the West and very unfamiliar to Ghanaian ears. Perhaps, because a stool house is mentioned with a spirit dying therein, the playing of drums would have been a better compliment of a dying spirit in a stool house and it will have therefore been better visualized by the ordinary Ghanaian. However, Fredua-Agyemang compounds this image with yet another Western auditory image in lines 4 and 5 as in "Men of the Motherland/ Crowded Wesley chorales."

5.0 CONCLUSION

Several instances of the images of the West in contemporary Ghanaian poetry abound. The youth are torn against Tradition and Innovation but they tend to prefer the latter. And as intimated earlier, attempting Innovations without a fair knowledge of tradition is a useless venture. So, when then is a creative art considered as good and true? A good and true creative art as a poem must be innovative as well as lend itself to indigenous traditional norms. What is traditional may be varied, but a better understanding of diverse traditions and above all the tradition of the poet in question will bring out the innovative genius in a poem.

Students must learn to apply their knowledge to other circumstances. It is only practicable that in the study of Literature for example students be made to identify what is peculiar in their communities. It is only when they understand to appreciate this that they can attempt a better appreciation of what is foreign.

Resource persons in the orature from the respective communities could be consulted and made to share their knowledge with pupils. With this venture, orature and for that matter literature of the

community will not only prevail, but also, attain both national and international statuses and innovations. Ghanaian text books and modules on the study of the English language and Literature in particular should include oral traditions in their courses and discussions.

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