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"THE SOCIAL FUNCTION OF POETRY IN UNDERDEVELOPED
SOCIETY: AN EAST AFRICAN EXPERIENCE"

By

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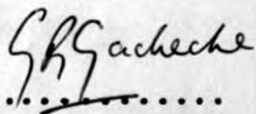
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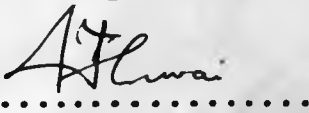
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THESIS ABSTRACT:

When one considers the position of oral poetry in Africa, an obvious element that emerges is that this medium of expression takes the form of a collective activity. From time immemorial, it has been expressed at funerals, marriages, child-naming and other ceremonies. An instant, collective response is achieved because, generally, oral poetry is expressed through a language and an idiom which the entire community understands.

There is much of this collective activity which has been lost through the written form. Written poetry is a recent innovation in Africa and one which requires the participants to have acquired reading skills through the existing educational system. In other words, written poetry has assumed a class form in that it is written for the elite. Consequently, a majority of the people are cut off (partly through the use of English language or any other foreign language and partly through characteristics of obscurity associated with formal education). It is the above artistic development which inspires one into the evaluation of written poetry in its modern context in the communication line between the

poet and the public.

In the first part of my thesis, I have elaborated on the social role of oral poetry and how negritudist poetry emerged more or less for a similar purpose. I have examined critics who, although paying due respect to the poetry of the Negritude Tradition, feel that the time for Africa to glorify its past is long gone. There is now an urgent need for African poets to face the existing social and economic reality as genuinely as possible. The voice of the poet should also be the voice of the masses. In fact, this is the major point of consideration which this thesis undertakes.

The second part of my thesis therefore, examines two poets, Taban lo Liyong and John Mbiti, who, in my opinion, are anti-social. Taban lo Liyong's poetry, for example, is at times too personalised and obscure to have any social hearing. Such poetry serves no useful purpose in a society which is threatened to extinction by neo-colonialism. Even John Mbiti's poetry which glorifies the heavenly kingdom can be regarded as being escapist and therefore, badly fitted to the plight of the masses. But the attempt of the two poets in at least writing some poetry is appreciated.

The third part of the thesis examines Richard Ntiru and Jared Angira since the two poets have their arms spread in both the private and the public domain. The social obligation of the two poets has been put to question since the private domain seems to dominate their artistic efforts. In fact, Angira's poems, for example, appear to develop into more obscurity from Silent Voices, to Soft Corals. The argument here is that poets need to re-examine their social situations much more consistently.

The fourth part of the thesis takes up from the shortcomings of Ntiru and Angira to show how, to a large extent, Okot p'Bitek and Okello Oculi have paved the way for a meaningful poetic expression. It is, for example, argued that although Song of Lawino glorifies the past, there is a sense in which it appeals not only to the Acoli background, but also to the entire East African context through the language and imagery used. Okot p'Bitek's and Okello Oculi's poetry (particularly the former's Song of Prisoner and the latter's Malak) justify what this thesis regards as "The Social Function of Poetry" in modern context.

The conclusion of this thesis has noted the stages of artistic development which East African poets are going through. The graph line begins from the oral art forms, through Taban, Mbiti, Ntiru and Angira up to the point where Okot p'Bitek and Okello Oculi are now. The purpose has been to determine the logical development of East African poetry in order to identify a convenient direction which would require more emphasis. In this respect, the conclusion has considered a number of limitations, such as illiteracy, and has gone further to suggest ways and means of narrowing the present gap between the poet and his public. For example, it is suggested that a programme of mass education, if it is implemented, would offer a wider readership of the written works of art. This would be reinforced by public dramatizations of poetry in order to maintain a necessary link between the oral art forms and the written art forms. The more the poetry is removed from the masses to the ivory towers of the elite, the more we deny the downtrodden a creativity which can mobilize them and restore them to the base of collective activity.

Okello Oculi's Malak seems to give much more appropriate illustration of a poet's social commitment. The poet addresses himself to imperialism and the class struggles which disable our societies and he does this without any divided loyalties. In a confident way, Oculi charts out the plight of the suffering majority in as far as this class of peasants and workers benefits very little (if at all) from the national wealth. He seems to strongly appreciate the peasant labour which sustains nations. It is for this reason that he sees "Ujamaa" - socialism - as the only salvation in that, within this system, the welfare of the common man is given priority in national planning policies. However, Malak is considered as only a beginning. It is considered as an opening into a whole new territory of meaningful poetry on the East African literary scene. It is, therefore, regarded as a big challenge for the future development of East African poetry.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION.

One of the things this thesis seeks to prove is the definite relationship between literature and society. Literacy, a by-product of Africa's contact with the western world, has resulted into the co-existence of oral and written art forms. This, to a large extent, reflects the social, political and economic reality in Africa, be it before or after the colonial era. But the one form of art which still is accessible to a majority audience - the illiterate population - is the oral art form. It is for this reason that one would be justified to regard it as the most popular medium in Africa through which relevant, social comments are expressed. Also, its success is determined by the fact that it is able to involve a big population of the community since it assumes an oral delivery. The oral aspect puts the relevant public in a better position to participate and interpret a situation than would be the case in the written art form.

Taking into consideration the fact that a majority of the masses in Africa are illiterate, the oral art-form becomes the surest way of engaging a people into the values of creativity. For example, a

funeral mood will be expressed through the appropriate oral poetry which brings out the prevailing sorrow and the necessary consolation, all at the same time. Or a traditional marriage setting may have its own 'praise' songs and 'mocking' songs in order to give full expression to the experiences of a wedding day. An example of this is the way the Isukha community handle such an occasion. They may sing a song of praise

Mwana wamberi neshikhoyero¹
The first born is a blessing¹

depending on the first impression they get when they meet the bride or the bridegroom; or they may sing a mocking song

Khali wasakhula habula okhunyo la mwana weru
He would have died unmarried if he hadn't
got our daughter.....²

depending on a 'malicious' intention to discredit the bridegroom. There is, therefore a sense in which creativity continues in any social context so long as the pace has been set.

It should also be noted that such categories of oral poetry are ones Okot p'Bitek is dealing with in his analysis of the oral tradition of the Acoli

people.³ Okot argues that it is the words of the poems which are exploited by the listeners or participants during celebrations. His analysis is an illustration of the way in which African oral poetry takes the form of live performances. This enables members of a particular society to share in the experience (be it funeral, marriage, circumcision or any other cultural activity) as emotionally as the occasion allows. Among the themes of the Acoli dirges, for example, Okot cites incidents in which man's life is compared to vegetable leaves that soon wither and dry up:

beloved of my mother
is like plucked vegetable leaves 4
Death has destroyed a prince

One advantage with imagery such as the one above is that it would be understood by all those listening or reciting. Also, such words are repetitively sung or chanted in order to lay emphasis wherever it is due and in order to maximize the quality of collective response. In this respect, the oral art-form does not, by its very nature of delivery, become a monopoly of only a few individuals in society. The talented poet's creative response to a situation or an experience is like a stone gently thrown into a pool of water, whose

spontaneous effect is to cause ripples throughout the water body. The impact is not the same once poetry becomes written. Indeed, Lennard Okola is aware of the fact that

Poetry as an expression of human emotions and sentiments is one of the oldest of man's activities; it is almost as old as language itself. Yet in their written forms both poetry and language are recent innovations in Africa.⁵

The emergence of literacy in Africa has, therefore, meant major deviations from the oral art form into the written form. It has meant, for example, that poetry is written down by an individual who perhaps has the literate audience in mind. In this case, problems of the delivery of this written poetry to the audience arise. So far, there are perhaps only two ways: either it is read privately by those who have acquired reading abilities or it is performed to a largely non-reading audience. The latter is not yet a popular phenomenon in East Africa. One attempt that has been made is by the Tamaduni Players who at one time in 1977 dramatized Okot p'Bitek's Song of Lawino, combined with Song of Ocol, at the French Cultural Centre, Nairobi. They also performed

Okello Oculi's Malak at the Kenya Cultural Centre in early 1978. But one needs to bear in mind the fact that not all written poetry can be dramatized due to individual limitations in, for example, form and content.

However, the uses of poetry certainly vary as society alters and as the public to be addressed changes. Africa has moved from the fundamental stage of communalism in which the means of production and distribution were governed by the egalitarian principle. This stage was, to a large extent disrupted by colonialism and also by slave trade. The latter was responsible for the forceful shipment of Africa's sons and daughters as commodities of labour for sale in capitalist-owned plantations in the United States of America and the Caribbean. Slavery, therefore, was due to the growing force of capitalism and, consequently, economic competition for international supremacy. The irony of this trend has been the resultant reality of Africa's underdevelopment. But what is underdevelopment?

All of the countries named as 'under-developed' in the world are exploited by others; and the under-development with which the world is now pre-occupied is a product of capitalist, imperialist and colonialist exploitation.⁶

Manifestations of this underdevelopment include, among other things, the big material difference between the minority who exploit and the majority who are exploited. Even in the so-called independent countries, African masses are denied the fruits of their labour by the fact that a lot of what they produce goes into foreign markets. Whatever is paid for these raw materials goes into the hands of the black bourgeoisie who now own the means of production and distribution of the national wealth. This class of the privileged few continue to make huge profits from the labour which is cheaply provided by peasants and workers. In order to get a clearer picture of this deplorable economic contradiction - underdevelopment - let us see what development should be, by once again making reference to Walter Rodney:

development in human society is a many-sided process. At the level of the individual, it implies increased skill and capacity, greater freedom, creativity, self-discipline, responsibility and material well-being.⁷

It is undeniable, however sad it may be, that the opposites of the above aspects of development are what we find when we examine the individual lives of the majority of our peoples. In a capitalist system, there is no way the material well-being of the under-privileged class can be improved because,

in addition to labour exploitation by those who control the system, they are subjected to poor living and working conditions. The situation of under-development is made even more difficult by the fact that Africa relies heavily on agriculture. This over-dependence on agriculture stifles industrial establishment through which more wealth could be generated for the development of responsible skilled manpower, social services and employment opportunities. It should be borne in mind that ~~X~~Africa is still sustained by foreign skilled manpower (for which she pays heavily!) and by foreign investment in form of loans. Such loans ensure that Africa remains an underprivileged appendage of western, capitalist manipulations. These are just a few areas to show Africa's economic position in relationship to industrialized, developed nations such as the United States of America, Britain and Japan.

From the above analysis of an underdeveloped society (East Africa included), one can argue that poetry, through the various stages of Africa's history, has been meeting with new challenges. This appears to be the case with the poetry that was born out of the negritude movement. There is a

sense in which negritudist poetry in its earlier stages followed, to a degree, the traditional pattern of a collective experience. Negritudist poets, whether they came from the Caribbean or Africa, had the same goal: the affirmation of the African personality, in cultural terms, before the white world. This was in reaction to white racism whose main objectives were to oppress and exploit while at the same time, discriminating against the black race. It is this situation which resulted in the power with which these poets sought to express themselves, as for example:

Listen comrades of the struggling countries
To the keen clamour of the Negro from Africa
to the Americas
It is the sign of the dawn
The sign of brotherhood which comes to
nourish the dreams of men.⁸

There is a sense in which such kind of negritude poetry served a useful purpose at a time when all Africa was colonized. It contributed a lot to the morale of the struggle for independence right from the second quarter of this century. Indeed, Leopold Sedar Senghor defined negritude as the awareness, defence and development of African cultural values.⁹ Senghor, symbolically, looks at Africa as a woman, or rather a mother, tender to her children and who also becomes the source of inspiration. He approaches 'her' saying:

Woman, rest on my brow your balsam hands, your
hands gentler than fur
Woman, light the lamp of clear oil, and let the
children in bed talk about their ancestors,
Like their parents.
Let me breathe the smell of our dead, let me
contemplate and repeat their living force.¹⁰

Senghor is describing his people's close relationship with the ancestors in the above homecoming tone. He gives centrality to the dead and indicates the way in which they determine the lives of the living. He is, therefore, alluding to a strong traditional background whose essence is recognized by the need to have children brought up in the ancestral ways of the tribe. But Senghor himself never took a consistent line of argument in the negritude campaign. He kept on wavering between a reverence for the ancestors and a call for a universal culture which would embody both French and African cultural values. In one of his prostrate postures, he writes:

Lord, I have accepted your white cold that burns
worse than salt.
And now my heart melts like the snow in the sun
And I forget
The white hands that loaded the guns that
destroyed the kingdoms.
The hands that whipped the slaves.¹¹

Senghor forgets the history of colonialism. He forgets the history of slavery as a result of his fascination with the vision of a universal culture. This is the

concrete reality of the inevitable cultural changes which have resulted from Africa's contact with the rest of the world.

One ought to note, however, the base which determined the creative efforts during the Negritude Period. Arthur Luvai summarizes its content when he argues that

the Francophone writer, under a political and economic system which wanted to half-bake him into a Frenchman was inspired by that system's assimilation policy and his refusal to be inferiorized took on a cultural emphasis.¹²

Luvai goes further to prove that this cultural emphasis was not only dominant in Francophone poetry, but that it was also evident in Anglophone poetry, although rather implicitly. The attack by black poets on the western values and the emphasis on traditional African culture was viewed as the social function of poetry at that particular stage of Africa's history. Poetry was viewed as one of the instruments in the war of liberation and the poets saw no victory in this war without a cultural bias. They recognized the fact that a cultural bond would determine a people's fate in the political struggle.

It is upon this background that David Diop, in a nutshell, commands:

You, bowing, you, crying
You, dying, like that, one day without
knowing why.
You, struggling, you watching over another's
rest
You, looking no longer with laughter in
your eyes
You, my brother, your face full of fear and
suffering
Stand up and shout No!¹³

But the use of English or French by Africa's poets posed a language problem which greatly modified the ability of the poets to speak to or for the entire community. The emergence of elitist poetry (that is, a poetry confined to the small literate percentage of society) was already taking root to such an extent that critics like Mohamadou Kane argue:

the misfortune of African writers result mainly from the fact that they lack a public and that their work has no real grip on the African public for whom they claim to be writing.¹⁴

It is in the light of the above that there have been many objections to the negritude philosophy. The argument has been that negritude poetry could not in itself make a liaison between the elite and the masses. Ezekiel Mphahlele¹⁵ states that the most realistic stance for Africa is not to dream of

traditional communalism, but to face the existing imperialism. He feels that an image of Africa which only glorifies our ancestors and celebrates our innocence is an image of a continent lying in state, waiting for burial. Taban lo Liyong too considers negritude as "crying over spilt milk"¹⁶ since there is urgent need to adjust to the social and economic realities that are here now. Therefore, a perpetual glorification of the past (such as negritude poetry does) would be a betrayal of the downtrodden masses of Africa. Lennard Okola, making specific reference to the East African situation, says:

The East African poet seems, in his relative aloofness from negritude enthusiasm, to be striving to come to grips with the present. Perhaps he feels, subconsciously that much of the colonial situation has been explained away for him by the longer established West African poets, and, therefore, considers negritude a dead subject which would dissipate his creative energy in vague nostalgia.¹⁷

In other words, what Okola views as "striving to come to grips with the present" (see above) may be interpreted as the new social role of East African poetry - a conscious effort to expose the present-day social ills. One could, in fact, make the above a criterion for establishing the achievements which have so far been made by the East African poetry.

Unfortunately, most of the criticism has been in form of book reviews or Study Guides for secondary school students. In this latter category the most notable are Austin Lwanga Bukenya's Notes on East African Poetry¹⁸ and George Heron's Notes on Okot p'Bitek's Song of Lawino and Song of Ocol.¹⁹ In Bukenya's study guide, brief comments are made about most of the poems which appear in Poems from East Africa.²⁰ This is done for a specific audience: in order that the "0" Level candidates, who may not have good background in poetry find their study of the poetry in this anthology. Possibly he is limited by the nature of his audience and by the fact that there is a whole group of poets to be considered. However, one valid observation Bukenya makes in reference to Okot p'Bitek and which this thesis seeks to examine in detail is that

Okot p'Bitek goes back to the established forms of African oral poetry ... East African poets writing in English have long realized the usefulness of this approach and are, either in imitation of Okot p'Bitek or of their own accord, experimenting with it in a great deal of their writing.²¹

This is to presuppose the fact that the dominant form of poetry in East Africa, so far, is the oral form, particularly Song accompanied by Dance in the countryside. Okot p'Bitek's Horn of My love²² is a good example.

Yet when George Heron²³ chooses to discuss Okot p'Bitek, he does so in one instance with a lot of unwarranted detail and in another instance (the Study Guide) with a lot of simplicity for the sake of "O" Level candidates in East Africa. All in all, George Heron's study of Okot is extensive but it doesn't see him in relationship to the other poets in East Africa in order to map out some kind of historical development in East African poetry.

Okechukwu Mezu²⁴ talks about poetry in an oral context and uses mainly the Igbo examples to show that in oral poetry the emphasis is on the participation of everyone. But even this does not go in detail because it is just a short essay among many others by other contributors. What Okechukwu Mezu therefore lacks are specific examples of the poetry he is referring to even from his own west African situation. He however, poses a challenge which this thesis takes up when he concludes,

The revolutionary stage of African poetry appears to be fading at least from the continental point of view Another kind of poetry is being born, less revolutionary, less collective, more personal, introspective and perhaps unfortunately bourgeois.²⁵

The revolutionary stage of African poetry in the above context could be referring to the Negritude Period. In which case, the thesis wishes to establish whether the above conclusion holds for all the poets chosen for study.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o has given credit to Okot p'Bitek, with particular reference to Song of Lawino which he (Ngugi) regards as a major contribution to African literature. He attributes this success to the artistic power with which Okot has borrowed from the Song in the oral tradition. According to Ngugi, Song of Lawino belongs to the soil, to the black people in Africa and elsewhere in the world. It is with the above in mind that Ngugi accuses the other poets, saying:

The poets (for example, David Rubadiri, Jonathan Kariara, Sam Mbure, Jared Angira, Richard Ntiru), like their counterparts in fiction, have not in the past sufficiently explored the technical resources of the oral tradition or realized that these can revitalize their poetry and enable them to move in a different direction. 26

Abdai Jetha²⁷, in his essay, stresses proper medium of expression. He is aware of the fact that it is difficult to use English or French (or any other

language) without absorbing some of the literary traditions that have grown up with the language. The poets he cites to illustrate his argument in the essay are J. P. Clark, Wole Soyinka, Christopher Okigbo, Gabriel Okara and Kofi Awoonor. This excludes the East African poets who perhaps are seen by West African critics as not deserving mention. If this be the case, then it is an error which ought to be corrected, at least to some degree.

Besides the above mentioned critics, there have been occasional book reviewers²⁸ who have not done much in way of portraying an objective picture of whichever work of art they are reviewing. As a result, the East African literary scene has been found to lack in comprehensive criticism in its poetry. Other criticisms are just short essays²⁹ which do not actually do enough justice to the East African poets and their poetry. Furthermore, there is an obvious bias, in most of these essays in the sense that they tend to concentrate on Okot p'Bitek at the expense of the other notable poets such as Taban lo Liyong, Richard Ntiru, Jared Angira and Okello Oculi. In the latter case, nothing convincing has been set out as regards Malak apart from the dramatization of the poem that was done by Tamaduni Players sometime ago.

At this juncture, one wishes to justify the rationale behind the choice of poets included in this thesis for detailed study. First, poets were chosen on the basis of their output in the field of creativity. It would be unfair to consider or to study a poet in terms of just the few poems he has written and which have appeared here and there in the literary journals or anthologies. Secondly, variety in both theme and style were considered. For example, John Mbiti was singled out as having a bias toward religious poetry. Taban lo Liyong, on the other hand, is considered as an iconoclast who appears to break away from the generally accepted or common poetic patterns on the East African literary scene. These two poets can be put into the category of older poets. In which case, one also needed to consider the new breed of poets who have set out to experiment with both style and theme and who oscillate between the public and private domains of poetry. Again, on the basis of output, Richard Ntiru and Jared Angira were thought of as offering good examples. The guiding principle is the search for a meaningful expression in poetry: a poetry which should embody ✓ the feelings of the underprivileged.

However, before one goes further, there is need to explain what is viewed as private domain in poetry. The modern African creative artist has been alienated from his society by the present educational system. This system lays emphasis on individual and not group performances and achievement. The role of a poet therefore, in a majority of cases, is like that of "a lone singer" described in Maori Yambo's poem:

In the slumbrous afternoon
Under the virgin palm tree
is a lone
Singer strumming his guitar
His mind absent.³⁰

The above therefore, seems to give a good definition of what this thesis regards as the private domain: some kind of secluded poetic world in which the poet appears to talk to himself. Quite often, one gets the impression of a labyrinth as, for example, in Maori Yambo's "synthe":

The light went out
And I ceased to haunt my own shadow
The shadow of my twisted self
The weird light with a potter's hands
Died
To haunt nothing was to haunt oneself.³¹

In the above poem, the average reader is subjected to a lot of mental strain as far as interpretation is concerned. One would be justified to argue that

the poet's mind is absent from the audience. It is a desperate attempt on the part of the poet to communicate his experiences in society to a reader. Such an approach to poetry seems to subscribe to Okigbo's assertion at one time that poetry was a type of cult from which the uninitiated were excluded.³² In fact, initially, Arthur Kemoli accuses Jared Angira of being quiet and meditative and insists that his poetry is deeply personal.³³ In Okigbo's terms, Kemoli would perhaps argue that Angira's poetry becomes an impenetrable territory - a private domain - to the uninitiated. But this is not entirely the case as will be shown later in this thesis.

In the light of the above statements, one recalls Okello Oculi's argument to the effect that written poetry in East Africa involves a private as well as a public pre-occupation, depending on which direction inspires the poet most.³⁴ A committed poet would be the one who deeply portrays a clear picture of his age. It seems, therefore, that there are two options open to East African poets: either they write a poetry that has the aspirations of the majority of the people at its core or a poetry that is private and isolated. It is clear that the former option (the public domain) is favoured, particularly when

Jared Angira³⁵ argues that the only positive direction for the writers is to create a literature, committed to the plight of the masses.

Within the above context, the question which many critics have posed is: how individualistic can the modern poet in Africa afford to be? It can, of course, be argued that works of art are only individualistic up to a certain extent beyond which the very act of writing should be interpreted as the artist's way of participating in the affairs of his society. However, the simple fact of literacy encourages the elitist elements in creativity. In other words, literacy for only a few creates classes and privileges which negate the aspirations of the majority. Its effect therefore, is much more felt when it encourages individualism. In which case, the writers emerge from an individualizing situation within which they may or may not develop clearly defined social visions. The modern artist, in as far as his relationship with the audience remains vaguely defined, cannot uphold the social accountability of the oral poet who

has always functioned in his society as the record of experience of his society, and as the voice of vision in his own time.³⁶

Indeed, a poet makes a tremendous achievement when, through his medium of expression, one can sense his conscious effort to take along with him his reader. Such impact, wherever it is realized, enables the reader to also share in whichever experience being portrayed.

As a point of illustration, one can compare Jonathan Kariara and Charles Owuor who both handle the same theme: 'Vietnam', but produce quite different effects, mainly because of their different style. The former shows a much more confident style when he writes:

The field was full of bruised faces
Blood, hardening
Slowly stealing on ashen faces
painted open lips.
Women sat reclining
Monuments of peace
Sculptured by death. 37

Kariara's language use in the above stanza of a much longer poem brings out the aftermath of the Vietnam war effectively. It is not only the content of the poem which is appropriate, but also its form which, to a large degree, facilitates the impact of the theme upon the reader. In other words, the form is such that the words chosen by the poet make a down-to-earth impression of the war experience. The poet works on

the reader's emotion and at once registers his (the reader's) sympathies through the serious, sad, accurate tone he uses. Kariara's style, in this case, contrasts with Charles Owuor's

quiet
depressing quiet
sombre quiet of a cathedral
as mutilated human bodies
sleep the sleep of ages.³⁸

Although the tone used in the above poem brings out the solemnity, the poem fails, due to its restricted; and 'above-stylized' form, to achieve the competence of the former. Overall, therefore, one would conclude that Kariara, through his style and imagery, emerges as the poet who is clearer on the 'Vitenam' subject. His main objective appears to be to communicate the war experiences as accurately as possible without playing down or concealing the gravity of the situation. It is such aptness of the artist which compels one to examine Okot p'Bitek, more than any other East African poet, in terms of his relevance to the public. Okot p'Bitek's success, as shall be argued later, derives from the fact that there is a dominance of the oral poetic influence in his written works.

To study the above poet or any other East African poet whose poetry renders itself easily to the reader, is to want to justify the definition of such poets as being 'social' as opposed to those who are 'anti'social'. This thesis endeavours to identify both the positive and negative values in the East African poetry. In this case, poets such as Taban lo Liyong who take refuge in their own personal poetry (as shall be illustrated later) and fail, in most cases, to reach out to the reader, are regarded as being 'anti'social'. They write from a private domain and their art is largely meant for an elitist audience which, in reality, is a minority audience. On the other hand, poets such as Okot p'Bitek and Okello Oculi, whose poetry has a close link with the Oral Tradition, are regarded as being 'social'. Their foremost intention, to a large degree, is to communicate meaningfully to the majority audience - the peasants and workers. These are the people who sustain nations through their labour and who are, therefore, producers of national wealth over which they have no control because of the existing monopoly by the privileged class. A social or public poet will, in most cases, make a conscious effort to involve the active appreciation of his creative works of art by the under-privileged class (the illiterate, majority audience).

It is necessary to recall that Okot p'Bitek's Song of Lawino was first written in Acoli and only translated into English later. The purpose of this linguistic choice was the poet's intention to be answerable to the Acoli people first and to the rest of the audience second. Since he was also using Lawino as an Acoli village woman, it was appropriate to find a firm, Acoli background from which to argue his point in order to be relevant within the situation he was dealing with. What is most important is the appeal Song of Lawino has made far and beyond the Acoli boundaries. The example quoted below portrays what is typical of Okot and the one quality which has made him popular as a competent and original poet:

Husband , now you despise me
Now you treat me with spite
And say I have inherited the stupidity of
my aunt;
Son of the Chief
Now you compare me
with the rubbish in the rubbish pit. 39

Okot's language is conversational which in a way indicates that he adheres to a poet's foremost obligation: to address his people with the forms of language they know. Such forms portray the roots of a particular work of art in a specified social and cultural environment. It indicates the adaptation of English only for the purposes of reaching a wider

audience and not for those of paying homage to the western poetic tradition, as shall be argued in some cases of Richard Nturu. It will also be shown how the use of English in the Okot p'Bitek style, as cited above, has been the determining factor in the success of Okello Oculi, one of East Africa's leading poets. Although the use of English may be viewed as a barrier, the success or failure of any poem seems to depend very much on a poet's social vision, a point that will keep on recurring in this thesis.

Hence, the comments made by various critics or reviewers have contributed a lot to the argument stated in the thesis. Their limitations, be it in terms of scope or approach, have been the very base from which this work has taken off. The task which is undertaken in the succeeding chapters is to identify the limitations that are brought to bear upon the poet as regards his social vision. But the major point of reference will be the degree to which a few poets have transcended the private domain into the public domain in order to give a meaningful expression to their works of art. Also, this will be a general indication of the trends of development in East African poetry. In no way should this endeavour be considered as being exhaustive because at the time of writing Jared Angira's Cascades and the years go by were in the pipeline. Hopefully then, a much more comprehensive and up-to-date work will emerge.

CHAPTER TWO

THE ANTI-SOCIAL FUNCTION OF
TABAN'S AND MBITI'S POETRY

It may seem far-fetched to slot Taban lo Liyong together with John Mbiti. But the purpose of this chapter is to determine the degree of commitment in each of these two poets and how it relates to the expectations of modern society. Furthermore, Taban invites a comparative approach to his poetry and that of other East African poets since he has argued that East African writers are now more developed than they were several years ago. On these premises, therefore, one wishes to establish the sense in which East Africa's poets see this artistic development. The distinction Chris Wanjala is making between a committed and a non-committed artist should be borne in mind, especially when he argues that

Taban is an artist But his kind of commitment is different from that of Alex la Guma and Ngugi, for instance, La Guma's is a view of literature as a vehicle for social change, as opposed to Taban's which is addressed to a few artists, the elites who aspire to write or are writing.¹

The above criticism takes into account the fact that the literature of Alex la Guma portrays committedly the political oppression in South Africa. La Guma's voice can, in this sense be

interpreted as the voice of the oppressed people which, to a convincing degree, makes heroic their resistance. In the Fog of the Season's End, for example, he portrays a people who risk their lives daily in the under-ground movement against apartheid. He does this without fear or reservation with full conviction that this kind of literature can and should contribute positively to the liberation struggle. Ngugi wa Thiong'o also, after analysing the effects of the history of colonialism on the lives of the black people in his earlier work, stretches out to reach the downtrodden masses and to emphatically speak for them in his Petals of Blood. He too views literature as contributing positively not only to the struggle for political independence, but also to that of economic independence.

One also wishes to measure an artist, particularly Taban Lo Liyong who is a poet-cum-critic, by his own pronouncements about society in general and literature in particular, in order to determine how far his statements in the above context justify the validity of his own creative works. One is considering, for example, Taban's recollection to the effect that

When I shed tears over our literary barrenness six years ago, I had expected that our writers would create songs for us to sing along with them; that the didactic among us would be extra-mural teachers instructing all our people who can read or have the interest to be read to.²

One expected that Taban would illustrate, through his poetry, how the above recommendations would be implemented in order to feel much more concretely the social function of poetry. However, quite often, one finds a poetry which is not in any way meant for the people to sing along with the poets. In addition, none of the East African poets, except Okot p'Bitek, has become an extra-mural teacher to the masses so that they too share in the experiences which are portrayed in the written work. Instead, one notices the quickness with which a non-committed artist finds a scapegoat for what should be his own inadequacies in creativity. For example, when Taban criticizes the local publishers -

Any publishing house without a Department of Popular Literature is primitive ... the ordinary man and woman who works in the towns, who labours in the fields, who works in the offices have to be induced to read books, to buy books³.

he is, in this context, advocating popular, cheap editions because of what he views as a huge reading audience. But one thing he does not mention is who

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should be submitting these editions to the publishers. It would appear that he, as a poet, withdraws from the centre of the responsibility of popularizing literature and only prescribes what the publishers ought to do.

One should bear in mind that the immediate problem in East Africa is not that of being able or unable to read as many books as possible. The problem is the educational system and the inherent stiff competition for opportunities which inevitably allow illiteracy to thrive since a majority of the masses cannot afford to pay school fees for their children. Furthermore, Taban, in the preceding argument, does not specify which kind of reading he wishes to have popularized. Also, Taban seems to equate the effectiveness of literature with the number of books one gets to read, forgetting to suggest ways and means of first dealing with the illiteracy which disables the literary interest of the majority of the people. One also needs to consider the quality of what is read in order to determine its validity to the people. It is not, therefore, enough to just have writers becoming extra-mural teachers. In any case, their small number cannot deal effectively with the large numbers of the illiterate. One needs to stress the point raised in the first chapter to

the effect that, if the present-day poetry has to borrow meaningfully from the impact the oral poetry makes upon the participants, then the existing gap between a modern poet and his public has to be narrowed. This can be done possibly through a nationwide literacy campaign. But above all, the poets have to be aware of the importance of ordinary, straight-forward language which renders itself to be understood easily by the public.

Language needs to be stressed here because it is a tool, not to put lumps but rather to make smooth the piece of writing which seeks to communicate meaning. It has to be a language which is taken from the people's everyday speech in order to make an immediate and relevant impact. An example of this language is that which alludes to what Taban terms "the grabbing instinct" (referenced below) prevalent in most of East Africa, an instinct which can

Milk your cow to death and take the
milk to feed their young while yours
wither to extinction.⁴

It also follows, in relationship to the above that a poet should manipulate social theme in a manner which is able to make realistic impression upon the audience. In this case, the audience feels the truth being portrayed in the same way it feels it in practical life. In other words, a reader may not be

a gifted interpreter of poetry, but the manner in which the poet handles his subject may mobilize his interest in the creative work of art at hand.

So far, the point one is arguing above is that, when the illiteracy of a majority of the people is borne in mind, a socially conscious poet should strive to make clear what is obscure and in the same process make familiar what would have been remote. Occasionally Taban pauses for self-criticism which one suspects is geared towards the above mentioned goal. For example, he cautions his readers by telling them:

Ask not
reader
if this be
poetry
or
not
because it isn't.⁵

One then looks forward to a much more serious stance. But Taban seems to be much more at home in the private, poetic domain to the extent that the reader is left wondering whether in the first place, there is any point for self-criticism. This is so because Taban switches to an entirely personal and purposeless style which appears to appeal to the poet alone. For example, when he is describing the difference between prose and poetry, he writes:

Reading prose
is
likened into
wriggling
 wriggly
 wrigglily
in a laby
rinth⁶
Of Crete.

It is evident that Taban is juggling with words to his own advantage. But by so doing, he makes another "labyrinth/Of Crete" (quoted above) out of the poetry he is creating. The line he seeks to draw between prose and poetry is, in a way, nullified by the treatment he gives to his medium of expression. In the above case, the style seems to have no bearing on the common good the readers are supposed to derive from creating art. Furthermore, it fails to bring out the artistic competence of the poet to the extent that Taban appears to be taking his readers for a ride, as it were. It is within this same vein that he argues

Poetry
a
ccor
ding
to
Aris
to
tle⁷
is imitation.

There is a sense in which the graphic disjointedness of Taban's poetry justifies what

he alludes to Aristotle in the above context to the effect that poetry is imitation. But as much as this may be the case, one wishes to see the East African poetry as a meaningful imitation of the existing social realities. It should, therefore, bear a lot of seriousness in order to prove the poet's sincere commitment to his subject and medium of expression. Otherwise, Taban has a definite approach to art but he does not express himself convincingly. The end result is confusion for the reader. For example, in the above quotation, there is the danger of an ordinary reader looking at each line as a separate entity and this may result in an incoherent interpretation. Such a reader, it can be argued, becomes misled by the poet since he is caught at the wrong end in the poet's own game. It is for this reason that a keen audience is justified to ask the Tabans on the East African literary scene:

where are your feelings?
How are we to sigh?
when you don't heave our hearts?
How are we to cringe?
when you don't raise the heavy hands?
How can women shed tears?
when no pitiful character is astage?⁸

Literally, one may argue that in as far as a poet does not involve the reader emotionally, he passes for a dry poet. It should be noted that it is not just a question of the poet making the reader sigh

and shed tears. It is essentially a question of making him (the reader) also understand the circumstances which cause these sighs and tears. The private domain implies an artistic selfishness and yet this seems to be the domain which dominates Taban's writings. It has moulded the personal god he worships in art. But it is a god which Taban selfishly pays homage to. It becomes an obsession to the extent that the poet takes all literary precautions to make sure that between him and his 'god' there is no betraying of the 'self' for the sake of the entire society. He even argues that

in believing in myself
I have substituted a personal God,
More meaningful to me,
Because he caters to my desires.⁹

One would have liked to know what these desires are and how far they relate to society. However, it is evident from the above assertion that Taban is a kind of iconoclast. It is this inclination which makes him contrast sharply with John Mbiti's strong Christian beliefs, as will be proved shortly. A poet who individualizes poetry to the extent Taban does fails to recognize this medium of expression as a concrete means through which some of his contributions to society may be measured. One could only be subscribing to destruction of man when his definition of progress is

more men of money
more initiators of projects:
our versions of the military-industrial
complexes
To finance manufacture of bullets.¹⁰

If the above was being put in a sarcastic way, then it would be justified. But Taban seems to hold that the only way out for an underdeveloped society is the establishment of military and industrial complexes. Perhaps he is not aware of how some independent African nations have built military might at the entire expense of industrial or agricultural development. Therefore, Taban's definition of progress in terms of "the manufacture of bullets" (quoted above) amounts to an anti-progress. Taban seems not to be clear about the improvement of the social and economic condition of the underprivileged class. His poetry, it can be justifiably argued, serves an anti-social function in this context. It is disappointing to note for example, that "more men of money" above contradicts sharply Taban's earlier criticism on men's grabbing instinct. It would appear now that Taban is rationalizing a kind of society whereby the weak get elbowed out of the way by the strong.

Perhaps, economic contradictions such as the one in which East Africa finds herself arises out of the fact that a mixed economy prevails - one which

does not allow for a well-defined ideology in practical life. But the economic muddle in practical life should not necessarily mean a corresponding muddle in the creative works of art. Hence, a positive poet will be he who is clear which path of development he needs to stress in his works. Taban seems to fall in the group of wavering artists, particularly when he subscribes to two diametrically opposed ideologies:

Socialism and capitalism are but paths to development; paths to acquisition of better conditions of living for the inmates. And, provided the goals are clearly stated, and the will to achieve them is there, nobody should cut his throat because country A took the capitalist path and country B took the socialist.¹¹

It is questionable what Taban considers as the elements which constitute development. Furthermore, it is a myopic view of the existing economic forces (some of which are determined by an international capitalism) to argue that socialism and capitalism can lead to the same goal. One needs to clarify which goals one is referring to in order to see whether they could be achieved by following either path to development. Otherwise, it is unbecoming for one to argue that an individual in country A for example, who owns big shares in foreign-owned companies does so in public interest. There is definitely a difference between individual consciousness and group consciousness and it is one of these

two, above everything else, which determines the nature and purpose of an economic goal. The point one is making here is that a poet who does not fully understand the way in which the world's prominent ideologies work normally comes up with creations of his own. For example, Taban asserts that

It is not so much ideology that we lack. We all subscribe to the ideology of African Development.... But, a sound, competent administration guided by a code of honour stressing responsibility is the greatest possession any country could have.¹²

One is questioning what Taban exactly means by "the ideology of African Development" (see above). One hopes that this does not mean the putting up of Hiltons, for example, and the building of multi-million-pound airports, facets of prestige which are far removed from the common man. If this ideology means the draining of agricultural products into foreign countries in return for military hardware, then it is high time a better criterion was found for defining development in any social context. It is also unfortunate that Taban interpretes education as a means for acquiring the tools for amassing wealth. He feels that Africans have not achieved, on individual basis, as much as they should have. It is for this reason that he thinks

We are foolish, primitive, uneducated, naive, cowardly To wit, confirmed imbeciles second only to the lowest, darkest casts in India We have always been that.¹³

Taban loses confidence in himself and his people for the simple fact that they have not done with education what he assumes is expected of them. He is so fascinated with material progress at individual level that he does not seem to see it in terms of the entire society. He even argues that one needs to have claws and sharp teeth where they are an advantage. These would certainly be needed in a capitalist situation whereby acquisition of wealth is on a stiff competitive economic level. Taban's argument at this juncture seems to distort whatever positive values have so far been identified in his creative works of art.

Quite often, Taban seems to be aware of his artistic predicament and offers a personal solution out of this situation when he argues:

I have accepted my position between the horns of the dilemma. I have accepted other people's choices for what they do. The impulses are many, the goals varied, but the motive force is the same: how to live life more abundantly, more intensely, more leisurely.¹⁴

In a way, the above confession indicates Taban's lack of a concrete social vision. One surely needs to create a favourable social condition in which all the people of a particular society can live life more abundantly, more intensely, more leisurely, as stated above. In any case, living life only within these

prescribed limits could lead to a moral degeneration which may inhibit a people's inventiveness for purposeful projects. It should also be noted that the lack of creativity as a result of a very relaxed life may eventually kill the dynamism of society. Any poet therefore who promotes individual satisfaction at the expense of society's laid down values negates what in the definition of this thesis should be the social function of poetry. If Taban's ideology of African Development can be taken to mean the uplifting of the living conditions of the common man, then one wishes that poets should be specific and consistent towards this goal.

With the above in mind, it is difficult to establish an artist's social commitment, particularly when he adopts an ambiguous tone in his argument about the common man. For example, Taban questions:

Who told this common parasite
That states should be overthrown for his sake?
Who told this common beggar
That those who work hard should always succour
him?
Who told this common fly
That his interests outweigh all the rest?¹⁵

However, it is possible that Taban, in the above context, is referring to the grabber of wealth as the "common parasite", the "common beggar", or the "common fly" (see above). In this case, the underlying

heavy tone of cynicism in the above lines is justified. It is the exploiter who thrives on the common man's sweat. Through the toil of peasants and workers, national wealth is generated only to be grabbed by the exploiter. There is a sense in which Taban, in the above respect, views the class of the exploited as the one which is each day gnawed at by the teeth of capitalism. It is this class of the underprivileged whose comfort and happiness are further ruined by the existing system of taxation and a high cost of living. In the final analysis, its body falls on the ground helpless, crippled by poverty, disease and illiteracy, but its enduring spirit is sustained throughout the years. This class of those who toil survives through the small harvest from the already exhausted piece of land (if there is any), or through a meagre pay from an inhuman occupation in town. It is, therefore, timely for Taban to conclude that

Efficiency demands
Everybody should carry his weight
For, the common man is a parasite
And, he must be made to work
For his own advancement
And ours as well.¹⁶

It is possible that the reference to the common man as a parasite is an ironical twist. The interpretation one can possibly give is that Taban lo Liyong

is sarcastic in regard to those who see the common man from the above angle. The "ours" in the above quotation could be referring to what the under-privileged class feels is its right to have its share of the national wealth. In this case, Taban is identifying with this class.

It can, however, be argued, from the above analysis, that the essays in Taban's The Last Word which were written much earlier than those which appear, for example, in 13 Offensives Against Our Enemies, seem to show a Taban much more aware of the plight of the masses. For instance, he points an accusing finger at the privileged class referring to it as

that cancerous black bourgeoisie rising fast all over Africa and fattening on the sweat of the duped people, a homicide squad filled by politicians, traders, professors.¹⁷

This earlier Taban is aware of the fact that politicians exploit the poverty of the masses by making numerous promises at election time which they never fulfil the moment they get through to Parliament. He is aware of the alienation of the elite from the masses and the manner in which they merely nationalize the social conditions, in the process shifting the responsibility of social change to the politicians. These are the groups of people which the Taban in The Last Word

considers as a homicide squad which murders the communal soul of society through selfish interests. Taban even follows up this line of thought when he argues that

If we still let their system rule us
It testifies to our weakness,
Our inability
To grow out of a cocoon.¹⁸

Taban, at this stage, realizes that East Africa needs her own systems of government which ought to be accountable to the needs of the people. He implies that the leadership of any African nation should be aware of the dangers involved when a country is controlled economically from the outside. When this happens, a nation's leadership is said to be a mere puppet of the foreign magnates. It is, however, disappointing to note that Taban does not develop his argument along this well-thought out line. He later subscribes to integrated systems of government and social life. For example, in one of his contradictory poems, he advocates racial inter-marriages arguing that these offer a solution to racial prejudice. One ought to be aware of the fact that to advocate racial intermarriages as solutions to racism reflects an inability to come to grips with the underlying causes of the prevailing social ills. One of these for example, is the social prejudice which arises out of racial,

tribal or religious differences and which could hamper a society's social and economic development. Taban, in this context, displays an inadequate interpretation of the existing social realities. Instead, he seeks to convince his public that a racial intermarriage

is the meeting place
of people and thoughts¹⁹

But one only needs to cite the example of the Black Americans in order to establish the degree to which racial intermarriages have been used as a link in the exploiter - exploited relationship. The fact that so many Black Americans marry or get married to white Americans does not mean that the white society will discard entirely the superiority complex it has developed through the years over the black society. It does not also mean that the white society (which wields a decisive political power over the whole continent) will expose the entire black American society to equal social opportunities. Racial intermarriages cannot therefore, be a panacea to such social contradictions. In this same poem, Taban admits the inevitability of cultural change (a most realistic standpoint) but he centres his poetry so much around himself that he fails to convince his readers about this change.

It is the above kind of stance which makes one feel that Taban has failed to establish a firm ground within his art and therefore his society from which to justify his role. The reference to racial intermarriages shows a poet who is fascinated by western values. In a way also, Taban's views about cultural synthesis coincide with Leopold Sedar Senghor's obsession with the idea of a universal culture. These views arise out of a misguided vision of a superman as expressed through Taban's plea to the whitewoman:

Marry me
And we shall have children
who will not need sunbathing
Having been blessed with a skin
The hue that is intermediate:

True representatives
Of the race of the future
The race that will inherit²⁰
The best there is from both.

But one needs to recall the apartheid system in South Africa, for example, which makes the idea of racial intermarriages a far-fetched dream in a country where it is a legal offence for black and white to mix. In this respect, all one can say is that perhaps Taban does not fully understand the racial consequences which result from what he is advocating.

What is most disturbing is Taban's inconsistency. At one time, as has been illustrated in this chapter, both his statements of criticism and his poetry are bourgeois, elitist and sometimes downright fascist in orientation. At another time, Taban emerges with positive views as can be illustrated by his Student Lament (see below). For example, he argues:

a writer must say a word
For humanity's sake
And not remain
The eunuch scholar ...
The disguised lackey
Of bourgeois power holders
Every writing must have a moral
Tacked at the end
Like stories of old.²¹

But to simply have a moral tacked at the end of a novel or a poem does not necessarily mean a social commitment. However, it is important to note, from the above poem, that Taban at least makes the attempt to identify the root causes of inefficiency in governments. Taban feels that the bourgeois class degenerates so much, due to excess personal wealth, to the extent that it is unable to formulate clear-cut policies for the good of the whole nation. He even goes further and gives the responsibility to speak against this trend in society to the writers who "must say a word/For humanity's sake" (referenced above). At this stage, one can argue, that Taban is

aware of the negative nature of progress in African nations, particularly if it is in the interests of only a few people. To this extent, he has justified a much more fitting social function of poetry. But there is a sense in which he still falls short of an adequate social commentary due to the individualistic standpoint which is generally identifiable with him. This can be largely attributed to Taban's vacillation which is apparent in his works of art and which does not allow for a critic's consistent conclusion about him.

One appreciates, for example, the fact that a revolution brings about a total overhaul of the existing social system because, as Taban argues,

Revolutions are for change of leadership
And transfer of wealth,²²
Not equitable to all.

But one is also aware of the fact that a revolution is a very complicated process which requires strong foundations and proper organization if it is ever to succeed. It is not, therefore, enough for a poet to merely recommend a revolution without having analysed consistently the circumstances which make it necessary.

There is a sense in which Taban's "Student Lament" (part of which has been quoted above) is very much like Okot p'Bitek's Song of Lawino in which the one lamenting has a very limited version of how the situation can be put right. The end result is writing for a writing's sake. One therefore, is tempted to regard Taban's commitment as being a commitment to art for art's sake.

It has been established in this chapter how the form of some of Taban's poetry and criticisms serve no useful purpose either in intellectual or social terms. It has also been pointed out that the contradictions which are evident in his creative works of art indicate a poet with divided loyalties. In fact, Jane Odhuno evaluates Taban's works as a kind of disease which she intelligently refers to as "The Tabaneurosis of Progress":

With Progress, we breed death
On our doorsteps!
Let the religionists bleat out
The Soul!
But we must cultivate
"An aggressive, materialistic,
Technological mentality".

We will walk into our own destruction
With the Tabaneurosis of Progress!²³

Taban's derangement in art, especially as it relates to his definition of progress, amounts to a mediocre analysis and a soul-less response to the social realities of East African societies.

One can also identify another extreme in art and particularly that which lays emphasis on heavenly aspirations. This approach to art views Christianity as the means through which it expresses itself for the fulfilment of man's spiritual needs. In this respect, the social needs do not seem to count because it is generally argued that those who persevere in suffering will deserve the heavenly rewards. Foremost in this approach is John Mbiti. One is therefore looking at Taban lo Liyong and John Mbiti as extremes and whose poetry, although taking two different courses, does not have an immediate social bearing. This is so because Taban's lack of a clear direction in art and John Mbiti's clear direction in art but one which seeks to glorify Heaven have similar results - a poetry which is not down-to-earth in terms of content. John Mbiti, a religious poet, makes the Christian frame of reference dominant in his poetry. But it is disappointing to note that this stance gives him an obsession with a world far removed from this familiar one and in which he visualizes peace of the soul:

Had I the wings of a honey bee
To a distant shrub would I retire
In search of solitude and stillness ...
Away from the rush of life
From interrupting traffic noise 24
And the cares of the cared

Mbiti views with disgust the urban life which is congested with buildings, people and motor traffic. Since he fails to adjust favourably to these conditions, or since he perhaps finds the adjustment painful, he longs for a world of solitude and stillness. In a sense, he longs to be in a world of his own in which he is free from the crowded and un-patterned human interaction. One is justified to argue that this is a failure in that Mbiti seems to take to pure escapism and which has no relevance at all to the society from which he writes. Mbiti is so much pre-occupied with the Heavenly Kingdom that every interpretation he makes about life is geared towards this end.

One can see also the way in which Mbiti, when faced with the reality of old age and the inevitability of death, romanticizes the days of his youth. In other words, he takes a negritudist escape into dubious past glories -

And so another day was gone
And still further did my youth remove
Forsaking me on a barren brink
Surrounded by rocks and pebbles of decay
I sighed.
For a glimpse of those retreating glories.²⁵

All that Mbiti achieves through the negritudist tone in the above poem is a creation of a youthful impression of a world he thinks is full of warmth.

He, for instance, mentions a mother's caresses which one experiences when one is still young. The poet sighs desperately because of what he believes to be the retreating glories of youth. The conclusion one is compelled to reach is that perhaps Mbiti finds life as an adult much of a burden, and perhaps seeks to shy away from the demands which society makes upon an individual. In fact, it can be deduced from Mbiti's poetry that he literally attempts to escape the life of an adult on this earth since he focuses and directs his artistic efforts to the Heavenly Kingdom -

I see through that long pale sky
A something beyond this 'Now'
A world without shadows. ²⁶

It is genuine to say that the above focus results out of an individual's inability to interpret the existing social and economic contradictions meaningfully. For Mbiti therefore, religion becomes his only vision of salvation since it promises spiritual rewards in the Kingdom of God. Mbiti looks at life on this earth as a temporary phenomenon and one to which attention should not be given. The foundations he lays therefore, are for the world to come -

Time sways between the stars
Ending like a tailless meteorite
Till time invades eternity
And makes us immortal victims
That wander between the first and last. ²⁷

It is perhaps this pre-occupation with eternity and the Heavenly Kingdom that accounts for Mbiti's failure, when he is dealing with such natural hazards as the desert, to bring out the full potentialities of the people who live within these exerting environments. All that Mbiti can achieve is to evoke pity for "The Desert Man" who

reclines upon a hard rock in the midst of
a hot desert
After a long tiring walk all day,
A long day of toiling, toiling
The lot of the poor Bedouin traveller,
Labouring, breathing,
And sleeping in a bed of worries.²⁸

If one were to take diction as a criterion for a successful poet, then Mbiti's choice of words brings out effectively the hardship which the desert man faces each day and his strong sense of endurance. The simple structure makes immediate the impression the poet is creating. Also, the manner of presentation evokes a kind of painful experience resulting out of the bitter truth about the hardy, desert man. However, the Bedouin merely endures the hardships and accepts this destiny without ever showing signs of an initiative which can break the desert monotony. In other words, the poet fails to fully make heroic the existence of the Bedouin. The end result is a poet who merely touches the surface of an otherwise serious experience and magnifies it in order for it to appear as if it were the real substance.

It is this kind of treatment of social themes which brings about the anti-socialness of Mbiti's poetry. The pre-occupation with eternity seems to be out of tune with the social conditions which the masses experience in the rural areas and which need to be a poet's focal point. Mbiti, in this respect, is not down-to-earth in his poetry to the extent that he too seems to take his reader for a ride, as it were, to ecclesiastical territories. The confession he makes to the effect that

I still feel embarrassed to be considered a poet: for I do not know when one writes genuine poetry or simply its imitation.²⁹

seems to bring out the awareness of his inadequacies as a poet. Perhaps, his line of argument is so much rooted in metaphysics to the extent that his poetry cannot be ascertained any further than that of a sermon from a pulpit and which stresses a spiritual other than a social change. When Mbiti chooses to incorporate his philosophy into poetry, he becomes very obscure in a confusing way -

How is why and where is not;
When is now and this is that;
There is here and here is there;
After is before
And wrong is right
And right is left³⁰

The above seems to imply a static state of the mind or circumstance which amounts to a monotonous experience.

The poet's concern does not seem to be to communicate meaning coherently. However, one appreciates the consistency with which he promotes the theology of his thought. He also shows a kind of originality in style, particularly when he is criticizing the class of the rich:

Layer upon layer
Rolls of fat
Laid upon rolls of fat
Heaped in stacks
Behind the neck
and a three levelled chin.³¹

This is probably Mbiti's only down-to-earth poem in that it successfully creates an accurate, visual impression of an over-nourished man. But apart from just these timely surface descriptions, Mbiti does not express the underlying social contradictions which are, in any case, implied by the shocking, physical state of the rich. He does not seem to know that behind this class of exploiters, there is the class of the exploited whose plea is at least enough food for themselves after a hard day's work! Yet all that Mbiti does is to describe

Fat upon fat
Rolled like a colossal net
In a hammock -
The convex belly
Of a rich political guy³²

This amounts to looking at society from one angle only and which implies a poet's failure to grasp the social forces operating within his immediate surrounding. For example, when Mbiti looks at the common man and the privileged man within the same social context, all he achieves is a photographic picture of the stereotyped caricature of the "rich, political guy" (see above). He does not attempt to explore in detail the relationships which exist between the two classes of people - the rich and the poor - as set against the social reality. In which case, this single poem in which Mbiti pays slight attention to one of the prevailing crucial issues does not in itself justify him as a social poet. The overall observation is that his poetry preaches humility on this earth as a means to a world happiness beyond death. His poetry, therefore, like Taban's, is harmful in the sense that it shows a disregard for the immediate expectations of the suffering majority. When it looks at the present life, all it portrays is a dubious, romantic beauty of the rural setting and the pleasures of youth.

Mbiti's poetry is therefore consistent only in as far as it operates from a Christian ethic. But there is need to recall the way in which Christianity

worked hand in hand with colonialism as one of the instruments of oppression. It can also be illustrated from the nineteenth-and-twentieth-century turmoil in Uganda the degree to which Christianity has been responsible for the many sectional conflicts within the East African context. It has even continued to sow seeds of discord in the hierarchies of churches since these, in some cases, have come under direct political influences. For Mbiti, therefore, to glorify Christianity through his poetry indicates that perhaps he is not aware of these contradictions. Or if he is, there is a sense in which he is too committed to his religion to bother about this truth about the Church and Christianity today. It can, therefore be argued, in this respect, that the poetry of Taban and Mbiti is only an attempt in a big task: the artist's identification with the masses and his ability to portray meaningfully the experiences of his people's age. Mbiti and Taban, one feels, have not utilized their poetic talent well enough in order to create a poetry which favours art for society's sake.

CHAPTER THREE

THE NEW BREED OF POETS: MTIRU AND ANGIRA

It has been argued in the preceding chapters that when an artist creates art for art's sake, he defeats the social function of creative art in the sense that his work bears no relationship with society. The categorization of such art as private presupposes that there is a more committed art which has a recognisable bearing on the people for whom it is meant. One needs to recall the definition of private poetry, for example which was given as that poetry whose pre-occupation is mainly with very personal experiences, and which may be too obscure to the reader. In other words, a poet's voice can either be seen as talking to itself or making a conscious effort to reach the audience. In this respect, the clarity in one's style of writing may not in itself be enough if it is not accompanied by a quality which gives concrete, realistic expression to the experiences being portrayed. It is with this in mind that Taban lo Liyong and John Mbiti were taken to task in the previous chapter since their approach to art evidently lacks a social commitment.

But there is another breed of artists who may not have a well-defined direction but who, it can be seen in their works, grope towards a decisive

commitment. They may not have impressive conclusions about society, but one appreciates the creative efforts they make toward this end. The only problem for the critic is that such artists normally may write about themselves, but then keep alluding to the public so that it becomes difficult to distinguish between their private and public standpoints. Richard Ntiru and Jared Angira fall in this category. It is understandable that poets, due to the conventions of their medium of expression, do not have that much time and space to explain words or lines in their works. But one always feels that a good poem should be able to communicate with the reader on its own merit without much difficulty. One is not in any way recommending prosaic poetry, but rather emphasizing the fact that a socially conscious poet should be able to create a poetry in which his readers and himself share common experiences and, possibly, a common language.

In connection with the above, Arthur Kemoli accuses Jared Angira of being meditative and private in his poetry.¹ But, in a kind of self-defence, Angira argues that:

every creative piece, every work of art is an experiment, and the artists themselves go through stages.²

However, if most of the poetry in Silent Voices is

experimentation, one hopes that this experimentation should be purposeful. Such an obligation definitely requires a clear social vision in both the writer's literary criticism and his creativity so that there is no discrepancy between intention and practice as was shown in the case of Taban lo Liyong. One can in fact, argue that the reader in most of Silent Voices is confronted with "The Silent Voice" of the poet to the extent that the communication line between him and the reader is distorted. There is a sense in which the medium of expression is intruded by the poet's intended or accidental obscurity so that the reader, in reference to the poet, wishes

to understand (his) voice
and appreciate (his) beauty
and unmask the seat
of (his) fathomless power.³

In short, the complexity of expression does not allow for the reader's easy analysis of Angira's intention in most of Silent Voices, a state which leaves the former dissatisfied with the latter's creative efforts.

One appreciates the fact that a creative artist has tremendous artistic power with which to mould words into whatever meaning he wants to express. But, according to the argument of this

thesis, the above statement does not in any way refer to the artist's command of the English language. It simply refers to how a poet uses the artistic power to convince the reader or the listener. A sensitive reader or listener is likely to be able to detect areas where the poet's manner of handling theme could be regarded as an obstacle in the medium of expression. For example, when Nturu commends the Krishna denomination for accepting any kind of worshipper, he overloads the intention with words which may appear impervious to most readers and which therefore obscure the theme:

Krishna undercuts them all
and declares, full of primogeniture,
"Whatever God a man worships,
I answer the prayer," and promises
subsumption of polytheism into monotheism,
transmigration of souls, and
acceptance rather than exclusion.⁴

The conclusion one is tempted to reach is that Nturu gets so involved with words that he camouflages meaning. This amounts to a metaphysical treatment of common experiences, a tendency which categorizes a poet as being obscure.

Hence the essence of committed poetry is to speak to and for the common man. It is a poetry

which seeks to make an accurate social observation on the social and economic deprivations which the underprivileged class confronts in modern society. It should be borne in mind at this stage that Richard Ntiru too feels that "the African literary tradition as we know it today is still in its nascent state."⁵ Perhaps Ntiru, in this context, is referring to the written literary tradition which, in a way, explains his literary borrowings as will be seen later in this chapter. It should also be noted that Ntiru and Angira are not tied to the Negritude Tradition which, as was illustrated in the first chapter, stresses the past more than it does the present. In other words, Ntiru and Angira can be regarded as representing a strong new breed on the East African literary scene. The distinction between the Negritude Tradition and the tenets of this new breed is offered by Charles Khaminwa when he tells Leopold Sedar Senghor not to

Wake the dead from their wakeful
slumber in the earth
Nor delve into the basement of glories gone:
But look to the unmended rafters of our
bondaged being.⁶

Khaminwa, in the last line of the stanza quoted above, indicates what ought to be the concern of East Africa's new breed of poets: the breakaway from the

ties of negritude in order to face the present as realistically as possible in relation to the future. This injunction maps out the direction these poets should take and it becomes also the criterion for assessing the degree of their achievement. Khaminwa's reminder of what is expected of modern poets ties well with what Ntiru himself, poetically, observes to the effect that

The life is in the present
that wombs our future, in the here
that propels us to the there.
The past and the place behind
are for ghosts and history to haunt
deserted hearthstones.⁷

At this point, there is a sense in which a certain amount of social consciousness is beginning to emerge and which ought to shape the social vision of the poets. One senses a foundation from which focus can be made upon meaningful communication between the poets and their audience. This argument presupposes that poetry can be a very important medium in that it represents the core of people's self-expression. In this respect, the type of audience a poet has in mind determines the manner in which he treats his themes. It is this factor which Njuguna Mugo perhaps has in mind when he mentions that

To be of genuine use, poetry must articulate a people's collective experience - the poet who puts people's idiom and metaphor into poetic verse soon gains central ground, because the artist becomes his/her people's collective articulation.⁸

When, for instance, Angira mentions something about "crude voices gasping in the dark, of voices trapped in between despair and existence, of voices caught up in a maze but always seeking to get through",⁹ there is a sense in which he is articulating a common people's collective experiences. It has, however, been pointed out that the poetry in Silent Voices does not convincingly advance the above social theme. Angira has not found a clear direction in this collection to the extent that it has only isolated cases to which positive reference can be made. One of these is the poem about "The Slum" in which he describes, for example,

a one way road
dusty with flour of sand
the slum bears the load
of the port's bulk of labour.¹⁰

In this poem, Angira is showing how the economic activity of a country depend largely on the sweat of the under-privileged class. It is this class of people which is subjected to a lot of labour exploitation by the capitalist privileged class.

The workers man the machines of production in the urban areas and undertake all sorts of odd jobs in order to survive. The peasants in the rural areas toil each day to produce the urgently needed raw materials for both domestic use and export trade. Yet the living conditions of peasants and workers, the very people who sustain nations, consist of nothing better than drudgery and meagre rewards. Angira's imagery in the poem accurately shows their hopeless existence. It is perhaps this social contradiction which compels the poet to pitifully ask:

must the coup take place
while the papyrus fibres
embrace my legs
like overheated adolescents in the bush
may I not jubilate
at the end of the regime?¹¹

Angira is perhaps having in mind the fact that a majority of regimes are toppled because of what is alleged to be their inability to improve the social condition of the masses. But one ought to bear in mind another social contradiction which is characteristic of coups d'etat: the masses remain at the papyrus swamp, as it were, trapped in more labour exploitation, while those who happen to be in power enjoy all the privileges.

Angira's choice of words, in the above context, brings out effectively his lamenting tone. Also, his choice of theme indicates a poet, who, to some degree, is aware of Africa's present-day political turmoil. In this case, he assumes the role of a social commentator on current events in the sense that he relates some of his poetry to the class and power struggles which have continued to plague Africa. It should be noted that these struggles have caused so much frustration and disillusionment that the children of poverty innocently enquire:

Mother,
Do we have
matunda ya uhuru
in our hut?¹²

Historically, 'matunda ya uhuru' were never realized because soon after independence, Africa moved to the neo-colonial stage whose social structures exhibit much of the exploitative nature of the colonial era. It has, therefore, become the responsibility of modern artists to speak out against this development in order to give a revolutionary dimension to a people's economic struggle. The objective is to

show a dynamic society struggling to break through the economic maze. In this respect, it can be argued that Angira and Ntiru show some courage in revealing the truth about modern society in order to give purpose to their poetry.

Ntiru, for example, in a number of his poems, indicates what it is to be a social poet. In one instance, he comments on the young girls who become barmaids not because of their own volition, but because of the need for an economic survival. In the same breath, he criticizes the sugar-daddies whose lives are dominated by booze and sex only. The poet is arguing that what used to be a stable traditional pattern of life now withers like roses under the scorching influence of western values. It is for this reason he writes:

The earth is baked
The seed dries and cracks under it
Fallen breasts are supported by textile props
Like ant-eaten walls
Oily shorts with untucked shirts
Use their cheques as passport to sex
To recapture their youth on car cushions. 13

There is a definite lack of moral principles in social life as African men and women become caricatures, not only in the eyes of the western world itself, but also in the eyes of traditionalists. There

appears to be too much individual concern with pleasure to the extent that there is no communal focus upon the future. In this case, society is shown into a state of confusion and random existence by its craving for western values. It assumes a moral decline and the sense of insecurity is intensified by

The headlines (which) repeat the refrain:
'The bodies found in a river again
This time without a face
Crime strides at a sprightly pace.'¹⁴

One does not need to go far back into history to recount the murders which have been committed in one of the East African states since a military take-over. Ntiru is therefore arguing that this present age in which money has become the fetish of men is full of tragedies. It is an age in which crime works down human populations, destroys property and sows seeds of restlessness which later become a common harvest all over the country. The poet is basing his argument on the fact that, although Africa had its own turmoils resulting out of tribal conflicts, the present state of affairs is so adverse that it contradicts the meaning of social enlightenment. There is so much hypocrisy that instead of advancement there appears to be a regression. One can, therefore,

to some extent, justify Ntiru's assertion that

"The business of poetry in particular is to explore the numerous modes of human response to the problems inherent in a world that is naturally hostile and is increasingly becoming more and more complex in all its manifestations."¹⁵

Ntiru, a Ugandan poet now living in Kenya, is certainly very sensitive to a hostile world. The experiences his country offers make this attitude on the part of the individual poet inevitable. This, in essence, is the value in poetry toward which Ntiru and Angira are groping. But one needs to be cautious of the fact that it is not enough for a poet to merely "explore the numerous modes of human response to the problems inherent in a world that is naturally hostile" (referenced above). The task that the East African public seeks to entrust upon its poets, is that which involves an accurate pointer to resolutions of these social conflicts. It should be noted that the first prerequisite in the above direction is a thorough understanding of all the social forces at play in order for a poet to be able to analyse their causes and effects. The second prerequisite is that a poet will state a social

situation as accurately as possible without mincing his poetic commitment. There is a sense in which Ntiru is using the above foundation to advance his sarcasm on men in public offices. The poet implies that these are the men who form the class of black bourgeoisie which maintains the status quo of neo-colonialism. Yet they ironically lament that:

We are the exhausted men
Shouting our voices hoarse
Writing our pens dry
Driving our cars tyreflat
To champion the cause
Of social justice.¹⁶

These men, pitiably, regard themselves as a revolutionary force which has been fighting for a long time for social justice. They seek to convince themselves that they have been at the forefront of the masses. Yet their national role portrays much more their emptiness of purpose than their social commitment. The impression they create is that of dead souls, as it were, who become haunted by their own degeneration.

Ntiru is also fond of philosophizing situations, and particularly as they relate to human relationships. For instance, he asserts that what people have taken to today is the wearing of masks in order to hide their

guilt. They are "The Masqueraders" who are aware of the fact that -

In this unsung and songless age,
We wear our masks during the day,
We wear our selves inside out,
To avoid the prying rays of the sun
That focus our actions into question marks.¹⁷

This, to some extent, sounds like Ralph Singh - a disgraced colonial minister exiled from the Caribbeans - when he is commenting on the corruption and the political turmoil during his time in power.¹⁸ In the above poem, which to a degree has a universal implication, Ntiru is arguing that the actions of men are ambiguous. In other words, functional smiles and mechanical handshakes betray genuine human relationships. Men have become like tapers wasting "away the moment/ They are lighted."¹⁹ It is commendable the way Ntiru makes his conclusions about society after he has exposed its weaknesses:

Society is a market stall
And men goods on display
Where the label is more important than the labelled
And the price more fascinating than the values.²⁰

Society, by its very economic structure, is made up of dehumanized individuals. This dehumanization has in turn affected social relationships to the extent

that men treat each other as objects for sale.

In other words, they treat each other as articles which could be dispensed with if only individual happiness and comfort are derived from such actions. Life has become so commercialized that the criterion for evaluating an individual becomes the amount of wealth he owns. It is this criterion which results into market stalls which, symbolically, can be taken to refer to the existing class structures. The poet seems to imply that the people affected most in such social systems are those who have only their labour to sell and who get destroyed in the process. The sense of "the label is more important than the labelled" (see quotation above) also indicates the contradictions which are caused by class differences. For example, if one were to consider the context of a manufacturing industry, a worker's energy input is definitely more than that of a Managing Director. Yet, in terms of pay, the latter gets many hundreds of shillings above the net pay of the former. Furthermore, an individual becomes so much fascinated by the label - for example, 'Managing Director' - to the extent that he assumes an unnecessary aloofness and arrogance towards his workers.

Ntiru, deducing from the above context, has gradually become aware of the various class positions in present-day society. He is now looking at the situation straight in the face, as it were. He may be a difficult poet when he is dealing with metaphysical themes. But, it can be argued that he is down-to-earth when he is confronted with a popular, social theme, particularly if it concerns the people who struggle for a livelihood. It is these people Ntiru, in a sympathetic tone, is addressing when he writes:

You limply lean on a leafless tree
Nursing the jiggers that shrivel your bottom
Like a baby newly born to an old woman.
What crime, what treason did you commit
That you are thus condemned to human
indifference?²¹

In the above poem, there is an element of Ntiru's appendage to the western, poetic tradition. For instance, he is paying due respects, through the structure he adopts in "the pauper", to William Blake. There is a sense in which the former's poem relates very closely to the latter's "the tyger", particularly in the opening stanza:

Tyger! Tyger! burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?²²

Such literary borrowing, in itself, presents another dimension in poetry. That is, poetry tends to be free to draw from history and other innuendos. However, one is interested, above all, in the degree to which this borrowing is done and whether it affects the originality of a poet. In the case of Ntiru, he seems to borrow meaningfully William Blake's structure, particularly in reference to "the tyger" (quoted above). Nevertheless, there is a fundamental difference in theme: Whereas Blake is rationalizing the beauty and the greatness of tyger, Ntiru is addressing himself to the suffering majority of his society. However, it ought to be pointed out that, whereas it may be true that writing from two cultures (for example, the western culture and the African culture), offers a dilemma, one hopes that an African poet will not pay too much homage to the western poetic tradition. It should also be noted that noticeable imitation in structure, such as the one cited above, may, in a way, play down a poet's sincerity to the theme he is portraying. What saves Ntiru's artistic image is his major concern with the pauper who has no shelter because all there is for him is "a leafless tree" (ref.21). This poor man has no friend or sympathizer (except, of course, the

poet) as he struggles on the brink of survival. What makes him see another day is his strong quality of endurance.

Ntiru goes further to portray a society in which the discrepancies resulting out of the existing class structure make the artist sincerely align with the pauper who sits alone

on hairless goatskins,
(His) ribs and bones reflecting the light
That beautiful cars reflect on (him)
Squashing lice between (his) nails
And cleaning (his) nails with dry saliva.²³

The immediate impression one gets from "hairless goatskins" is that the poor have been sitting on them for so long that they have now lost their hairs. In other words, the social and economic condition of the poor has not changed for a long time. Yet the rich are not bothered in any way by this irony of independence. They are not bothered, for example, by the pitiful crouching of the beggar on cold verandahs. It is as if this human indifference is meant to tell him that he is in the wrong place (even as a citizen of whatever nation!).

The above observation seems to be the whole truth about society today. A social poet grapples

with what one can justifiably call a difficult task in order to leave no stone unturned in this search for social justice. However, there is a sense in which Ntiru, like John Mbiti in "Not for the Poor" (ref.31 of chapter 2), falls victim of mere descriptions of the two antagonistic classes: the class of the rich and that of the poor. Ntiru's obligation seems to be stating the class differences as exactly as they are without committing himself to possible solutions. In short, all that Ntiru does is to write about

Those who eat roasted cassava
and force it down with stagnant water
to heal their blistered souls.²⁴

One cannot dispute the fact that Ntiru has genuine sympathies with the poor. But, he does not go beyond this sympathy to map out a positive direction for positive social change. He only assumes a sarcastic tone when he is addressing himself to the privileged few

who punctuate dishes of delicacies
with glasses of imported wine,²⁵
to blunt their heart attacks.

The latter group of people are over-fed and live in a comfort which lacks any physical strain. Their

private selfish ambitions make them complete for personal business enterprises. And in the process, the common men are reduced to mere objects of labour which is needed to sustain these enterprises. Society, eventually, becomes inhuman and therefore unfair to those who do not have the wealth and the power. Hence, one is justified to argue that it is the social cause of these people which committed poets ought to champion as fearlessly as possible. The way this is done will go along way in realizing social changes which are in favour of the down-trodden masses. Yet Nturu, in a rather despairing way says:

The feeling seems to be that even if he (the writer) offered concrete solutions, he does not have the political power to execute them, with the result that you have a "we vs. they" situation. The writer then opts for being indrawn, nursing his angers and frustrations until he achieves a personal psychic catharsis.²⁶

Whereas the above observation may be referring to Okot p'Bitek's literary position in Two Songs, there is a sense in which it also covers the other East African poets. Specifically speaking, it shows a failure on Nturu's part because it implies his subscription to a writing which merely seeks to achieve a personal

psychic catharsis. It is understandable that a poet lacks the political power with which to dismantle the foundations of bureaucracy, but this should in no way mean that a poet falls back from the national forefront to the rear of a people's struggle. The moment he does this, he betrays what in the view of this thesis ought to be the social function of modern poetry. It makes one question the extent of such a poet's social vision even though he might have shown a competent analysis of the underlying social contradictions.

One therefore turns to Jared Angira in order to examine the other side of the coin, as it were. In Juices, a publication which preceded Silent Voices, Angira claims to have dedicated the poetry in this collection to the common man. To establish a basis for this claim, he writes:

the shadow of Karl Marx seems to give
my trembling self some consolation; for
how can I talk of the tower of Babel
without recording the presence of the ground
on which the tower stands? It is this
much trampled on ground that decides
the course, for if the ground is sandy
and porous how long can the tower stand?²⁷

One wishes to determine how far Angira goes in his poetry in implementing the above resolution.

Symbolically, 'the tower of Babel' (in the above context) represents the class of exploiters and 'the ground' represents the exploited: the peasants and the workers who form the base upon which the class of exploiters thrives. In this respect, the tower derives its stability from the concreteness of the ground. Should the peasants and workers withdraw their manual support, then the privileged class will inevitably crumble.

Angira's Juices begin with showing the common man as the hero in the sense that he is very enduring in his economic struggles for survival. This underprivileged man, aware of the hardships he experiences and of the endurance with which he encounters them, asserts:

I am the trouncing hero
whose success at failures is unrivalled
whose abortive attempts in life's span
are unsurpassed.²⁸

In this collection, more than in any other, Angira is down-to-earth in terms of his style and language. It is evident that the poet has made, in this particular context, a conscious effort to achieve a wide readership. The use of simple language is commendable in that it communicates meaning much more

instantly. It is also evident, to some degree, that Angira is writing for and about the common folk in most of Juices. For example, describing a rural context, he observes that:

The sweating faces
grow cold and gummy
and the sun
puts east on the shadow.²⁹

The use of "sweating faces"(above) implies a people who have been toiling all through the day and who retire home for rest when the dusk falls. Angira, in this poem, appropriately creates the impression of fatigue and resignation. But he does not go beyond this description to the extent that one is forced to doubt his assertions in the 'Preface' to Juices. In fact, there is a sense in which, coincidentally perhaps, Angira is inspired by just the shadow of Karl Marx and very vaguely by the substance of his socialist ideas. This perhaps explains why the poet oscillates between private and public themes since he is groping toward a firm understanding of "the ground on which the tower stands" (see ref.27).

It is fitting at this juncture to mention Angira's criticism of the elite as a people who

have been alienated from society by their book-knowledge. These are the people who have, to a large extent, betrayed whatever communal aspirations there were at the dawn of independence. They have been estranged by the western values from their own African backgrounds through the selfish search of an abstract world in books. It is this theme of alienation to which Angira gives concrete shape when, in reference to an elite, he writes:

I came to Africa
And to my home
And they withdrew
Their tentacles of love
And they said
I had lost much of them
No longer one of their one-time son
Unless I renounced.³⁰

One ought to regard this theme of alienation not only in terms of the cultural values at stake, but also in terms of the written works of art which emerge on the East African literary scene. In this case, one is looking for how close to or how alienated from his audience a writer is, particularly in reference to the simplicity or complexity with which he treats his themes. It is also, in a sense, justified to regard alienation as an aspect of life

which becomes so much entrenched in an individual to the extent that, if he is a writer, he favours elitist display in whatever he creates. However, one cannot take Angira to task in this connection because he illustrates in a number of his poems the extent to which poetry can be an indispensable tool in criticizing society. The only notable shortcoming is that he does not go beyond the above mentioned level, at least in Soft Corals, in order to create, to a degree, a hope for a positive social change.

One is not, in any way, suggesting that Angira should have written propagandist poetry in Soft Corals. On the contrary, one wishes to point out the fact that the complexity of expression which recurs in this latter collection of Angira's poetry greatly undermines the characteristic simplicity in his first collection, Juices. There is in fact a sense in which Angira retrogresses in terms of dedicating his poetry to the common man. Soft Corals opens on a very obscure note which makes the critical reader begin to suspect that perhaps the poet has failed to understand "the ground on which the tower of Babel stands" and which he himself defines in his 'Preface' to Juices (ref.27 of this chapter). The overall obscurity leaves the reader

with the option of only capturing highlights, and particularly those which link up with the idea of the common man as the hero. For example, Angira, in one of these highlights, portrays the downtrodden masses as a people who are forced into a state of oblivion by the privileged class:

We are the giraffes
swallowed by the politicians
And we too, dancing at the watershed
have swallowed honesty.³¹

In the above context, Angira has raised the idea of man feasting on man. In other words, the pride and usefulness of the people who provide the necessary labour are trampled upon by the selfishness of the privileged class. Angira also implies that in a situation where survival is a question of the fittest, it is a real moral test to uphold honesty in whatever somebody does. Conspiracy, for example, becomes a common phenomenon due to the cut-throat competition which is born out of capitalism. The poet does not however, suggest submission by the underprivileged because he optimistically believes that

It is now our turn, indeed our turn
to pass round the calabash
which they (the politicians) hollowed with
disgrace.³²

According to Angira's poem, the palmbeach road (whose palmleaves symbolize peace and protection for society) becomes the only road out of the existing social quagmire. In this connection, the poet lays emphasis on the masses as the only people who eventually determine the course of a social struggle. He is, in other words, aware of the 'paper' revolutionaries or 'intellectual' guerillas who contrast sharply with

He on whose mouth flies buzz
without realization
That inside there is only hunger
in that dark cave
It is he alone
who knows the heat
of the frontline.⁵³

The poet is appropriately emphasizing the fact that the success of a revolutionary struggle cannot only be determined by the vocal expression of, for example, Karl Marx's and Frantz Fanon's ideas. The intellectual mobilization of ideas must be accompanied by the physical mobilization of the peasants and the workers for a meaningful struggle which is aimed at effecting positive social changes in society. One is arguing that it is high time the common fighter turned the bourgeois-inspired wars into purposeful wars which concern his own social condition and that of the entire deprived society.

But Angira betrays his confidence in the revolutionary potential of the masses when he appeals to God on their behalf. The irony here is that the poet is aware that the suffering majority have been praying for a long time without any response from this 'God' whom he is now appealing to. The poet is also aware of the fact that the ivory tower in which God sits is remotely removed from these people who

are still soaring the streets, still searching in desperation, for a staple tuber....³⁴

Yet, in desperation also, Angira continues to look for solutions to the social and economic problems of the masses from spheres where they are not forthcoming. One then begins to doubt the sincerity of his criticisms of what he terms 'paper' revolutionaries. There is a sense in which one is frustrated by Angira's inadequacy to take a consistent line of argument in order to substantiate his earlier claims in Juices about the common man as the hero in present-day society. He keeps wavering, for example, between the obscure 'sliding in the rhombus'³⁵ and 'wondering',³⁶ and the much more accessible

Long, long, long
I have watched the fire of the gun
and the runners go
and it is me who now must go.³⁷

Angira is, of course, implying the prevailing

competition in all social spheres and how the competitors vie for first positions in this race for bourgeois-class privileges. But there is also a sense in which he is referring to both physical and spiritual destruction of positive human values as a result of these economic competitions. In other words, a situation develops in which man lacks a rational approach to life and it ought to be the duty of modern artists to retrieve society from the social and moral decline through an elaborate social commitment. This means a sacrifice through their works of art for the benefit of the exploited class and not a self-centredness which resolves that

In this darkness alone
I must fight the iron hand
alone, I must solve my puzzles
It is my sole duty to wake up tomorrow. 38

Angira fails when he resolves to fight the iron hand of oppression and exploitation alone. He fails when he now personalizes a people's revolutionary struggle to the extent that he seeks to solve his own personal puzzles and, in a way, implies a personal benefit. One is justified to claim that Angira has irresponsibly contradicted himself, particularly when one recalls his line of argument in Juices. In this case, one is recalling the poet's

expressed confidence in the class of peasants and workers, a confidence which should inevitably lay emphasis on a communal rather than an individualistic approach in the just struggle for social change. One is even further disappointed when Angira, despairingly says:

Since I have come to the milestone
I want that book of reference
Not for problems encountered
Or those expected
I have no intention of solving problems
But to enter a few notes 39
For future travellers

In the above context, Angira seems to have reached the climax of his artistic, tedious journey for solving problems until he has no intention of going on. He transfers this task to future travellers - future generations - since he has been unable himself to come to any logical conclusion. This is the pitiable posture which results out of Angira's abstract world in most of Silent Voices and Soft Corals.

It should, however, be noted that Richard Ntiru and Jared Angira, to some degree, grope toward a most commendable stance in poetry: that which requires a poet who wishes to be the mouth-piece of his own people to be at the centre of

the relevant society. In this connection, wherever the poets have been discredited, the guiding principle has been that it is the public domain and not the private domain which determines whether one is a social poet or not. However, credit has been given where it is due. For example, if Angira has criticised the elite, the reader has had to question their social role and whether it can be seen to be in agreement with the aspirations of the masses. Also, if Ntiru has exposed the masqueraders, the reader has had to question the logic behind the wearing of masks in a context which requires an individual to sincerely and courageously face reality. One therefore, hopes that the social themes which emerge out of Ntiru's and Angira's poetry will act as the milestone for the poets to assess how far they still have to go in order to catch up, or even overtake, Okot p'Bitek and Okello Oculi, as will be discussed in the succeeding chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR

OKOT p'BITEK AND OKELLO OCULI

It has been argued in the preceding chapters that in order for poetry to justify itself socially it needs to have the public domain as its base. This assumes that a poet will address himself to the existing social and economic contradictions. It is in this context that Mbiti's poetry, because of its Christian and heavenly pre-occupation, was seen to be out of tune with the search for ways and means of realizing social changes here on earth. It has also been established that Taban lo Liyong's works, because of their inclination towards art for art's sake, do not serve any useful purpose in a social context. One, however, begins to see some sense of social consciousness in the poetry of Richard Ntiru and Jared Angira. These two poets do not earn full credit because, at this stage of their artistic development, they still have their creative arms spread out into both the private and public domains, a position which indicates divided loyalties.

It is therefore not until one comes to consider Okot p'Bitek and Okello Oculi that one can

justifiably refer to social commitment through poetry. These two poets, as will be shown, have used a style which portrays the characteristics of Africa's oral poetry and which has a deeper, and a much more instant impact upon the reader or the audience. This is much more so perhaps due to the fact that the structure of a long poem allows the poet ample room within which to shift moods and vary themes in order to achieve a full, purposeful expression. Okot p'Bitek and Okello Oculi, in this context, have shown tremendous initiative in breaking into a new field of creativity on the East African literary scene.

There is a sense in which Okot p'Bitek's Song of Lawino demands that the reader identifies the class basis of Lawino's lament. She may not herself be credited with a clear class consciousness, but the nature of her lament symbolically makes her the voice of the peasantry. Her attack, therefore, although limiting itself to cultural implications, alludes to the bourgeois, alienated class of the Ocol group. What is most commendable is the manner in which Okot has utilized the techniques of song in the oral tradition. Using local imagery and idioms, Lawino varies her tone between ridicule and sympathy in order to give a concrete shape to the cultural

theme. In addition, one wishes to assess the extent to which Okot has met one of the central requirements of a committed artist and which stipulates that:

The African novelist (poet) can be successful if he is sufficiently sensitive towards his reading public, and employs themes that either have a significant bearing upon real life or give a clear insight into the nature and the general spirit of the age or society he is writing about.¹

There is a sense in which Song of Lawino, on a thematic level, forms part of the historical chain of works which had their inspirations from negritude. By this philosophy, the African traditional cultures were seen as the only hope of salvation for a continent which had been trampled upon by colonialism and its cultural values. Okot's attitude to the cultural conflict resulting out of the western and African contact is therefore similar to Aime Cesaire's or Leopold Seda Senghor's, for example, who were the main exponents of negritude. In this respect Okot is, in Song of Lawino, giving a clear insight into the nature and the general spirit of the age, as has been quoted above. Lawino, aware of the need for her voice to be heard and understood, at once established a direct contact with her audience through the manner

she addresses them:

My clansmen, I cry
Listen to my coice:
The insults of my man
Are painful beyond bearing.²

One is made aware of the fact that the issues in question are not just between Lawino and her husband. They concern the whole of the Acoli people and the whole of Africa whose Ocols have been alienated from the African ways of life. In other words, Lawino appeals to Africa's Ocols to come back to the fold, as it were. She appeals to them to come back to communalistic traditions. But one ought to question whether this is practically possible in dynamic Africa or whether it is a politically conscious way out of the social ills of capitalism. In any case, it has already been established in the first chapter of this thesis that the acute social and economic condition of the suffering majority has taken priority over such appeals as Lawino's which seek to glorify the past. Nevertheless, Lawino, faced with the limitations of literacy, keeps within the manner of expression familiar to her and which is endowed with the Acoli vocabulary. In this way, she achieves a lasting effect upon her audience in the sense that

Literature is the communication and sharing of deeply felt emotions the aim of any literary activity must be to ensure that there is communication between the singer and the audience, between the story teller and his hearers.³

The above implies that in any literary activity the artist needs to clear the way, as it were, so that there is no obstruction between the audience and the literary work being delivered. In other words, there can be no meaningful communication if the artist keeps on interrupting his work of art by the use of, for example, abstractions. As a point of illustration, it can be shown that Okot p'Bitek, through Lawino, utilizes the repertoire of local imagery in order to make an impact upon his audience. In this respect, Lawino can afford to assemble as many images as she possibly can, all at the same time, in order to emphasize an important point:

My husband's tongue
Is bitter like the roots of the iyonno lily,
It is hot like the penis of the bee
Like the sting of the kalang!
Ocol's tongue is fierce like the arrow of
the scorpion,
Deadly like the spear of the buffalo-hornet
It is ferocious
Like the poison of a barren woman
And corrosive like the juice of a gourd.⁴

This accumulation of details portrays not only the oral influence on the written form of art, but also

indicates Okot's awareness of the purposes to which poetry can be put in order to communicate meaning effectively. The use of such Acoli words as 'Iyonno' and 'Kalang' do not in any way impede the flow of the song because of poet's overall sincerity to his society and the manner in which he views this cultural conflict as a collective deprivation. The argument here is that Ocol pours scorn on black people because he is in love with Clementine, the woman who represents the western cultural values. It is these values which the African elite embrace with deep passion. The end result is the rootlessness of the Ocols in Africa and their total aloofness from their own people. What is most disturbing is their blindness to the ill effects of the values they embrace as portrayed through Clementine who

resembles the wild cat
That has dipped its mouth in blood
Her mouth is like raw yaws⁵
It looks like an open ulcer.

This alienation is an ailment which needs curative attention. Lawino is making a valid observation especially as it relates to the period immediately after independence. But for how long, one still wonders, should dynamic Africa continue to give support

to Lawino's plea to the effect that

The pumpkin in the Old Homestead
Must not be uprooted!6

Such pleas, one can further argue, are made out of a misleading assumption that Africa is a static continent which therefore, must uphold its old traditions and an apparent innocence at whichever stage of its history. One can also add that Lawino's attack on Africa's Ocols at only the cultural level falls short of a serious, analytic consideration of the other side of the coin, as it were - the economic structure in present-day society. This is particularly so when one takes into consideration the fact that Ocol represents the class of the bourgeoisie who have monopolized national wealth and political power. Lawino's lament, therefore, about the passing African traditions carries the same weight of conservation as Ocol's in Song of Ocol when he is advocating western civilization. In both cases, Lawino and Ocol fail to adjust meaningfully to the changing social and economic conditions. Their interpretation of the existing social realities fails to subscribe to a meaningful programme of social change which, one hopes, should show links with the egalitarian pattern of Africa's old social systems. Whereas it may be

true that

Lawino and Ocol are each to some extent mouthpieces of Okot's satirical purposes: their lampoons and general satirical attacks express comments on society which are Okot's own⁷

there is a sense in which Okot, particularly through Lawino, unjustifiably portrays the peasantry as lacking a revolutionary potential. Even Lawino's awareness of the existing class differences is not given a sense of purpose. She is made to helplessly mention the fact that

While those inside
Eat thick honey
And ghee and butter
Those in the countryside
Die with the smell,
They re-eat the bones
That were thrown away
For the dogs.⁸

The class contradictions, as above, are merely described without the poet, through his heroine, analysing their root causes. The impression one gets is that of a poet who perhaps is more concerned with the effects than the causes. However, Lawino's observations are commendable in the sense that she implies the struggle to get into the political party leadership is ironically the struggle to acquire affluence. But this is done at the expense of the

underprivileged whose daily experiences are described in terms of

pythons of sickness
swallow the children
And the buffaloes of poverty
Knock the people down
And ignorance stands there
Like an elephant.⁹

The above contrasts sharply with the condition of the party leaders who "eat thick honey/And ghee and butter" (see ref.8). The use of the animal images throughout the poem perhaps indicates the poet's intention to bring out the inhumanity in Africa's economic structures and in as far as it affects the rights and privileges of the common man. But Okot does not dwell for too long on this economic aspect, especially in the case of Song of Lawino. His open pre-occupation with cultural issues provokes Ngugi wa Thiong'o into saying:

While I agree with p'Bitek's call for a cultural revolution, I sometimes feel that he is in danger of emphasizing culture as if it could be divorced from its political and economic basis.¹⁰

The argument here is that, there is nothing wrong with evoking a cultural theme, but this should not be treated in a manner which overshadows the social and economic contradictions. When this is done, one

gets the impression of a negritudist approach to commenting on present-day social issues. There were arguments against this approach in Chapter One because it lacked modern, literary tools with which to analyse society with considerable accuracy.

One is therefore, tempted to justify Ocol's mocking reply to the effect that

Song of the woman
Is the confused noise
Made by the ram
After the butcher's knife
Has sunk past
The wind-pipe.11

However, this is not the way one wishes to have Lawino's lament evaluated. If she has idealized the African traditions as a result of her village pride, one does not expect the same degree of idealizing western cultural values from an enlightened man such as Ocol, and who should therefore know better the value in stating facts sincerely. Nevertheless, one is aware of Ocol's shameless alienation and, furthermore, the difference there can be between an elite and an intellectual when it comes to considering practice and theory. In other words, an elite cannot

necessarily be credited with the view that

The position of the intellectual in African society, his training and educational background, are such as to enable him to master philosophical and social truths about the world and to use that knowledge to guide and influence the masses.¹²

The degree to which Ocol has been alienated from the cultural ways of his people deprives him of the ability to live up to the above requirement. His attitude to Lawino, and symbolically to his people, exposes him as a negative element in society. He shows a lack of confidence in his own origins and even goes further to portray Africa as an idle giant unable to act in any purposeful direction.¹³ It should be noted that this is not a correct view of Africa. What Ocol's evaluation amounts to is a derogatory image of this continent as perpetrated by her enemies. One can argue that Ocol's view of Africa is the view of a man who has failed to inspire, to guide and to lead a people into determining their own destiny. Okello Oculi¹⁴ has also argued against such elites who display utter ignorance of this social role. The Ocols of Africa, having failed to come to terms with their respective social environments, look for scape-goats from within or elsewhere to explain

what in their own terms they consider to be the continent's backwardness.

It can also be argued that Ocol fails to convince his audience of the fact that what he is advocating offers a solution to Africa's social problems. He would even like to pretend that he is in no way a betrayer of the aspirations of the masses. No sooner had independence been achieved than Ocol forgot the people's contributions to the political struggle. He credits the party leaders with the victory and seeks to justify his standpoint by asking:

Who says
I am responsible
For the poverty of the peasantry?
Am I the cause of unemployment
And landlessness?¹⁵

The above assertion can be tied with Taban lo Liyong's castigation of beggars and the unemployed which was mentioned in the second chapter of this thesis. To a degree, Ocol, like Taban, admits that he is a puppet; that he is a mere cog in the wheel of foreign economic machinations. Otherwise, it is a criminal offence for the African elite to claim that they are not responsible for the poverty of the peasantry. It is to deliberately refuse to appreciate the fact

that it is the rural area which sustains the whole nation. In other words, it is through the toil of the peasants that the urban dwellers, for example, survive. Ocol, instead, wishes to see everywhere transformed into new cities built of concrete and steel and having

Broad avenues, spacious gardens
Parks, swimming pools.¹⁶

Taking into consideration the fact that a majority of Africa is agricultural, the above development would seem to be wasteful and therefore unnecessary since there is urgent need to boost agricultural produce in order to meet the demands of the growing population. There is a sense in which Ocol's view of progress is similar to what was cited earlier in connection with Taban lo Liyong. The end result of these two similar views of progress is that they are not in the interests of the common man. Foreign enterprises, for example, become the means through which the exploitation of the underprivileged by the bourgeois class is strategically maintained. To therefore, advocate the establishment of solid, urban centres which, from all intents and purposes, favour foreign economic manipulation is in a way to promote values which negate the welfare of the common man.

It is, in short, to centralize exploitation so that maximum profits are derived from the urban workers by those who wield the batons of economic and political power. In this connection, Ocol's reply to Lawino's song can equally be interpreted as

a song all alone
A solo fragement
with no chorus
No accompaniment,
A strange melody
Impossible to orchestrate.¹⁷

In which case, Ocol's reply to Lawino is unrealistic and cannot in any way be said to conform with the role expected of an African elite in a developing society. Perhaps, this contradiction results out of Okot's ambiguous economic standpoint. For example, his vision of the required social change does not also include the means through which such a goal can be achieved. All that he does is to pose questions such as:

Can we not electrify the whole of our countryside? Must our people continue to live in unhygienic surroundings? Can we not resolve to erect better homes of permanent material for all our people? Africa must create a New Village on scientific lines.¹⁸

One obvious conclusion that can be drawn from the above

is that Okot p'Bitek has now emerged out of the cultural fascination which he portrays in Song of Lawino and is now able to subscribe to modern, scientific development. But one is justified to assert that Okot's view of progress represents a very idealistic approach to social change in the sense that it considers electricity and permanent homes as the major components of a New Village on scientific lines. One needs to first take into consideration the need for an equitable distribution of national wealth and the need to step up the literacy campaign in order to involve the entire population. These are some of the issues Okot does not address himself to in Song of Lawino. One is therefore tempted to identify him with Ocol in Song of Ocol who, after failing to be one with the people in the struggle for 'uhuru' further alienates himself from improving their social conditions. He fails to appreciate the importance of peasantry and instead assures the villagers of a very bright future in

A new city on the hill
Overlooking the Lake, 19
Concrete, steel, stone,

Ocol assumes that this phenomenon will solve the

existing social and economic problems which confront the rural populations. His interpretation of the development is limited to the idea of a city and flower gardens as if these are the priorities of the common man. Now that he has arrived, as it were, he jeers at those that have not achieved the same privileges.

From the above analysis, one can argue that in both Song of Lawino and Song of Ocol, Okot is still grappling with establishing the most convincing way of examining society. In doing this, it should be appreciated, he utilizes the elements of dialogue as a link between his written poetry and the oral tradition. The oral influence that recurs in Okot p'Bitek's works of art, and one which makes their delivery instant, is perhaps derived from the fact that

songs are still sung as a means of informing, instructing and entertaining people as well as means of self-expression.²⁰

It would therefore appear that the idea of 'song' in Okot's context constitutes an important element in his works in the sense that its background is the oral poetry in Africa and which is independent of any foreign, artistic influence. One can, for instance, justify the basis of 'Song of Prisoner', particularly if it is viewed as one of the effective ways of making

direct comments on the political and economic problems of the day, an attempt to interpret and evaluate the whole complex of the modern society with its imported ethics. 21

'Song of Prisoner' is, on one level, a song of pride from a man who is convinced that the assassination he has just carried out was in the interests of nationalism. On another level, it is a song of hate from a man who feels the weight of the social and economic deprivations. The prisoner is not only a prisoner in the actual cell limitations but also, symbolically, of the prevailing economic realities. What is most revealing is the way Okot portrays a kind of umbilical cord relationship between the prisoner and his present condition:

The stone floor
Lifts her powerful arms
In cold embrace
To welcome me
As I sit on her navel. 22

The stone floor becomes the concrete expression of the frustration, the hatred and despair which prevail in Africa and which are normally suffered by the oppressed class. The people, as represented by the prisoner, are alienated by the power elite which rules them. The pains of the prisoner, although at a personal

level in the context of the poem, assume a bigger dimension in real life. The brutality meted out to him in prison signifies the oppression suffered by the weak and poor section of the society which the poet presents as

A young tree
Burnt out
By the fierce wild fire
Of Uhuru.²³

The above imagery implies a survival for the fittest. The weak get burnt into ashes, as it were. In other words, the Uniformed Men enjoy sadistically the torture of those who fall within their grips in order to make them ineffective. In a way, the poet is implying that one expects such police oppression in areas which are still under colonial rule but not in those that claim to be independent states. Police brutality, it should be noted, assumes that a victim is guilty of the alleged crime until he is proved innocent. The unfortunate individual is tortured as a way of disciplining him. But, as is well known, this kind of attitude, whether practised in prison or outside, negates the virtue of social justice. One also wonders whether it is a crime to ask:

How many pounds
Of meat
Does this dog eat
In a day?
How much milk?²⁴

This question is necessary since it reveals the irony of economic development based on capitalism. There is a big rift between the class of haves and that of the have-nots. The difference is such that even the Chief's healthy dog contrasts sharply with the mosquito legs of the prisoner's children. That is, the children of the common man are plagued by a debilitating hunger while a minority of the people feed excessively. The Chief's dog symbolizes those Africans who have become hirelings in the economic interests of their white masters. One imagines the Africans in foreign-owned companies, for example, and how they are used in the economic exploitation of African nations. The dog also symbolizes the value attached to private property in a capitalist system and how this property is selfishly protected by the 'Mbwa Kali' which characterize the bourgeois-class residential areas. Okot, in the above context, is arguing that such contradictions are incompatible with the promises which were made during the struggle for independence by those who were at the forefront

of the struggle. In this respect, although the prisoner assumes a lamenting tone as that of Lawino, there is a sense in which it is much more realistic in as far as Okot finds appropriate answers to the judge's recurrent question:

Do you plead
Guilty
Or
Not Guilty?²⁵

This question arises out of the fact that the prisoner has assassinated one of the government officials who is believed to have been notorious in the betrayal of the aspirations of the masses. But above all, the refrain implies a recurrent experience and the answers the prisoner gives suggest that the root causes of crime must be looked for in the existing social and economic set-up. This set-up, it should be remembered, does not affect the prisoner alone but also the downtrodden masses. There is a symbolic link between the prisoner in his cell and the outside world since he says:

The cry of my children
And the sobs
Of my wife
Haunt me like
A vengeful ghost.²⁶

There is no doubt about the prisoner's concern for

the welfare of his family. The root cause of his family's cries and sobs lies in the poverty they experience each day. This condition is aggravated by the absence of the man (now in prison) who may be the sole bread-winner in the home. It is the thought of the above experiences which prompts the prisoner, with conviction, to reply to the judge's question:

I plead smallness
I am a mere
Pygmy
Before your
Uniformed Power.²⁷

Okot, at this point, is gradually mastering the courage with which to face reality. He considers the court setting as symbolizing a public scene within which the victim, or for that matter, the poet, cannot afford to mince his words because the audience must know the truth. The imagery he uses fits well into the inhuman situation he is analysing. For example, what the prisoner is definite about is the fact that he is

an insect
Trapped between the toes
Of a bull elephant.²⁸

However, one obvious weakness in 'Song of Prisoner' is the failure to suggest what ought to be done

after one of the exploiters has been shot dead. The evidence given by the victim is sometimes contradictory and implies the product of a confused mind. One can in fact argue that this state of affairs also indicates the lack of a consistent loyalty on the part of the poet. The prisoner, for example, is not just the man who has committed an assassination: he is a vagrant, a murderer, a dismissed bodyguard, and even a disgraced minister, all in one. One is therefore not clear from which angle or level the prisoner's evidence should be assessed. One is however, clear of one important fact: that the existing social-economic set up puts men in slots, as it were. It produces a class society in which labels are put on individuals according to the position they occupy and the role they play in the system. In other words, one is either a vagrant or a minister, for example, depending on the assessment of the social-economic scale. Above all, the existing set up produces crime, which is characteristic of a situation full of social deprivations and, hence, frustrations. It is this element of 'crime' which makes the prisoner less heroic in the context of his society which is in

any case dominated by the privileged class. Bearing the above factors in mind, one cannot therefore, subscribe to Ntiru's view that

The prisoner suffers from a heredity complex which makes him deranged. He curses his mother for succumbing to the wrong man, and his father for conquering the daughter of the wrong clan.²⁹

It ought to be mentioned that the idea of 'clanism' adds another dimension to the issue of employment and other opportunities. In other words, clanism is an aspect of capitalism, which is the existing social and economic set-up. It was earlier seen how capitalism used racism during the colonial rule in order to promote slave trade on the continent of Africa. It is now evident that tribalism (or clanism) is also being used to promote the elements of privileges which obtain in capitalism. It is this latter aspect of the present-day economic set-up which, perhaps, diverts and warps the prisoner's growth of a clear consciousness. Clanism becomes a kind of disease which infects the prisoner since he has no connection with the 'right' clan from which the cure of social deprivations can be found. He therefore suffers from a kind of hallucination which not only

results from the torture he receives from prison but also from the stringent tribalism which prevails.

Okot is, in a way, being sincere with the prisoner's condition. He perhaps gives it a physical exaggeration in order to lay emphasis on the prisoner's terrible experiences. For example, he (the prisoner) says:

My feet are a pair
Of pregnant women
Heavy like grinding stones
And full of the fangs
Of the cobra.³⁰

The prisoner uses such appropriate imagery at his disposal to convey his deepest experiences to the audience (the reader). This technique, in itself, is commendable in the sense that it does not portray the kind of idealization one finds in Song of Lawino or Song of Ocol. The prisoner, in any case, establishes pillars of argument within 'Song of Prisoner' which can be seen as his way of speaking not only for his public but also to his public. For instance, he says that he is an orphan

Crippled by the cancer
Of Uhuru
Far worse than
The yaws of
Colonialism.³¹

In this context, he implies that neocolonialism has crippled the common man, and that this is ethically contrary to laid-down goals of 'Uhuru'. In other words, the underprivileged majority are haunted by dreams which can never become a reality in the existing economic system. It is only those in positions of influence who have their dreams coming true each passing day. Some of these, it needs to be remembered, never actually fought for independence, but have acquired power and wealth out of the principle of opportunism. These are the ones responsible for the present-day class conflicts in which

The sharks of Uhuru
Devour their own children. 32

However, much as one deduces the above viewpoints from the picture Okot creates, one feels let down by the fact that the prisoner was a mere hireling. Perhaps it is also Okot's intention to prove that capitalism uses money and violence to establish itself wherever it wishes to have a monopoly. It turns human beings into tools with which to achieve its economic goals. Its mystery is such that the poet does not reveal who paid the prisoner or who he actually killed. The only conclusion the reader is left with is that

the prisoner acted out of ignorance of the real motives of those who hired him. This being the case, one can argue that the prisoner acted irresponsibly. It is further disappointing to note that the prisoner pleads fear, helplessness and hopelessness.³³ One therefore wonders how the prisoner harbours hopes of being proclaimed a national hero, more so, for just one act of assassination. He wants to be released in order to realize the fulfilment of a dream - the deep respect and applause which are normally accorded to a national, popular leader. This is the one reason why he wants to join what he imagines to be

The jubilant throng
Gathered at the City Park
Waiting for me.³⁴

The above seems to be another aspect of his dream-land of a large, fertile farm and which, to a degree, coincides with Ocol's far-fetched ambitions in Song of Ocol. The prisoner craves for pomp. But there is a sense in which he is being sarcastic in the above context. In other words, the prisoner seems to be arguing that if the downtrodden 'live' death everyday and yet still give applause to those

responsible for their appalling social and economic condition, he too therefore deserves praise for contributing to the 'national game' of conspiracy and murder. It is perhaps for this reason that the prisoner also wants to enjoy power and wealth and sounds very murderous in his approach to his goal:

I want to drink
Human blood
To cool my heart.³⁵

Or else, the prisoner is not sure of how he can justify his crime since his plea for release is focused on three naive goals - drink, sex and dance - at least in this political context. The prisoner does not tell his audience what else he wishes to do in order to justify his demand to be recognized as a national hero. In short, his resolutions indicate a dilemma and therefore a total lack of a positive social vision. He wants to escape from the existing social and economic realities. This is why he wishes to dance in order to forget that he is jobless and landless.³⁶ But this implies a cowardly withdrawal. It is a surrender not only on the part of the prisoner but also on the part of the poet. Such short-comings render Okot's

social commitment incomplete in the sense that there is no clear focus upon the future. One therefore wholly agrees with Atieno-Odhiambo when he argues that:

The point simply is that we do not want to forget. We want to move on: where do we go from here?³⁷

'Song of Malaya', too, fails to offer a direction. The song is an ambivalent reaction to prostitution, which is one of Africa's most irritating social plagues. Okot does not give the malaya distinct origins so that the impression one gets is that of a character who remains anonymous. The reader is not also given the circumstances which make prostitution possible. One is therefore justified to argue that Okot makes fun of very serious social problem. The best he achieves is in making the malaya's song a kind of lampoon in which she attacks the enemies of prostitution. This is why she directly addresses herself to the Big Chief (perhaps symbolizing those who should be responsible for its eradication), saying:

Why do you look at me
As if I were a bunch
Of hornets?
Why do you hiss
Like a frightened cobra
And bark at me
As if I were
A thief?³⁸

It should be noted that prostitution results out of economic dictates on an individual. That the existing economic structure determines how an individual earns a living. But Okot's 'malaya' is unique in the sense that this economic factor does not come through her song.

The impression one gets is that she is not poor, an aspect which puts the reader in a kind of suspense in as far as the malaya's relationship with her clients is concerned. Or perhaps she does not want to openly admit that she is exploiting others in the same way she too is being exploited by the prevailing economic conditions. For example, when she is referring to the schoolboy, she says:

All my thanks
To you
Schoolboy lover,
I charge you
no fee.³⁹

She charges the schoolboy no fee because, according to her argument, he makes her feel ten years younger. She regards their sexual intercourse as a kind of physical rejuvenation. Hers, therefore, seems to be a new brand of prostitution whose sexual pleasures over-ride the need for money. Hence, one is justified

to accuse Okot of not having found the answers to just this one question:

Can we not free Africa
From this one pest?⁴⁰

The fact that the question comes from the malaya herself makes the whole song an enigma. In fact, the impression one gets is that of a kingdom of prostitutes who are free to say and do anything so long as it satisfies their whims. Even the instruments of law and order become victims of the power of prostitutes in the sense that they too visit the brothels. In other words, the malaya institutionalizes prostitution so that there appears to be no way out of this social ill.

The argument is that Okot, in his songs, merely poses questions without providing convincing answers or a definite path of interpretation for the reader. Furthermore, Lawino in Song of Lawino and prisoner in 'Song of Prisoner' are denied a revolutionary virtue so that the impression one gets is that of a poet who perhaps does not want his characters to be vehicles of social change. Ocol, in Song of Ocol, and malaya in 'Song of Malaya', fail to appeal, even in their declared lines of argument.

It is with the above viewpoint in mind that one wishes to examine Okello Oculi to see how he takes over from Okot p'Bitek. In this respect, Oculi makes a public confession to the effect that

For me at the time my argument was: why can't I be a disciple of Okot? I'm not going to have any sense of apology about writing, especially in the way Okot wrote.. that much I wanted to be loyal to Okot.⁴¹

One therefore wishes to determine the extent to which Okot has had a literary influence on Oculi. The latter, however, varies a bit in his treatment of Orphan in the sense that, instead of one character singing all the way, he makes it a village opera. That is, several characters perform for the orphan at the cross-roads. Through this technique, Oculi's intention in Orphan is to portray the inhumanity which is caused by the exploitation of man by man. He seeks to involve the audience in order to realize a meaningful communication because, as indicated,

Each person performs a drama for the orphan boy, and all of them with the orphan boy perform for you and me.⁴²

Okello, the orphan, is, in the absence of a strong foundation of African traditions (symbolized by the death of his mother), abandoned at the cross-roads in order to establish his own cultural roots and be able at the same time to fend for himself. At once,

he becomes a good example of how an individual is required to not only face the social realities in his own time, but also to choose the direction in which he is going to move. It should be noted that the orphan has been born into a society torn by superstitions and "village gossip".⁴³ But the way he adjusts in this social environment will be determined by his sense of maturity. This is the one reason why the orphan is encouraged by the village elder to face determinedly the social and economic problems which confront him. In other words, solutions to these problems cannot be found in mere lamentations because he (the orphan boy) must learn to expect little

From the generosity of the world,
To grapple alone with the top of the earth,
As the baby must will to walk
And teach its wobbly feet the harsh
Truth of hunters.⁴⁴

There is a sense in which the reference to 'hunters' could be implying the competitive nature of a capitalist society and in which selfish ambitions take priority over communal efforts. The hunters therefore, become those involved in the race to bring home, as it were, as much of the national wealth as individual strength and skill can allow.

The orphan must learn to adjust to this pattern of life which dominates present-day society. One is justified to assert that Oculi's diction in the poem achieves the same impact as Okot p'Bitek's in as far as creating effective impressions is concerned. Also, the inclusion of the village elder in the opera would seem to indicate, at a literal level, Oculi's respect for the old and the recognition of their wisdom. But at a much more symbolic level, the village elder represents a kind of class consciousness and the value in an economic self-reliance. It is these qualities which will make the orphan boy, instead of sitting idly at the junction and expecting miracles,

Walk to a spear
And learn the message of facing, alone,
The twang of its stem and the silent power
In its blade.⁴⁵

However, the point of emphasis is that the orphan boy must recognize the essence of communal efforts in present-day social and economic struggles. In which case, the idea of walking to a spear alone seems to indicate an individualistic approach which, in itself, may not be able to overcome the many economic hurdles in the existing social system. Nevertheless, Oculi is advocating a unity of action which should

not face reality empty-handedly. The reference to a spear seems to imply a military and technological preparedness in order to realize positive social changes. If these assumptions point to Oculi's intentions, then one can argue that he overshadows Okot p'Bitek in that he goes beyond mere description to outline what ought to be done. Furthermore, if Orphan stands for a neo-colonial situation, then facing the world alone, as indicated above, probably implies the first steps to self-reliance in economic terms. In this connection, Oculi's hero is given the responsibility to revenge the wrongs of imperialism done to his people who

sweated and bled oils for Europe's machines
And gave her a new madness,
The madness of production and religious work,
Annihilating brains with sound and
Shrill rhythms.⁴⁶

The 'shrill rhythms' perhaps refer to the immense industrialization motivated by imperialism. They also relate to the dehumanization that was unleashed to the men who were forcefully enslaved to these machines of production. The imagery that the orphan's father uses in the above context, while bringing out the long-standing bitterness of a

people, indicates also the poet's mastery of the situation. There is a sense in which he shows that since the history of colonialism, the dehumanizing process, carried out by both white and black imperialists against the common African, has continued. As a result, there has been a shameless tendency to disregard the ordinary African's dignity and also to dismiss his ability to shape his economic destiny. There is no doubt that the circumstances in which the orphan finds himself are hostile, particularly as symbolized by "the woman whose husband is of Okello's clan" (see below). She scornfully asks:

Where shall I find the body
For feeding other people's children?
Who has not seen toil and been the child
of poverty?⁴⁷

In other words, the world is not at all prepared to adopt the orphan. Those who should be kind and responsible argue that they already have enough burden to attend to. But Oculi indicates that there is more to this kind of negligence. The underlying conflict is that which appertains to the old and the young. It is, in a way, a cultural conflict, in which the old see the young as having been alienated from their ways of life to the extent that no helping hand is

offered to those considered by society as cultural outcasts. It is perhaps for this reason that the old woman claims:

When Okello joins the clan
Of "yes, no" people he will
Say he is going to the office
On my funeral day.⁴⁸

She even uses the Bible to justify her stand when she reminds the orphan that God helps those who help themselves. There is a sense in which this links up with the village elder's recommendation that the orphan learns the message of facing the world alone. In the context of the old woman, it implies that those who are culturally rootless should seek foundations in the Old Homestead, as it were. To a large degree, her argument relates to Lawino's in Song of Lawino. It is also in this context that Okello's stepmother, with traditional pride, says:

The fertility of my womb shall never
Enrich dustbins and public utilities
With abortions done by fashion.⁴⁹

However, Oculi is not only referring to cultural alienation in the above context. There is a sense in which he implies that child rearing has become an economic burden to the extent that abortions are preferred as a way of avoiding this demanding responsibility. The marauding forces of imperialism are such

that there are those who can afford the cost of living and be able to raise families at the same time, and those that can hardly afford sufficient food for themselves.

Okello Oculi's Malak gives concrete shape to the social issues analysed above. It is a long poem on contemporary African political realities and one which established Oculi as "a revolutionary poet".⁵⁰ The poem reveals the poet's deep understanding of the economic issues at stake in present-day Africa and also clearly indicates the poet's social commitment. Oculi in Malak, more than in Orphan, states committedly the case of 'the wretched of the earth' against the class of exploiters. He does this through his usual poetry-cum-prose style which, it can be argued, enables him to express himself as freely as possible without any kind of structural inhibition. Or perhaps it is an easy way out for a writer who is not very confident in any one genre - whether prose or poetry.

The importance of women in society is once again recognized by Oculi in this poem when he begins by stating:

Woman

I see a record of people choosing to be
Second-class citizens in the annals of
human aggression under heaven
while gold and diamonds and
groundnuts and cocoa and coffee
were being shipped out in front
of their loyal foolishness.⁵¹

Apart from the significance of the poet's choice to address 'Woman', he convincingly establishes the degree of exploitation and foreign economic domination which have been going on for years in Africa. There is a sense in which "loyal foolishness" (see above) could be referring to the black bourgeoisie who, in a way, have been accomplices in the above exercise. serving perhaps in capacities of puppets. In other words, these people have been too loyal to the white economic manipulators to notice the destruction of human life which Africa has suffered through the ages. They have become covered by economic veils, as it were, so that they can no longer see or recall

graveyards of men for whom no graves were dug
and no parliamentary questions asked.⁵²

The poet's intention seems to be to awaken his audience to the realities of the history of slavery. He reminds modern Africa that men were dragged from this continent to go and toil in foreign, profit-making plantations. Those who offered resistance were mercilessly whipped and later killed or thrown into the Atlantic Ocean for the sharks. In other words, Africans were considered as mere objects which could be dispensed

with at the colonialists' will. This also marked the brutality against the sons and daughters of Africa. Nothing positive, Malak seems to imply, has broken this monotony to the extent that the sensitive poet, too, feels the fatigue

Of men tired of dying cheaply
tired of mourning the death of children. 53

Oculi views the above trend as a calculated process to intimidate blacks wherever they are. His embittered voice emphatically rises at each line and one gets the impression of its building up, skilfully, to a climax with a clearly defined commitment to the people who

have been flogged too long
been the oppressed of the Third World
too much. 54

In the above respect, Oculi shows no divided loyalties like the case is with Okot p'Bitek in 'Song of Prisoner'. Oculi's is a strategic approach to analysing social issues as systematically as possible in order to leave no stone unturned in the search for truth. He is aware, for example, of the weight of malnutrition which depresses the downtrodden masses of Africa. He is aware of the tyranny of Africa's ruling classes which continue to instil fear into those who labour

each day for the survival of nations. Yet they, too, in their search for social justice, are required to Plead Guilty or Not Guilty", to which Oculi's oppressed answer:

We confess
to rain falling on our sorrows while
we cut cane across the surface of History.

We confess
Counting how many times the heavens laughed
with the whips across our lonesome skins.⁵⁵

These are genuine confessions because they result directly from a people's bitter experiences in history at the hands of the oppressors. Oculi is, through the use of the emphatic 'We', proving the degree to which poetry can be an effective medium of collective expression. He is also portraying the concrete relationship there is between a committed artist and his society. Such a relationship reveals an artist who is clear about what is good for his society and who can, therefore, go further to suggest ways and means of achieving this 'good'. To a large extent, Oculi adheres to the above criteria when he sees salvation in socialism - 'Ujamaa' - and argues, using the simple image of rain, that

Ujamaa are the pillars of raindrops across the
land,
the splashing in togetherness against mud
For those raindrops know
Only we
Only us
each playing a part. ⁵⁶

To Oculi, rain in the above quoted context may be symbolizing the kind of brotherhood which Africa needs. Class differences and other divisions negate the virtue of collective existence. In other words, there is an urgent need for modern society to exist as organic units, each sub-unit having a part to play for the benefit of the whole unit. The path of socialism implies the eradication of hunger for the millions of people because it is

the wisdom in the arms of Mama Fanti
pounding yams
mixing tuesday and friday into yams
pounding the familyhood of Africa for hungry
stomachs.⁵⁷

The essence of 'woman', as mentioned earlier, recurs in the above context. Mama Fanti symbolizes a collectivity since it is the basis for socialism. She symbolizes an equal distribution of national wealth. In a way, she symbolizes collective labour prompted by communal goals for the benefit of the entire society. The above is the kind of future which Oculi envisages. According to his convictions, it is the only way out for the suffering majority. But he cautions those who get fascinated by ideologies without deeply assessing them that 'Ujamaa' cannot be achieved in any simple way because

They who thirst for the blood of the world
know only of power
of the sounds of teeth melting under their
feet
of staccatos of guns banging across
nightmares of rats and condors
constipating the downtrodden with tears.⁵⁸

In order to therefore achieve 'Ujamaa', determination and a collective effort are needed. The poet sees Tanzania as one of the nations in Africa which have set upon the road to socialism. Oculi however, recognizes the fact that this is only a beginning in a revolutionary programme to uplift the downtrodden peoples of Africa. The future of Tanzania and any other nation which follows in her footsteps is bright because, as Oculi argues, 'Ujamaa' is Africa and Africa is familyhood. The suffering of a people in one part of the continent should be interpreted as the suffering of all the peoples of Africa because, for example, there are

no visas marking boundaries of hunger
no separate flags of malnutrition.⁵⁹

In other words, disease, poverty and ignorance plague all the masses of Africa. Any artist who is committed to the cause of these people, plays an important role in advocating a united stance, especially when he speaks with a clear, public voice.

He not only elaborates on the issues he raises,
but he, too, frankly asks:

"When Brigadier Afrifa* zooms away in
his air-conditioned Mercedes, does he
really know what goes on in the heart
of the villagers whose children line the
streets, some naked, unwashed, under-
nourished, cheering the Great One Along?"⁶⁰

This is the kind of contradiction Okello Oculi is
addressing himself to. To this extent, he is on
the forefront of social commitment on the East
African literary scene. His intention in Malak is
to make the world understand the irony and conflicts
which appertain to developing societies. He is in
a way arguing that the social ills of corruption
and greed must be got rid of in order to lay a
strong foundation for 'Ujamaa'. Such social ills
must be got rid of by any means necessary - including
a revolution since this realizes a total overhaul in
the existing social systems. There is in fact
tension building up to this climax as symbolized by
Oculi's timely observation to the effect that

There is a whisper wondering in the clouds
urging to be born
It is a cry for the wills that would make
new Niles and Nigers and Kongos
In answering the cry of that pregnant
whisper
We shall not rest.⁶¹

It is a cry to change the course of history so that

the masses can have the opportunity to determine their own economic destiny. The social tension is ripe enough for a justified revolution. A people's cry is also a cry for a workable socialism which should effectively phase out capitalism. The masses have suffered long enough, and the poet is making their struggle heroic, recognizes their revolutionary potential. Oculi, with conviction, urges the sons and daughters of Africa to rise against the class of oppressors and exploiters because

The land is pregnant with screams
screams of millions of the historically skinned -
skinned by forced labour in plantations and mines
by smallness
by malnutrition
screams of those peeled by tax-collector's ropes.⁶²

Victory by the oppressed and exploited class in the above context should go along way in establishing the kind of future the majority favour. This should be guided by a resolution to the effect that no historical mistakes should ever be repeated in the social re-organization.

If Okot p'Bitek in 'Song of Prisoner' exposes men of power as being guilty of many social crimes against the common man, Okello Oculi in Malak has evoked the revolutionary spirit which is needed by

the oppressed to reverse the order of things. The bitter feelings of Africa's underprivileged have been taken up by Oculi who articulates them with the deserving power of a people entrusted with the responsibility of revenge. And the fact that 'Malak' among Oculi's people means the beginning of new life indicates that there is tremendous hope of victory in the imminent revolutionary struggle. His social commitment therefore has more strategies than that of Okot p'Bitek. Furthermore it has 'Ujamaa' as its goal and Oculi advocates an untiring struggle until this goal is achieved. He has deep confidence in 'Ujamaa' because it represents a humane and egalitarian society. Whereas it was established earlier that Okello Oculi takes over from Okot p'Bitek, one is not arguing that the former has reached the ultimate achievement of East African poetry. In fact, through Malak, it can be argued that Oculi has only managed to lay the foundation for a meaningful social function of creative art, similar to that which appertains, for example, the Dennis Brutus and A.N.C. Kumalo, leading black South African poets. In other words, Oculi, more than Okot p'Bitek, has justifiably subscribed to a resolution which

stipulates that:

Let's have poems
blood-red in colour
ringing like damn bells
poems
that tear at the oppressor's face
and smash his grip.⁶³

One hopes that East African poets who are aware of their obligation to the public will go a long way in effecting the above resolution. One also hopes that, poets of Okot's and Oculi's calibre will continue to meaningfully utilize their poetic talent while at the same time actively involving the masses in order to make concrete the direction and purpose of the revolutionary struggle. It is not a far-fetched conclusion to assert that East African literary scene needs more Malaks in order to discard with the conservative cultural preoccupations which Okot p'Bitek portrays in Song of Lawino. In other words, there should be a gradual but purposeful artistic development from where Okot p'Bitek's 'Song of Prisoner' ends to levels which reinforce or surpass Okello Oculi's Malak.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

This thesis has undertaken to examine prominent East African poets in order to determine the extent to which they understand the various social contradictions in modern society. In this context, it would be pointless for a modern artist to assume that, for example, the existing basic class divisions do not constitute a point of reference in the works of art. Various individual limitations have been identified in connection with a majority of the poets cited in this thesis. But the general conclusion is that poets should transcend these limitations in order to reinforce the impact of a poem as an artistic work. The case of Taban has shown that there are poets who may be much more concerned with the form of poetry for their own personal satisfaction. But this thesis argues that poets should not look at form and content as separate entities if they wish to achieve a meaningful communication.

The advantage oral poetry has over the written artforms has been noted. That is, oral poetry assumes an oral delivery which inevitably involves a significant proportion of the community. But the fact that a majority of the masses are illiterate should be borne in mind in an age where written poetry seems to be in the limelight. Nearly all the poetry considered in this thesis can be said to be, strictly speaking, for a literate audience. This is in fact the consequence of an educational system which is still only accessible to a privileged few. Those parents who do not have the means to afford school fees have their children denied the educational opportunity. Even when the requirement of school fees is discontinued at certain levels of education (such as the primary level), there arises the problem of fitting thousands of school-age children into the limited number of schools. It therefore becomes a matter of parental influence to get one's child or children into school. Those who are lucky to get through the school pipeline form the base of the class of the elite. Consequently, if they become writers, their

written artistic products assume a class form in the sense that the poets are, in a sense, elitist and that one needs to be in the elite bracket to be able to read their works and understand them. One can, on this basis, justifiably argue that such an inclination in literature certainly tends to exclude the majority of Africa's masses who are illiterate.

Due credit has been given to Tamaduni Players (stationed in Nairobi) for their performances of Okot p'Bitek's Song of Lawino/Song of Ocol and Okello Oculi's Malak. This is a commendable attempt to convey dramatically to a large audience what is written down. But performances such as these have demerits too, particularly when they are delivered in English. In this case, they are confined to a specific category of audience and in a specific place (mostly in the urban areas) with defined entry charges for those who can afford. One therefore, wishes to borrow from T.S. Eliot's argument when he is advocating a much more direct contact between the poet and his public. Although T.S. Eliot is specifically referring to the western written tradition, he reaches a relevant conclusion to the

effect that the theatre is the only convenient place for a meaningful communication.¹ This is perhaps on the assumption that a theatre offers a setting which could be regarded as being very close to the oral contexts. Were it to be delivered in open-air theatres all over the countryside, dramatized poetry (although written down in English initially) would still keep close to the masses. Such public performance would be some achievement in that poetry would no longer appear to be a product of a kind of ivory tower as the case is now in a majority of poetry in East Africa.

It has been noted that the very act of writing indicates the artist's way of participating in the affairs of his society. But as has been pointed out before, this participation meets with a number of restrictions. On one hand there may be a lack of positive commitment and hence an element of obscurity in the creative artist's work. This was the criticism raised against Taban lo Liyong. It was argued that most of Taban's poetry is too self-centred to appeal to a keen audience. The inconsistency which was cited in his poetry indicates a lack of positive artistic values for the purpose of a meaningful communication between the poet and his public. Even Mbiti's poetry

which was seen to have consistent theological pattern did not bear relevance to the existing social contradictions. In the case of Ntiru and Angira, there was a sense in which they were groping out of the private domain to a much more public standpoint. Most of their poetry was seen to strike a harmonious note with the suffering majority and therefore indicating that the new breed of poets in East Africa were becoming much more sensitive to the plight of the masses. It is in this context that one begins to justify Ntiru's observation that

The business of poetry in particular is to explore the numerous modes of human response to the problems inherent in a world that is naturally hostile and is increasingly becoming more and more complex in all its manifestations.²

On the other hand, the degree of illiteracy in those for whom the work of art is meant becomes the biggest handicap in Africa. Indeed, the pressures in East Africa and which are caused by the inequalities inherent in the educational systems inherited from the colonialists. There is a sense in which countries like Tanzania, Guinea, Nigeria and lately Ethiopia have embarked on revolutionary programmes in education in order to rectify the above cited situation.

These countries are experimenting with mass adult literacy programmes and one hopes that the rest of Africa will catch up with this development. Mass education will inevitably mean that a majority of the works of art will receive a much wider readership. One feels that the masses in East Africa deserve the right of participation in written poetry as much as they do in oral poetry. It is for this reason that mass education is viewed as a most logical step to be taken by the existing governments.

This emphasis on the masses is inevitable, particularly in neocolonial situations in which they find themselves as forming the class of the exploited. These are the people who are hit hard by such economic forces as inflation since they fall in the bracket of meagre incomes. Yet they continue to provide the labour upon which the privileged class thrives and out of which the machinery of exploitation is made even more efficient. One sees therefore a lot of sense in what Sekou Toure suggests to the effect that

To take part in the African revolution it is not enough to write a revolutionary song; you must fashion the revolution with the people There is no place for the artist or the intellectual who is not himself concerned with and completely at one with the people.³

The poet, according to poet critics like Okello Oculi, should have as his main objective the exposition of a people's social deprivations such as illiteracy, unemployment which leads to poverty, and poor living conditions which lead to disease. Sekou Toure's reference to African revolution should imply therefore the artist's conscious efforts to bringing about social changes in society. The requirement here seems to be that he first identifies with the underprivileged class by way of consistency and genuinely analysing their social situation. One feels that the output in creativity should be seen, at every stage of change or development, to have kept abreast with the dynamism inherent in societies. It is for this reason that this thesis has undertaken to trace the development of poetry from its oral form to the written form and to determine the degree of social commitment to which the poets considered here have expressed in their works of art. The purpose of doing this has been that the quantitative achievements by the East African poets should be accompanied by the qualitative achievements in order to effectively realize the social function of poetry in underdeveloped societies. Various criteria

for a qualitative achievement have been identified. One of these was in Chapter Two where it was concluded that

The belief in art for art's sake arises wherever the artist is out of harmony with his social environment.⁴

In other words, a scale has been established which has its low point at Taban's commitment to art for art's sake and its high point at Okello Oculi's art for society's sake in Chapter Four. In fact the poets who seem to be in total harmony with their social environments are Okot p'Bitek and Okello Oculi.

The general feeling of this analysis is that a good poem should be able to communicate with the reader on its own merit without much difficulty. In this case, the definition of a socially conscious poet has been given as he who creates a poetry in which his readers and himself share common experiences, and, possibly, a common language. It is within this context that Okot p'Bitek and Okello Oculi have been singled out as poets who clearly know what to say about the existing social contradictions. Part of their success was attributed to the characteristics of Africa's oral poetry which their works of art show. One other point that was considered was that

relating to the form of their poetry. It was argued that a long poem allows the poet ample room within which to shift moods and vary themes in order to achieve a full, purposeful expression. It was found commendable, for example, the manner in which Okot has utilized the techniques of song in the oral tradition, particularly in Song of Lawino. Due credit went to Lawino for having established a direct contact with her audience through the manner she addresses it and the themes she advances. She sets an example, through her role, which one feels should be an inspiration to the East African poets: that of establishing a direct contact with the audience. One feels that this could be another criterion for a qualitative achievement in poetry. Various limitations have been identified and dramatized poetry has been suggested as one of the solutions. Popularizing the reading of poetry should also be one way of giving the written art-forms a bigger audience. One also longs to see the day when there will be dedicated groups of artists who will organize discussions of poetry between the poets themselves and the audience. If the emphasis has to be on the dramatization of poetry like the Tamaduni Players

have already begun doing, then there should be a serious consideration of form by practising poets. For example, the analysis in Chapter Four revealed that prose-cum-poetry poets (Okot p'Bitek and Okello Oculi) are the ones seen as doing the right thing in terms of adaptability to public performance and social significance. It would not be wrong to conclude that their success or impact has a lot to do with form. In other words, putting together all the poets considered in this thesis, one feels that the better poets are the narrative poets. This seems to justify the link which should be maintained between the oral art-forms and the written art-forms.

One final criterion for determining qualitative achievement in poetry is the concreteness of a poet's social vision. On a comparative level, Okot p'Bitek seems to merely describe the existing social realities but Okello Oculi goes further in his Malak to make a focus - to give his analysis a concrete social vision. This is why it was stated earlier on that what one was looking for from Taban lo Liyong, through Mbiti, Ntiru, Angira and Okot p'Bitek, to Okello Oculi was a logical sequence of artistic progress and social awareness. This is also the reason why much more emphasis has been laid on Okello Oculi's Malak which

reveals the poet's deep understanding of the economic issues at stake in present-day Africa. It also indicates his total social commitment. He states much more convincingly the case of the wretched of the earth against the class of the exploiters. There is evidence to show the mastery with which he has established the degree of exploitation and foreign economic domination in Africa. In this task, he shows no divided loyalties as the case is with Okot p'Bitek in 'Song of Prisoner'. Okello Oculi is very clear, for example, of the exploitation of peasant labour by the capitalist class and the malnutrition which the downtrodden masses of Africa continue to suffer. Also, as has been indicated, his analysis goes further to see salvation in 'Ujamaa' - socialism. His confidence in this is based on the fact that 'Ujamaa' constitutes a collective existence in which the means of production and distribution of national wealth are communally owned. Oculi singles out Tanzania as one of the nations in Africa which have set upon the road to socialism. He recognizes this as only a beginning in a revolutionary programme aiming to uplift the lot of the underprivileged classes in Africa. It is, therefore, justified to have argued that, through Malak, Oculi has laid the foundation for a meaningful

social function of creative art. One looks forward to more East African poets of Okello Oculi's calibre who will be deeply aware, for example, of the frustration that

overcomes a worker as a result
of a productive relationship in
which he does not often see,
benefit from or control the
product of his labour⁵

The above is one of the most disturbing social contradictions which the budding East African poets should, at least, address themselves to. Okello Oculi's Malak only offers a beginning towards the above direction. It has thrown a challenge to the new breed of poets to open up a whole new territory in poetry which will be meaningful and purposeful in this era of class contradictions. Malak has demonstrated that there is no way sensitive poetry can avoid to address itself to certain crucial social issues which affect the underprivileged classes in Africa. The challenge one is throwing to other poets is that if Okello Oculi has been able to succeed in Malak, they too can emulate him or even surpass him in order to map clearly a logical development of poetry in East Africa. In this case, the artists have a responsibility of creating a sense of hope and not despair. It is therefore felt that escapist or elitist poetry which sometimes emerges from Taban lo Liyong, Mbiti, Ntiru

and Angira is a negation of the artist's sincerity.

This thesis wishes to re-emphasize its definition of a social poet as he who grapples with what one can justifiably call a difficult task: the search for social justice. The guiding principle in this task should be seen in terms of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's feeling that

criticism of our social institutions and structures is a very healthy thing for our society.... writers must sincerely examine all aspects of our national life.⁶

For example, imperialism has to be resisted at all social fronts in order for a people to re-create their own history and their own economic destiny. Bearing Malak in mind, this thesis also wishes to recognize artists as the conscience of society who therefore have a contribution to make, through their works of art, to proper policies in national development. For too long, it has been observed, the peasant and the worker have been forced into drudgery by the selfish interests of the bourgeois class. This is why Okello Oculi's Malak offers a convenient opportunity for other poets to also, in their own but purposeful way, begin to dismantle the exploitation of man by man. The appeal which this thesis is making, on behalf of the entire exploited society, to the East African poets is that

let the people know
that dreams can become
reality.⁷

Hence the hope that Taban, Mbiti, Ntiru, Angira and any other poets on the East African literary scene, will transcend the private domain into the public domain in order to rise with their readers to new heights of consciousness. Okot p'Bitek and Okello Oculi have paved the way. Above all, Oculi's Malak has posed a big challenge because of the new poetic experience which it creates. One hopes that the impact such poetry makes upon the audience will have significantly arisen out of the theory that

What matters is not what I want
Or YOU want
but what WE want⁸

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