

Modern African Verse and the Politics of Authentication

Gabriel S. Bamgbose
Tai Solarin University of Education

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Abstract: In his article "Modern African Verse and the Politics of Authentication" Gabriel S. Bamgbose argues that the authenticity of modern African poetry is marked by the intricate tie between African verse and African life in its diversities and complexities. Bamgbose examines the "modern" nature of African poetry, its oral roots, its treatment of colonial, and cultural nationalist issues, its issues of *négritude*, language, radical consciousness, gender, and its "international" nature. Bamgbose draws on the poetry of Okot p'Bitek, Taban Lo Liyong, and Frank Chipasula of East Africa, Tchikaya U Tam'si, Tati Loutard, and Gahlia Gwangwa'a of Central Africa, and Dennis Brutus, Agostinho Neto, and Luvuyo Mkangelwa of Southern Africa (he excludes poetry from West Africa, which has often taken the front space in critical discourse on modern African poetry). In doing so, he reveals that modern African poetry possesses a complex nature, a direct representation of the spirit, identities, and realities of Black Africa and Africans.

Gabriel S. BAMGBOSE

Modern African Verse and the Politics of Authentication

The task of mapping the nature of modern Black African poetry raises a series of problems because most studies present a homogenous outlook on the African poetic tradition. Frank Mowah claims that the term "modern" African poetry is "a political term ... It assumes also that there is something homogenous about the feature of poetry written in every part of Africa. This is not so" (99). Oyeniyi Okunoye has also castigated "the earliest approaches to the study of African poetry [since they tend] to construct a monolithic African poetic tradition" ("The Critical" 772). The discussion of modern Black African poetry has often raised fundamental questions about periodization, appropriate paradigms for its study, and its inclusion/exclusion from North African poetry. Irrespective of these problems, it is clear that like other forms of African literature, in modern Black African poetry, the political, social, economic, psychological, domestic, and spiritual experiences of Africa and Africans are evident. African poets' responses to these experiences or realities are not homogeneous because they are often influenced by the poet's individual class, gender, ethnicity, and ideology. This enhances the "sometimes opposing and apparently contradictory trends in the same literary tradition. This variety is healthy for the art [since it promotes its pluralistic outlook and] positive growth" (Ojaide, "New" 5). Moreover, it should be noted that changes in these experiences also necessitate changes in the poetic tradition. Poetry and arts among Africans, as Taunre Ojaide has observed have "always been utilitarian" ("New" 4). According to Romanus Egudu, modern Black African poetry "is intimately concerned with the African people in the African society [and in the Diaspora], with their lives in its various ramifications — cultural, social, economic, intellectual and political" (5). Kojo Senanu and Theo Vincent note that, "in essence, [Black African poetry] involves a people's appropriation of their material, as well as their cultural and spiritual heritage as these react against one another in history, because this is what, in the final analysis, gives them the authentic voice to express their identity" (8). Hence, Black African poetry is a creative appropriation of and engagement with every aspect of African life, both material and immaterial, as perceived by the poet.

In the article at hand, I discuss the nature of Black African poetry by examining a range of ideas that shape authentic African verse. I offer an overview of critical issues including its "modern" nature, its oral roots, its treatment of colonial, and cultural nationalist issues, and issues of *négritude*, the language question, radical consciousness, gender, and its "international" nature. Often, critical discourse on Black African poetry is dominated by the exploration of poetry from West Africa, which is understandable since West African writers have achieved a prominent presence. Thus I draw on nine poets from Eastern, Central, and Southern Africa. The poems of Okot p'Bitek, Taban Lo Liyong, and Frank Chipasula from East Africa, Tchikaya U Tam'si, Tati Loutard, and Gahlia Gwangwa'a from Central Africa, and Dennis Brutus, Agostinho Neto, and Luvuyo Mkangelwa from Southern Africa are subjected to literary analysis. Ayo Kehinde claims that "it is an indubitable fact that the postcolonial African [poetry], to a very great extent, reflects the realities of the continent. Actually, all works of art signify the relationship between the individual and his [or her] society ... [Consequently] the postcolonial African [poetry] is a site for the interplay of context and text" ("Rethinking" 87). And according to Herbert Igboanusi, "modern African literature [poetry] continues to reflect the African tradition which gives this literature a distinct identity and character" ("African" 219). This shows that it is a continuation of the oral poetic traditions in Africa as opposed to a legacy bestowed on Africa by Europeans as a result of contact and colonialism. The term "modern" does not connote "a departure from the old" (Mowah 99), but a recasting of the "old" poetic tradition in the "new" poetic tradition. Even the pioneer poets, as Donatus Nwoga claims, "were continuing the tradition of our vernacular literature" (122). According to Ojaide, "The concept of what is old or new is relative in African literary history ... the old and the new can be rooted in the same tradition. Literature is after all a part of culture, which is a dynamic process...though written in European languages of English, French and Portuguese, modern African literature [poetry] cannot be English, French or Portuguese; it carries African sensibility, culture, world view and response to the poet's own peculiar reality" ("New" 4). In discussing the "modern" nature of Black African poetry, one question that readily comes to mind is

how modern is this poetry? Thus in order to examine the measure of its modernity, we must consider literacy, orality, and the modernist movement in poetry.

Literacy has imposed some measures of modernity on the "old" tradition of oral poetry in Africa. Literacy is the colonial legacy of the "civilizing" mission to bring the Western culture of reading and writing to bear on the oral culture of Africa. Poetry is transmitted by educated Africans from what Walter Ong calls "primary oral verbalization" to "written verbalization" (6). According to Ong, "writing, commitment of word to space, enlarges the potentiality of language almost beyond measure, restructures thought, and in the process converts a certain few dialects into 'grapholects' ... A grapholect is a transdialectal language formed by deep commitment to writing. Writing gives a grapholect a power far exceeding that of any purely oral dialect" (7). Poetry as a craft in the hands of literate African poets has gone through a "grapholectal" process; as a result, poetic imagination is committed to "words in space" (Ong 7) as opposed to "words in the open air" and the use of writing effects "changes in mental and social structures" (Ong 6). Hence, "more than any other single invention, writing has transformed human consciousness" (Ong 77). This transformation in human consciousness, effected by the grapholectal process of communication, also transforms the nature of poetry in Africa. The revolution in Western poetry led by poets such as T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and Gerard Manley Hopkins also influenced African poets. The modernist movement is characterized by the search for new techniques for poetic expression and experimentation with language in order to achieve greater meaning (Nwoga 142-43). Most of the modern African poets are university trained and the Western education they are exposed to affords them the opportunity to acquire modernist techniques and this changes the outlook of poetry in Africa (see Ogunpitan 39; Ojaide, "New" 6; Omobowale 112). For instance, Brutus, a South African poet, was introduced to English poetry by his mother, who read Tennyson and Wordsworth to him (see Senanu and Vincent 116) and this exposure to the Western literary tradition blended with his African experience.

Orality is "sometimes associated with assumptions about the social and cognitive characteristic of oral communication or the significance of oral culture within broad stages of historical development" (Finnegan 6) and Abiola Irele identifies three levels of orality: the ordinary communication level, the rhetorical level, and the literary level and these levels of oral communication are inseparable since they "exist in a continuum" ("The African" 54-55). Isidore Okpewho also claims that modern African writers find recourse through oral literature in their art via translation, adaptation, and exploitation and this continued recourse to oral resources in modern African literary discourse serves "to demonstrate that traditional African culture is not obsolete but relevant for the articulation of contemporary needs and goals" (293). According to Kojo Senanu and Theo Vincent, "the achievement of modern African poetry is precisely this mental and emotional appropriation of this concrete and spiritual heritage" (8). Before the coming of the Europeans, rich oral tradition existed in Africa. Oral poetry, in its religious and secular forms, is prevalent in African societies. This oral tradition serves, Igboanusi posits, as the basis of modern African art ("African" 219). Oral tradition is the "creative strategy" (Ohaeto 170), which enriches modern Black African poetry and it is "central in the creative imagination of the modern African poets" (Igboanusi, "African" 220). That is why Taunre Ojaide and Tijan Sallah suggest that "classical oratures, as precursors to our literature, continue to exert strong influences on modern African poetry" (1).

Taban Lo Liyong, a Ugandan poet born to Southern Sudanese and Ugandan parents, has always displayed influence of a rich oral tradition in his works. Notable is his 1997 *Homage to Onyame: An African God* in which he projects the essence of African cosmology. In "Pre-Prayer," Lo Liyong adopts incantatory and supplicatory modes: "The hen firsts points the water in its mouth to the Sky God / before swallowing it" (11). The images in the poem capture the African milieu in its socio-cultural and spiritual consciousness: "The king first tastes the new yam in his mouth and takes / away the poison before sharing it. / The father first pours libation to the gods, spirits and / ancestors before sipping it" (11). The vital forces above human beings are given preeminence in the poem. Also, in the short imagistic poem "Invoking Sango, as One Leaves Home," invocation and repetitions are predominant: "Sango! Sango! Sango! / Sango Koso! Sango Koso! Sango Koso!" The repetition here is not emphatic but metaphysically symbolic; that is why it appears three times. The use of praise name epithets is also present in the poem (15). The praise name of "Sango Oba Koso" (Sango the king who did not hang himself) is re-echoed in "Affirming One's Faith in Sango": "Oba Koso; the king cannot hang

himself" (16). Other poems in the collection cover themes that are typical of African rites including cleansing, marriage, death, and a human's spiritual essence.

Okot p'Bitek, also a Ugandan poet, is "culturally conscious of Africa" in his poetic imagination (Nwoga 144). In fact, he has the tradition of writing in his Indigenous language, Acholi, before translating into English. This is an attribute he shares with Mazisi Kunene, a South African poet (Senanu and Vincent 152). p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino* alludes to the African sense of communalism: section twelve of the poem, subtitled "My Husband's House is a Dark Forest of Books," opens with "Listen, my clansmen / I cry over my husband / Whose head is lost / Ocol has lost his head / In the forest of books" (113). The use of "clansmen" reflects the social structure of African societies. Repetition and parallelism used in the third and fourth lines give the poem the sense of African rhythm and musicality. The expression "lost his head" is an example of what Igboanusi calls "collocational extension" ("African" 224). It represents an Africanized form of English. Other attempts at Africanizing English in the poem are reflected in the use of cushioning and imagery. p'Bitek's poem is also imbued with images which are typically African: we can see the use of Indigenous tropes through the poet's engagement of elements of African cosmic bodies like "the wizard / getting ready for the midnight dance," "the guinea fowl," "glowing charcoal," "raw yams" (37) and "the python's discarded skin" (54).

The scramble for Africa in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in which Africa was partitioned by European powers is a particularly prominent part of Black Africa's history. Colonialism has ravaged African societies and left indelible marks on its cultures, economies, and politics. The White brought their culture, education, and religion and superimposed them on Africans because they believed Africans had no culture, religion, or education. According to Egudu, "the African plight in the colonial era was organized by the material gods of the white men as embodied in the trinity of imperialism, capitalistic exploitation and militarism. Besides these forces, there were the cultural ones which were spiritually and psychologically exploitative in the sense that they tried to remold the Africans anew" (6). These colonial realities in their diversified forms in different African regions have generated various responses and reactions from African poets. In South, Central, and East Africa, James Tar Tsaaior posits that "poetry was seen as a revolutionary weapon for liberation from political domination, oppression and marginalization because of the peculiarities settler colonialism instituted and encouraged" ("Negotiating" 126; see also "Tropologies" <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1708>>). The apartheid system is dominant in South Africa and land domination in East Africa. Hence, poetry "became an indispensable expressive arsenal of organized resistance against the monumental forces of colonial domination, exploitation and oppression" (127).

Neto of Angola has participated in anti-colonial and nationalist activism that has earned him series of imprisonments. His "Fire and Rhythm" presents Africa in the "shackles" of suffering and oppression of colonialism. The poem is filled with the imagery of "rhythm" of violence which Africans are subjected to. The "bonfires" of suffering and the "grievous voices of Africa!" caused by colonialism, are x-rayed in the poem (Neto in Johnson 90-91). The imagery of fire is also echoed in "African Poetry": "Out of the horizon / There are fires/And the dark silhouette of the beaten / With arms outstretched/In the air, the green snail of burning palms" (Neto in Senanu and Vincent 79). Colonialism is cast in the metaphor of fire that consumes the "green" Africa. In Neto's work, the stifling nature of colonialism and the poet's resistance is expressed in ironic and paradoxical terms. Brutus of South Africa is another poet who preoccupies his poetic imagination with rage against apartheid system in his country during the colonial period. This anti-apartheid quest has earned him imprisonment, bullet wounds and finally exile. In "The Sun on this Rubble," Brutus exposes the dehumanizing and humiliating effects of apartheid with specific reference to the massacre at Sharpeville in 1960: "sun-stripped perhaps our bones may later sing / or spell out some malignant nemesis / Sharpvilled to spearpoints for revenging/but now our pride-dumbed mouths are wide / in wordless supplication" (Neto in Senanu and Vincent 118). The verbalization of the name of the place "Sharpeville" is aimed at the graphic representation of the violent acts unleashed upon its inhabitants at that point in time in the South African history in order to capture that traumatic memory in poetry. Further, in "Nightsong: city," Brutus uses the imagery of night and the violence of apartheid in South Africa, to describe how "the harbour lights glaze over restless docks, / police cars cockroach through the tunnel streets; / ... /

violence like a bug-infested rag is tossed / and fear is imminent as sound in the wind-swung bell; / the long day's anger pants from sand and rocks" (Brutus in Senanu and Vincent 124).

Similar to Neto, the subject of Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino* is the destruction of African cultural values by colonial religion and education. The character Ocol, who represents brainwashed Africans, becomes alienated from his culture as a result of colonial education and is reduced to "A dog of the white man!" (115). Lawino laments that "all our young men / Were finished in the forest, / Their manhood was finished / In the classrooms / Their testicles / Were smashed / With large books!" (117). Lawino also condemns the Christian missionaries for devaluing African religion. Colonialism, as voiced by Lawino, has not only affected African culture and religion, but it has also affected Africans' psychological outlook on themselves and this is well represented in the image of Tina in "The Woman With Whom I Share My Husband" (36-39).

The quest of the colonialists to make Europeans out of Africans through policies of assimilation gave birth to the philosophy of *négritude*. Emmanuel Ngara argues that "in terms of the policy of assimilation, members of the black intellectual elite who rejected their African identity could be accorded the status of French or Portuguese citizens ... Sooner or later, French and Portuguese colonial ideologies came face-to-face with African nationalism" (22). *négritude*, as a term, was first used by Aimé Césaire, a Martinique poet and politician in his poem *Return to my Native Land*. *négritude* as a movement is a viable tool of cultural nationalism (see, e.g., Ngara 22; Okunoye, "Francophone" 124) and according to Egudu, *négritude* as a philosophy or concept is ontological since it foregrounds the cultural being and existence of the "Negro" or Black. It is only in its objective that it is political, because it aims to fight the policy of assimilation and liberate African culture (31). There is a sense of alterity between the Black and the White in *négritude*. Leopold Sedar Senghor states that *négritude* is "the sum total of the values of the civilization of the African world" (99). Ngara identifies two schools of *négritude*: the idealist school which romanticizes black essence and the realist school which is revolutionary in its approach. The idealist school "tends towards a subjective and mystical interpretation of the African condition, while the realist school presents a revolutionary analysis of African history and the African predicament" (Ngara 31). Ngara establishes further that while the idealist school deals with cultural and philosophical issues, the realist school deals with historical and political issues. Generally, *négritude* is the "formal expression of the black nationalist consciousness — or to be more precise, of black cultural nationalism" (Irele, "What" 204).

Tachikaya U Tami'si, like Senghor, is associated with the idealist school of *négritude*. U Tami'si is from Congo Brazzaville who has lived in voluntary exile in France until his death. According to Gerald Moore, "U Tam'si appears to re-enact the hate affair with 'assimilation' which Damas and Senghor have played out before him" (105). In the poem "Viaticum (I)," whose title has an intertextual allusion to Birago Diop's "Viaticum," U Tami'si asks rhetorically: "All of us from the same umbilical cord/But who knows where we fetch/our awkward heads" (U Tami'si in Senanu and Vincent 144). This questions the ontology of being White or Black and there is a sharp discrimination between these beings as if they were not created by the same God. The poet's use of "head" as the essence of being is typically African. The typical quality of being African is reflected in the first stanza: "You must be from my country/I see it by the tick/Of your soul around the eyelashes/and besides you dance when you are sad" (U Tami'si in Senanu and Vincent 144). The poet also registers his "spite" for colonialism and its effect on Africans in the five-line heading of the poem, "I am full of spite with the sun" (U Tami'si in Senanu and Vincent 144). There is a play on color in the second stanza of the poem; the sharp contrast between the "light" and the "dark" is symbolic of racial differentiation. The poet urges Africans to preserve their culture, which defines their being Black: "and that, if it overflows, you mustn't light your lamp/We must have a dark corner somewhere/For our ancient orisons" (U Tami'si in Senanu and Vincent 144).

Neto is associated with poets of the realist school of *négritude* like David Diop (Ngara 27). The creative (re)engagement with the trauma of African history forms the artistic vision of his *négritude* poetry. In "Cruelty" the physical violence meted on Africans by the colonizers without any justifiable reason is projected. This leads to psychological violence for the oppressed that terminates their pre-colonial fun-filled life: "And suddenly / in the neighbourhood the dance ended / and faces hardened in the night" The color and image of "night" is foregrounded in the poem. Neto, like U Tami'si, also notes something peculiar about Africans: "From the lit-up town / Come bursts of laughter / of a cruel disgust

/ To render trivial / a daily event / Coming in the silence of the night" (Neto in Johnson 94). This shows that Africans are people with resilient spirits who can laugh and dance in the face of violence and oppression.

The question of language in modern African literature has always generated controversy. There are different schools of thought: those who advocate the use of Indigenous languages, those who uphold the use of "hybridized" European languages, and those who think the use of *patois* will do. It should be noted that this problem of language choice is a result of the heterogeneous or multilingual status of Black African societies and the legacy European languages left behind. Obiajunwa Wali faults the decisions made at the Conference of African Writers of the English Expression held in Makerere College in 1962. Wali argues that "the whole uncritical acceptance of English and French as the inevitable medium for educated African writing is misdirected and has no chance of advancing African literature and culture. In other words, until these writers and their western midwives accept the fact that any true African literature must be written in African languages, they would be merely pursuing a dead end, which, can only lead to sterility, uncertainty and frustration" (282). Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o also aligns his argument in the direction of Wali's view because of his notion that "any language, has a dual character: is both a means of communication and a carrier of culture" ("The Literature" 291, see also *Something*). Hence, African literature remains "colonized" if it is expressed in colonial languages and a foreign language cannot adequately capture the essence of African culture. On the other hand, Chinua Achebe advocates the use of "new English": "I feel that the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be a new English, still in communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings" (62). This comment implies that the domesticated, nativized or hybridized form of English should project the African experience in African writings (see Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin). Jaja Nwachukwu-Agbada claims that African writers use other strategies like a return to orality and experimentation with pidgin in their works (20). Igboanusi, in *Igbo English in the Nigerian Novel*, has worked extensively on how African writers have trapped African world-views in Western languages and argues that this blend of codes is inevitable because modern African literature/poetry is one of the "contact literatures" (217).

Modern African poets have hybridized language skillfully and were able to strike a balance between the "other tongue" and the "mother tongue" in order to subvert the language of the colonizers (see Barber 676-78) and produce a literary "third code" (Zabus 3). For instance, in Tati Loutard's "Congo, my Motherland," indigenized similes are used: "like oil singing in a frying pan / Dancing to the touch of fire," and "like moths / On a display board." Further, there is a display of indigenized metaphor in "her three-stone fireplace" and the imagery of the "Congo River" (Loutard in Johnson 74-75) and p'Bitek uses local words in such expressions as "Ororo snake" and "Kituba tree" in *Song of Lawino*. The imagery of "the bamboos" and "leaking roof" is foregrounded in Gahlia Gwangwa'a's "Leaking Roof" (Gwangwa'a in Ojaide and Sallah 127-28).

Taban Lo Liyong inputs local expressions and images throughout in his poems. Let us consider these lines from "Mawu Makes Do With Left-Overs": "Mawu, poor God of Ewes / Like the extravagant wife / Always does not have enough dough: / Intent on feeding guests / She heaped more *gari* on elders' plates / And had to feed kids on redone crumbs" (17). The flora and fauna of African cosmos attain an imaginative relevance in the poem through its linguistic recourse to the literary third code. The degree at which these poets exploit the folkloric resources justifies the fact that the poetry could not have been written by anyone else but Africans.

Mowah's thesis that "Modern African poetry is a product of conflict, political schisms and experiences which have characterized the African world since the coming of the Europeans in the sixteenth century" confirms that radical consciousness and protest tradition is as old as Black African poetry itself (99). African poets have always protested against one anomaly or another in African societies. Perhaps, the will to voice their discontentment with socio-political ills has always shaped their imagination. This implies that revolutionary and radical consciousness has been at the heart of poetic preoccupation in Africa, because African experiences and realities have always been dotted with colonial and neocolonial predicaments. African poets have always reacted to these predicaments in their poetry because the poet "is a member of the society, and the content and style of his work are affected by social reality" (Egudu 2).

Neto and Brutus are poets of the transitional phase who have protested against colonialism radically. Neto, like other Lusophone poets, expresses "militant reaction ... anger, disgust and protest against Portuguese colonial exploitation" (Ogunpitan 41). Brutus expresses the same temper against the apartheid system in South African. In "To Adorn Your Hair" Neto expresses his love and commitment to his culture using the imagery of a woman, Maria Eugenia, to whom the poem is dedicated:

... our hearts are choked
in the iron bars
where freedom dies
... roses shall ever grow
I shall go and pick them
from the farthest prairies
from the least accessible mountains
in the chasms
in the friendship
and the distance which unites us. (Neto in Johnson 92-93)

After colonialism, neo-colonialism sets in. Corruption, abuse of power, oppression, injustice, and all other sorts of problems bedevil post-colonial Africa (see, e.g., Omobowale 119). Modern African poets of the Marxist/revolutionary phase attacked these socio-political issues in their poetry. Oluwatoyin Jegede explains that "this focus on current socio-economic issues is a shift from white/black conflict to black/black dialectics" (140). Gahlia Gwangwa'a shows a commitment to the masses in his poem "Leaking Roof." Like a prophet, he warns of imminent ruins coming to the "house," which symbolizes Africa states. Here is a poet asserting his long violated right to speech: "Leave me to say it. / Others also have better ideas / But won't speak out 'cause / They have no courage." The poet urges the people to "Act now before it's / Too late to do anything (Gwangwa in Ojaide and Sallah 128)." Frank Chipasula, a Malawian poet, in "Manifesto on Ars Poetica" claims that poetry should "undress our land and expose her wounds / ... point light ... into the dark / Nooks where our people are pounded to pulp" (24-25). The poet renders his poetic preoccupation thus: "I will not wash the blood off the image; / I will let it flow from the gullet / Slit by the assassin's dagger through / The run-on line until it rages in the verbs of terror; / And I will distill life into the horrible adjectives. / I will not clean the poem to impress the tyrant" (25). In the hand of this poet, poetry is a means of awakening the sedated giants in the masses.

Women have always been victims of oppression and subjugation under the patriarchal culture that is prevalent in most African societies. However, although they are culturally relegated to a marginal position, in African oral literature "women were very visible not only as performers but as producers of knowledge especially in view of oral literature's didactic relevance, moral(izing) imperatives and pedagogical foundations" (Nnaemeka 138; see also Akujobi, "African," "Motherhood" <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1706>>; Olatunji <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2176>>; Uko). The relegation of women causes the late arrival of women in the modern African literature dominated by men and their phallogocentric ideology. Echoing Obi Maduakor's claim about women's voicelessness, Ojaide states that "while poetry appears to be the commonest literary mode for self-expression and is thriving well these days, women hence not made a strong mark in the poetry scene, in contrast to their achievements in fiction and drama" (*Poetic* 16). This claim may not be valid now. As Aderemi Raji-Oyelade has noted, women have "established an ethereal presence" in the poetic canon in Africa (2).

Luvuyo Mkangelwe is a South African female poet. She expresses the voice of women yearning for freedom, visibility, voice, and choice. In "The Women Sing" we hear the voices of women singing "to conquer the thoughts / of the day's orders" and making "drum-like sounds" using "their strong hands." While the metaphor of "the day's orders" signifies the dominant, stifling patriarchal order, the metaphor of "strong hands" implies the women's caged strength that seeks to be exercised, their hidden talents seeking freedom. The poet's repetition of "The women sing" foregrounds the message of the poem: "The women sing! / The women sing / To be free // The women sing / to possess themselves / For a moment / at least!" (Mkangelwe in Ojaide and Sallah 92). Further, Mkangelwe registers her concern for class inequality in the highly philosophical poem "Observations." She shows

the disparity between the rich and the poor: "Children play with dolls & toys / others play in mud and dust, / ... / A man commands/another compiles / ... / Some live in cans / others in mansions" (Mkangelwe in Ojiade and Sallah 91). Her play on binary opposites echoes the racial segregation of the apartheid system in South Africa and the Whites in the advantaged center, while the Blacks are the "Other" on the disadvantaged margins. Mkangelwe resolves the tension in the poem by stating that nature and death are levelers; they do not discriminate in terms of color or class: "We only breathe the same air / live in the same planet / & die the same way" (Mkangelwe in Ojiade and Sallah 91) and this reveals the futility of power.

Many of the modern African poets are diasporic since "migration is a dominant feature of modern life" (Kehinde, "Memories" 148). The modern world is, metaphorically, without borders; therefore, people move from place to place, and in the process of their migration, they acquire different identities. In Africa, many writers have become migrants as a result of forced or self-imposed exile or "search [for] better life, security and sustenance" (Kehinde, "Memories" 149). The movement of the writers across the borders of Africa also means the movement of poetry. Hence, modern African poetry has crossed the borders of Africa and has attained global standing. The voice of the (im)migrants or "international" African poets is connected to their African roots. Although they battle with crises of identity as a result of their displacement and dislocation from home, their poetic voice is characteristic of typical Africans. Alongside capturing their diasporic or exilic experiences through poetry, they maintain a strong commitment to the cultural, socio-economic, and political realities of Africa and Africans.

Frank Chipasula is a Malawian poet of diaspora who lives in the U.S. as a result of his exile from the dictatorship of Hastings Kamuzu Banda, the leader of Malawi from 1961 to 1994 (see Ojaide and Sallah 24). In "A Love Poem for my Country," the poet rages: "I have nothing to give to you, but my anger / And the filaments of my hatred reach across the border. / You, you have sold many and me to exile. / Now shorn of precious minds, you rely on / What hands can grow to build your crumbling image." His rage is kindled, ironically, against his country, which he loves despite the ugly experiences of his exile: "The days have lost their song and salt; / We feel bored without our free laughter and voice / Every day thinking the same and discarding our hopes" (Chipasula in Ojaide and Sallah 26). The fact that the poet laments the scattering of his country's human resources signifies that he has the love of his country at heart and that his rage is directed at the dictatorship: "And our dreams are charred chapters of your history." The poem ends on an optimistic tone, hopeful that the days of the evil and oppressive regime will soon be over: "I know a day will come and wash away my pain / And I will emerge from the night breaking into song/Like the sun, blowing out these evil stars" (Chipasula in Ojaide and Sallah 26). And the opening of Loutard's poem carries the gravity of what it means to live in exile: "There is nothing I dread more than exile / The loss of my sun spilled over the waves" (Loutard in Johnson 74). The harsh weather condition, the loss of "Self" and identity, and the anguished memory of home contribute to the persona's dread of exile. When children are scattered in exile, the mother also suffers: "And my mother wet with anguish / in front of her three-stone fire place / Oh how many poets, in the lands of the North, / Carry an unending nostalgia for the Tropics / The sorrows in their writings spread out like moths / On a display board" (Loutard in Johnson 74).

In conclusion, modern Black African poetry conveys the complexities of the African spirit, realities, and worldview on the one hand and the complexities and multiplicities of African identity on the other hand. It encodes African realities and experiences in their diverse and complex forms and this gives credence to the claim that the "boundary between text and context is often so thin or blurred that it becomes difficult to distance texts from their enabling situations," because modern Black African poetry is "immersed in the historical and the social" (Okunoye, "Pan-Africanism" 57). I argue that modern Black African poets, in different times and spaces, have woven history, memory, and contemporary issues into contemporary verse and explored the resources of African folkloric elements thus establishing continuity between African oral/traditional and written/modern poetic traditions. This gives modern Black African poetry its true African essence and authenticity. Although its emergence has been influenced by Western poetic tradition, modern Black African poetry has been able to (re)authenticate itself by describing its own world.

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Author's profile: Gabriel S. Bamgbose teaches literature at Tai Solarin University of Education. His interests in scholarship include African literature, African American poetry, gender studies, postcolonial studies, literary theory and criticism, poetic and dramatic literature, and creative writing. Bamgbose's recent publications include "The Black Man's Ordeals: A Postcolonial Reading of Kofi Anyidoho's *Ancestral Logic & Caribbean Blues*," *The African Symposium: An Online Journal of the African Educational Research Network* (2013) and "Naturalist Aesthetics in John Millington Synge's *Riders to the Sea* and *The Playboy of the Western World*" (2013). He has also published poetry in *Sankofa Magazine*, *Ijagun Poetry Journal*, and *BareBack Magazine* among others. E-mail: <gabrielbamgbose@yahoo.com>