

**AFRICAN LITERARY *TOPOI* IN MODERN AFRICAN TEXTS AND THE  
PROBLEMATICS OF EUROPHONE FORMS**

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**Abstract:** *This article treats selected oral poems whose topoi or motifs have transcended time and space to play out themselves in modern African fictions where colonial languages and their consequent habits of thought serve as media of enunciation. Thereafter, it beams attention on African scholars and writers who have attempted, presumably, to translate the oral medium of expression into indigenous and/or colonial written form(s) while maintaining the navel-strings that linked them, through the transfer of topoi and from the local and indigenous language to the Europhone form which, though, has led to international recognition, also serves to affirm a classic consequential illustration of the zero sum game*

**Keywords:** *African oral literature, African novel, African poetry, Europhone forms, topoi.*

## **1. Introduction**

Civilisation and culture, indistinguishable at any particular time, are symbiotes – a connection largely and readily useable in any particular context. Both are ingrained in and, in turn, are affected by a people who have practised them with the aid of time, cultivation and habit. Out of the world civilization and culture, Africa has carved out its own peculiar literary tradition. It has been able to do so owing to its peoples' common ancestry with other humans as *homo sapiens*. Africa's contribution to world ancient literary culture is technically termed: African oral (traditional) poetry. It is traditional in the sense that they are handed over generationally through the oral medium, or what Strauss articulates as diffusion (209-221). Today, apart from the heydays of Okot p'Bitek whose proven skills and dexterity in translations and adaptations in Acholi, his native Ugandan language, resulting to the *Song of Lawino* (1966) and *Song of Ocol* (1970), alongside several others, before they were translated into English, on one hand, and Adeboye Babalola's seminal translations of narratives and poetry from the Yoruba to English, most works are written in modern European languages and forms in our present era.

Scholars believe that some of the present set of works has been obviously influenced by African folklore like riddles, proverbs, oral narrative story-line and so on. This is true. But they have also, surprisingly, overlooked the perceptible and somewhat imperceptible oral poetic *topoi* or motifs, the recurrent poetic formulas that these works posit. A careful probe will discover that

some of the embedded oral poetic *topoi* of love, unity, power, death, death and revival, and offering, in modern African works are evident. This article intends to investigate, therefore, some modern African texts in order to identify their correlations and establish the fact that these African works have been remotely, whether the writers were aware or not, influenced by oral poetic *topoi*. The *topoi* are by no means univalent: they are as fluid and can be readily understood as being in the vicinity of *themes*.

But what was the status of oral works before writing trapped them and before they emerged in modern African works? It is worthy of mention that despite oral poetry being a long time appurtenance of Africa's cultural life, there was a disheartening situation, the sort Senanu and Vincent calls "the unfortunate situation" "where traditional poetry as serious art worthy of attention has been ignored for a long time and has only recently commanded the attention it deserves from African scholars" (1988:12). These African scholars, foremost of whom were p'Bitek and Babalola but later Soyinka, Achebe and a host of others, were to engage in a typical rescue mission consisting of translations, adaptations, borrowings, and so forth from these oral spheres and their embedded *topoi*, exploring same in the three genres of literature in which they wrote and researched.

European (conventional literary and) stylistic containments such as language, genre, stanzas, metres and other discursive structures and conventions could really avail little in seizing and sizing up this oral works during the process of translation and transplantation because of their fluid nature. As a result, instances abound where this literature glides into songs, dance, dirges, chants, epics, lyrics, religious poetry, praise-poetry, occupational poetry, the poetry of abuse, satires, narratives, and so on, even in all the various sub-strata of the sub-genres mentioned above. Rather than take this fluidity as a disadvantage, we can say it accounts for its worthiness and richness. I have no intention to go into scheming its genres, but it is enough to state that they are poetic, rich in imagery and devoid of noviceal representation of ethical life as was once supposed. Therefore, they are not excused from the imprints of modern literary forms. Here is the view Senanu and Vincent hold concerning oral poetry (literature): "the unequivocal recognition that poetry in one form or another is a cultural heritage of all peoples who have rational conceptions of what it is" (12). Since all peoples have this heritage, no definitions could limit its nature and must have modern poetry or literature captured it. Here is how they expressed the possible damage done by any seeming misconception: "The true origin and nature of poetry tend to become blurred by the overly conscious and highly artistic written forms of modern poetry" (12).

Senanu and Vincent, above, in expressing a possible damage done to oral poetic materials using the prism of modern poetry, seem to chart a course that collapses Western stylistic definitions of poetry in order to capture that of oral literature. A set of terms counting in their favours is: "the overly conscious and highly artistic written forms of modern poetry" (12). The notion of *scribere* as emptying of subjectivity is privileged here. We may not go into the crannies of how written poetry has come to be, such as whether primordial man's language and voice are convergent issues at the point of the poet's scribbling or not. But one acknowledges,

with respect to this article, that colonial and post-colonial discourses are in the colonial language (or do we have to say {post-} colonial language?) whether it is written as a translation from the vernacular language or as a translation from one colonial language to another, as was the case with Diop's and other Francophone poets' works. The terms "colonial" and "post-colonial" are used here in their very literal and unspecialised senses.

With the infiltration of Western forms in the translation of the traditional is the problematic of the notion of 'African literature'. African and non-African scholars have asked "whether there was such a thing as 'African literature' as the new works which are now so designated were all in European languages" (Akwanya 2005:9). Akwanya offers a reason why scholars are sore with the term: "perhaps the real reason for the unease with an 'African literature' in which we encounter not an African, but a European language is that it takes away from the vernacular the element in which it might grow and renew itself" (2005:11). Because of this major challenge, African literature faces an uphill task of helping to renew the European language's Other, a sufficient reason for African languages' foreseeable extinction with the passage of time no matter how long; or to be a little more optimistic, the Other's stagnancy and eventual redundancy amidst the gradual and forceful seismic advance and encroachment of globalisation so called. In all ramifications, European languages and its forms are the overlords. Could we not begin to see glimpses of how Africans under-develop themselves culturally?

Coming back to Senanu and Vincent's assertions behind, we discover that some issues and terms raised in those assertions are very fundamental in setting the background of this article. Some of them are: "rational conceptions", "cultural heritage of all peoples", and "overly conscious and highly artistic written forms of modern poetry." We shall make out these in explicatory and expatiating terms in due course. But for poetry to be ascribed to as the "cultural heritage of all peoples" and, as Achebe puts it, "a derivative of the universal creative rondo" (2008:6), it affirms the authenticity that the object called *poetry*, that is, the art properly called poetry, may not be genre-specific after all as we know it conventionally today.

There is need to examine this generic nonspecificity because of its overall import to the direction of this paper, that is, in identifying what oral poetry is, its structure, and how it permeates modern written texts in Western forms and the attendant negative corollaries. This generic non-specificity can also be perceptible in Aristotle's account of human action (*praxis*). *Praxis*, he believes, could be "primarily imitated by histories, or verbal structures that describe specific and particular action" while *mythos* is a secondary imitation of an action as differentiated from reality and histories (Frye 1957:82, 83). *Theoria* is imitated by "discursive writing", that is, conventional writing style where words are placed alongside another in a very long string beginning from the first page and ending at the last. Now, a *dianoia* is a "secondary imitation of thought" (*theoria*) which is preoccupied with "typical thought, images, metaphors, diagrams, and verbal ambiguities" from where flows specific ideas (83). This adumbration forms the direction of the primitive core of our beings as humans and the appurtenance of every man as affirmed by Heidegger when he said that "the speech of genuine thinking is by nature poetic" (1971:x). Continuing, Heidegger posits in a way that is relevant to Frye's thought that the needfulness of

taking “the shape of verse” is uncalled for as “the opposite of the poem is not prose”, for “pure prose” if it qualifies as literature, “is as poetic as any poem” (x). Here is Aristotle’s and Frye’s accomplice, and whose footsteps this article tows concurring that “poetry is more historical than philosophy” and more involved “in images and examples” (83). Therefore, one can surmise that the *mythos* being the *dianoia* in movement and the *dianoia* being the *mythos* in stasis, resulting in “*mimesis*”, is what is meant by “*poiesis*” (Ricoeur 1981a: 180). This is poetry of the very poetic sort irrespective of the genre it appears in. It is characteristic great classics possess in bounteousness. In a sense, the term ‘poetry’ here is transgeneric as well as pro-generic – a reason why *topoi* are recurrent and permeative. As a result, wherever *topoi*, these recurrent poetic formulas of love, unity, power, death, death and revival, and offering are evident, traceable to and from, there this article would focus its attention irrespective of the genre in which *topoi* are found.

By settling the facts that the word “poem” or “poetry” is an all-inclusive technical nomenclature and that traditional poems are serious art-forms dealing with the range of human experiences as dreams that conjure up whole worlds, embody rich figurative language and present beautiful pictures in words, we also need to acknowledge that poetry contains deep reflections about the world and man’s place in it (Achebe 2008:13). Soyinka tells us that: a thorough “examination of traditional poetry reveals that it too is built on a densely packed matrix of references. . . . This progression of linked allusions towards an elucidation of the experience of reality is the language of all poets” (1975:15). Because these poems are collectively owned, they remain the product of the ethnic nationalities in which they are found as against the individual property rights ascribed to modern poems or African works of works nowadays.

A great many efforts have been made to “rewrite” this traditional literature and then, where possible, in an extreme instance, deform the Standard English in a way that makes it serve the poet indeed. This way, the earlier thought pattern would still be in place, but in a novel form, resulting in a kind of “new wine in an old skin.” The following from Gabriel Okara’s *The Voice* would probably hit home this fact:

How or where do you think you will find *it* when everybody surface-water-things tell, when things have no more root? How do you expect to find *it* when fear has locked up the insides of the low and the insides of the high are filled up with nothing but yam? Stop looking for *it*. Stop suffering yourself (1964, 34).

At another instance, we are shown that:

Only a mad man looks for *it* in this turned world. Let him look for *it* in the wide world if he can find it. But we don’t want him to stay here asking, “Have you *it*? Have you *it*? Have you *it*? Even in our sleep we hear him asking. We do not know what *it* is. We do not want to know. Let us be as we are. We do not want our insides to be stirred like soup in a pot. We do not want to be troubled by one whose inside is filled with water. So, let us be (72).

The question of this language permeating poetry is not, in the slightest, in doubt. It is not only in prose fiction that this happens. The genre of drama and its dramaturgy is another. The dramaturgy of African plays in European languages has been vigorously debated since the 1960s (Darah 2008:xxxviii). But borrowing and debts are not new in literature either, Kristeva has called *intertextuality* while Quayson termed it *interdiscursivity* (1997:36; 16). There have been ample instances where “European playwrights” are found to be indebted to other (earlier) traditions (Darah 2008: xxxviii). But in the above case as well as those that would be established in this article, the debt appears to be in paradoxical totality, in excess of what it borrows and, also in deficiency of what it reveals as having been borrowed. I shall take pains to explain these shortly.

Now, concerning oral poetry, the media of speaking and listening are very essential in the transmission, liveliness, and being of oral literature, the latter being “the first point of” one’s “encounter with language” (Akwanya 2005: 54). They were transmitted in African languages, a process that was unhindered by the colonial presence. For instance, Gates, Jr. pointed out this manifestation from Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road* in his review thus,

Ben Okri, by plumbing the depths of Yoruba mythology, has created a political fable about the crisis of democracy in Africa and throughout the modern world. More than that, however, he has ushered the African novel into its own post-modern era through a compelling extension of traditional oral forms that uncover the future in the past (1992).

Despite its plumbing into in colonial language, folklore can never really be apprehended, for the poetic object existing in an autochthonous domain is apprehended by an alien but familiar language and habit of thought.

The last phase of the switch, of *plumbing the depths* of indigenous mythologies and *topoi* in modern Europhone forms and languages brought about fresh problematics. This time, unlike the problems that accompany translation, they occur in both the colonial languages and the *topoi*. At a time, the audience a writer writes for was part of it until some of us came to agree with Frye, Eliot, Jung, and others, that any literary work worth its salt should be engendered in and from the common ground of homogeneous ancestry – the core literary tradition and the total body of literature from the ancients to now. These modern African writers were to appropriate European discursive structures as they mediated the ancient African idiom. One of the foremost and most effective appropriator in Black Africa in the novelistic genre is Chinua Achebe. Lloyd declares that Achebe:

consciously expropriate the European’s literary techniques, and related perceptual values, in order to postulate an African, or even anti-European, point of view. Hence he constantly borrows European historiography in order to explode the notorious myth that Africans have no history (qtd. in Sugnet 1996:89).

What he said about the deft use of the deformative technique by Chinua Achebe holds, considerably, for several other African writers irrespective of the genre their works took. In their cases, it may have been a “myth” or it could have been some other things. Definitely, these ‘some other things’ were and are at the service of some distinct variegated *topoi*, or vice versa. The *topoi* analysed in this article are by no means representative. But they do, from these analyses, indicate the serial and variegated ways in which they, from traditional African poems, have influenced modern African texts.

## 2. The *Topoi*

These *topoi* are garnered from a majority of imagery in a particular poem. The *topos* of the Ethiopian (Amharic) poem, “Love Song” is that of love. The figurative language that litters this poem of 30 lines is that of hyperboles, similes and metaphors. It is not surprising because the poem itself is a praise directed to a loved one. The range of movement is from comparisons and exaggerations to the following rapturous burst:

When she opens her heart –  
The Saviour’s image!  
And Jerusalem herself, sacred city,  
Shouts “Holy, Holy!”

The word “opens” implicates and collocates with words like “lid”, “door”, “case” and so on, but not “heart.” And it is because “open” is used with “heart” that brings about the following exclamatory and rapturous remarks that connote joy, expressing the bliss that accompanies the discovery of an oversearched and overly desired object, which in this case, is a lady’s love. The speaker’s exclaim echoes Archimedes’ legendary “Eureka”, an indication of the intensity of desire building up in the speaker towards his love-object which, at the end, privileges the *topos* of love, quest and discovery and holds the poem together that finally culminates in an outburst of ecstasy.

In an apparent discussion mode, the speaker in an untitled poem, christened “Swahili Poem” for this paper’s sake, enunciates the motif of unity: “Woman cannot exist except by man,” “cleave unto your man,” “when man goes on his road, . . . he goes with a friend, for he who/ walks alone has no good fortune,” “the sand-mote is in one’s eyes,” “a friend is needed to help remove it” and many more. If this plea for unity and togetherness is unheeded by all and sundry in the present time, at least, in their apartness and incapacity to will unity today, they, the rich man and the poor, will one day get over this schism and “join hands across the shroud” undermining their earlier wills. “Shroud” here literally means the piece of cloth with which a dead man is wrapped, but bears behind this literal meaning, a symbol of death that levels all, which the rich and the poor would forcibly and equally participate in and partake of. This participation is the unity of all. Perhaps, the realisation of unity in death which could not be achieved while they were alive is a necessary figment for observation and thought.

The *topos* of nobility, bravery and heroism prevails as well in the South African (Zulu) oral poem, “Ndela, Son of Sompisi” building up to the level where the community of selfhood defends itself from an aggression or tries to conquer another and impose a dominion. Such is Ndela, the son of Sompisi, the person by whom this poem is named. He is one of the “Rattlers of spears” whose side is “red with wound” and whose “wounds are as numerous as the huts of a large Kraal”. Consequently, he finds it difficult to lie down. This circumstance provokes echoes of his past heroic deeds and how he comes about those numerous wounds. Throughout his campaign, “they stab the Rattler but he retaliates”. Rather than relent, he attacks “people with fury” securing more wounds “in the face”. From this poem, the motif of bravery, leading to war, pain and the major characteristic of Yeats’s rough beast, the inflicting of pain, is gradually enunciated, for he is the “Great branch”. Towards the end of the poem, the motif of bravery is later reechoed, this time not in the least suggesting the dispatch to battle but the sewing of the numerous gashes. A rhetorical question suggests the magnitude of these wounds: “Have you a piece of gut long enough/To sew up Ndela’s wounds?” and also dares the courage of whoever could deem himself brave enough to come forth.

The above mentioned *topos* of nobility, heroism, and bravery is also implicated here in the Nigerian (Yoruba) poem, “Salute to the Elephant”. Although it is popularly ascribed to as an Ijala, a hunter’s chant, which is a famous and respected sequence in Yoruba oral literary culture, it is to be seen here as a panegyric poem exuding the *topos* of power, nobility, bravery and heroism, and igniting around itself, a mixture of aura of awe and joy. The principal image here is the “elephant” folklorically known as the king of animals. The remote meaning it invokes is that of “the rough beast” (Akwanya and Anohu 2001:153). The semblance in characteristics and nature are evident in the metaphors and hyperboles used in reference to the elephant: “enfolded by honour,” “demon flapping fans of war,” “Mountainous Animal,” “Huge Beast” “who tears a man like a garment,” “veritable ferry’s veritable water-jars,” “Ajanaku”, which means “killer of Ajana”, and “primeval leper.” Awe and disgust are invoked and raised from these. “O elephant” is repeated severally in honour of power and in provocation of the *topos* of power is underneath the expressions of disgust and awe in this poem.

In addition, what gathers in the space of the Nigerian (Yoruba) poem, “Incantation to Cause the Rebirth of a Dead child” are unity, deception, death and rebirth and their which are the fulcrum which are flashes of allusions and incidents mentioned in the poem. From lines 1-2, “Death” catches the “hunter with pain,” “Eshu” does same to the “herbalist in a sack . . .” In lines 3-15, “Death” or rather “death” is implicated, but in several varying ways. While Shonponna, a snake, “dies” and in the end, takes all its children with it; it uses the “invisible calabash” in *killing* ten score persons. The origin of the invisible calabash is traceable to Eshu, who, in line 2 gave the invisible calabash to Shonponna. “Black soil” is associated with “earth” and “red soil” to “heaven” where the gateway from one to the other is through the grave. The idea of death that commenced at the beginning of the poem is further clarified in the last four lines when the speaker directly addresses his child:

You my child,

Oludande, you born-to-die,  
Return from the red soil of heaven,  
Come and eat the black soil of this world.”

Now, the issue or motif of death and rebirth, or rather the cycle of birth and death (rebirth) or creation and re-creation with all its adjoining mythical implications is enunciated here.

The motif of death and rebirth or of cycle is also seen in Fulani’s “The Fulani Creation Story” where it is further stretched. The human mind imbues meaning with anything that catches his attention properly. What is found in the Fulani poem is a metaphoric space where distensions and extensions are possible forming the basis for myth creation, as it is for all people. There is constant interplay of two axes of interaction in the above poem – the vertical and the horizontal axes. While the vertical axis monitors, moderates and improves on the activities taking place in the horizontal level, the horizontal axis just proceeds altering itself as the same element is converted to some other elements in the hands of the Creator and moderator. The motifs of cycle and creation, defeat, sequence or cycle are what the interaction of the two axes enunciates.

The defeat of death, mortals’ greatest enemy and the most powerful tool of oppression, evil, and wickedness, is very thought-provoking:

Doondari descended for the third time,  
And he came as Gueno, the eternal one.  
And Gueno defeated death.”

There are implications and echoes of apocalypses and eternal supremacy of Christ and the Almighty by which the Christian religious discourse is framed and structured. One also finds the principle of the present entity always getting defeated by the potency of future ones. As a creation poem, it has veritable elements that have influenced later works by Africans.

In the context of “The Fulani Creation Story”, Death is vanquished, defeated by Gueno, and this is ably privileged in a latter chapter of time before his presence in Ghana’s (Akan’s) “Owusu” at an earlier chapter when people used to fall to his fire and power. A few words enunciating the idea of the supremacy and overlordship of the dead so destroyed by Death in (Akan’s) “Owusu” are: “father” which is repeated, “killer of hunger, My Saviour” whose “footprints are on all paths” and some verbal elements like “depend, confer, the slender arm full of kindness.” The dead rather than death are honoured here. Other vocabulary implicating the meaning of honour and praise, or if permitted, a dirge-praise, wherein, typical of Akan dirges, the dead man’s name is coupled with the names of his ancestors whose achievements are enumerated through the techniques of praise-words, adjectives, verbs and nouns. In this poem, the motif of death is still very much explored, but in the dimension in which the dead is classified as a guardian, who is very much interested in the affairs of the living who depend on him. The dead as a protector or death as a gateway for their enhancement of fortunes is discoverable in this poem.

Unlike the motif of death-revival, the motif of power is identified in the Nigerian (Igbo) poem, “Breaking Kola Nut” where the weak, supplicates before the super-being with alternating natures. The weak’s gift also possesses alternate natures. Only this gift could make a super-



person glad, for since “Every man has a price” – as it is said in *A Man for all Seasons*, it is possible that every super(natural)-being has his terms. If we examine the “concept of offering,” we will find that it is universal to all religions and customs. It only takes different turns and variations, but the central principle and motive which are either for placation or devotion are the same. Power and offering contest for prominence in this poem. Other sub-motifs channel their meanings to these. Offering and sacrifice have a way of co-occurring. Sometimes, one could substitute for the other. When the speaker intones the vocative, “God the Creator,” dignity, reverence and almightiness are evoked altogether. After several qualifications, he lets out his purpose: “It is KOLA I bring!/ It’s all I can offer!” Alongside the offering and prayers he makes for himself and his well-wishers that they be blessed. But he must qualify for those blessings; hence, he says:

And you can judge;  
 If I’ve ever touched the wife of a relation  
 Or seen the nakedness of a sister;  
 If I’ve ever stolen what belongs to any human being  
 Or oppressed a widow or cheated an orphan;  
 Or borne false witness, or spoken calumny;  
 If I’ve killed any human being  
 With knife or spear,  
 Or arrow or rope,  
 Or poison or witch-craft,  
 If I’ve done any of these things,  
 May this our land  
 And the Mother Earth EAT ME!  
 But if none of these is my guilt . . .

The blessings including deliverance from his enemies and evil-intending spirit via the invocation of the principle of Hindi *karma* and Greek *nemesis* and many others which he prays for and which must flow to him from the super-being. Thereafter, he breaks “the KOLA NUT”. The exploration of the situation of offering, the offeror and the offeree, reveals to us that the offeror, who is also the inferior, must be grateful and meek, while the other who is willing to accept offerings and able to bless because his is stronger than and superior to the offeror, should be able to relish the offering.

So far, these *topoi*: offering, power, (dis)unity, death (or rebirth), love (discovery) and bravery (war) are found in generous measures and instances in various oral African literary poems and, as this article seeks to prove, abound in modern African fiction. Again, we must not forget that these poems are written in colonial language(s) which made them to be accessible besides the weightier fact that their original equivalents are not available. This lack of the

original or the loss of the original in the translation into the language of colonial legacy has an overall effect on African literary tradition.

### 3. The *Arche* and Their Referents

From *archetype* we derive the term '*arche*' which suits the reference to earlier appearances of *topoi* in a literary tradition. The *topoi*, or motifs above – “recurrent poetic concepts or formulas,” have transcended time and space, as ancients and *arches*, to emerge play out themselves through further recreations, in modern African texts as possible *referents* (Abrams 1988:110). The *arches*, the very first serial points of the emergence of *topoi* of today, are related to *topoi*. For a case in point, the *topos* of cycle in “The Fulani Creation Story” is the operating principle of civilization and modernity which intones and connects those other oral poems in which further elucidations in modern African literary texts as we have it today is offered. This connection is in implicit ways.

Beside transcending time and space, the *topoi* in the above poems possess peculiar features of universality which are not met in the mainstream of African literature, but also in world literary traditions earning what Frye has termed, a “*characteristica universalis*” (Frye 1969, 19). For example, the *topos* of offering – acceptance/rejection of an offering – is which is found in Ayi Kwei Arma’s *The Beautiful Ones are Not Yet Born* is what elongates the plot. Although, in this case, it is not the offering of a gift to the supernatural and protector by the help-seeker and worshipper we find in “Breaking the Kolanut”, it is an offering to induce one who holds and controls a superior and beneficial booty or advantage into passing by a rule that hitherto hindered, the ‘lesser’ from having ‘abundant’ life. The man’s refusal of allurements makes him experience the lees of life and puts him in straits. At another instance, a very important but minute prop to the speedy progress in the tragic drive in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* can be seen to be offering. Okonkwo has to offer one thing or the other to the gods, the elders, the people, and his future in order to make progress in life and belong to the community of his forebears. Another is the offering of respect to the dead during the burial of Ogbuefi Ezeudu, the acclaimed oldest man in the clan who merits it. It is in this circumstance, at the burial of an old son of the clan, that Okonkwo murders unknowingly a young son of the clan. This is not really like offering kola nut to God as we find in “Breaking the Kola Nut”, but there is a seeming similarity in that each is believed to dwell in the same region of the unseen, an after-here, that is accessible only through death. Moreover, Okonkwo’s greatness is not got from nothing. If it were so, it would be no greatness as his father’s case was. But he offers his strength, vision, ingenuity and discipline to achieve it. So are all the elders that have got a title or two in Umuofia. In fact, this *topos* of offering is the symmetrical element that divides the society in two: the privileged and the less privileged.

The same *topos* in *Things Fall Apart* is in participation with the concept of *chi*, a kind of unseen but principally conscious entity that wields influence and power over the individual in Okonkwo’s world. The power of the *chi* implicates the *topos* of power starting from ancient oral literary culture to the modern textual enunciations of same. As is discoverable in the “Salute to

the Elephant”, the display of power by the elephant evoking awe and disgust and the “rough beast” is a “figure” that still pervades African literature especially in the Nigerian novel where “we can trace his movements” (Anohu and Akwanya 2001:153). “Anarchy is the consequence of the appearance of the rough beast” which lets loose blood and drowns “all ceremonies of innocence. Finally, and perhaps most crucially, is its impact on the consciousness of the individuals who survive its passage. The worst become conformed in their ways, while the best are shaken and undermined” (153).

In “Salute to the Elephant”, this *topos* of power further elaborates itself in Isidore Okpewho’s *The Last Duty*, Festus Iyayi’s *Heroes*, Amadi Elechi’s *Sunset in Biafra*, Mezu’s *Behind the Rising Sun*, Soyinka’s *Season of Anomy*, Nkem Nwankwo’s *My Mercedes Benz is Bigger than Yours*, Gabriel Okara’s *The Voice*, Achebe’s *A Man of the People*, *Anthills of the Savannah*, *Arrow of God*, *Things Fall Apart* and even lately, Okpewho’s *Tides*, La Guma’s *A Walk in the Night*, Chimamanda Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus* and *Half of a Yellow Sun*. These are novels whose discourse formations are colonialism, war, freedom-fighting and the apartheid. An *archetypal* example of this, outside Nigeria’s literary borders is Alan Patton’s *Cry, Beloved Country*. In these works, the individual is subjected to a type of Athol Fugard’s psychosomatic trauma of the experiences they go through. The same ethos and *topos* touch on Ngugi’s *The River Between*, Peter Abraham’s *Mine Boy*, *A Wreath for Udomo*, John M. Coetzee’s *Life and Times of Michael K*. The last is the story of a man’s physical and psychological journey through a country at war.

Depending on another different reading, we can also see the *topoi* of love, unity and bravery though in varying degrees in the above mentioned texts and in those that follow. *Cry, the Beloved Country*, involves the unifying power that love possesses and the divisive force of fear. In fact, Norrdge noted that sexual love could form both a language and strategy with which to explore and contest violence (2012:18-39). The gallant traversing of the *topoi* of the rough beast through colonialism and bravery through the Mau Mau still dominates Kenya’s literature. Its most powerful and lyrical voice is Ngugi’s. Through him, all the other motifs (of unity, sequence, death and rebirth and love and discovery) are played out in a complex mode of inexplicability and contention where they could be seen as representatives. In *Weep Not, Child*, there is a complicity of members of the victims’ group for want of gain or other privileges as they yield to the services of the figure of the rough beast, the figure of power, in order to torment and traumatise the oppressed already held captive by the beast. Jacobo, as an instrument of oppression, unites with the settlers for good in order to disrupt the shift away from the *status quo*, while to his family, he is an instrument of provision.

The exploits of the rough beast – a preeminent image of power at the service of the *topoi* of bravery and power evoking the paradoxical concepts of awe and disgust, death and presence, with discursive structures as sediments tilting towards current political and social problems of a group is evident in a number of contemporary African writings. Among them are prominent one like *Songs in A Time of War* (1985) by Nigeria’s Ken Saro-Wiwa; *The Fate of Vultures and Other Poems* (1990) by a Nigerian, Tanure Ojaide; and *The Graveyard Also Has Teeth* (1980) by

Sierra Leonean Syl Cheney-Coker. Somali's Nuruddin Farah wrote of a family's struggles, thorns and thistles before and during the civil war that broke out in the novels: *Maps* (1986), *Gifts* (1992), and *Secrets* (1998). In the end, all these *topoi* are found to be linked to the *topos* of unity in the "Swahili poem," the *topos* where the powerful and powerless, the rich and the poor, the oppressed and the oppressor, in their apartness and incapacity to unite, always "join hands across the shroud" against their intentions. They achieve unity in death which they could not be achieved while alive.

Modern Lusophone African literature, mainly in poetry, combines echoes on such issues as identity, ethnicity, alienation, and language. One discovers ethnicity in the Zulu oral poem, "Ndela, Son of Sompisi" as the root cause of favouritism, corruption, tribalism, mediocrity and wars. Ndela, through whom the *topos* of bravery and war emanates, could not have gone to fight another tribe either in defence or in attack if he was not operating on this divisive principle of ethnicity. Examples of such works where we find this *topos* are those of two Angolan writers: Paula Travares, *Ritos de Passagem* (*Rites of Passage*, 1985) and Ana de Santana Sabores, *Odores & Sonho* (*Flavours, Scents & Reveries*, 1985). Other writers whose works exemplify this trend include Mozambique's Helder Muteia, author of *Verdades dos mitos* (*Truths of Myths*, 1988), and Eduardo White, in *O país de mim* (*The Country That Comes from Me*, 1989).

A novel by the Cameroonian Victor Beti Benanga, *Le miroir bleu* (*The Blue Mirror*, 1990) telling the story of a man who trades a rural life of farming for unemployment in the big city implicates the remote and background underpinnings of the *topos* of cycle as found in the "Fulani Creation Story." He returns to the very first lap or stage of his ascent that he left behind. Here, his progress is self-nullifying one. With his second novel, *Le pauvre Christ de Bomba* (1956; *The Poor Christ of Bomba*, 1971), Mongo Beti established himself as an important Francophone (French-language) writer as he posits the *topos* of power through mild religion and colonialism in contrast to the severity that accompanies that of the rough beast. What started as an inspiring awe, turns out, at the very last, to be disgusting, with the complicity of the missionary in initiating, perpetuating and entrenching colonialism despite their good intentions. This *topos* implicates the missionary's upward to the colonisers and downward movement to the colonised.

From the terse and often painful and humiliating humour of Beti, we identify great passion, sometimes anger in most of Brutus' poetry. Though always restrained and controlled toward horizons of injustice, they implicate the *topos* of power or the weak before the super-being traceable to an increasingly austere precision from his prison experience. Brutus's other collections include *Poems from Algiers* (1970), *A Simple Lust* (1973), *China Poems* (1975), *Salutes and Censures* (1984), and *Airs and Tributes* (1989). The above *topos* is echoed too in Es'kia Mphahlele's *Down Second Avenue* (1959), his second and most famous work. But unlike very many of the works where this *topos* reigns as we have it in the "Salute to the Elephant," the confronted is not overcome as a victim, but rather within that stringent atmosphere of suffocation, pain and immeasurable trauma, he comes out triumphant having survived it. Mphahlele's novel *Father Come Home* (1984) is concerned with echoes of the suffering caused by the Natives Land Act in the hands of those with whom power is a sly weaponic possession.

That all these *topoi* are seen and can be traced from these modern African texts cannot be said to be much of a success as generally presumed. It is true that only very few representative texts are mentioned here, but one also dares to state that the defects which African oral literary culture carry in themselves are consequent upon the absence of a systematic written representation of thought in much of Africa. The poems treated here are translated. Acknowledging that a translation gives us “a new understanding of the original, a *performance* of it”, it is also “a performance, and an occasion for a new encounter with the translator’s language” (Akwanya 2005:11). It does harm to texts and the original voice thereby making the theoretic attempt to remedy the challenge seen much like a mirage. A cursory look at them will inform us that they are from varied backgrounds and languages. Some of them like the Lusophone poems have been translated twice: once from the tribal language into Portuguese and later into English. And who knows, it could, later on, be translated, for those who are interested in them amongst the French-speaking Africans, into French, at a third remove.

#### 4. “The Eye that Looks Down Shall See the Nose”

The above statement credited to Christopher Okigbo invokes a searching idiom of introspection, retrospection and prospection. The eye that looks down is a careful eye – certain and prospective. It is this type of an eye that sees the future. Today, as we have it, was yesterday’s future. The combination of yesterday, today and tomorrow makes history. History, an issue that is as aporetic as it is somewhat inexplicable, has memory at its service. It is so because time pulls it from behind the instant, the moment. With our experience of the *topoi* of the African oral idiom present in modern African texts, or what Ricoeur terms “a relation of indebtedness which assigns to the people of the present the task of repaying their due to people of the past” (1988, :157), we now have a sure ground to project into the future of African literary works. These *topoi* have acquired power in a most vibrant and resourceful manner. Within the magnitude of their power, they in turn have the potential of enacting, re-enacting, and configuring literary culture and history, and they are at their service, either by the individual writer or by a group’s literary tradition, as well as always in serious contention in wanting to “to be thought” (Ricoeur, 1981b:288). Although we need not stress too much the role of time in bringing this to pass, we must acknowledge the fact of these *topoi*’s complicity with modern African works.

With what African scholars have achieved so far, can it be said that much has been done; that the future is bright especially by perpetrating Europophone forms through the European idiom of language and forms? The journey was not all rosy in spite of their successes. For instance, it was concerning the immediate past of African writers and their writing, say in the 90s, that Achebe referred to as a time when “it seemed as if the thing was drying up” unknown “that it was waiting for something to happen” (2008:10). This was the interregnum – between 1980 and 2005 (which marked the emergence of Chimamanda and her horde) – within which momentum was gathered and the artistic eventually launched itself as practically evidenced in works like *Purple Hibiscus*, *Yellow Yellow*, *Dizzy Angel*, all of Ben Okri’s, Ezeigbo’s and many other new generation authors’ works. All of them have given us a glimpse at some visions of troubled

psyches and irredeemable selves through this (ill-fated?) medium of expression that African writers have used for some time with great success(es) by earning world acclaims.

Granted that much has been done, those that have earned us recognition globally like Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Ben Okri, Pius Okigbo, Festus Iyayi, Niyi Osundare, and now, Adichie Chimamanda are still being mentioned and recycled in literary media all over the world. The Nobel, Man Booker, Booker and Commonwealth Prizes have all been won and more are still coming. Achebe as a person has attracted more unprovoked publicity than all. In November, 2007, he won the Man Booker Prize for his lifetime achievement in fiction writing beating a “formidable shortlist that included Philip Roth, Salman Rushdie, V.S. Naipaul, Ian McEwan” and so on (28). Naipaul was a former Nobel Prize winner; we can appreciate the enormity of the award. He became the first African, to win the American National Arts Club Medal of Honours for Literature in November, 2007 and many more garlands hang not only on the neck of Achebe, but also of many other African literary luminaries.

But, so far, they cannot be said to have succeeded in the real sense of the word “success”. The reason is because all these were achieved through the addictive resort to the medium of English while maintaining the navel-strings that linked them to the traditional through the transfer of the *topoi* and *mythoi*, from the local and indigenous systems to the Europhone forms. The Europhone forms have really accentuated the international recognition they got. In ascending this much, they have also served as a classic example of the zero sum game where what we thought we have gained, hitherto, is equal to [if not much less than] that which we have lost. By this, I mean the gross underdevelopment of Africa’s autochthonous literary tradition and language as they are being conditioned to serve and meet the taste of global expectations through Europhone forms and languages.

Today, literature in indigenous languages and the desire for them are almost lost – a situation only translation of Africa’s [or even European] classics can remedy. Even in this respect, a conundrum of factors is impeding. For instance, the unappreciable accomplishments of the “relatively little-known” Yoruba novel informed why Emenyonu (Gates, Jr. 1992), a year before the above description, bemoans the squalid state of indigenous literary works thus: “Literature in indigenous languages is the most neglected literature in Africa today. . . . Nowhere in Africa is the retardation of indigenous literature more felt than in Nigeria” (1991, 33). He specifically mentions “literature in the Igbo language” as that which had great prospect but has been “the most hampered and the most neglected of the three major Nigerian languages” even when “it had as good a foundation as literature in Hausa and Yoruba” (34). No one needs doubt what the future hold for indigenous literatures given the present lukewarm attitude towards it. However, Emenyonu is optimistic the table would turn if proper attention is given it in Africa, using Nigeria as model, through favourable Government intervention, worthy recognition in University curricula and the support of the “development of literature in as many written indigenous languages as possible” (35). Nigeria could still “capture great world attention in literary output” (34). At this level, indigenous authors may have the opportunity of proving to be “far more significant to contemporary African literature than what has so far been experienced

with writers in English” (35). But who will begin it, when will it begin and how? Prof Chinua Achebe was reported, sometime in 1999, to have begun a project of translating great classics of the Western world into Igbo. I do not know what became of it and I also cannot tell the level of support his idea drew from those who mattered. Perhaps, no encouragement or sponsorship was given and so that dream is dying or is dead.

Unless we do a deliberate turnaround for the forthcoming generations, it remains to be challenged that they would continue tag along the track already charted by such literary elders like “Achebe, whose choice to write in English and in Western form has been very conscious” (Sugnet 1996, 89). Perhaps, a change is not foreseeable because it is already a colonial legacy, “one of the major maybe the top problems that colonial rule has left for us” (2008, 10). And I daresay literatures in indigenous languages are done for, since the notion of *scribere* will continue to provoke the polemic of representation like the issue of double audience. I have in mind, Lindfors, when, in paraphrasing Achebe, says that the English language will have to pay [and will continue to pay] the price of shedding some of its autochthonous features as it is conditioned to represent indigenous ideas in African literature (2002, 173).

The future of African literary culture today, especially as these Europhone linguistic factors linger unyoked, but rather, is accepted, given its more international acceptance, one can affirm that though it would be ‘better’ because the scholars and writers are great and good (Achebe 2008, 10). But then, this is going to be realized at the altar of the exclusion of the enrichment of our indigenous languages and the consequent deprivation of the resources with which to renew them.

## 5. Conclusion

I will conclude with a prediction or an optimism John Reed and Clive Wake made in 1964 concerning the future of poetry and, by extension, African literature which I consider as having been deflated or cut short:

Whether the future of African poetry lies mainly with the vernacular poetry or whether it lies in the development of an African tradition in French poetry and English poetry we do not know. But for many years, it is probable that some poets will continue writing in the African languages, and some in the main European languages which are used in Africa for administration, education and international purposes . . . imitation is sometimes of African and not European traditions, and there are poets who are really adapting African vernacular literature into a European language (1964:1-2).

This optimism is dual: the indigenous literature thriving in parallel continuum with the Europhone sort. Only a section of that prediction has been fulfilled – that of writing in European languages, the other is nowhere – not even its signs are there. This is where we are. Today is that “future” of African poetry that they referred to; who knows, tomorrow will be that of today. And when tomorrow comes, when we get to that future which would be our today and from the

manifestation of our literature based on our present proper grasps of our literary trend today, shall we not be worse off?

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