

## THE POET AND HIS ANCESTORS: A STUDY OF SELECTED AFRICAN POEMS

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### **Abstract**

The notion of the ancestors is a reoccurring index amongst adherents of traditional religious worship. Some poets of African descent have however used the ancestral motif to craft excellent poeticized narratives. These poets in their poems have exalted the ancestors to levels of eminence. This paper traces the relevance of the ancestors in the cosmology of the cultural and religious milieu of the African people. It discusses the use of the ancestral theme in Kofi Awonoor's "Songs of Sorrow I and II", Birago Diop's "Vanity" and "Viaticum" and Kwesi Brew's "Ancestral Faces". The Magical Realism literary theory is in tandem with the sentiments expressed in these poems. The views of these poets tally with the pre-eminent status the traditional religious believers confer on the ancestors.

**Keywords:** Ancestors, Magical Realism, African worldview

### **Introduction**

Who are the ancestors? In African tradition past and present, it is believed that the human soul remains alive even in death. This belief cuts across various religions, but more pronounced amongst the adherents of the traditional religion. Richard Gehman agrees with this view and asserts that this belief system is common amongst "most African peoples from the earliest times (Gehman, 105)". For Yusufu Turaki "the ancestors hold a place of pre-eminence in the traditional society. If they are not worshipped, they are at least highly revered (Turaki, 34)". While citing Steyne, he asserts that life has no meaning apart from ancestral presence and ancestral power. T.N.O Quarcoopome sees the ancestors as "the heroes and heroines of the various tribes (Quarcoopome, 43)".

Apart from occupying prominent status in the lives of African people, the ancestors perform diverse functions for the living. Smart Ninian's view is that "ancestors are generally assumed to be interested in some way in the continuance of the line, so the gift of offerings to them is a means of promoting the fertility both of human beings and of the environment (Ninian, 36)". Gehman's opinion is that the prominent role the ancestors perform for the living is that of serving as intermediates between man and God. To Turaki

the ancestors are the “most powerful, basic and primary component of the kinship system in an African community (Turaki, 176)”. Quarcoopome believes that the ancestors possess extra-human powers and “with these powers they are able to intervene in the lives of the living members of the society (Quarcoopome, 43)”. Despite their roles as the intermediates between man and God, they perform the sacred duties of being the guardians of public morality. To Quarcoopome they perform the role of adjudicators in the affairs of the living and prescribe appropriate punishment for those who disobey “the norms of the society with diseases, crop failure etc.” (43) On the other hand, their offspring who behave well are rewarded with good health and good harvest. Francis Njoku shares Quarcoopome’s sentiment and sees them as “mediators between man and the Supreme Being (Njoku, 128)”. They are consulted for their guidance and “given offerings for their continued influence on the living by helping them to resolve their day to day problems.” For David Durkheim, the guidance role of the ancestors over the living begins from conception. According to him, it’s one of the duties of the ancestors to not only watch over the new born at birth, but influence positively all his engagements as he grows and protect him from all dangers.

Bartholomew Abanuka expands the engagement of the ancestors in the African cosmology by classifying them into grades. To him the position an ancestor occupies in the land of the dead “is determined by the ancestor’s accomplishment for the community. In a positive sense, those who not only performed great feats for the community, but also died in grand old age, have the most noteworthy credentials for being ranked among the ancestors (Abanuka, 34)”. For Joshua Onwuliri, it’s “those who lead a good life, live to a ripe old age, die good death, and are accorded full burial rites” (52) that should be identified as ancestors. This paper attempts to discuss the preponderant importance of the ancestors in some selected African poems. It x-rays the omnipresence statue the poets confer on them. It is appropriate to prefix the research attempt with a literary theory that will elucidate the contextual and metaphorical interpretations that the poems will proffer.

Magical Realism as a literary theory is considered germane. This is because it incorporates elements of the supernatural which the ancestors are. The most profound work on this topic to my mind remains that of Chanady who in her famous book, *Magical Realism and Fantastic: Resolved versus Unresolved Antinomy*, details some fundamental principles of Magical Realism theory as an enriching platform for critical discourse of art that certainly includes poetry. The most important of these for me is her view that this concept is “characterized first of all by two conflicting, but autonomously coherent perspectives... the acceptance of the supernatural as a part of everyday reality (18)”. It is this view that the ancestors, who are supernatural, are part of the everyday existence of the Africans that has influenced the worldview of the

African poets who have picked these entities as the epicenter of their poetic narratives. Thus, it is the presence of the ancestral motif in some selected African poems that is the bulwark of this paper.

### **A Survey of the Poet and His Ancestors in Selected African Poems**

Among the poets of African descent who have shown tremendous lineage on the ancestors in their thematic consideration is Kofi Awoonor. The poet, who was born as George Awoonor, abandoned his English name in the tradition of most African writers of his generation like: Ngugi waThiong'o and Chinua Achebe to assert his African-ness. At the time of his death in Nairobi, Kenya in 2013, he had churned out a sizeable quantum of poetry collections. In some of these poems he affirms that the relationship that exists between the ancestor and the living in Africa is without cessation.

In his poem "Songs of Sorrow I and II," the poet using several images and symbols, show cases his emotion and frustration at the abandonment of the persona by the ancestors. The persona in this poem represents all Africans who hold firmly to the view that the ancestors are alive in their graves. Due to his pessimism, the tone of the poem is one of continuous sadness and melancholy. In the tradition of the Ewe dirge, the poet through the persona expresses desolation and helplessness as a result of the difficulties the living are experiencing because the 'omnipresent' ancestors have abandoned them. This poem is believed by scholars to be a translation of one of the practitioners of the Anlo-Ewe folklore called Akpalu. In my opinion, the narrator cum persona while addressing Dzogbasa Lisa (one of the gods of the Ewe people of Ghana) uses various images of lament to describe the difficult moments of his life journey. These are images of hardship that are permanent and dehumanizing "like the chameleon feaces" (Nwoga,73). In his lamentation of the abandonment of the ancestors, he bemoans his status of mediocrity and hopelessly believes that such will end in death. Using the image of firewood to capture wealth and success, he is of the opinion that those of his lineage with him as a representative cannot be endowed because he is not "in the row with the eminent" (Nwoga, 73). Also, the acquisition of wealth is not for the lilly hearted people but for men who have the outstanding courage to surmount risks. In consolation, his desire is that everyman should be "happy with (his) fate" (Nwoga, 73). To worsen his predicament, his relations who sojourned abroad have come back worse than himself, for they "are back all covered with debt". Even those who have gone abroad in search of greener pastures have been abandoned by the ancestors, thus they come back with liabilities rather than assets.

In "Song of Sorrow II", the narrator goes beyond caring for material possessions. He suddenly realizes that death is imminent for all mortals. At his transition from mortality to immortality he has no living kin that would

perform the rituals that would facilitate his admittance into the class of the ancestors. This is the lamentation of one man left behind to mend the broken fences left behind by his fore bearers. The rituals that include wailing and firing of gun shots will be performed by the living relations of the dead, but the persona laments bitterly that:

“I have no sons to fire the gun when I die.  
And no daughters to wail when I close my mouth...  
I have no kin and no brother,  
Death has made war upon our house”. (Nwoga, 74)

The lamentation goes beyond personal loss and extends to the calamity that has befallen the entire “Kpeti’s great household”. To him, these misfortunes have come about due to their ancestors who had abdicated their responsibilities to their living off springs. He accuses them directly thus:

“Let those gone before take note  
They have treated their off spring badly”. (Nwoga, 75)

He subsequently sends Agosu an elder of the clan who departs shortly an ‘errand’ to these progenitors:

“Tell them their house is falling  
And the trees in the fence  
Have been eaten by termites;  
Ask them why they idle there  
While we suffer and eat sand  
And the crow and the vulture  
Hover always above our broken fences  
And strangers walk over our portion”. (Nwoga, 75)

With the use of extremely pathetic images and symbols that are associated with desolation, destruction and death. the narrator laments the abandonment of the ancestors which has led to serious sufferings for the living relations. Kofi Awoonor in this poem has used to fullest the ethos of the Ewe dirge folklore to lash at the dead who he believes should watch over the living and help them achieve success and prosperity. For Mawuli Adjei, the poet expresses in this poem his “loneliness, frustration and anguish” which he voices through the poet – persona.

Like Kofi Awoonor, Birago Diop the Senegalese Veterinary doctor has had an awe-inspiring engagement with the theme of the ancestors and historical legends in his poems. As a man who was greatly interested in African folklore, the pervading motif in his poetry is “that of the continuous presence of the ancestors” (Nwoga, 229). As one of the pioneers of the famous Negritude concept of African Literature in conjunction with Leopold Sedar Senghor and Leon Damas, his style of poetry “was inspired by an earnest

desire to recreate old tales and to write poems which speak not only of the ancestral heritage of the African, but also deal with ordinary human situations” (Senanu and Vincent, 67). In ‘Vanity’ and ‘Viaticum’ Diop brings to the fore his passion for the progenitors in his discourse of African poetry. In his poem titled ‘Vanity’, there is an allusion to the Biblical narrative as contained in the book of Ecclesiastes where all human activities are considered vacuous. The poet uses this allusion to remind all Africans that attempts made at distancing themselves from their roots is alter waste of time and will be highly regrettable. In Diop’s thematic handing of the celebration of the ancestors as well as the need to show reverence to African cultural values and tradition, he highlights the grave attitude of the educated Africans who due to exposure to western education and mannerism have abandoned their roots. For this action, these elites are bound to be punished by their progenitors. Therefore, the lamentation of these Africans is imminent. When their wailings and agonies begin, they shall not receive any respite from their forefathers. Diop who believes in ancestral worship is of the opinion that:

“Since we have never listened to their cries,  
If we weep, gently, gently  
If we cry roughly of our torments  
What heart will listen to our clamouring  
What ear to our sobbing hearts?” (Nwoga, 106)

In consonance with ancestral worship, the living relations of the dead should offer libation and other sacrifices to their ancestors to make them happy in the world beyond. When this is not done, they in turn will deny their living offspring the protective shield they require in moments of difficulties. Diop with the use of subtle humour brings out “the misery of those who forsake their ancestors” (Senanu and Vincent, 69). With the use of the free verse structural technique, the poet also highlights the mood of condemnation and sarcasm. In the poet’s use of sarcasm, he mocks those who have been blinded by western civilization and by so doing ignore the spiritual importance of their dead relations. The occasional repetition of lines in the poem helps reinforce the mocking humour that is contained in it. For instance, the line “what eyes will watch our large mouths?” (Nwoga, 106) is repeated twice in the second stanza. His frequent use of rhetorical questions helps exasperate the agony and defenselessness of those Africans who have abandoned their African roots and have therefore not benefited from the wisdom of such an association.

Diop by giving animate attributes to the ancestors, help sustain their important status. They speak in ‘clumsy voices’ to show that they are partly human. For its only humans who alter audible sounds when they speak. The powerful imageries that are linked to ridicule and rebuke are numerous in the poem. These include: voice of beggars, cry roughly, large mouth, plaintive throats,

sobbing hearts etc. In conclusion, the reading audience of this poem will easily decipher in the entire poem the negative mode of sarcasm, condemnation and finally ridicule.

The poem “Viaticum” is a poem of sacrificial due diligence where a mother offers a sacrifice to the ancestors for the protection of her son. In this poem, Birago Diop departs from the lamentation ethos and focuses attention on ancestral worship. Ordinarily the title of the poem has a dual interpretation. It connotes the Eucharist administered by a Catholic priest on a dying person and also refers to the indigenous African ritual tradition of preparing the youths for growth into adulthood. Thus, in this poem of ritualistic performance, Diop uses the symbolism of the three pots and three fingers to recreate the concept of the trinity as encapsulated in the catholic doctrine. These same symbols are also used in traditional African religious activities for invocation and magical mythological tradition.

The sacrificial performance in this poem is an exercise to prepare a young man for the dangers that are imminent in the journey of life. The spiritual fortification that the individual receives after the sacrifices to the ancestors is enough for him to trudge through the world and in life. The choice of the materials used for the sacrifice is deliberate and instructive. Why the choice of blood? What informed the choice of animals to be used for the sacrifice? Certainly, blood in any form is a necessary ingredient of ritual atonement. For the Christians, Jesus Christ shed his blood on the Calvary, died and rose after the third day to redeem man from eternal damnation. Amongst the adherents of the traditional African religions, the blood of animals constitutes a major component of the offerings to the gods. It therefore follows that in any worth ancestral worship like the type performed in this poem, the blood of an animal must be part of it. What therefore informs the choice of animals as in this case can be rooted in the mystical belief of the people. The blood of three animals in this worship is significant. It could be for maximum efficacy. Rather than the male character, it's the mother of the young man who is the Chief Priest in this sacrifice. In African tradition, more so in a polygamous environment, it's the duty of every mother to shield her children from the evils of the world, while the man who is the head of the family is pre-occupied with providing the essentials for the household. The choice of the time for this event is significant. It is at night that such traditional events take place and in this case the full appearance of the moon confers a positive mystic endorsement of the exercise. Diop in this poem demonstrates an in depth combination of “mysticism, religiosity and ritualism in celebrating the importance of spiritual worship in African tradition.

Kwesi Brew, a Ghanaian poet also known as Osborne Henry in this creative expression, deliberates on issues of utmost concern to the African tradition.

The theme of the ancestors is one of such that is close to his heart. For him the lives of the Africans are not complete without reference to the ancestral component of their spiritual being. It is in this context that Brew in the poem "Ancestral Faces" discusses the accustomed behaviour of the ancestors to constantly sneak into the lives of living relations to find out if their conducts have deviated from the traditions they left behind. For it is expected of the ancestors in the African cosmology to provide shields from dangers for their off springs. Therefore, their supervisory duties over the living include sneaking into their daily lives to be assured that the living have not abandoned the cultural batons the ancestors have handed over to them.

In "Ancestral Faces", the invisible persona observes the ancestors sneak into a funeral ceremony and watch the traditional rites being performed for the dead. The title of the poem points to more than one ancestor. It is a lineage of ancestors who have come on this journey to observe this rite of passage for the dead. This half human and half spirit of a persona pay close attention to and describe vividly the revered actions of these ancestors. The poet uses the narrative of this eye witness to indict the actions of the living human beings. In the course of this rite of passage, the ancestors begin to take cognizance of the various items of this ritual engagement. These items which include: brass bells, sacrificial sheep and talking drum and the sacrifices offered with them should impress these spirit beings. But they are not. They must however accept the dead into their fold despite the short comings of this ancestral worship. The narrator however shows the frustrations of these ancestors in the negative attributes associated with the items used for this sacrifice. This frustration and disenchantment begins from the inception of the poem where they cannot deaden the sound emanating from "the gay jingling Brass bells on the frothy necks of the sacrificial sheep". The "rust on the ancient state-swords" further demonstrates the disgust associated with the entire process. These living off-springs do not help matters with their foreign dress codes and mannerisms which are alien to the culture of the people. Out of extreme disgust the ancestors observed that their living relations "have not changed". Perhaps they expect better conducts from these children of theirs.

Of note is the poet's use of the plural forms of the pronouns and traditional images in the poem. The frequent use of the plural pronominal like: they, their and them, is the poet's way of showing the numeracy of the ancestors. Despite their large number, they hold the same opinion on issues of ancestral worship. The use of traditional imageries shows that this is a typical African experience. The choice of the traditional materials is also deliberate. In the typical Akan tradition, a sacrificial sheep, brass bells, drums and cowries perform different roles to achieve the desired effects and acceptance in a process like this. The poet uses the symbolic expression of "white locust through the forest" to show the awesome presence of the ancestors. The "rust

on the ancient state – sword” is the poet’s show of anger of the dead over the paucity of the rite of passage taking place here. Finally, the tone of this poem is that of anger. The language of this poem is past tense to indicate a narrative that supposedly took place in the past. The poet utilizes one stanza and one full stop punctuation mark from the beginning of the poem to the end to create a pace that is racy. The height of the frustration and anger of the ancestors is shown with the exclamation mark that ends the poem. The poet uses the narrative technique of an omnipresence persona who possesses the ability to observe a supernatural event between the dead ancestors and the relations they left behind. This technique however differs from the technique adopted by Kofi Awoonor in “Songs of Sorrow I and II” whose persona cum narrator is an off-spring of the dead who is lamenting the abandonment of their fore bearers.

### Conclusion

In conclusion therefore, these poets have confirmed the opinions of the Western, African and Oriental religious adherents that there is the influence the ancestors exert in the lives of the living that cannot be wished away. Also, the poets through the personas in these poems have ascribed a larger than life status on these spirit beings. The opinions of the religious people therefore tally with that of the characters in the poems. Of note is that these poets have used these poems to discuss the fundamental spiritual ethos of the Africans regardless of their nationalities, religion creeds or western education. They have shown the universality of the eminent position the ancestors occupy in the African cosmic reality. The ancestors as shown in these poems display characteristics that are not confined to only one tribe or nation.

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