

Re-Defining the Teaching of Modern African Poetry in Nigerian Tertiary Institutions

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Abstract

Over the years some teachers who teach modern African poetry experience difficulties in presenting the subject to their students at all levels. The feedback has always been that Poetry is a difficult subject, wrapped in figures of speech, imageries, and allusions to eclectic sources and restricted within lines that make its form. This paper tries to break the myth and makes poetry an attractive field to both the teacher and the student. Discussions of the subject Modern African Poetry have typically been limited to either the obscurant nature of the poetry of Soyinka, Okigbo and Clark or the subtlety of Brutus. Little attention is often given to the oral tradition that gave birth to the styles and forms of these poets, and so their poems are by this attitude detached from their roots, making it strange and difficult. This paper therefore, attempts a response to this question by highlighting the features that make Modern African Poetry a home-based phenomenon and can also be studied easily like any other subject in the humanities. This study, is more pedagogically inclined, it sought to place Poetry into a larger instructionally and theoretical context; as a result, it has taken largely from the lecture notes of Professor Amali, Dr. Usha Obasi and Dr. Othman Abubakar. The paper emphasized historical development by relating changing styles of the literary representation of reality by Modern African Poets to the changes in the social history of the poet's milieu. The conclusion points to the fact that poetry can be made more lively, meaningful, pleasurable and satisfying, if sincere, thorough and timely coaching of students in poetry is rendered at all levels of studying poetry.

Keywords: Culture, History, Modern African Poetry, Orality, Poetry

Introduction

In this paper, an attempt is being made to present Modern African Poetry as a friendly field through providing its cultural and historical background alongside its themes. The idea is to espouse poetry as a paper, phenomenon and to disabuse the mind of learners, teachers and other readers from their erroneous belief that poetry is obscurant, created along rigid order of words and so difficult to study. The paper has also highlights some of the problems contributing towards the declining interest

towards poetry in educational towards and towards some contributing factors towards the dislike for poetry. Some suggestions that could make towards process of poetry more pleasurable and profitable in the future are also made. To achieve its goal, the paper largely towards together the lecture notes of renown poetry lecturers from the Department of English and Literary Studies, University of Maiduguri; these include Dr. Usha Obasi and Dr. Othman Abubakar (both of blessed memory) and Professor Idriss O. Amali. The conclusion points to the fact that poetry is not the monster students, some teachers and other readers have taken it to be, but rather an ordinary field in the humanities which can be studied like any other academic field and even more as a recipe to solving several psychosocial problems.

What Is Modern African Poetry?

Literature is a product of culture, and culture includes the arts and other manifestations of human intellectual achievements put together Poetry happens to be an aspect of this arrangement and qualifies achievements put together genre of literature. In his *Preface to the Lyrical Bollards*, William Wordsworth (1798.340-1) writes:

Poetry is an imaginative composition in verse form. It is the image of men and nature, an acknowledgement of the beauty of the universe. Poetry is a homage paid to the native and naked dignity of man, to the grant elementary principle of pleasure, by which he knows, and feels, and lives and moves.

He goes further to claim that poetry is the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge. He claims that “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings (emotions) by a man who, being possessed of more than usual organic He claims that and has thought long and deeply.” Poetry is written to give immediate He claims that to a human being possessed of that information which may be expected from the poet, not as a lawyer, a physician, a mariner, and astronomer, or a natural philosopher, but as a man. As far as Dylan Thomas is concerned, poetry is what makes you laugh, cry, prickle, be silent, makes you want to do this or that or nothing (Martin and Furbenk, 1975). To D.H. Lawrence, poetry is a matter of words. It is a stringing together of words into a ripple and jingle, and a run of iridescent colours. Poetry is an interplay of images, the iridescent suggestion of an idea. Given all these ingredients, you have something very like poetry, something for which we might borrow the old romantic name *poesy*. The essential quality of poetry is that it ‘discovers’ a new world within a known world.

As far back as history has recorded, man has tried to tell in some form or the other his experiences not only in the field of endeavor, but also in the field of emotion such as love, hate, hope, despair, triumph, regret, sorrow and joy. These records of human experiences have taken many diverse forms, and the various arts such as sculpture, literature and art, bear witness to this diversity. Whatever be the form, it reveals the desire of man to express and to pass on to posterity the deeds and thoughts of the present. A greater part of art is short-lived. But poetry is one form

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of art that seems to bear within its power to possess some mysterious sense of immortality. It seems to appear as though there is a kind of language within language, a power of appealing to, and being understood by, men of all generations. Poetry like a thing of beauty is indeed a joy forever and for all times. In the words of Wordsworth “poetry is the first and the last of all knowledge, it is immortal as the heart of man.”

The concern of this paper is not just poetry per se, but Modern African Poetry which refers to the Poems written by poets of African descent about Africa and Africans which, according to (Darthone, 1982: x), “... is the rearrangement of traditional images of Africa into a cohesive whole. It expresses the totality of the experience, world-view, and sensibility of Africans”. Modern African Poetry combines two literary traditions: The African (oral) and the Western (written). As a result, understanding it requires: the knowledge of Africa’s history, traditional oral literature, the African environment and the influence of Western languages and literary conventions. Most critics, students and teachers of modern African Poetry, miss it at this stage and look at poetry as something strange, out of reach and summarily difficult.

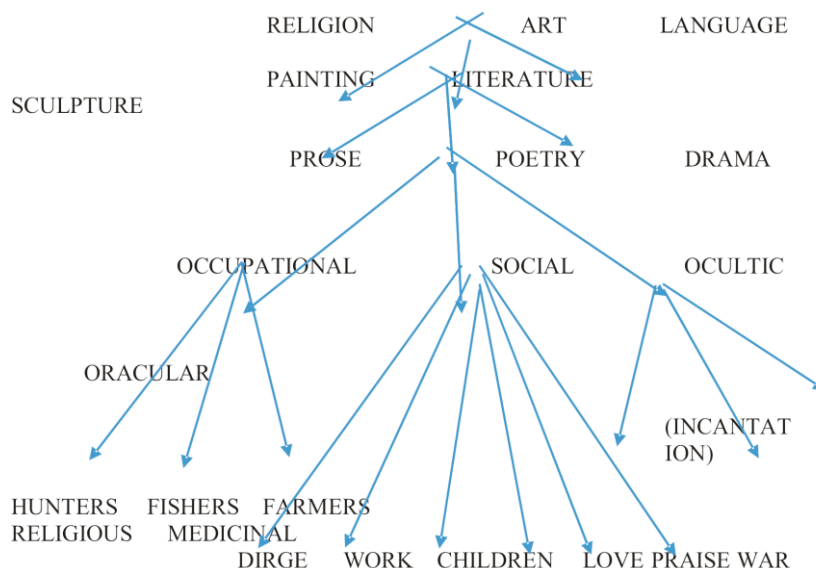
The Historical Foundation of Modern African Poetry

History is generally referred to as a record of past events, but it has also been recording current experiences of humanity. Therefore, it is also appropriate to refer to history in this paper as the study of the relationship between man and man, man and nature, in space over time¹. The Africa’s experiences of slavery, apartheid, colonialism and neocolonialism, military coups and consequent dictatorship, civil wars and post-independence disillusionment are historical events that serve as constant reference point for the African imagination. Eustace Palmer (1979) and Irele Abiola (1981) maintain that African Literature “generally is a reaction to the consequences of imperialism.” Modern African Poetry, in the opinion of these critics, is “reactive to historical developments: First to external i.e. to the European encounter with Africa and later, to internal i.e. African experience since political independence.”

The Cultural Foundation of Modern African Poetry

Modern African Poetry, takes its origin from the oral poetry of the pre-literate societies. Poetry at that level performs distinct and significant functions in the society ranging from social, occupational, religious to oracular. The diagramⁱⁱ below illustrates the functions of poetry in pre-literate African Societies. Literature is a cultural production and Culture is divided and operates on three levels, religion, art and language which are in turn subdivided into various forms.

Culture

* *Othman Diagram of Orality*

Each class of poetry has its peculiarities with its function. For example, under ‘Cult’ the poetries listed are religious, medicinal and oracular. These, at the formal level share the form of generally being rendered in a heightened voice, functionally being part of magic or prayer and sharing some significant aspect of the cult art itself.

At the social level, the dirge may share the same formal quality of slow solemnity with some types of ijala, the Yoruba hunter’s song listed under ‘occupation’. The group listed as ‘occupational’ includes poetry that is peculiar and specific to certain trades. For example, hunters among the Yoruba are bound by their allegiance to Ogun, the god of hunting, fire, iron and war, which unites them with blacksmiths. But hunters also share the love of animals and the forests: hence, they participate in a more cultic essence of Ogun.

The ijala, one of the most popular occupational poetry, is a speech –like song chanted at the gatherings of the devotees of Ogun. Ijala contains imagery drawn from all aspects of non-human life. It deals with human relations, provides admonitions for ethical conduct, and covers the whole range of traditional mythology. Its theme includes a salute to animals, stressing their attributes, characteristics, or roles in legend. The ijala also contains a salute to particular lineages and distinguished individuals, which form by far, the largest division of the subject matter, sharing something with the Yoruba ‘Oriki’ praise song poem which has a broader appeal.

Occupational groups use poetry as an essential aspect of work. Those poems go beyond being just mere work songs since they are part of a reportorial

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accumulation used in specific religious functions pertaining to the group's calling. A good example is the Ewe fisherman's song tradition. These poems invoke the sea, fish lore, and ceremonies pertaining to specific nets. They are a times accompanied by drums; they are marked by a quick, almost martial rhythm.

Cult poetry covers religious poetry, and oracular poetry. Religious poetry includes the praise poems of gods, or what may be called hymns, for instance, the Yoruba god Esu-Elagba, the messenger deity, has his own worshippers who perform his rituals and sing his praise names: ^{“iii}*When he is angry he hits a stone until it breaks / When he is angry he weeps to tears of blood. Esu, confuser of men.*” Or the praise poetry of Shango, the god of thunder: ^{“iv}*Huge sacrifice / Too heavy for the vulture, / It trembles under your weight.*”

It is clear that these praises are sung to put the gods in good humour. Elaborate prayers for good health, plentiful harvest, children and wisdom follow the praises. Among the Dinka people of the Sudan, the same pattern exists – extravagant praise, followed by a silent reflection on the meaning of life, and then the characteristic demands and complaints: ^{“v}*Do you not hear, O divinity? / The black bull of the rain has been released from the moon's byre. / Do you not hear, O Divinity? I have been left in misery indeed/ Divinity, help me!/ Will you refuse the ants of this country?*”

Sometimes the gods are rebuked for failure or persistent malevolence. This, too, is an aspect of worship. The long ceremony of libation among the Ashanti and Ewe includes a long poem to dead ancestors, who are invoked at important occasions such as birth or death rites to continue to give succor to the living. Some of these poems, generally recited, are interrupted with characteristic yells from the audience to signify agreement and emphasis.

The diviners' art exists within the significant context of a poetry that produces direct revelation of the cure. In Africa, disease has both physical and metaphysical dimensions. There, a number of cures or medicine cults whose art rests very much within the nature of the poetry they endanger. Among the Ewe and Hausa, medicine cults such as Dentse, Brekete and Bori use elaborate system of chants and prayers to induce cure.

The group under social poetry, has six broad sub-groups: dirge, work, children, praise, and love and war poetry. In the broadest sense, the dirge is the lament for the dead common among the Bura people of Southern Borno and Northern Adamawa in Nigeria. The elaborate African funeral, from the wailing and the ululations through the first burial and second or final burial, provides occasion for poetry. This type may be described as philosophical, seeking the meaning and purpose of life and has an expected tone of solemnity and sorrow. The Bura dirge for instance, like that of the Ewe, reveals the loneliness and sorrow of death, traditional world views of what the next stage of the journey is, and finally a message or prayer. The dead person is a traveler from the world of the living to that of the ancestors; he is given intimate message to deliver to those who had gone ahead.

Prominence is given to the words over the simple melody which serves as a vehicle to convey the basic notions and ideas of the poem. Reception of lines or large segments and of imagery and sounds act to enhance the chirality of the lament. This gives it a persistence that tends to relieve the mourners of the burden of their sorrow. The Bura dirge is a famous example of elegiac poetry, chanted mostly by women in a dense of sobbing, wailing and weeping. Among the Bura people, these poems are composed impromptu, i.e. at the funeral of the person whose death inspires them. In such poems/songs or dirges praise names are invoked.

Work songs are very common throughout Africa. They have a direct functional relationship to the activity they accompany. The mine and plantation workers of South Africa are said to have no end of work songs. Most of this poetry is simple in form and rhythmic. Its landmark is rhythmic repetition that tends to relieve the sheer drudgery of labour.

Children's songs can be grouped as one branch of poetry serving social needs. Like lullabies in other traditions, they are simple both rhythmically and in terms of ideas. They cover a number of subjects; Ewe cradle song ranges from solemn dirge –like songs of consolation to a brisk type that employs a great many idiomphones and plays on words for effect.

The largest subgroup under social poetry is the praise poetry, and it also includes blame poetry or the poetry of abuse. Within this group, we have the Yoruba 'Oriki' (praise poems), the halo poems of abuse among the Ewe; and the praise poetry of the Zulu, sometimes called heroic recitations. Among most African peoples, praise singing is an art which may be part of a chief's court, as among the Ashanti and the Hausa. There are also professional praise singers among the Hausa, Yoruba and the Wolof. These are strolling performers who follow their patron through the streets, and at social gatherings, beating out their patronymic salutations and heaping upon them exaggerated array of praise epithets. They may liken him to the elephant, to signify strength, to fox to signify sagacity, to the cow for his meekness. If the patron recognizes the singer's work and rewards him, he may soon be elevated to the status of lion, a leopard, or some other noble beast. But if he makes the mistake of ignoring the singer, he may soon be likened to the red-bottom baboon or the greedy goat that ate too much at his own mother's funeral and thus befouled the funeral compound.

Shakka, the 19th Century warrior –king of the Zulu, utilized praise poems as an essential aspect of war and heroism. Some of the poems may refer to real acts of heroism or to the nobility of particular chiefs and their benevolent reigns. The poems are sometimes addressed to animals, especially among the Southern Bantu people, particularly Zulu, Xhosa, and Swazi, whose earth occupy a significant ceremonial and economic role. At times the praises are an aspect of the passage, marking the point of upward movement of a man into the next group. Praise poetry also does coincide with war poetry, especially among the Zulu and among other Southern Bantu groups. Praise poetry occupies important positions in the royal

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household. They acquire wealth and status according to their success. This type of poetry is public, being recited at festival occasions like anniversaries or victories. Its scope may include legend, mythology, and history. Its delivery is ceremonial and elaborate.

Closely associated with the praise poems is the poetry of abuse. The poetry is more pronounced among certain peoples, especially the Ewe, Hausa and the Yoruba. The Ewe halo poetry was regular feature of Ewe drumming for a long time. Its essence is its verbal agility, exaggeration, and elaborate use of imagery. Halo becomes the instrument through which rival villages settle outstanding differences. Each side commissioned its poets to dig into the history of other group for all the scandalous details about their leaders, true or false. The ingredients constitute the material for verbal assault on the ugliness of the opponent's leadership, juicy bits about whose grandmother was a whore or whose great-grand father built a wealth on stolen goods.

Love or erotic poetry has a long tradition as any of the other types. It exists within the specific framework of the lovers' performances, young men and women fall in love around these performances, and the love poets take a lot of liberty in their songs. At times their work borders on the bawdy and the ribald, this is essential for the purpose of destroying or embarrassing beauty. They try to remove descent shyness in young girls especially by open reference to the love act, to establish rapport with the loved one through flirtatious references to her beautiful endowments and to arouse attention from the lover by exaggerating her virtues and those of her lineage. The full moon is the occasion for love poetry. It sometimes states the sorrow of love, the demise of love, and the parting of lovers. An extract from Ewe love poem reads: "*I am on my way to death's land, / Folk art in tears. / My beloved, weep not, /for it is for you I die*".

Among the Bura people for instance, love songs are mostly composed by young women who usually sing on the way to visit their young men, in the farm, along the path going to fetch water or while doing home chores. They sing these songs in groups or singly, waiting to be entertained by their men by the light of the moon. The young men rarely compose songs for their lovers.

The last subgroup of social poetry deals with war. War poetry is dramatic; fast, agile and brief, accompanied by a chorus of yells. It is calculated to frighten the enemy, to instill the spirit of bravery into the hearts of the warriors, and to recall the heroic deeds of the past. In some communities, war poetry rests within the war drumming performances such as the Bura, Ewe and Tiv war songs. This then brings us to one one-non oral which should be classified as unique. This is the poetry of drums and horns popularly known among the Bura as *ganga ka timbl* (drum and horn), but more often, it is the horn that ignites fire in the frame of the warrior.

Drum language plays a very important part in traditional life of the people. Drums or the horns serve as signaling instruments, sending out agreed codes.

Secondly, drums communicate the tonal system of languages and are therefore used as literary medium. The drum can play refined stereotyped phrases.

Poetry in Africa generally, expresses itself in the songs, ritual incantations, prayers to gods, praise, or salutations to gods and men. In short, it covers all that ordinary everyday speech does not express. In everyday life good deal of poetry is performed in the name of gods. The pouring of libation before a meal or a drink is a prayer and a poem. Thus poetry involves in the sense that the total world-mythology, legend, music, dance, worship –is embraced in a feeling for “the solidarity of all life”. Its folk nature is only discernable within the scope of the genius of individual poets. It is in the art of poetry and its immense verbal variable that individual talent flowers, for the poem is carried by the voice. The most significant fact is that the ultimate realization of this material lies in the occasion and atmosphere of its performance.

Orality is, therefore, one of the cultural determinants that have imparted on Modern African Poetry its particular tonality. Modern African Poetry is therefore, deeply rooted in Africa’s oral tradition and culture, proverbs, folklores, epics, songs, incantations and sometimes abuses form the bases of African Poetry which in turn became the menu for Modern African Poetry. The fauna and flora of Africa’s environment assume symbolic significance in Modern African Poetry. While the Africa’s Worldview and sensibility serve as its socio-political background.

Themes in Modern African Poetry

The theme of a work of art, especially poetry is usually the main message the writer intends to pass on to his/her readers. It is always arrived at by a total consideration of the work. There could be different themes in a given literary work. Modern Africa Poetry reflects African historical experiences and so African Poets have found poetry a convenient medium to express the experiences of their people at various periods of the development of the continent. For example, we have protest poems from South Africa when under apartheid regime, we have negritude poems by assimilated Africans in Francophone zones, in East Africa it is poetry to reclaim land from colonial masters, in North Africa is a problem of cultural identity, in parts of South Africa we have liberation poems and in English West Africa it is all about culture conflict. These themes selected from the wide range of African literary output, appear to be very suitable for the depiction of the continent’s history. As a continent the pre-occupations of poets from Africa largely depended on:

The Theme of Religious and Cultural Suppression

The poets in this category do not ask questions about western practices, but are opposed to their being asked to abandon their indigenous religious beliefs and practices in preference to a supposedly ‘superior’ one. This is the point George Awoonor Williams is making in his ‘Weaver Bird’. In Kwesi Brew’s “Least we should be the Last” in a cynical way, the poet presents the disappointment and

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disillusionment of the early Christian converts who on getting into Christianity became disillusioned, because they did not get something new.

The Theme of Political and Economic Exploitation

An example of this is Abioseh Nicol's "The Meaning of Africa" which is based on the situation of Africa after independence. Africa is presented as a continent of multiple complexities. In David Diop's "Africa", the political theme is fully illustrated in a moving and rhetorical language.

Contemporary and Post-Independence Themes

The failure of independence to bring about a new dispensation is a hot cake for writers. The abundance was unfortunately just a mere of unprecedented social upheavals. There are incessant military coups that have plagued most African states since independence. Political instability, coupled with economic instability disorganized the society and made life unbearable for the ordinary people. Corruption has become the order of the day. The rich has become richer and the poor poorer. "The Casualties" by J.P.Clark, "A Song for Ajegunle" by Niyi Osundare and Ojiade's "The Fate of the Vulture" are all about post-independence problems of social and political mal-adjustment. The poems discuss the marginalized citizens who have been reduced to sub-human level in society.

Why Do We Teach Modern African Poetry

The main aim of teaching poetry is to promote human values, in an age where dehumanizing forces are at work. Thus, the dire need for human literary education for a country like Nigeria as it is in any country in the universe. According to Berry (1971). Poetry should be the most enjoyable subject in the school curriculum. It develops the spiritual and emotional sides of our nature and it gives us values than material ones. But unfortunately, poetry has lost its glamour among learners and teachers alike. It seems as though the sands of popularity of poetry in modern times is fast running out.

The Teaching of Modern African Poetry

Though poetry has been accorded a place of honour not merely in African culture but in all existing cultures, which have literature to boast off, where poets have been hailed as 'prophets', 'makers', 'unacknowledged legislators' and 'men of affairs' the teaching and studying of poetry in most developing countries still present special difficulties. Many teachers are therefore inclined to avoid it as long as they can.

Poetry is beautiful but is wrapped within idioms, figures of speech, rhyming schemes which give it the perceived difficulty. This situation also makes poetry as a subject to be difficult to teach. The treatments of Drama and Poetry have many things in common (viz plot, characterization etc) but the teaching of poetry is recognizably different. This is because poetry is unusually tightly

compressed with thick density meanings, unusual word sequences etc. which often pose problems to learners.

The teaching of poetry in our schools has met with discuss failure, and the most fundamental reason is the failure of the Nigeria society at large to promote professionalism over and above material acquisitions There seems to be two kinds of obstacles to the enjoyment of poetry. The first is the thought that it is acquisitions-is the demanding nature of poetry itself.

In a country where wealth is greatly admired as a symbol of success, it would be unrealistic to expect messianic and heroic teachers is rest contended with their expectation of “reward in heaven”. Many teachers engage in businesses like, running provision stores, is, beauty- is etc., which deprive them time that is to be devoted for the is needed for successful teaching, such teachers find it convenient to rely on some obsolete notes which they might have received when at University. Teaching thus is more of a side business. And this, has adverse effects on the teaching of poetry, as the subject to be prepared to think, read and investigate as a continuing process, especially in a second language situation, if is to teach well.

The students on their part wish to acquire some expertise in the fields of science and technology and not study poetry which seems only a matter of words, archaic spelling, familiar words used in unexpected contexts, obscure references, unfamiliar comparisons, nonsensical statements, chaotic sentences, none of which can lead them to bag a million dollar contract, launch a lunar rocker or create a test-tube baby!

Another factor contributing to the failure of poetry in our schools is the wrong assumptions teachers make that their students have known the nature and function of poetry and method of its art. With these erroneous assumptions, they plunge into the teaching of poetry. But the language of poetry is prone to diverse individual interpretations. Accurate knowledge of these interpretations would be impossible if the students have not acquired command of the language, including those that contravene the basic structural principles through inversion, ellipticism, etc., and also, at the purely semantic level, are at least familiar with the deviational use of language. This will be possible if, and only if, students are provided with the required time and material to use or fall back on; unfortunately at all levels of learning poetry, learners are not provided with either.

The time allocation for the study of poetry is very meager and there are hardly adequate or relevant references for poetry available. Besides, most poems taught in the class-room do not aim at stirring the imagination of the students, but are geared to make it possible for the teacher to cover the poetry syllabus in preparation for an examination in the subject. Thus teaching poetry solely for examination purpose does not provide the students the required time or atmosphere to understand and appreciate poetry.

It might be an uphill task to formulate some forms of standardized methods for teaching of poetry. But a broad set of objectives could be drawn and put into practice. The objectives may be as follows:

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- i. The teacher must help learners to find meaning along with all the various experiences that accompany the study of poetry, by developing a sense of appreciation for the literary form;
- ii. The teacher must help students to relate poetry to life; and
- iii. The teacher must help the students to understand how the poet's meaning can be successfully elicited through an artistic interpretation.

To achieve these objectives, teachers of poetry should examine closely current theories and practices of its teaching. Lack of proper schemes of work leads to disarray, thereby making poetry lose its sense of direction. Teachers of poetry should at all-time endeavour to teach poetry primarily for pleasure without wasting much time in pursuits of obscure meanings in poems, identification of figures of speech, tedious analysis of meters and other such paraphernalia, which often lead to boredom and outright dislike for the unpredictable subject. Above all, the teaching of poetry should be done not by any teacher who has studied poetry at college, but by those who have a natural flair and love for the subject. Such a teacher could quite successfully transmit some for her enthusiasm and make the teaching of poetry challenging and its study exciting.

It is also important to avoid assigning inexperienced and unenthusiastic teachers to teach lower levels for this may result in the formation of speech, in the young minds. Frequent changes in teachers bring about varying teaching styles and varying emphases or concepts of poetry. This and other aforementioned factors contribute greatly towards the poor understanding and the ultimate apathy towards poetry.

Syllabus

Generally, the syllabus for poetry in most instances is vague in its definitions of aims and scope. Very often individual lecturers have to decide on the amount of flesh to put on this skeletal and vague definitions. This does not, however suggest that the syllabus is grossly inadequate, but merely states a fact that the teacher is burdened with the difficult task of interpreting the syllabus. The teacher must first and foremost have a fairly good idea about the prescribed poems and then decide what or how he/she intends to teach them. This more often than not leads many to teach not "poetry" but poems as recommended in the syllabus, be it appropriate or not.

Comprehensive and impressive as the aims set out in the syllabus are, they do not tell us how we could achieve them. Therefore the syllabus should be used as a general guideline only. This article does not discuss the ultimate aims of poetry, but intends to concentrate on immediate classroom situations or problems.

The Problem of Poor Background

Since poetry has been and still an oral art in many cultures, children should be made to get the feel of poetry even before they are introduced to the formal study of poetry in schools. Students should, as far as it is possible, continue the study of

poetry from the infant stages (with nursery rhymes) through primary (a few simple translated African poems) to junior secondary (African with a few non-African poems) to senior secondary (African with a non-African - to include poems from other parts of the world).

When students are kept in constant touch with poetry, as part of their academic activities, they will not be totally baffled with more advanced methods of poetry studying. This is not an extremely difficult aim to achieve, for the reading of poetry, like the reading of fiction, is an activity children can be easily geared into, if sufficient encouragement and guidance is given by both parents and teachers alike. Sufficient attention should therefore be given to the early years of studying poetry, in order to construct an unshakable foundation for future fortresses of poetry to be built upon.

Selection of Materials

Selection of materials for students must necessarily be related to the special functions of poetry teaching in Africa. There are certain psychological and linguistic criteria which are to be considered as a broad framework for the selection of poetry. These include the type and setting of a literary work, age and psychological stage of development, subject matter, interest value, reading preferences of students, readability (in the comprehensive sense of the term) etc.

Though such criteria are taken into consideration by most syllabus makers, there are quite a few drawbacks in the prevalent choice of poems and poets. For example, in the lower classes, students are mainly taught translated 'traditional' poems. Such poems may have been good in their original form, but lose their original work through translations. From these relatively simple poems, the syllabus makes a giant leap to include complicated poems like "Night", "I think it rains" by Wole Soyinka and J.P. Clark respectively.

The writer is of the opinion that the mastery and unique use of the English language by Soyinka and J.P. Clark could be a rewarding experience to a more well-read group of students, like those in the upper levels in the Universities. But it would be an exasperating experience to a less knowledgeable group of students at lower level of learning.

While seeking to familiarize the students with poetry related to their cultural background, one should also select literature from other parts of the world whose second language is English in order to broaden their experimental horizons. This variety in choice also would go a long way in accomplishing the main aim of teaching poetry which is to promote human values in a technological age, dehumanizing forces are constantly at work.

Method of Teaching Poetry

While selection of materials is oriented to cultural, environmental and psychological needs of the students; teaching methods must focus more exclusively on students' needs. The teacher can make use of a great variety of techniques for

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actively involving students in a poetry class. For instance, students can be meaningfully involved in choral reading, dramatization, creative writing, group work, etc. as part of their enjoyment and exploration of different parts of poems. But it has been observed that most teachers of poetry do teach more about the poem than the poem itself. Besides, students are not given the opportunity to acquire 'great familiarity' that poetry demands. They are, in fact, not even given sufficient time to get the feel of the poems. For the moment the teacher is ready to teach a poem, he / she starts making the students pick out all the poetic-devices that maybe found in the poem. This instant dissection of the poem does not afford the opportunity for the students to appreciate the poem as a homogeneous entity.

One of the surest ways to alienate students from participation in a poetry lesson is for a teacher to constantly adopt 'from me to you' style of teaching. There are selected occasions when it is necessary for the teacher to impart some background information, or explain concepts and terms, which may be helpful in discussing, analysing and evaluating poetry. For most part, questioning, discussions and supplementary activities in poetry teaching should be centered on the interest and motivation of the students, the extent and nature of experience, their level of ability and their effective impulses. "Poetry and creativity" states Abe (1977) "should be the guiding principles for teachers of poetry". As long as the emphasis is placed on the individual and the creativity of the students, literature offers opportunities second to none of the other areas of the curriculum.

It is not only the study of poetry that is the most neglected aspect of English study in African schools; the writing of poetry by pupils is another aspect which is often ignored by other teachers. The reason for this gross neglect is due to the mistaken view some teachers of poetry hold, of poetry being a mere decorative addition to language, remote from life and of no practical value.

If on any rare occasion, a teacher comes across a budding poet in the class, he/she should go all out to examine, evaluate and offer assistance or guidance, when and where needed. According to Woolger and Ogungbesan (1979), "if pupils are to write poetry, they should not be expected to device their own strict metre or rhyme schemes. Free-verse should be the obvious and natural form with emphasis on precision and vividness of expression and development of thoughts". But where a teacher discovers his/her students straying away from poetry, he/she should try every possible means to cajole and coax the students by giving them ideas to expand upon, giving them a list of words to use in the forms they wish to but should at all times desist from the use of force and command. By encouraging creative writing among students, the teacher encourages young minds to express their thoughts in a most original form; no mean task when accomplished.

Teaching Aids

As poetry is essentially an oral art, the importance of sound in poetry cannot be over-emphasized. The best method of enabling students is to listen to a good reading of a poem or to play a pre-recorded recitation of the poem either by the

teacher or any fairly good reader. An occasional play back of poems by native speakers of a language could be played for comparison. Students could also be invited to read a piece of poetry, while the teacher records it. The very excitement of getting their voices on tape might even draw the shy ones into active participation. The cassette can later be played back, so that the students can compare their reading with that of the original reading of the poem, enabling them not merely to discover their faults but also to recognize their potentials as budding poets of the future.

It is therefore of prime importance that all departments of English be equipped with not only texts or collections of recommended poems, but there should be available, at all times, tape recorders, pre-recorded tapes, and a good stock of blank cassettes for recording both teachers' and students' recitations or dramatization of poems in class. A functional language laboratory would play a very encouraging role in the teaching and study of poetry at all levels.

All art is dedicated to joy, and there is no higher or more serious problem than how to make men happy' said Schiller and was later quoted by Matthew Arnold. Robert Frost was even more succinct when he said 'poetry begins with delight and ends in wisdom'. But unless there is a very good chance of a poem being "enjoyed" as well as understood, we do not teach poetry as it is meant to be taught. And no teacher of poetry can make a success of teaching poetry, if the teacher is not well equipped with few essential aids for making poetry lively and worthwhile.

Evaluation

Evaluation of poetry is not an easy affair. To provide a uniform marking scheme that could be used as a basis for all other marking schemes is impossible for two main reasons:

- i. No matter how objective an answer in poetry might be, there is definitely a good deal of unavoidable subjectivity; and
- ii. The teachers who score the essay type of answers have their individual methods of scoring based on what each considers important or essential points that need to be emphasized in the response. Besides, practically every poem has many interpretations; these various interpretations would in turn receive different scoring patterns. The end result would be various scores for a single answer. This would definitely affect the reliability of the scores returned for the same question.

The more suitable and reliable method to evaluate poetry responses is to first and foremost list out as many possible interpretations a student is expected to enumerate, explain or discuss. Marks then can be allocated for each scoring point without prejudice to other dedications which might fall under the category of mechanical accuracy. In this way, there could be some forms of uniformity in scoring poems.

Re-Defining the Teaching of Modern African Poetry in Nigerian Tertiary Institutions

Examination in Poetry

Bearing in mind the usually poses on examiners, examination questions in poetry forms in such a way as to give the students fair chances. Abe (1977) has this to say about the examination system as presently operated in Nigerian schools and higher institutions:

The present system of examination in poetry is a mere effort to catch the students' off-guard. The students who have learned the examination 'trade-trick' of fitting the given poem into the onomatopoeia, oxymoron straight jacket, come out with good grades. Whereas students who have imaginative power and have a genuine love for the subject might do badly because of the nature of the questions in the examination...

The intention of the examination should be proper evaluation and not-trapping!

Conclusion

Despite the unsurpassable subtle qualities of greatness and usefulness enshrined in Poetry, it has lost its glamour and magical appeal in most institutions of learning. There is indeed a myriad of reasons, which include poor language standards, attitude of teachers teaching poetry—these have had their toll in off-setting the serene and supreme state of power and glory poetry held not long ago. In addition, lack of the knowledge of the cultural and almost negligible knowledge of poetry, restricted if not totally wrong choice of poems prescribed to be studied, improper and obsolete methodology, gross lack of teaching aids and reference Materials, and above all, the indifferent historical foundations of Modern African Poetry and its socio-political setting contribute immensely to thwarting learning or teaching of it as a subject.

Poetry, therefore, can be made more lively, meaningful, pleasurable and satisfying, if sincere, thorough and timely coaching of students in poetry is rendered at all levels of studying poetry. More flexibility in the choice of poems and anthologies, in order to enhance exposure to a wide variety of poems and poets; update methodology, a greater use of modern teaching aids, but above all the teaching of poetry being assigned to competent and devoted teachers of poetry, would hopefully bring back the experience that "begins in delight and ends in wisdom".

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