


Towards Universal Harmony: The Works of Two Ghanaian Poets			Literature
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G. Edzordzi Agbozo		Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU), Trondheim.	
Mawuli Adjei		University of Ghana, Legon.	
David Ako Odoi		University of Ghana, Legon.	
Abstract			
<p>The past decades of human existence were draped with varied experiences: some serene and others horrifying. Writers make efforts as the conscience of humanity, to speak to the different human experiences that dawned on the world. In the face of horrifying histories and current international upheavals, some writers call for reconciliation and universal harmony. This paper explores how two contemporary Ghanaian poets try to advocate global coexistence in their works as well as suggest processes of healing and reconciliation worldwide. This study is carried out to add to the corpus of work on universal harmony, especially from the African/Ghanaian writing/cultural worldview.</p>			

1. Introduction

In a prose-poem introduction to a thought-provoking article titled, “Religious Facades and the Political Economy of Terrorism”, Adjei (2014: 17-18) posits:

Everywhere one turns, the smell of gunpowder pervades the atmosphere, the earth is force-fed calabashfulls of blood and the cries of victims echo briefly and die quietly. But this is not the darkest hour in mankind’s brief sojourn on this planet. The pages of history drip with the redness of pain, people’s pain. A cursory look into the past invokes sordid memories of pogroms, holocausts and genocides; a venture into the future is a futile attempt to escape the madness of the present, for the insatiable swords, bayonets and muzzles that feed on human flesh are still hungry for more of their familiar fare.

Over the ages, people have invented all kinds of reasons to subjugate, to enslave, torture, murder and annihilate individuals, groups, societies. Perhaps these orgies of bloodbath are rooted in mankind’s primal instincts, an atavistic libido that drives all animals into a vampire state, which makes them deploy instruments of destruction in the service of mating rights, territoriality or hegemony. For *homo sapiens*, the reasons could be racial, ethnic, political, economic or religious; calculated to legitimize atrocities and crimes against humanity. The world moves on. And so the Stalins, Hitlers, Mussolinis, Perons, Pinnochets, Pol Pots, Bushes, Amins and Abachas have reasons to do the things they do, and often with the benefit of massive support. All they need to do is to invent a reason. It does not have to be empirical; it just has to flow from a warped worldview, myth or belief. It is the issue of “belief” that has transformed national and international terrorism into a malignant religious infection.

Our point of departure, then, in this article is that, given the events that mark human history—the holocaust, world wars, colonization, slavery, the extermination of indigenous peoples etc.—one gets a sense of the indignity and the atrocities committed against humanity. The Second World War alone claimed about 2.5% of the world’s population. After the over 400 years of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, its negative after-effects on what Ghanaian poet Kwadwo Opoku-Agyemang (1996: iv) terms the “victim society” lingers, in terms of underdevelopment, displacement and mental slavery; a fact attested to by African heritage scholars like (Fanon 1967, 1968; Nkrumah 1965; Rodney 1982; Nunn, 2008).

Other devastating world phenomena such as apartheid, the 9/11 attack, the Arab Spring, the insurgence of Boko Haram in Nigeria, ISIS in northern Iraq and Syria, the unending Palestine-Israel crisis, the disintegration of Ukraine, among others, remind humanity of how volatile and fragile the world still remains after many attempts at building a peaceful world.

The continent of Africa has for a long time been the theatre of some of the most horrendous atrocities committed by mankind, some inflicted by outsiders, others self-inflicted. Over the decades, South Africa, Angola, Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda, Burundi, Nigeria, Chad, Central African Republic, Mali, Liberia, Sierra Leone and the Ivory Coast have experienced, and continue to experience violence. And African writers, self-anointed gatekeepers of history, memory and the collective unconscious, have endeavoured to capture in print these historical rites of passage, prominent among which are Chinua Achebe's *There was a Country* (on the Biafran War) and Veronique Tajo's *The Shadow of Imana* (on the Rwandan Genocide) and "Construction of the Other" (on the Ivorian Civil War). These social justice and peace advocates include two of Ghana's leading poets, Kobina Eyi Acquah and Kofi Anyidoho, the subjects of this paper. The paper examines the varied angles from which they propound their theses for a homogenous and harmonious world free from oppression, tyranny and the neo-Nazi hegemonic motivations that drive the economically and militarily powerful to subject the weak and the vulnerable to violence and injustice. They may be writing as Ghanaians or Africans, but their concerns are universal.

2. Kobina Eyi Acquah: Reconciliation and Harmony

Kobina Eyi Acquah can be classified as belonging to the second generation of postcolonial contemporary Ghanaian poets. In crusading for reconciliation through his poetry, he heavily draws on the motifs of the slave ship, jazz music, keyboard, mulatto among others. To him, all humanity is a common victim to any disaster. Human beings have then become slaves to nature, the cosmic elements and even the supernatural. The earth as a slave ship gives equality to all members aboard it:

*The walls of a slaveship
Confine
All is passengers
Black, and white, yellow, red
Equally
And though cramped into
Separate holds
We are journey fellows all after all
Aboard this vessel earth (1989:69)*

This idea of seeing the earth as a ship also defeats the artificial political and economic borders that separate people from one another in different countries and the separation of continents from one another by oceans and seas, ideologies, wealth and religion. For our own survival on this earth, Acquah suggests that we embrace one another and care for one another. He seems to say that all humans have one home, earth, and in our journeys, we are all found on continents other than ours and that we all engage in transcontinental journeys; an echo of Abena Busia's sentiments in "Exiles"—"All my friends are exiles / born in one place / we live in another" (*Testimonies of Exile*, p. 11). The European exists in Africa, Asia, America, Antarctica, Australia and Oceania inasmuch as people of other continents live on continents other than theirs.

This harmonious coexistence cannot be thoroughly fostered when there are no common virtues that should shape the behavior of one person towards the other. Any atrocity committed against a person breaks the strand that binds humanity hence the need for moral values. On the other hand, a humane treatment of a fellow goes to promote the common humanity:

*For the lynching rope around
One neck
Strangled the spirit in all us
And dignity, humanity
Gurgling blood
Dies in both the murdered and
Murderer (1989:70)*

In the history of the world, certain inhuman activities such as colonialism and slavery perpetrated by one human race against others, with their dehumanizing effects have left indelible scars on the victims. Indeed, Opoku-Agyemang describes slavery as “a living wound under a patchwork of scars” (1996: iv), meaning, behind the façade of what some have called “collective amnesia”, there is a deep-seated pain in the victim societies’ hearts. However, to coexist with the perpetrators of this crime, there is the need for forgiveness and reconciliation. The late Nigerian business tycoon and politician Chief Moshood Abiola and others proposed “Reparations” as the key balm to soothe the iniquities of the past, as post-Nazi Germany has done in respect of the victims of the Jewish holocaust. For his part, Acquah seems to call for unconditional forgiveness. In ‘Handed a Lemon’ (1989: 73), an African who is abused by a “pale” (white), revives his abuser with lemonade. The lemonade also becomes a significant metaphor for all the people who were victims of historical crimes, and a symbol of the survival of their abusers. It is this knowledge that can lead all persons to truly foster a peaceful world. Acquah invites all the abused to initiate an act of forgiveness. He likens these people to salt:

*And we-
(...)- become salt
Returning life, preserved
Again and again
To a decadent world (1989:77)*

Another prominent motif that manifests in Acquah’s poetry is the keyboard. The black and white keys combine to make good music on the keyboard. This is an idea earlier echoed by Aggrey, “If you play only the white notes on a piano you get only sharps; if only the black keys you get flats; but if you play the two together you get harmony and beautiful music” (Bautz, 1975). By using this motif, Acquah suggests that the world would be a peaceful place if we blend all our efforts and defeat racist and ethnocentric tendencies.

Acquah also uses the music of jazz to communicate his idea. Sergeant (1964) defines jazz as a “form of art music which originated in the United States through the confrontation of blacks with European music.” It is a blend of white and black music and specially noted for improvisation. In using this motif, the poet suggests that regional humanistic blocs: Pan-Africanism, Pan-Americanism etc, are unimportant if they do not work towards a more peaceful world. To achieve this, humans must steer off the conventional ways of doing things and embrace change, creativity and dynamism which are symbolized by the improvisation in jazz. A peaceful world therefore becomes the measuring tape for judging the success or otherwise of humanistic ideas and movements. If these movements do not lead to universal coexistence, they become

Wishy washy
 Jazz
 And it ain't worth a dime (1989: 52).

The harmony that results from the improvisation in jazz performance is emphasized in “Handed A Lemon” where music and dance break down racial barriers:

*Am I his brother, Ma
 Can I be
 Whose father raped my Mama
 In her virginity
 And then denied humanity, even
 Of the baby she bore for him?*

*Then he stood up
 Embraced me
 And danced with us to
 Duke Ellington and Charlie Parker
 He danced, Ma, to Loius Satchmo*

*Is it right, Ma
 Is it right
 That they
 Should dance to our music?*

*Did I say our?
 Where lies the line? (1989: 73).*

Worthy of note, also, is the musicians mentioned here: Duke Ellington, Charlie Parker and Loius Satchmo. Edward Kennedy “Duke” Ellington was an African-American musician, pianist and bandleader of jazz orchestras who was acclaimed for his especially sophisticated style of jazz. His special talent was reward with the Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award in 1966, the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1969, an Honorary PhD from the Berklee College of Music in 1971 and the Legion of Honor by France in 1973 among many other awards. Charles “Charlie” Parker, Jr. was a very celebrated African-American jazz soloist and a leading figure in the development of bebop, a jazz form with fast tempos, virtuosic technique and improvisation. His special contribution to music was recognized with the induction of his records into the Grammy Hall of Fame. Louis Armstrong, nicknamed Satchmo, was also an African-American trumpeter and cornet player who was noted for shifting the focus of jazz from collective improvisation to solo performance. He was posthumously awarded the Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award in 1972. These musical icons are blacks, mostly descendants of slaves, yet they have contributed creatively and immensely to American and world music. Their music is received by all races making them and jazz, a pseudo-bridge. This echoes an assertion by Barrio-Vilar, (2014) that black diaspora is often seen as a unifying force for peoples of black descent, underscoring the value of racial identity as a link that can surpass national differences; and also suggests the poet’s affirmation of the value of all peoples to the lives of anybody else. This poem concludes with a conviction that all human beings are one and there is no difference among the races of the world, “Did I say *our?*/Where lies the line?”

Another motif employed in Acquah's poetry is that of the mulatto, which also drives home the call for harmony. Mulatto is a term commonly used to refer to a person who is a "cross-breed" of black and white parents, or more broadly, a person of any "mixed" ancestry. Childbirth is a result of sexual union usually during marriage and love is one of the essential conditions for sexual union. In Acquah's poetry, the mulatto is a symbol of the creation of a multi-racially coexisting world. For the world to give birth to a mulatto, therefore, there must be a harmonious collaboration of all peoples. In an extended sense, the mulatto symbolism is subversive of such racially insular and exclusive ideologies as Nazism, Apartheid and Zionism which are founded on flimsy beliefs of racial superiority.

Dance is another recurrent motif with multidimensional interpretations in Acquah's poetry, and it is not for nothing that his most popular anthology to date is titled *Music for a Dream Dance*. It is a metaphor for peace, joy and invitation. He suggests that enemies cannot dance. Dances are performed in many cultures as a form of *emotional expression* and *social interaction*. Before the performance of a dance, there usually is a rehearsal, suggesting that the harmony called for, demands preparation which is symbolized by the rehearsal. This preparation should include the realization of the commonality, or communality, of all humans and leaving behind our separate ways and all our historical, socio-cultural and, of course, biological diversities. Dance is, therefore, a product of the trans-national and multicultural ethos, whose aesthetical values are defined by the artistic blending of diversity in oneness. Only this can make humans good dancers. The rehearsal is captured in:

...first
Learning the music
Opening up our souls to its
Themes and moods and nuances
Studying to hear and
Understand the sagas it recounts
The charts it spreads before us...
And hearing our name in our turn
Make our response, declare
Our faith
Bringing to the interpretation
The demands of our own reality (1989:83-84)

Acquah suggests then, that it is only this introspective preparation that makes

Our dance-
A dance worthy of human beings (1989:84)

To Acquah, like the older poets before him—Leopold Senghor (whose poetry resonates with the spirit of the "balafong" and the "kora") and Kofi Awoonor (who incorporates in his poetry his native Anlo-Ewe musical and dance traditions)—Africa leads the process of reconciliation through dance. In 'Awarso' (marriage in Akan), Africa, the 'Majestic Bride', invites the world to join in a wedding feast:

I see a wedding
Dawning
And Africa
Majestic Bride
Arising like the morning sun...

*From the East
Where the sun rise each day
And the West
Where the daylight lingers long
And from the North
And from the South
From ancient court and from
Youthful fields...*

*But come or not they
Will be there...*

Do please come (1989:85-86)

This wedding can be interpreted as the concretization of a perpetual union of all peoples in order to create a harmonious world where people coexist. It is symbolic that Africa leads this reconciliation given her high level of victimhood. What forgiveness does to Africa is that her prosperity and beauty, represented by the bride, becomes “A dowry to the world”. What Acquah advocates through this motif, and through others explored in this paper, remain a dream, hence his appeal “Do please come”. He is hopeful however that,

*...it was not only
A dream...*

*And it won't be long
Before
Through these fields and
Down these streets
Into
The Lincoln Memorial
Of First Circular Road
Johannesburg
To the love feast of
Brotherhood (1989: 91)*

Indeed at the end, there will be a celebration. The Akan stately drums, the *Fɔntɔnfrɔm*, are a symbol of this celebration. Acquah's sermon on a humanistic world can be likened to those of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. They both have same dreams, and they remain hopeful and it is this hope that drives their humanistic ideals.

1. Kofi Anyidoho: Hope and Urgency

Kofi Anyidoho can also be classified in the group of the second generation postcolonial Ghanaian poets. Anyidoho's voice is as sharp as a cutting edge as seems to be more aggressive and compelling than Acquah's. Whereas Acquah buries his strictures, exhortations and admonitions in anonymity, takes an aesthetic distance and places a burden on the reader to distil individuals and institutions from the collective, Anyidoho is less inhibitive.

He mentions names and shames the actions of people if need be, a hallmark of the artistic baggage that has attended his poetic career from *A Harvest of Our Dreams*, through *EarthChild*, *AncestralLogic* and *CaribbeanBlues* all the way to *The Place We Call Home and Other Poems*. Anyidoho in his poetry is constantly pushing for the birth of a saner world. His voice is a combination of condemnation, sadness, urgency and hope as he scouts the world as a keen “eye-witness” and “ear-witness”. As raconteur, he sells his songs to a cosmopolitan audience. In the midst of all the sordid spectacles that confront him wherever he goes, hope is one of the defining characteristics of his poetry. In a Foreword to *PraiseSong for TheLand*, Awoonor has this to say:

The volume is a celebration of the creative spirit of man as it affirms and promotes our collective endurance as a people, a particularly precious contribution to the artistic expressions of the entire human family (2002:13).

As Anyidoho himself points out in the Preface to *The Place We Call Home*,

*As a group, the poems in **Movement Three: QuietTime**, could be read simply as celebrations of life and death and hope (our italics) beyond death. But that is only my own bias. Of one thing, though, I remain convinced: that all these poems are inhabited by voices that plead for special and careful hearing at the court of memories (our emphasis) (2011: xviii).*

Early in his artistic life he declaims in ‘My Song’:

*Here
on
this
Public
Square
I
Stand*

*I sell My Song for those with ears to buy
It is to a tree that a bull is tied
You do not bypass the palm’s branches
to tap its wine (1985:66)*

His audience is defined as ‘those with ears’ and since all human beings possess ears they are compelled to listen to him. He forcefully drums his idea into the mind of the world. There is urgency in his voice as he wastes no time to state the mission of his art and seems not to be bothered about how others react to what he postulates. Though what he advocates might seem unpleasant, he is bent on accomplishing his task:

The things I have to say

*I say them now
I shall stand aside
from those who care
to clear their throat and
dress their shame in lies (1985: 66)*

Then he moves quickly to ask all humans to care, respect and coexist peacefully with persons from all socio-economic classes, races and worlds. Using the motif of the pauper as an object of laughter, he cautions humanity:

*When you meet a poorly-dressed neighbour
at a great durbar
you do not spit on the ground
and roll your eyes to the skies*

*The umbrella I bought
You stole from my rooms at dawn
Now I walk in the early morning rain*

*You point at me to our young maidens
And they join you in laughter (1985: 67)*

This symbol of the pauper also suggests the conditions of the so-called Third World countries where poverty is (said to be) endemic. Anyidoho calls for a conscientious re-thinking about our behaviour towards all persons. The umbrella is associated with protection, security and safety. Here it symbolizes Africa's "stolen" security, wealth and people through the dehumanising Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. Years after, however, the very oppressors who devalued the people described them as the poorest of the poor, hewers of wood and drawers of water. Drawing on the phenomenon of Third World brain drain, there is a suggestion that the oppressors lure the young of the oppressed and make them devalue their own ways of life; craving for a foreign life. In bringing out this phenomenon, the poet seems to advise against it.

Anyidoho also advocates total reconciliation, suggesting that reconciliation is the bridge between the past evils and the sane future. Recalling the past is painful, but it is necessary to remind oppressors the debt they owe the oppressed. Like Acquah, Anyidoho also employs dance as a cathartic, therapeutic, purificatory and reconciliatory ritual. In "Memory and Vision", originally composed for the Ghana Dance Ensemble's dance-drama, *MUSU*, he writes:

We are Dancer and The Dance.

*Time before Memory.
Memory beyond Time.*

*We harvest Tears
From laughter's Eyes.
We can sow some Joy
In sorrow's deepest Soul.*

We are Dancer and The Dance.

*In the space between the Drums & Us
You'll feel unfold
The endless saga of AncestralTime.
We are Dancer and The Dance.*

....

*It is the quest for a Future
 Alive with energy of Recovered
 Vision a Future
 Released from the Trauma
 Of a Cyclonic Past
 And from the Myopia
 Of a stampeded Present*

Although in this poem he minces no words about how demonic forces once upon a time “wiped...out” Africans, “Drowned their screams”, “Burned their nerves and bones” and “scattered their ashes”, in a rather conciliatory note, driven by the power of music and dance, he proclaims:

*...those who took away our Voice
 They are now surprised
 They couldn't take away our Song (2002: 22-31.)*

In ‘HarvestDance’ he asks the oppressed to initiate this renewal of comradeship, even with the oppressors, drawing no distinction between blood relations and the entire human family:

*So raise your arms..... Brothers
 Stretch your arms..... Sisters (2011: 22.)*

The arms are instruments of felicitation: greeting, salute, invitation etc. Extending one’s hand to a person is a sign of friendship and if this happens between enemies, it is a sign of reconciliation. The people to whom the hands have to be extended, are worthy of note in ‘HarvestDance’:

*Reach your hand to the BrotherMan from Birmingham in
 Alabama
 still Standing Tall...
 stretch your arm to the Sister from SouthSide Chicago
 still Standing Firm against Hostile Winds
 Stretch your eyes to that Tender Child from Harlem in NuYork...
 Embrace the Grand Mama from San Salvador de Bahia
 And yes that Hell of a Guy from KingstonTown in Jamaica
 From GeorgeTown in Guyana and From Baranquija in Columbia.
 From CapeTown in MandelaLand and From Addis Ababa in
 Abissinia
 From Kumbi-Saleh of AncientTimes and from Timbuktu of
 Ancestral Dreams. (2011:22)*

This is an invitation to all the victims of slavery, apartheid and other forms of human right abuses to unite and overcome the past atrocities. He proposes that, only this forgiveness will lead to a total reconciliation. The alliance of victim-hood that exists among these people and the friendliness this alliance generates must be extended to the oppressors. These alliances— Pan-Africanism, Negro and Black Civil Right Movements—are signified by dance, since a dance performance is always a collaboration among people and instruments. Between

this section of the poem and the next is a large gap deliberately left by the poet as a moment of pause, meditation and introspection.

The target of this reconciliation is made clear. These people are the clansmen who sold their own people into slavery, the slave buyers and all those involved in the chain of trade. The truth about the crimes committed must be laid bare and aggressively. Such words as “grab”, “spit”, and “touch”, “hold”, “shake” portray aggression which eventually mellows down to a smooth resolution:

See the Faint Rainbow Gently Rising from his Soul. (2011:24)

What this osmosis of emotions shows is that the process of reconciliation is a difficult one but for a humane world to exist, we all must take pains to go through it.

The world continues to experience violence and wars perhaps on a scale unprecedented. According to the Indian sociologist Jabbar Hussain, terrorism has become part of modern life. Hijackings, bombings and assassinations on different continents of the world may seem like isolated attacks, but they reflect an easy reliance on violence as a way to promote social, political and religious change. “They are elements of a pervasive end justifies the means philosophy being followed to its most perverse conclusions” (2011: 21). A war in a part of the world affects all persons because, in the words of Veronique Tadjo, “we belong to one world and the cry of one human being is the cry of all” (in Anyidoho, 2011: 92). This is not lost on Anyidoho. He advocates universal coexistence and postulates that war is a crime against humanity and there should be no reason for it. There is suggestion by the poet that the tendency of sanitizing war and all cruelty by any means is unjustifiable. Anyidoho’s focus on the Iraqi war, the 9/11 attacks in the United States of America, among others stresses this view. In his preface to *The Place We Call Home and Other Poems* (2011), he recalls:

...standing in a queue at Citibank on Amsterdam at Morningside Drive, Manhattan and watched the second aircraft as it flew into the second [Twin] tower... Then our world broke loose and we have not been at ease since then... I returned to the place I call home a few months later, but what I found on Ground Zero had set off a tremor that left every space on earth very ill at ease (2011: xvii).

In zeroing in on these events, the poet draws attention to and warns against its repercussions throughout the world. The absurdity of wars, he observes, threatens the very existence of all humans. In ‘DesertStorm’ he explains:

*Back into sad old times
Where war is not cannot be
A game of kids played on video screens
By InfantMen but a meal of Death
Cooked in Blood and served RedHot
at FlashPoint of Gun and Smoke
and the Chocked Breath (2011: 40.)*

Here Anyidoho is in agreement with Wilfred Owen’s “Arms and the Boy” and “Anthem for Doomed Youth” in condemning the recklessness of war. The poet make us all aware of the chaos death brings as innocent people die in bizarre conditions. This enormous sense of loss provokes the conscientious re-examination,

necessary for a sane world. The poet uses all the possible images and metaphors available to him to creatively push for a crusade to denounce the injustice and violence of war.

Movement Two of *The Place We Call Home and Other Poems* is dedicated to the advocacy for peace. Anyidoho is of the conviction that the world once overcame war and settled for peace and that is a historical motivation. Reconciliation, to him, is regeneration and renewal and helps the world to forge ahead by casting behind the atrocities of the past: "...ancestral wisdom reminds us that sometimes, the ashes of the modest palm tree fertilise the soil for the germination of the giant oak" (Anyidoho, 2011: xviii.) Indeed, today's happenings—the Arab Spring, Boko Haram's destabilisation efforts in Nigeria, the recent war that ended in the creation of South Sudan from Sudan among others— might cast doubts that world peace is still far away but the poet reminds us in repetitive word and song, even translated into Ewe musical tune on the compact disc accompanying the collection, that:

*There is darkness still in our minds
But dawn cannot be too far behind*

*There is darkness still in our minds
But dawn cannot be too far behind*

*There is darkness still in our minds
But dawn cannot be too far behind (2011:24)*

4. Conclusion

Creative writing serves many purposes. Among these are the political and ideological purposes. Creative writers use their strong imagery, keen observation of happenings around them and even rumors as the sources of their works, of course, with the inspiration of their muses. This paper discusses the advocacy of Kobina Eyi Acquah and Kofi Anyidoho, two prominent Ghanaian poets, for the end of separatism and the creation of a peaceful world. While Acquah is milder and suggestive, Anyidoho is assertive and aggressive, almost impulsive. This is more relevant in the twenty-first century where the past rivalries among countries have become pus exploding into insurgencies, nuclear armaments, and wars. Indeed,

*There is a Journey we all must make into the Past
In order to come to terms with our future (2002:15).*

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