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Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies

Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/06q5p0hv>

Journal

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies, 10(3)

ISSN

0041-5715

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Publication Date

1981

DOI

10.5070/F7103017281

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THE ROLE OF LITERATURE
AND
ITS CREATOR IN SOCIETY

(A REVIEW OF SELECTED WORKS BY ZEGOUA NOKAN)

By

Esi Sutherland

Zegoua Nokan of the Ivory Coast is a young writer who has overtly declared his intention to put his talents and skills to the active service of the political and economic liberation of oppressed peoples. The author's secondary and university education in France have contributed to his internationalist bias, a feature which sets his writing and views in a unique position in the context of contemporary African literature.

If some of his writing amply expresses disillusionment and frustration, it is because of the undeniable entrenchment of neocolonialism after a supposed independence from colonialism-- a trend which is in effect in many a post-independence African country.

This trend is naturally regarded by Nokan and several of his fellow writers¹ all over the continent as a betrayal of the people of the land for whom and mainly by whom independence was won.

Nokan, however, is not satisfied with exposing, if even in the most vivid manner possible, the ugly depths of the situation. Neither does he spend all his energy venting his frustrations. He is an author who believes that he must propose a solution to the people. As we will see, he does not shy away from any genre or avenue for reaching the people with his message of socialist revolution.

Even a cursory glance at Nokan's work, therefore, reveals an attempt to make literature maximally functional in the context of a socialist revolution. It also implies the author's pre-occupation with the role of the writer-poet in the framework of a mass-based revolution. It is in the light of this that one will attempt to discern the role of literature and its creator as proposed by Zegoua Nokan in his works.

In keeping with Nokan's own attitude to his work, Abraha Pokou and La Voie Grave d'Ophimoi will be approached as media through which the writer seeks to contribute concretely to society.²

Nokan has expressed himself prolifically through short narratives,³ novels,⁴ plays,⁵ and poetry, but he has expressed the opinion that he does not observe these categories strictly. Indeed, he sees them all as complementary in painting a realistic picture of the various aspects of human existence.

It would be true to say, however, that Nokan is essentially a poet and his plays can easily be classified as dramatic poetry. Two of these plays, Abraha Pokou and La Traversée de la Nuit Dense, are followed by collections of poetry (La Voix Grave d'Ophimoï and Cris Rouges, respectively).

The plays present a characterization of Nokan's appraisal of the socio-political condition and the dynamics of a practical solution to the problems that he recognizes. The poetry, on the other hand, contains, among other things, various conceptual images of issues characterized concretely in the plays.

Nokan does not attempt in any way to create a distance between himself and his works; therefore, Abraha Pokou and La Voix Grave d'Ophimoï will be further examined for what they reveal of the author's personal style, moods and conception of his own place in society.

Nokan, as a post-independence writer, is reacting strongly against the status quo as he perceives it in African countries such as his own, the Ivory Coast. By the mid-1960s, trends in post-independence African politics had crystallized and a number of glaring imperfections emerging from these political systems form the basis for the establishment of a setting in both Abraha Pokou and La Traversée de la Nuit Dense, even though the former is set in the legendary past and the latter in both post-independent Africa and post-colonial France.

Some of the contributory issues will now be examined as they appear in Abraha Pokou and La Voix Grave d'Ophimoï. First of all, Nokan establishes the fact that the existing government, be it traditional or post-colonial is oppressive to the majority of the people and that the ruling class is merely parasitic and overindulgent. In Abraha Pokou this is characterized through the attitude of traditional rulers to women, slaves and the society at large.

When Abraha Pokou tries to support her brother who wishes to marry a slave, her view is immediately dismissed and she is sent to bed like a child. Later, in "Le Chant des Esclaves," the slaves declare that they can no longer bear the extreme oppression of the ruling class.

The overindulgence of the parasitic ruling class is exemplified in Abraha Pokou's husband who refuses to accompany her in

her attempt to escape from the oppressive regime of Apokou Ouare. His arguments are based on a false nationalism: "Quant à moi je suis né de cette terre,"⁷ a false sense of pragmatism which is really a justification of opportunism: "Tu rêves, moi, j'ai les pieds sur terre." As Abraha Pokou incisively states, he is only hanging onto privileges which are only possible because of the exploitation of others.

Corruption is another aspect of the status quo which Nokan emphasizes. He does this through a detailed presentation of the process by which a successor is appointed to the throne after the death of the king. In the first place, it is made quite clear that the society as a whole takes no part in this process.

The wrestling match to decide who should be ruler is not based on any moral or political strengths. Praise-singers, emphasizing the corrupted, exaggerated nature of the match are present at every stage of the competition.

The winner, Apokou Ouare, wins by poisoning Dakon who has been fighting all along to prove his integrity. This gross malpractice is not only known but accepted and appreciated by the political system and those who perpetuate it. An old statesman claims, "Nous sacrerons le vainqueur, c'est-à-dire le plus fort, le plus malin, roi."⁸ The narrator also observes "Quant deux géants se battent, c'est le plus rusé qui l'emporte."⁹ A nobleman now states categorically that Apokou Ouare will defend the interests of the nobility in the same scene. Corruption here is not merely in terms of use of state power to protect private interests, but a ruthlessness which will not permit the survival of any members of the ruling class who may chance to go against its interests.

Just as is done in Abraha Pokou, the same premise is set up in La Voix Grave d'Ophimoi. The behavior of present-day ruling classes are compared to the behavior in Versailles under Louis XIV. They are compared to decaying "yellow" vegetation. They are often referred to as predatory animals: vultures, eagles, and crocodiles. Their life style is set against that of the majority.¹⁰

When in part VI directed reference is made to "...de colons et leurs collaborateurs" there is no doubt that Nokan is referring to the age of neocolonialism where the bureaucratic ruling class have become local agents of former colonial powers, thus intensifying and legitimizing their exploitative activities. Their rewards are, of course, personal gain. The Ivory Coast has indeed proved to be a most infamous example of this situation which prevails to a greater or lesser extent in most African countries.

Any system of governments or intellectual attitudes which lend support to this status quo are completely unacceptable to Nokan. He therefore dismisses the whole concept of "independence" in parts IV and V, for example, where he makes it clear that there are "clouds" over the so-called independence of his country. He claims that independence has fallen short of true freedom and is therefore woefully inadequate. Negritude is dismissed as a reactionary intellectual trend. Indeed, when he speaks of the future in part XIV, he says, "Les poètes de la Negritude se sont tus."

When Nokan speaks of the future, he is referring to a solution to the problematic status quo which has been sketched above. He puts the solution in a variety of perspectives. In La Traversée de la Nuit Dense, for example, White and Non-White workers with the help of students stay their ground in France fighting for the rights of the working masses. Hand in hand with this struggle is the politicization of skeptical workers.

The emphasis in Abraha Pokou is on another dimension of the revolution. Abraha Pokou leads ordinary citizens, slaves and discontented nobles away from the village in order to set up a new way of life according to their collective ideals. The rest of the play, stretching from the escape to the final establishment of a true government of the people by the people, carries several aspects of a people's revolution. The dynamics of the revolution that involves a radical break with old ways and beliefs are characterized by the situations in which Abraha Pokou and the exiles find themselves. The reactions of various characters to these new situations are indicative of the individual human dimensions of the struggle.

The first aspect of the revolution which is heavily emphasized by Nokan is the existence of a core figure who is Abraha Pokou in this particular instance. She becomes the inspirational leader on the journey and is central to the establishment of a new society.

While she provides the model of leadership in her initiative, strength and devotion to the common cause, she also exemplifies the leader as a servant to her people. She sacrifices her immediate family to the establishment of a new and better society. Her husband has to be abandoned for he is an irreversible exploiter. Her baby son is shot by a poisoned arrow meant for her so that she can become a matriarch of the newly emergent Baoule society rather than simply a mother of her son. Later on, her son Djassa's political ambitions are completely squashed by his mother who campaigns for the election of the slave Bassa. She does this because she recognizes his reactionary tendencies.

By establishing election by universal suffrage Abraha Poko

removes herself from the political center of the Baoule nation and effaces her personal importance. This marks an advancement in the political awareness in her people who, at the end of the play, are not being led by a heroic, stellar figure but by a person that has been elected from among the broad masses.

By doing so, however, Abraha Pokou still remains a heroic figure leading an exemplary political life which involves both initiative, power, sacrifice and humility. In setting up such a figure, Nokan is painting the picture of the heroic African matriarch as he sees her (see Tribute in the Preface to Abraha Pokou). He acknowledges the contribution of women to past and present struggles, treating them as members of an oppressed class. This justifies Abraha Pokou leading the oppressed Baoules and diminishes her position as a member of the royal lineage imposing upon the masses.

Abraha Pokou has to give up much more than any single character in the play for the establishment of the Baoule society and sacrifice is an important aspect of the revolution as characterized in this play. The death of Abraha Pokou's son is an affirmative sacrifice while her husband's refusal to leave the homeland is a negative confirmation of the importance of sacrifice.

Antithetical to the concept of sacrifice is that of treachery. It is significant that the traitor is a slave who has accepted his servility and cannot conceive freedom. He proves the most dangerous of all the problems of the exiles. By attempting to kill Abraha Pokou, he attempts to cripple the group by attacking its inspirational core. Even though he does not kill Abraha Pokou, the death of her son has a demoralizing effect on her and for a moment there is a risk that she will crumble emotionally, in which case, she may as well have died. Furthermore, he reveals the location of the group to Apoku Ouare's army, thus putting them in danger of physical extermination.

Once these obstacles have been cleared and a site has been chosen for settlement (at the edge of the savanna), the construction of a truly socialist society begins in earnest. Some of its elements are:

a) Cooperation: All members of the society are shown to be contributing their quota to the structuring of a society which they recognize as their own. Nature responds to this positive investment of energies and yields highly fruitful results. There is true dialogue at all levels, initiated by Abraha Pokou's attitude to the society at large.

b) The Joy of True Freedom: This is expressed in the form of movement. A highly energetic and intensive dance is

is created at the coronation of Abraha Pokou who is then invested with political power by the people. This is, however, only a stage in the political life of the nation, for, as has been mentioned, Abraha Pokou's successor is elected by universal suffrage

c) The Reality of Reactionary Trends: These are not overlooked, for Djassa, son of Abraha Pokou is rallying around himself a number of nobles who oppose the concept of universal suffrage and who characterize the fact that mental attitudes do not do an immediate volte-face merely with a declared change of political outlook. Their presence removes any impression that the new society is euphoric or idealistic. Abraha Pokou states categorically in handing over power to Bassa that reactionary elements must be eliminated. This emphasizes the concept of an ongoing struggle.

Indeed, the play does not end on a point of finality. Mention is made of unification with other nations. The final line is "Demain sera tres beau," while the final lines of the epilogue read: "Triomphera l'internationalisme prolétarien. Nous sommes le présent et le futur. Nous reprenons le monde. Les hommes deviendront les roses de la vie."

The solutions offered in Abraha Pokou contrast with or are complemented by concepts expressed in La Voix Grave d'Ophimo

What Nokan has offered is the severing of all ties with an old way of life through the escape from blatant oppression and a gentle transition into a new political system. What binds the exiles together is their common intolerance of oppression, but the evolution of a political system that will maintain and rejuvenate a new status quo is shown to take place at a much slower pace.

Where change is called for in the poetry, however, it is of a violent and aggressive kind, rather than the defensive nature of the solution offered in the play through escape. The masses are exhorted to take up arms and spill blood in order to achieve the revolution. Whereas the exiles are described by the narrator as experiencing prolonged suffering from natural hazards and obstacles. This expanded time is cut short by the violent solution in the poetry which is depicted in the form of storms, guerilla warfare, fire snakes or even the color red. Whatever its conceptual characterization, it brings to a fast and decisive close the era of oppression.

On the other hand, Nokan may be seen to have an ambivalent attitude towards African traditions in his poetry. He seems to believe in a certain traditional essence which has been corrupted by colonialism as well as neocolonialism. He refers to this

essence as: a) "âme de mon pays" and b) "La vie morte de notre race revient/ eau belle et noire du passé coule derechef/ La pluie de l'avenir la fécondera/ Ainsi chantait mon doux peuple."¹¹ Even in Abraha Pokou the new Baoule nation has political positions such as that of queen, indetifiable with the abandoned political system.

There would appear to be a sense of continuity, a transformation based on a kernel situation that does exist prior to the revolution and upon which the new society is built. This idea is further elaborated on in part III of La Voix Grave d'Ophimoï (p. 159) where Nokan depicts Africa as an ugly frog out of which some beauty could perhaps emerge.

The second half of the play depicts a search at two levels. The first level is the literal search of the Baoules for a new physical location and the second is the search by a society for a suitable political system. The poet finds himself serving a well-defined role here. Even though two different roles of poet and narrator are established in the play, one would suggest that these both serve a participant-observer-commentator role although the poet is more of a commentator on the nonmaterial aspects of situations as he observes them. He also projects into the future with his perceptions. A clear example is the scene of the wrestling match between Dakon and Apokou Ouare. While the narrator gives details of the scene, the poet comments on imminent and inevitable death and the tragic mood that such anticipation necessarily creates.

As soon as the escape begins, the narrator moves from a neutral role to an active one of participant. He uses the second person plural "nous" as he describes the journey. In the same vein, at the coronation of Abraha Pokou, the poet states: "J'ai toujours fait partie de l'avant garde de mon peuple en lutte pour sa liberté."

These conceptions of the role and obligations of the poet in society are further emphasized in La Voix Grave d'Ophimoï. First of all, most of these poems address the society as a whole or talk from the point of view of the society. They either describe the situation of the society (e.g., parts I, IV, V); they speak of the great future beyond the act of freedom (e.g., epilogue).

These poems contain both the intensity of condensed information and the power to provoke action. Their intensity lies in the multiplicity of images, categorizing and re-categorizing problems, stating and re-stating the inevitable solution.

The poet's role then is not to impose upon the society

but to keep the collective mind on its needs and aspirations. As was mentioned in the introduction, the foregrounding of the role of the poet-narrator emphasized Nokan's personal identity with his works and the political life of his society.

Much of what has been stated above illustrates the declared intent of Nokan as a member of the collective; but there are certainly other indications of his personal attitudes which stamp the works under consideration as being by and of him.

One of Nokan's attitudes that mark his work is his optimism. This puts him in a different category from most post-independence African writers who have mostly contented themselves with grim realities (e.g., Mongo Béti, Bernard Dadié, Sembene Ousmane, Ayi Kwei Armah). He offers a solution to the problems he raises in the form of a revolution by the oppressed masses. He constantly works towards "tomorrow" as being full of promise and positive change.

In this tomorrow we see another of Nokan's personal ideas: internationalism. He talks of unity with other nations at the end of Abraha Pokou but in his poems he specifies a universal alliance of all oppressed peoples and suggests that examples set by other peoples be followed by his own (e.g., parts II, XIV and the epilogue).

Perhaps parallel to the journey of the Baoule from oppression to true opportunity for socialist development is the internal journey of the poet from a state of hesitation through a period of utter depression and self-pity to a final state of freedom. Freedom here is specifically defined as the sudden realization that nothing can keep the poet from offering the only solution to the problems whose immediate dimensions have kept him ineffective until this point.

La Voix Grave d'Ophimoï, then goes from the poet's uncertainty about the potentials of his people to an account of the treacherous and disappointing state of political affairs. During this period, his mood changes continually and he goes so far as to abandon himself to abject depression: "Entre l'existence et moi, il n'y a plus de lieu solide. Le vide peut me dévorer."

This mood seems to be further deepened by the fact that he becomes ostracized from the people (parts IX-XI). This serves as a political lesson as does his physical incarceration for political activities. His release from jail is also symbolic of his release from internal depression and from this point on his positive role begins in earnest. "Je ne chante plus, Je pousse des cris séditieux." (part XIV)

Nokan's attempt to focus on crucial issues is not shown

merely through thematic unity but also through the structure of his play. In the first place, no secondary plots are developed. Indeed, very few characters are identified by personal names and no characters develop through the play. Their roles are set at first appearance as there is not time for development in the short space into which so much is condensed. A glaring example of this is the appearance of Djassa, Abraha Pokou's grown-up son, at the end of the play; his presence is neither known to readers earlier on nor explained after his appearance. In the preface to Violent Etait Le Vent, Nokan explains that if his works touch on a wide spectrum of issues in a very short period of time and space it is because he sees life in rapid flashes and wishes to present the reality of these images.

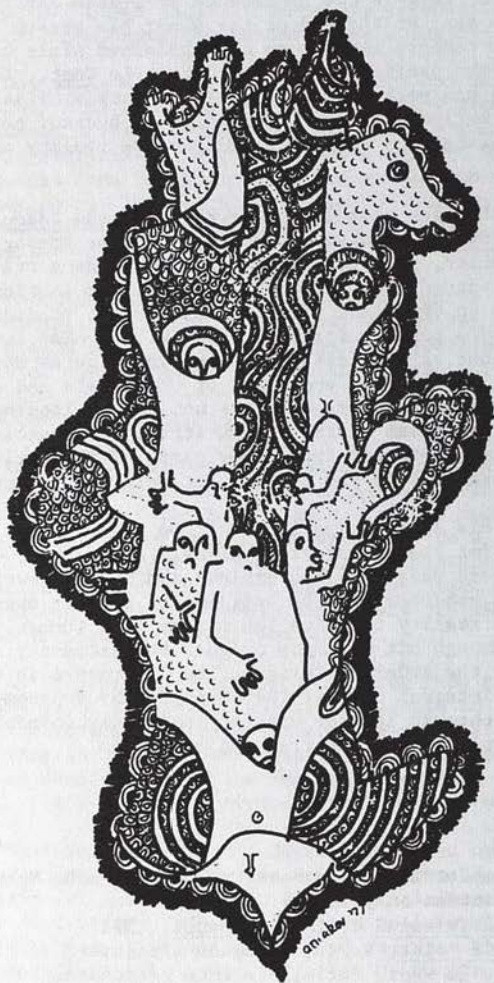
Despite the fact that in the works of Abraha Pokou and La Voix Grave d'Ophimoï, Nokan delivers an intense message of socialist revolution, yet he does not deliver it as a scientific inevitability divorced from all human sentiment or emotion. Indeed, he plays on these and speaks of suffering, vindication of harm done, and a passion for true freedom. He also indulges in a certain amount of deification by creating figures such as Abraha Pokou and the poet as spokesman of the people and director of thought. Perhaps, however, Nokan is not merely looking at the theories of socialism as they are written, but practical examples of socialism-in-use from other parts of the world which have been observed to bear the traits mentioned in his works.

Whatever his specific motivations, we hope that it is clear at this point that Nokan views himself as inseparable from both the broad masses of his society and his own works. His works act as vehicles for the building of greater awareness of the political reality in which the masses find themselves. He also seeks through his works to trigger the necessary revolution to change the order of things. The literature is therefore as much an integral part of the struggle for freedom as its creator is--through it, the creator leads, participates in, describes, contemplates and inspires social change.

Notes

1. Striking examples are Mongo Beti, Ayi Kwei Armah, Ngugi Wa Thiong--to mention only a few.
2. Preface to La Traversé de la Nuit Dense, 1972.
3. Le Soleil Noir Point, Paris, Presence Africaine, 1962.
4. Violent Etait le Vent, Paris, Presence Africaine, 1966.
5. See Les Malheurs de Tchako, Honfleur, Paris, P.J. Oswald, 1968.
6. Cris Rouges, 1972.

7. Abraha Pokou, p. 31.
8. Ibid., p. 32.
9. Ibid., p. 28.
10. La Voix Grave d'Ophimoi, Honfleur, Paris, P.J. Oswald, 1971, p.
11. Ibid., p. 61.



The Vow of the Changlings
Chike C. Aniakor