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The Back Without Which There Is No Front

Kofi Anyidoho

Using as its point of reference the principle of “continuity” fundamental to Ewe conception of development and of life itself, this paper draws on the author’s personal experience and testimony to establish an organic relationship between Ewe oral tradition and poetry written in English. The article examines contradictions surrounding the use of colonial-heritage language and culture as the basis of creativity and general education in Africa. It demonstrates the challenges of creative work in colonial-heritage languages and the benefits of original work in African languages that draws on models from the oral tradition; however, given that African cultural practice is primarily oral, the paper acknowledges the need for using modern technology for transmitting African literature, especially poetry, through recordings of the spoken voice.

Introduction

The story is told in oral tradition of the Ewes in Ghana that in their migratory journeys to their present homes, probably the most important single step they took into the future had to be done walking backward. It is said again and again that to escape from the tyranny of King Agokoli and the walled city of Notsie (in present-day Togo), the Dogbos, as they were then called, had to break out at night through a secret opening in the great wall and then proceed toward freedom by walking backward for a considerable distance away from Agokoli.

Oral tradition tells us that Agokoli’s final task for the Ewes was a demand that they weave ropes made of clay. It is also said that before setting this impossible task, the king had decreed that all Dogbo elders be killed. It would appear that his order was pretty much carried out, except for one family, which managed to hide away its venerable old man. This was the man who advised his children to tell the king that they were more than prepared to produce as many clay ropes as he cared for, provided he made available to them an old sample. “Go tell Agokoli,” he is reported to have

said: “Ka xoxoawo nue wogbea yeyeawo do.” (It is on to old ropes that new ones are woven.) It is also said that when it became obvious that Agokoli felt so humiliated by the response that he was ready to persecute and execute several Dogbo leaders, it was this same old man who provided his children with the master plan for their historic escape.

Today, whenever the Anlo-Ewe of Ghana perform their classic ancient drum known as *akpoka* or its modern variant *agbadza*, you will often hear them sing the song:

Agbo de le kome ne do ee :
 Kaxoxoawo nue wogbea yeyeawo do.
 Agbo de le kome ne do ee :
 Ka xoxoawo nue wogbea yeyeawo do.

Terror inside the anthill, come out:
 It is onto old ropes that new ones are woven.
 Terror within the anthill, come out:
 It is onto old ropes that new ones are woven.

Also, in November of every year, usually on the first Saturday, during the Hogbetsotso festival in Anloga in Ghana, when the Anlo-Ewe reenact their migratory journeys, they perform the *misego*, the special dance inscribed by symbolic forward-backward-forward movements (Nukunya 1997:106–107).

Kofi Awoonor, probably the foremost contemporary poet-scholar and interpreter of the Anlo-Ewe tradition in the arts, acknowledges his debt to that tradition:

Their world was my real world of consciousness, of growth. . . .
 I have returned to it, to the underlying energy that sustains it. The principle that I believe was at its base was *continuity*, for as our people say, *eka xoxoawo nue wogbea yeyeawo do*: “we weave the new ropes where the old ones left off.” There is in this concept the fundamental unity of time and place, with the people always the actors; the terrain and the time reveal the nature of the activities of my people, for in the need for continuity is stressed the principle of survival. . . .
 Survival in this situation was more than a matter of hope. It was anchored in faith, belief, and the certainty that life is a cyclical process; we fulfill our turn with drums, laughter, and tears, and pass on inevitably to our ancestor hood, to sustain those we leave behind on this wayside farm we call life. (Awoonor 1987:216)

The faith, belief, and certainty that Awoonor affirms here seem to have suffered severe erosion as a result of the encroachment of other faiths and values, to which his people, along with others in Africa and elsewhere, have

been subjected. In his poem "What Song Shall We Sing," he demonstrates how the old songs and dances, with their profound historical grounding, must now contend and compete with a thousand other songs and dances, which flood in from the relentless storms of history:

Shall we jump and clutch at the stars
Singing hosannas
Shall we sing the flesh peeling songs
Of goose-pimples,

Or shall we sing the new songs
That are on the lips of the street boys?
What song shall we sing? (Awoonor 1987:9)

In this poem, first published in Awoonor's 1964 collection *Rediscovery*, we can tell that the poet was keenly aware of the options his colonial history had forced on himself and on his people. It stands to his credit that despite the alienating bent of his early colonial and missionary education, he was able to rise above self-doubt and turn to his own ancestral poetic and song traditions, such as the one associated with Akpalu Vinoko, the greatest of all Ewe composers, as his primary source of inspiration and guidance. Elsewhere, Awoonor offers a significant demonstration of the use to which he and others of his generation put the oral traditions of their own people (1976:192–225). In particular, he provides extended examples of the relationship between his own work, especially his early work, and that of Akpalu and others of the Ewe tradition; between Mazizi Kunene's poetry and the Zulu oral tradition; and between Christopher Okigbo's poetry, especially his valedictory sequence "Path of Thunder," and the Igbo tradition.

Unfortunately, by far the greater number of Awoonor's contemporaries could not see their way so clearly into the future through the windows on life first created by their ancestors. Hence the poet's constant lament, despite his fundamental optimism, so well illustrated in his early poem "We Have Found a New Land":

The smart professionals in three piece
Sweating their humanity away in driblets
And wiping the blood from their brow. . . .
And tears well in my eyes for them
Those who want to be seen in the best company
Have abjured the magic of being themselves
And in the new land we have found
The water is drying from the towel
Our songs are dead and we sell them dead to the other side
Reaching for the Stars we stop at the house of the Moon
And pause to relearn the wisdom of our fathers. (Awoonor
1987:11).

Richard M. Dorson suggests three tests for establishing the relationship of a given written work to oral tradition: *biographical evidence* that the author has enjoyed direct contact with oral lore; *internal evidence*, indicating the author's familiarity with folklore; and *corroborative evidence*, "that the saying, tale, song, or custom inside the literary work possesses an independent traditional life" (Dorson 1957: 5). It is easy to find that much of Awoonor's work passes all three tests, as does the work of certain other African writers; however, beyond these three tests lies a more intriguing, creatively more significant one:

Perhaps we do not have to hunt for evidence of folklore (or oral tradition) as borrowed items only. We may not find a traditional Ewe proverb or fragments of songs in every Awoonor poem or novel, but can we discount the evidence of traditional Ewe styles and techniques of poetic composition? It seems that a writer's ability to adopt and adapt oral styles and techniques is a far more significant case of creative continuity than the incorporation of fragments of folklore into literature. After all, the good writer is an artist, a creator, not a mere dealer in borrowed items. And when most people talk of African writers being influenced by Western literary traditions they think more in terms of style, technique, and genre rather than "borrowed" passages. (Anyidoho 1982:17).

In an earlier study, I have argued that any critical survey of Ghana's emerging national tradition in the arts should reveal a constant interplay between antiquity and modernity, between past and present-future time. This interdependence of the past and the present-future, I suggest:

underscores a view of life in which the present is in constant creative interface with the past, but always with expectations of future harvests as their essential driving force. This view of a national tradition in the arts is appropriately captured in the now ubiquitous mythological figure of *Sankofa*: ancient proverbial Akan bird, constantly reaching back into the past even as it flies sky-bound into a future of great expectations, mindful always that an incautious leap into the future could easily lead to a sudden collapse of dreams. In the *Sankofa* bird, Ghanaian culture has found its most complex and most recurrent expression of the nation's favourite guiding principle of development. (Anyidoho 2000a:3-4)

The arguments so far made, and the illustrations so far drawn, all seem to derive from one overriding premise: that African contemporary arts and knowledge in general stand a lot to gain from the legacy of ancestral oral traditions. But we need also to be concerned with what the new knowledge

from other traditions can contribute to the enrichment of African oral heritage. It has been easier for us to dwell on the ways in which the oral heritage and indigenous knowledge systems have been negatively affected by their encounter with other and often hostile traditions. The encounter need not produce only negative results for African oral heritage. The Nigerian poet Niyi Osundare's vivid metaphor for the encounter between Yoruba and English is timely:

When two languages meet[,] they kiss and quarrel. They achieve a tacit understanding on the common grounds of similarity and convergence, then negotiate, often through strident rivalry and self-preserving altercations, their areas of dissimilarity and divergence. (Osundare 2000:15)

For most Africans, the real difficulty often comes from the kind of formal Western education they have been subjected to. All of us have our own individual tales of the two traditions of knowledge. The success or failure to achieve a harmony between the two traditions, to establish a productive, creative dialogue between the two—this has been the single most crucial challenge of education in Africa. Perhaps a brief look at certain aspects of my own life story may help to illustrate the point.¹

In primary school, once the initial uncertainties were over, learning was, on the whole, a great pleasure, despite the determination of many of the teachers in our Bremen Mission School to beat the devil out of our system. I quickly learned to read and write Ewe. In Upper Primary, we graduated from afternoon folktale sessions into the wonder-filled world of stories from distant lands: Ali Baba in the *Thousand and One Nights* [*Za Akpe Deku kple Deku*], *Montezuma's Daughter* [*Montezuma Fe Vi Nyonuvi la*], *The Pilgrim's Progress* [*Kristoto Fe Mozozo*], and *Lamb's Tales from Shakespeare* [*Shakespeare Fe Nutinyawo*]. I devoured and relished them all, because some earlier scholars had taken the trouble to do what Alfred the Great, King of Wessex (871–899), had done for the English people through the medium of their own language, using translation to bring home to his people the accumulated treasures of the world of learning (Burnley 1992:21–23; McCrum et al. 1992:52). And indeed at home, I had no difficulty explaining to and sharing with everybody much of what we were learning at school.

At that early age, good poetry in Ewe, usually as song, had a dramatic impact on me. I began to read transcriptions of Akpalu's songs in books, even as I heard my mother and others singing his songs at home.² And when Akpalu himself came on the radio, or when his voice boomed into the megaphone of Uncle Kofitse Ashiakpor's gramophone—that miracle of His Master's Voice—everyone dropped whatever they were doing and gathered around the miracle machine as the greatest of all Ewe poet-cantors spoke and sang to us in our own language:

Meyi manya Tamali.

Nudzadzra menoa amesi wodzranado de xome o.
 Mede Kumasi zi eve.
 Fifia, meyi manya Tamali.

Megbloe be Yevunue ke na mi

Akpalu be Yevunue ke na mi.
 Kpatsaklokpewo du vum.
 Meyi manya Tamali.
 Asi gawo nue ha le
 Megbloe be asi gawo nue ha le.
 Amewo do wotoa matso tonye ada de wogbo.

I say let me go and discover Tamale.
 You do not keep your precious wares hidden in your room.
 I have been to Kumasi twice.
 Now let me go and discover Tamale.

I tell you it is the white man's day that's dawned on us;
 Akpalu says it is the white man's day that's dawned on us.
 Even the crawling tortoise is running,
 So let me go and discover Tamale.
 It's in the big markets that you find song;
 I say it's in the big markets that you find song.
 When others display their songs, I'll lay mine beside them
 (Translation by author)

But all that joy of learning was to gradually disappear from school, giving way to an obsession to prepare for the Middle School Leaving Certificate Examinations. After middle form two, Ewe language and literature dropped out of the syllabus, their place taken by this strange language of strangers. And with this, poetry was to become a series of meaningless even if nice-sounding puzzles. You could memorize and reproduce them on demand, with the cane hanging over your head, but hardly any of it made much sense. Later, as I looked back, it became clear to me that poetry and all those stories couldn't make much sense any more, not because there was no sense in them, but because we were too busy struggling with the grammar of English. And if it was difficult with poetry and storybooks, arithmetic was a nightmare. What could Simon and Milikin mean by asking me to calculate *runs* and *innings* made in a far-away land by a man I would never know? It took me another decade and half to discover that they were trying to teach mathematics through the game of cricket.

Our Nigerian colleague Akinwumi Isola has recorded for us a village elder's complaint at a community meeting at which an address was being read in English: "We spend all our money sending them to school. But when

they become respectable they stop talking to us. Isn't that a big loss?" (Isola 1992:17). Throughout my career, I have been haunted by this indefinable sense of emptiness whenever I pause to consider my failure to take back home to my people all the wonderful things I can now claim as my knowledge of the world, most of it gained through my ability to read and write English. As an undergraduate in the University of Ghana, I went through a serious crisis with the knowledge I was presumably acquiring. Even the successes I seemed to be recording as a poet became doubtful. Here I was in an English department that was to be observed even a decade later, in 1986, as the least decolonized in all of Anglophone Africa. Following a survey of the content of syllabi of about thirty English departments in Anglophone Africa, Benrth Lindors concluded:

The most radical reorientations of literature study have taken place at universities in Kenya and Tanzania, while the staunchest conservatism has been maintained by English Departments at the University of Ghana and the University of Cape Coast, resulting in only minor alterations of the old colonial curriculum. (Lindfors 1995:48)

I was trying to make a creative contribution to the world of letters, and it appeared I was making some progress, but many of my lecturers insisted that African literature was not worth serious critical attention. I had spent most of my life trying to achieve creative excellence through the English language, and here were "the owners of the language" telling me it was not worth the effort. In my desperation, I tried to drop English and take up Ghanaian language studies for my graduate work. To my utter disappointment, the then head of the Linguistics department pointed out that there was no faculty member at the time with enough specialization to supervise my research work in Ewe Literature. I went back to English.

That I continued writing poetry in English even though my lecturers in English insisted African literature in English was a waste of time can only mean that something told me they were wrong. But did that mean I was right? Once my creative writing began to attract critical attention, each time I went home I was embarrassed to find that I could not share with my own people what I was supposed to be doing rather well. It did not matter much that my poems were allegedly being read "all over the world." All over which world? whose world? Were my people part of that world?

I belong to a family of poets. The elders and experts in the ancestral art of eloquence were always ready to share their knowledge and skill with me. I readily took this knowledge, this skill, and used some of it to create poetry in a language they cannot and will never understand. It was easy to confess to a sense of guilt, of ingratitude, even of betrayal.

When I first began my formal research into Ewe oral poetry, I discovered that one of my mother's favorite role models was a singer who was a distant relative of Alakple's. She was Awoyo Awevor, known by the stage

name Atsuborta. Later, I met with her, and in several sessions recorded her songs and reflections on the musical tradition she represented so well. Professor Kwesi Yankah and I even managed to bring her into one of our oral literature classes at Legon to share her knowledge and skill with us. She died while I was out of the country. About a year later, at the wake-keeping for her final funeral rites, members of her family and her own performing group performed several of her songs, and then requested that I play back some of my recordings of her performance. At the end of it all, her group left me with a song that they said was one of her favorites. It is a song heavily loaded with a question to which I am still trying to find an answer:

Megbona dzodzo ge loo.
Ame kae makpo woale gbe nyea ada di nam?
Megbona kuku ge loo.
Afikae mato woa le ha nyea ada di nam?

I am about to go.
Who shall I find to hold my voice for me?
I am about to die.
Where shall I go for my song to be held for posterity?

Clearly, it is not enough that we are celebrated in distant academies and in the pages of prestigious international journals and other publications, for as long as we cannot bring our knowledge home and share it with our people in such a way as to lead to some general transformation in the material conditions of their lives, for as long as we are unable to build our new knowledge from other traditions upon the foundations of knowledge our own cultural systems have generated over the centuries, we may be engaged in nothing more than a game of betrayal and of self-delusion, the dangerous and possibly suicidal game of language and the “politricks” of knowledge.

Perhaps the point of my story is now quite clear. You can have a meaningful dialogue with someone only in a language you both understand. It must have been this realization that eventually forced me to begin writing poetry in Ewe. In fact, I began by rewriting in Ewe some poems I had already written and published in English. Trying to write in Ewe was, and remains, a major challenge. After those early years of education through the medium of my mother tongue, almost all my formal education has been in English. Writing, like all skills, has to be acquired and nurtured through continued practice. The fact that Ewe is my mother tongue does not mean that I can automatically write in it.

The decision to write in Ewe may have been easy, even natural to take, but what this has meant for me is that I have had to go back to school, as it were. I have had to go back to those early years of schooling and pick up the abandoned practice of literacy skills in Ewe. For a professor of English and a well-published poet, this situation is quite an embarrassment, and I can understand why many of us would choose to spend a lot of time debat-

ing the issue, rather than trying to remedy it. But no amount of debate can wipe away the fact that probably the most important factor responsible for the poverty of knowledge in Africa today is that too much of the knowledge production and transmission takes place in official languages that are foreign to a majority of the African people.

The questions that troubled me then, I have since discovered, had troubled many others of the generation before mine: "Why, we may ask, should an African writer, or any writer, become so obsessed by taking from his mother-tongue to enrich other tongues?" (Ngugi 1986:8) Ngugi offers us perhaps the most closely argued answer to his own question, probably best summed up in the opening paragraphs of his seminal work, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*:

The language of African literature cannot be discussed meaningfully outside the context of those social forces which have made it both an issue demanding attention and a problem calling for a resolution. . . . The choice of language and the use to which it is put is central to a people's definition of themselves in relation to their natural and social environment, indeed in relation to the entire universe. (Ngugi 1986:4)

In a more recent reassessment of the earlier debates on the responsibility of artists and intellectuals to return to the languages of their people, Ngugi not only reiterates his earlier convictions, but also draws our attention to the challenges and the rewards that go with such a choice:

A return to the stolen legacies of the people of Africa—from the economic to the cultural—can only empower us African peoples, individually and collectively. Orature, literature, African languages mutually enriching one another will produce the necessary foundations for a new culture of democracy and self-confidence. Oral power will then contribute to literary grace for African languages, creativity, and dignity at home and abroad. The result will be genuine enhancement of oral power and literary glory for Africa. (Ngugi 1998:128)

For me, the efforts so far made have led to certain significant developments and revelations. The first major revelation is the discovery that once I write a good poem in Ewe, I am able to communicate directly with even those who have no formal school education. Thanks to developments in readily available modern technology, my poetry in Ewe can transcend that frightening gulf between the literate and the nonliterate. Seven or eight years ago, I was a guest on Ghana Television's weekly program "Adult Education in Ewe." My host, the late Yaoga Amuzu, wanted me to share with viewers some of my knowledge about Ewe traditions of oral literature, especially poetry. We dwelt at length on the legacy of Akpalu Vinoko and

other great poet-cantors. Toward the end of our dialogue, Amuzu asked whether contemporary poets like me were making any contribution to the rich legacy of Akpalu and other indigenous poets. He asked me to present a sample of the poetry I had done in Ewe. What happened next was to mark a major turning-point in my career as a poet. Halfway through my reading, or rather my performance, of the first poem, I noticed a delightful transformation in my host and the crew, some of whom happened to be Ewe-speakers. I was later told that the director had to shout a few times to the cameramen, urging them to focus on what they were doing. It appeared that more than once, the cameramen felt compelled to look directly at the performer and the performance.

That experience in the studio was nothing compared to what was waiting for me outside in the wider community of Ewe speakers. When I arrived at school the next day, I found a young man waiting for me at my office. He was a messenger working in the bindery section of the university library. With an unmistakable excitement in his voice, he asked if I could make available to him some of the poems I had performed the previous night on the TV program. I tried to explain that I was still working on them, trying to get them ready for publication. Suddenly, the excitement in his face and voice was gone. He explained to me that there was no point in my giving the poems to him on paper. First of all, he could not read Ewe. And in any case, even if he could read, there was no way he could recapture the experience of hearing and watching me perform the poems. Could I perhaps give them to him on audio cassette? Not too long after the young man had left, two other visitors came in, this time elderly gentlemen, one of whom I knew as a computer specialist from the data-processing unit at the university. They too wanted the poems as recordings, preferably video, or at least audio. Four days later, I was on a weekend visit to Anloga, about a hundred miles from Accra. I went into the market to buy some shallots, a special variety of onions for which Anloga is well known. The shallot-seller parceled what I had bought, and as she raised her head to hand it over to me, she suddenly shouted, "Ghana Nya!", the title of one of the poems I had presented on the TV program. Then she turned to the women next to her and recited a couple of lines from the poem. Many others have since then quoted back to me lines from the three poems I presented. I found out later from Yaoga Amuzu, the TV host, that several requests had come in for a rebroadcast of the program. Accordingly, the program was repeated at least twice.

The most important outcome of this experience is my decision to turn to audio recording as an important alternative way of publishing my poetry. I have since then produced two CD and cassette recordings, *Agben-oxevi* (2001a) and *GhanaNya* (2001b). The second of these is of special significance, since it presents not only my poetry in Ewe, but also several songs sung by my mother, who until her death (in 1978), was well known in the Wheta area as a singer and leader of Nyayito, a group that specialized in the tradition of funeral song and dance established by Akpalu Vinoko.

Nyayito was founded by the late poet-cantor Kodzo Ahiago Domegbe, the main subject of some of my early studies of Ewe oral literature, including the long-essay project for my Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Ghana (Anyidoho 1977, 1980, 1995).

Another important rationale for writing in one's mother tongue and finding another medium for transmitting such work beyond the printed text is amply illustrated in the following statement, from Niyi Osundare:

Yoruba is my mother tongue, English my acquired language. The former brings warm intimations of the cradle and the homestead, the latter stern memories of the classroom and the blackboard. In Yoruba, poetry is song and chant, a performed or performable *event*, throbbing with the human breath, with a robust sense of audience and participation. Accomplishment in the art is still largely natural, a matter of talent, or lineage inheritance; it is still demotic, if not democratic. Illiterate village women chant *oriki* (praise poetry, panegyric) with a virtuosity that would make a university professor go blank with envy; traditional hunters regale one another with *ijala* (hunters' song) from sundown till the last cock at dawn has crowed. At a personal level, I grew up admiring my father's performance of *alamo* (a long, colourful, episodic song popular among the Ekiti-Yoruba).

So poetry for me is song, performance; it is utter-ance. In the beginning was not the Word, in the Word was the Beginning. But the Word was a tablet of letters and symbols, mute and immobile until endowed with the animating power of the human voice. Meaning is sounding, sounding meaning. (Osundare 2000:26)

Like Osundare, every student of oral tradition knows that there is no adequate substitute for the experience of oral literature in live performance, but we cannot always experience oral literature in live performance situations. For the continuity of the dialogue with oral tradition, we must explore the many opportunities offered by modern audiovisual technology. For those to whom this sounds a bit odd, we need to show how technology has helped in promoting the voice of specialists of the oral heritage:

Akpalu's career makes a strong case for the fact that technology may actually promote rather than retard oral tradition. His rise to fame coincided with the rise of phono-recording technology in Africa. It is true that he himself traveled extensively, establishing his new dirge style for various Ewe communities. But the fact still remains that more people learned about him and his dirges by listening to his phono records on His Masters Voice label than actually ever watched him in a

live performance. In a technological age, oral tradition does not spread by word of mouth alone, but also by word [or sound and image] of technical devices. The role played by this new technology in promoting Akpalu's influence over Ewe oral tradition may be seen as one of many ways in which tradition looks forward into the future rather than backward into the past. (Anyidoho 1983:144).

Given the evidence of all the gains we stand to derive from a dialogue with African oral heritage, it comes as a real puzzle that such dialogue seems, so far, to have been limited mostly to a few scholars and creative artists. Very little of this dialogue seems to be taking place in the social sciences, and almost none of it in the sciences, except for the exceptional few often considered by their colleagues as odd fellows.

Sometime in early 2002, I gave a ride to a colleague from the University of Ghana, a research scientist working with the Noguchi Memorial Institute for Medical Research. He wondered why he had not seen any recent episodes of a television program of which I have been the main host, Ghana Television's "African Heritage Series," an educational documentary-cum-discussion program dedicated to the African legacy in world history and culture. He lamented over how much we are losing because we have refused to pay attention to our heritage of ancestral knowledge, especially in the field of medical science. He spoke with admiration of his grandfather, a great healer, and regretted that the old man had died without passing his vast knowledge to any of them. Finally, he told the story of an AIDS patient he had been working with. She had come to his lab a few weeks earlier with her mouth so full of sores she could hardly swallow her own saliva. While they were wondering what to do to help her, one of the healers he had been collaborating with came in. The healer laughed when he was told what the problem was. He took the researcher aside and into the bush right behind his lab, pointed out a particular plant, and asked him to pluck a few leaves. He explained to him that the patient needed to try and chew a bit at a time and swallow the water from the plant; the more she could force herself to swallow, the better. The patient went home with some of the herb. To his surprise, when he visited her a week or so later, almost all the sores were gone, and she could eat just about anything.

Common sense should tell us that this is a significant subject for serious scientific investigation, so when a group of newly trained medical doctors visited the institute a few days later, my colleague was anxious and excited to share this new information with them. To his disappointment and shock, his story met with dead silence from the group. No one asked any questions. No comment. He had hoped that at least a few members of the group would feel intellectually curious enough to ask to be taken outside to see the plant for themselves. Not one of them bothered. Something of a historical explanation for this tragic lack of interest is offered in the following statement:

Since the modernist approach to development and strategies adopted by the colonial regimes identified African cultures with “traditions” that were considered to be static and backward, it is significant to find that after independence, a large number of African policymakers and members of the intelligentsia continued to stick to this view of development, which precluded the utilization of local knowledge, know-how, beliefs and traditions, memory, collective imagination, and aspirations. (Pwono and Katuala 1996:24)

Speaking on the topic “Culture and the Health of the Nation” at the National Festival of Arts and Culture at Ho in 2000, I said there can be no healthy development in any aspect of a nation’s life without a firm rooting in the nation’s indigenous culture and its own traditions. A decade or so earlier, in the historic and culturally vibrant city of Kumasi, at a symposium that was part of the National Festival of Arts and Culture, I opened my contribution with the argument that “the principal and recurrent failure of development planning in Africa lies in its lack of an organic relationship with our cultural heritage.” That presentation, titled “Culture and the Human Factor in African Development,” concluded with a general observation:

Agriculture provides sustenance for the physical and ultimately perishable or mortal body of a people; culture cultivates the mind and nurtures the soul. A people who deploy all their resources into providing food for the physical body only, shall leave nothing but a legacy of skeletons and excrement to their offspring. (Anyidoho 2000a: 30)

In May 2002, again in Kumasi, I had the privilege of being part of an international consultative workshop devoted to finalizing a draft Cultural Policy for Ghana. The draft document opens with a statement in which I wish we could find a great deal of hope:

In the era of globalization and contemporary technological challenges, the people of Ghana have further recognized that their culture is the basis of, and the most important factor in[,] the nation’s human and material development. Thus our history, cultural values and institutions continue to exercise a deep influence on the nation’s destiny and play a key role in governance and national life. (National Commission on Culture 2002)

Equally significantly, the document reminds us of the important provision in Ghana’s Fourth Republican Constitution (1992), article 39:

1. Subject to clause (2) of this article, the State shall take steps to encourage integration of appropriate customary values into the fabric of national life through formal and informal education and the conscious introduction of cultural dimensions to relevant aspects of national life.
2. The State shall ensure that appropriate customary and cultural values are adapted and developed as an integral part of the growing needs of the society as a whole; and in particular that traditional practices which are injurious to the health and well [sic] being of the person are abolished.
3. The State shall foster the development of Ghanaian languages and pride in Ghanaian culture.
4. The State shall endeavour to preserve and protect places of historical interest and artifacts.

Obviously, the designers of our constitution must have meant well. Our one regret is that so far, the State, as it were, has been too busy tracking down “traditional practices which are (alleged to be) injurious to the health and well [sic] being of the person.” Perhaps sometime soon enough, the State and all of us can turn our attention to a meaningful dialogue with our cultural practices and values. We may be surprised to discover that far from being a constant source of injury to our well-being, our indigenous culture on the whole is, in fact, a:

multi-dimensional intellectual space[,] which provides the framework within which a people’s mental and manual work takes place. . . . The soil from which the nutrients of their self-conception as a society or nation are ‘manufactured’ by the brain into social values and meaning . . . is also the source for departures from the present, for new ideas and products. (Bing 1994: 1)

My colleague Professor Kwesi Yankah gave us a timely caution against “trivializing the indigenous sources of knowledge,” and he called for:

greater commitment by African scholars and institutions to their local academies and epistemological systems . . . to rediscover and adapt local paradigms of scholarship to mainstream or dominant patterns. . . . The search would be for indigenous knowledge systems that address local needs, and also for scholars who would be committed enough to seek to facilitate the synchronization of indigenous knowledge with dominant knowledges. (Yankah 2000: 21)

It is indeed true, as the poet Kobena Eyi Acquah asks in his poem “Where We Are Going”: “Is it not a long way when you do not know / where you are going?” (1984:90). It may be even truer, as the elders say: “How can you know where you are going when you do not know where you are coming from?” It is onto the old ropes that new ones are woven. Our dialogue with the future must begin with “The back without which there is no front.”

NOTES

1. For an earlier version of this life story and its implications for my creative and scholarly work, see Anyidoho 1997.
2. For a portrait of Akpalu and his impact on Ewe oral tradition, see Awoonor 1974.

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