Finding Traditions of African Literature in Black Orpheus

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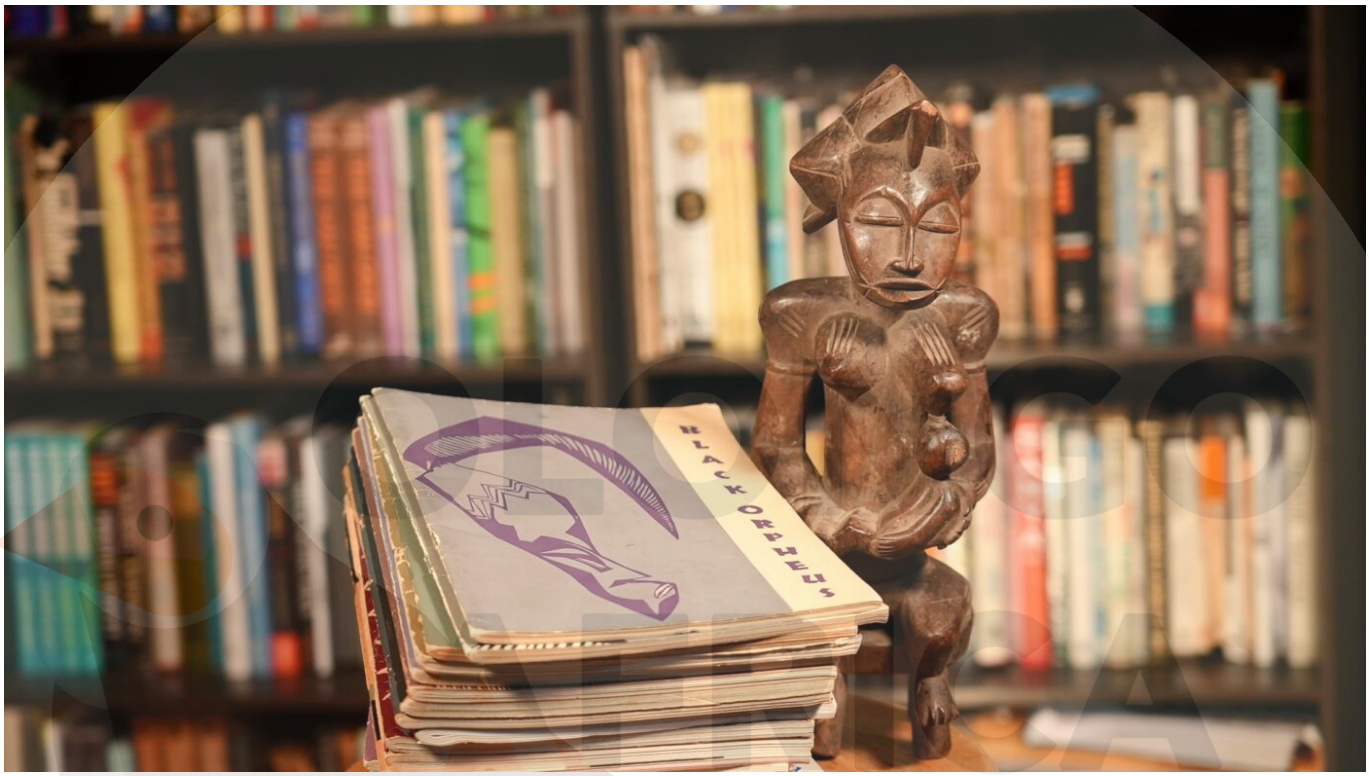
It's not unusual, these days, to hear older writers eulogize the great critical tradition that heralded contemporary Nigerian writing, waxing nostalgic about a quality of literary criticism, which, in their estimation, has gone extinct. They chalk this regrettable state of affairs to the poor reading culture; and the understanding—or the lack thereof—of the dynamics of critical analysis on the part of contemporary critics. This scathing assessment of the current state of literary criticism in Nigeria, and indeed Africa, often raises questions about the commitment of today's critics to robust literary ethos and discourse. The critics, in turn, say in their defence that they are doing their best to engage with, and critique, the works of their contemporaries. Thus, the dearth of rigorous literary criticism in Nigerian literature, decades on, remains a subject of concern and interrogation by writers, readers, critics, and scholars alike. This debate has permeated conversations at festivals and on digital platforms like Facebook, X, and WhatsApp groups, often resulting in bitter exchanges between the older and younger generations of writers. It must be said, however, that older writers who make these claims do so from a historical perspective, armed with privileged knowledge and exposure to the rich culture accentuated by publications such as *Black Orpheus: A Journal of the Arts in Africa*, which was instrumental in defining the trajectory of African literature and traditions.

Unfortunately, the ensuing dysfunctional state of education and apathy towards critical thought have deprived many young writers and critics of access to historical documents that record the literary and scholarly legacies of their forebears. This has not only created a disconnect between younger critics and the older generation, it may also explain why many Nigerian writers and critics continually cite Western authorities, while seeming oblivious to the equally important works of their own literary ancestors. The blame lies at the door of an educational system that devalues the contributions of its indigenous knowledge experts and thinkers. In other words, if the Nigerian educational system fails to teach and instill the right knowledge about its own history and

contributions to the global canon, we can hardly blame the products of such a system for failing to embody the required values. The poor quality of literary education in educational institutions, especially at the tertiary level, is a major contributory factor to the disconnect between younger writers, critics, and the cultural legacy of their ancestors. How many writers and critics today can truly claim to have read up to five editions of *Black Orpheus* in the last twenty years? Access to these journals have remained the exclusive preserve of a privileged few. The near-absence of the publications over several decades may be attributed to our poor archival culture, which, thankfully, is now less dire, with the digital copies of *Black Orpheus* made available through OlongoAfrica.



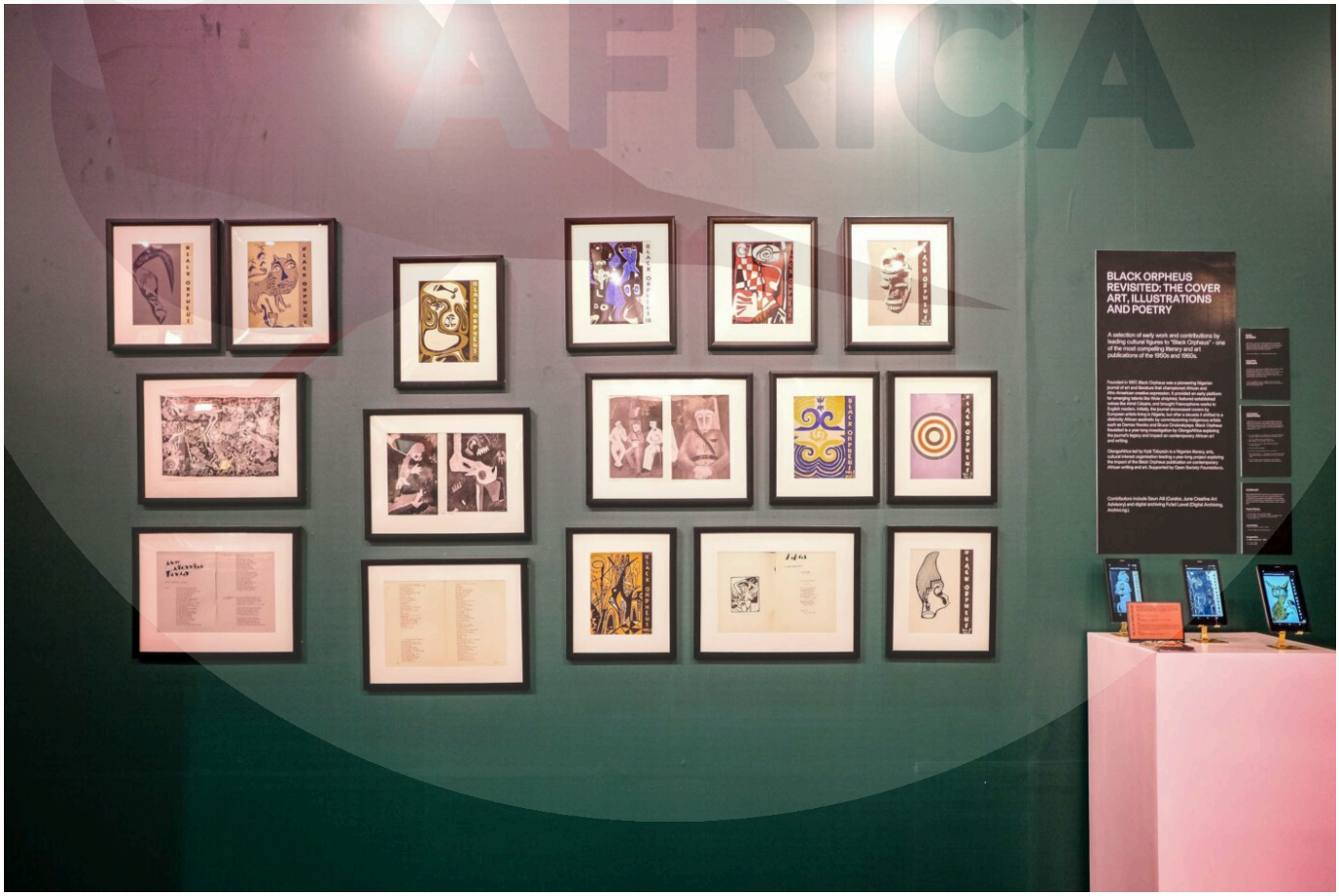
This is why I was elated to have access to the publications. I considered it a rare privilege because for years, I had heard and dreamt of reading the journal. One cannot truly claim to have knowledge of their cultural lineage unless they have engaged with the thoughts and ideations of their past epistemic systems. The gem that is *Black Orpheus* is our collective legacy, as it tells us a lot about our journey. It also validates what we do in the present and into the future, as it helps us to realize that we are not operating in a vacuum. We are extensions of our histories, and the literatures of our forebears are an immeasurable resource for reconnecting to our past and essence as a people.

As an emerging critic who has written extensively on contemporary Nigerian literature, encountering *Black Orpheus* provided me with uncommon insights into the literary contributions of Africa's pioneer critics, whose dedication and hard work ensured that we have a cultural system to fall back on, particularly in the area of literary criticism. I was intrigued by the rich criticism in various editions of the journal. I couldn't wait to acquaint myself with a part of Africa's cultural resources, which I had longed to be connected to for years. My curiosity was spurred by the desire to understand the tradition of critical intervention laid down by some of Africa's foremost literary critics and scholars; and as I pored over the various volumes, I had a better understanding of the older writers who harked back to this priceless asset of African literary history. Journeying through the thoughts and critiques left me wondering how much has changed in terms of the contemporary approaches to literary appreciation and appraisal. I marvelled at the thoroughness and critical responses to the craft and social issues explored by our foundational writers.

I gained two significant insights from my cross-generational encounter on the pages of the journal.

Firstly, the realization that the sociopolitical conditions that have plagued Africa's development weren't recent occurrences; they are as old as our independence from colonialism; rooted in systemic failures and misgovernance, as reflected in the poetry and fiction and even the critical interventions of the era. It was striking to note that, several decades after *Black Orpheus*, very little has changed regarding the socioeconomic and political development of most African countries. The disillusionment appears to have worsened over the years with pervasive poverty, hunger, insecurity, corruption, and misgovernance. This may explain the sociopolitical themes that characterize much of African literature. A nation and people trapped by existential realities cannot afford the luxury of literary utopianism; as a result, many African writers are stuck in the periphery of imagination as they confront the basics of sociopolitical realism.

B.M. Ibitokun, in his powerful essay, "The Dynamics of Spatiality in African Fiction" (*Black Orpheus* Vol. 6, No. 2, 1993, edited by Theo Vincent), notes that our literary output cannot extricate itself from the historical antecedents that constitute its imagined and lived realities. To Ibitokun, it cannot escape the burden of the sociopolitical conditions of its people occasioned by colonialism, imperialism, and artificial borders. "Because African fiction so far is mostly socio-political, its strength and growth rest on historicism from which artistic spatiality will always derive its own dynamics" (P. 11), the scholar asserts. He presupposes that African literature (fiction, in particular), is intrinsically linked to the historical influences behind the author's perception of the present and the context of the prevalence of the sociopolitical conditions in which the author exists. Decades after this assertion, very little has changed. African writing continues to exist in the shadows of history. Whether in Chimamanda Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Helon Habila's *Oil on Water,* or Obinna Udenwe's *Satans and Shaitans*, we encounter the textualization of the socio-political realities and historical conditions that have continued to impede Nigeria's development.



From the exhibition at Art X Lagos (November 2024)

A second insight from my reading of *Black Orpheus* has to do with the blunt critiques of the works

engaged by critics and scholars on its pages. A generation that was perhaps more honest and unsparing in their perception of the aesthetics and artistic merits of the works of their peers. A level of critical engagement is lacking in most of today's critical interventions. This is largely due to the emotional immaturity of many contemporary writers who seem incapable of letting go of their works, and fail to appreciate the value of a critical response. They view any critique that points out the weakness in their work as hateful and vindictive, rather than honest feedback. This notion of 'hate' and 'jealousy' has become a serious issue confronting the practice of genuine literary inquiry in Nigeria today. Critics are increasingly conscious of authors' emotional reactions to their works and, in many instances, assume the role of praise-singers and hero-worshippers who celebrate mediocrity.

As a critic, I have experienced firsthand the outbursts of writers angered by my review of their works. I have not been deterred by such philistine responses, even though it has cost me goodwill in some quarters. In one particular instance, a famous writer 'reported' me to mutual friends, for my critical opinion on his work. Another writer excommunicated me for the same, concerning his highly celebrated work. I have often argued that the responsibility of a critic is to the art, not the author or writer. A critic should not be concerned about what the author may say or think. It is a stifling antithetical posture that arises from a poor understanding of the imperative of criticism in advancing a robust literary discourse, and the development of literature. The apathy is compounded by the advent of social media, which has promoted cliquism and a false sense of entitlement among younger writers. Populism has overshadowed quality engagement; aspiring writers become instant superstars for merely regurgitating monotonous themes. The situation is not helped by Western institutions that serve not only as platforms for propelling the careers of young African writers, but also as agents of canonisation who determine what is perceived as the best of our writings. While some observers frown on outside influence, it must be said that the lack of supportive homegrown systems, and institutions dedicated to literature, is largely responsible for the dependence on foreign gatekeepers for the validation of our writers. The West continues to teach us what it means to value and celebrate creatives, therefore, they continue to take credit for the development and canonising of African literature.

To return to the lessons of *Black Orpheus*: its contributors maintained a high level of intellectual integrity, responding to literary works without bias or sentiment. They were not encumbered by some false sense of familiarity aided and abetted by social media, which today blurs the lines between objective criticism and patronage, as suffered by contemporary critics. A striking example is the submission by Adeboye Babalola in his essay, "Yoruba Oral Poetry for Children" (Vol. 5, No. 1, 1983, edited by Theo Vincent). Babalola's is a scathing critique that today would be categorised as hateful and envious in the current dispensation. Read him:

> There is in this poem a clear indication that it is rather a piece of nonsense verse. To the term 'nonsense verse' I am here attaching the connotation given in the Encyclopaedia of Poetry and Poetry: "a type of verse which violates the law of association, substitutes dissociation and avoids the reader's sympathetic involvement with the events in the poem.
>
> From line 1 to line 9 of the poem, we have a tenable coherent story. But in lines 10 and 11, we have a question which seems entirely irrelevant to the preceding story. And from line 12 to line 14 we have a well-connected series of utterances dealing with the respective emblems of three different divinities. But from line 15 to line 17 the theme

> goes off at a tangent, dealing with a personal request to the Head Chief for a gift of colourful cloth.
>
> The most prominent stylistic feature of this poem is its antiphonal rhythm produced by the balancement of sense in associated utterances. Tonal contrast at segment-ends is not much in evidence within the poem before the eighth line but from line 8 to the end, it is well-featured (p. 37).

Babalola's dispassionate criticism would today be viewed from a pedestrian perspective; but those were the days when intellectual integrity required an assessment of a literary work to be wholly objective. It is this kind of honest engagement that is lacking today. There are critics who are deterred by perceived attachments and connections with the works they engage with, thereby compromising the integrity of their conclusions. Again, inadvertent praise-singers rather than critical assessors of literature. This further explains the frustration of older writers who declare that literary criticism is dead in our literary space. The bemoaners are astounded by the lack of depth and honesty in what passes for critical intervention in contemporary Nigerian, nay African, literature.

We can observe a similar stance in Afolabi Olabimtan's review of William Bascom's "Ifa Divination: Communication between Gods and Men in West Africa" (Black Orpheus, Vol. 3, No. 2 & 3, 1975, edited by J.P. Clark, Afolabi Olabimtan). Bascom's perception and representation of Ifa divination poetry invites a scathing review from Olabimtan, thus:

> One of the disappointing features of the work, however, is that the 186 verses are not so selected as to reflect a cross-section of Ifa divination poetry. Of the sixteen paired Odù he himself acknowledges as the most important he uses for exemplification verses from twelve, and leaves out verses from Obàrà, irẹte, Otúrá and Otúrúpon. It would have been better if Bascom had given examples from each paired Odù without necessarily increasing the number of verses in the volume. It is also a surprise that Bascom should present as prose what he admits to be verses of poetry (p. 100).

The point of note in Olabimtan's submission, and of this essay, is the fact that earlier generation critics and scholars were dispassionate in their response to literary works. They did not approach the task of interrogation of literature from a sentimental perspective. They understood that objective feedback, albeit unvarnished, was critical to the overall wellbeing of the creative process, not just for the author but also for the reader. A reader is better educated when exposed to critical engagements that help them recognise the beauty as well as weaknesses of literary works. Balanced criticism was thus the crux of the critical culture in the pioneering era of African literature, and this is amply reflected in the various editions of Black Orpheus. This is why the journal is, in my opinion, a unique cultural artifact that should be widely available. It has a critical role to play in shaping the outlook of contemporary writers, critics, and scholars as to the important contributions of those that came before them, in the formation of African literary tradition. Critics, especially, have a lot to benefit from these invaluable documents.

In conclusion, as the title of this essay suggests, I set out to reflect on my personal experience encountering *Black Orpheus* for the first time through the OlongoAfrica Fellowship, and the

importance of the journal in the African literary tradition. Reading the journal made me realise that there is a lot that current and future generations can benefit from access to the volumes. As a literary critic, I am intrigued by the profundity of this rich resource, which would require a decade of study to fully grasp its enormous import. I pray that more critics and writers would get the opportunity to encounter the now rare cultural gem that is *Black Orpheus*.

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