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Poet Signature: French-Colonial Poetry

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POET SIGNATURE

French-Colonial Poetry

ALTHOUGH "French-Colonial" is in this case the only generic term that can be used to designate work which originates in widely-scattered parts of the globe, it is not a good term. Most of the poets concerned consider themselves African and French—in that order—rather than a hyphenated hybrid of the two. This includes Negro poets from the Caribbean Islands, for example, since for them the West Indies are in reality simply an outer circle of the vast African center.

In Africa, up to approximately 1900, most of the native writing was prose—or a kind of prose-poetry—based on local folklore: legends, tales, parables, songs. With the ever-increasing European presence in Africa, and with the rise of occasional opportunity for the African Negro to study abroad, direct or indirect contact with European "song," i.e., poetry, became inevitable. Equally inevitable was the influence, the absorption by African poets of European techniques, and even, occasionally, outlook.

Yet for the most part African poetry retains its definite sense of origin, even should the writer of it be a graduate of the Sorbonne. Its rhythm may be somewhat more polished and restrained, but it usually retains its essence as a rhythmic beat from within rather than a metric measured from without. The message of protest may be more complex, dealing perhaps with underlying causes of social and political racism, but it remains, as African poetry must, a poetry of protest.

When, as I believe to be true of the following three poems, African poetry attains the level of conscious art, it is in the long run perhaps the Negro's most effective protest against those who, in defense of their opinion that the Negro is somehow degraded, set about to degrade him.—*Miriam Koshland*

EX-VOTO FOR A SHIPWRECK

Hallo hallohallo the King is a great King
Let his majesty condescend to look in my anus
to see if it contains diamonds
Let his majesty condescend to explore my mouth
to see how many carats it contains
tom-tom laugh
tom-tom laugh
I carry the litter of the king
I spread the carpet of the king
I am the carpet of the king
I have the scrofula of the king
I am the parasol of the king
laugh laugh tom-tom of the kraals
tom-toms of faces who laugh under cloaks
holy tom-toms laughing in the faces of missionaries
with their teeth of rats and hyenas
tom-toms of salvation that don't give a damn for
all the armies of salvation
tom-toms of the forest
tom-toms of the desert
virginal darkness where each stone
murmurs
unaware of disaster—my fever
tom-tom cry
tom-tom cry
low tom-tom
low tom-tom
burned as far as the ardent silence of our shoreless
tears
low tom-tom
lower considerable ear
(the red ears—the ears—far-away easily tired)
low tom-toms

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roll low only once some billiard ball for the far-away
ears

wordless endless without a star
the pure time of carbon of our long major terrors
roll roll dull roll low tom-toms

frenzies without words
red lions without mane defiled by thirst stench
of marigots in the evening
tom-toms protecting my three souls my brain my heart
my belief

harsh tom-toms sustaining on high my dwelling
of water of wind of iodine of stars
on the crushed rock of my black head
and you tom-tom brother for whom it falls to my lot
to keep all day long

a word turning warm and fresh in my mouth like the
little known taste of vengeance

Tom-toms from Kalaari
tom-toms from Good Hope fastening the cape of your
menaces

O tom-tom from Zululand

Tom-tom from Chaka

tom tom tom

tom tom tom

King our mountains are mares in rut captured
in full convulsion of bad blood

King our fields are rivers making restless the stores
of rottenness mounted by the ocean and your caravels

King our stones are ardent lamps of a hope
widowed by the dragon

King our trees are the displayed form catching
a flame too big for our heart too feeble for
a dungeon

Laugh laugh then tom-toms of Kaffir
like the beautiful question-mark of the scorpion

designed in pollen on the tableau of heaven and
our mind at midnight
like the shudder of a watery reptile charmed
by the thought of bad weather
of the small laughter thrown out by the sea
into the beautiful portholes of a shipwreck.

AIMÉ CÉSAIRE
(Martinique)

POEM

Here is
she whose eyes are prisms of sleep
and whose lids are heavy with dreams,
whose feet are buried in the sea
and whose slimy hands stick out of it
filled with corals and blocks of glistening salt.

She will put them in little heaps near a bay of mist
and sell them to naked sailors
whose tongues were cut out—
until the rain begins to fall.

Then she will no longer be visible
and one will only see
her hair flying in the wind,
like a clump of unwinding algae,
and perhaps some grains of tasteless salt.

JEAN JOSEPH RABEARIVÉLO
(Madagascar)

THEY CAME TONIGHT

they came to-night when the

tom

tom

revolved from

rhythm to

rhythm

the frenzy

of eyes

the frenzy of hands the frenzy

of the feet of the statues

S I N C E

how much of M E

has died

since they came to-night when the

tom

tom

revolved from

rhythm to

rhythm

the frenzy

of eyes

the frenzy of hands the frenzy

of the feet of the statues.

LEON DAMAS

(French Guiana)

Translations by Miriam Koshland