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Commentary and Interpretations of Tagore's 'Ode to Africa'

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Commentary and interpretations of Tagore's *Ode to Africa*

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Stanza 1 : Within this opening stanza, Tagore sets the tone for Africa's unusual beginnings compared with most continents. Thus, Africa was set up amid dark forest canopies, separated from the rest of the earth by mighty seas, as if with a specific mission from the Creator (*Srashta*, in Tagore's language).

Stanza 2 : Stanza 2 outlines how Africa embarked upon a unique evolutionary experiment, developing and unraveling mysterious secrets and creations of nature. These experiments that spanned vast amounts of time provided Africa with the ability to create life-forms, both exquisitely beautiful and unimaginably terrible, in a manner unprecedented anywhere else on the planet. What is prescient in these lines is their relevance to the ethnographic scientific discoveries much later that human life (and likely all life with myriad diversity) originated from Africa. Tagore communicated a great sense of fascination that life on earth owes its variety and vitality to Africa's unique experiments.

Stanza 3 : This stanza sets up the enduring enigma of Africa. As we find later, Tagore imagines Africa as an alluring woman that set up boundaries and defenses in response to the turbulent drama of evolution that was playing out in her domain for ages. Thus, the ferocity of the African wild, in the poet's view, is nothing more than a necessary defense against the terrible cataclysms that were re-defining Africa's flora, fauna and terrain over untold millennia.

Stanza 4 : Here Tagore reveals the humanity of Africa as the face of an alluring woman beneath a veil. It brings to question the civilizational (here especially European) misperception of *The Dark Continent*, and the attendant humiliation and derision heaped upon that crucible of life.

Stanza 5 : The real stark message of brutal colonial invasion and savagery is laid out in graphic fashion in this stanza. The poet describes the ferocity and viciousness of the colonial invaders armed with manacles, with claws sharper than the sharpest on Africa's wolves. These ruthless and barbaric purveyors of civilization, traffickers in human rustling and profiteers from the savage slave trade, embarked upon supreme acts of inhumanity upon Africa's priceless gifts and heritage. The poet's indictment of colonialism and racism, plunder and pillage, slavery and human trade, even if applied specifically here to the "Dark Continent," applies just as well to all geographic and ethnic contexts. European (and, since the mid-1800s, Euro-American) invasion, occupation, exploitation and genocidal rampages in Central America, South America, vast stretches of Asia, and even Australia and New Zealand- all fit into the scheme of *Civilization's barbaric greed*. Tagore characterizes these acts emphatically as the sheer barbarity of imperial civilization and its racist savagery against those viewed as lesser.

Stanza 6 : Tagore empathizes here with the ravaged and violated humanity of Africa, viewed metaphorically as a desecrated and humiliated woman, whose centuries-long trail of blood and tears (a continent rendered speechless and dumbfounded by the sheer savagery of the rapacious colonial invaders) has turned the very soil of Africa into a fetid swamp. Tagore sees the imperial (here clearly European) invaders as *dasyus* (Sanskrit for demons), whose rampaging boots and iron chains of slavery have left their grotesque marks forever upon history.

Stanza 7 : This stanza is a case study in irony, contrast and unremitting hypocrisy. This diabolical hypocrisy is overwhelmingly common in the realm of religious dogma, pretenses of piety, missionary zeal, and invoking a divine name while conducting acts of extreme inhumanity. The examples of this are strewn throughout the history of missionary religions, especially those that claim prophetic origins, and assorted holy books that are cited profusely while unspeakable acts of horror are committed by their most

devout adherents. While Europe's ruthless rampage through Africa left an entire continent bleeding, gravely wounded; tribes, communities and families torn apart across a region many times the size of all of Europe; humans bound in chains, flagellated and whipped mercilessly, fathers taken away from children, sons in vast numbers crated off for lives of endless slavery; women terrorized and violated since darker peoples were not worthy of the slightest human dignity- while all of these unspeakable acts of the ultimate barbarism were going on (much like the rest of Euro-American history to this day)- Tagore paints this pious and peaceful picture of an idyllic life across the seas in any European hamlet during those exact same times. Children playing within the safety of mothers' arms; poets were composing great works of art and beauty (after all, what barbarians of the world have not heard of, or read, the works by Milton, Coleridge, Voltaire, Mozart, Handel, Byron, Mill and on and on?) dedicated to civilization. So much beauty, so much piety; so many church hymns, so many truths proclaimed by gospels. Amazingly, as Tagore says, the poets in these tranquil lands sang paeans to Beauty, and the church bells bespoke the grace of a heavenly Father. The irony and cruelty inherent in these contradictory pictures are beyond shock and bewilderment. The audacity inherent in the inhuman and savage acts of (so-called) civilization that then preaches humanity, brotherhood, and in well over 200 years, *democracy* to the non-Euro-centric world, is mind-boggling, and leaves any sane human being simply aghast and speechless. But this is what the human world has lived with since the golden years of colonial and imperial rampage.

Stanza 8 : In the concluding stanza of this potent and exemplary poem, Tagore offers the imperial plunderers at least one possible path to partial redemption for their savage acts of inhumanity. In Tagore's imagination, along the lines of *Karmic* consequences, the long trail of evil and inhuman acts must lead eventually to an impending storm that proclaims the end to the degeneracy and debasement. He visualizes such an ominous dusk descending one day upon the Western horizon. In the twilight of that dusk, Tagore sees the vast congregation of animals emerging from their lairs in Africa, announcing the end of the day. He entreats the poet of that era of a not-too-distant future to prostrate apologetically before the brutally violated Africa and ask contritely for her forgiveness. As Tagore puts it- anything short of that would make all of Europe's pious and holy creations add up to nothing more than *hingsro prolaap*, in other words- violent delirium. That act of contrition alone, in the poet's vision, would be perhaps the West's last, genuinely divine and meritorious pronouncement.