Nana Ampadu and the Sung Tale as Metaphor for Protest Discourse

Every subordinate group creates, out of its ordeal, a hidden transcript that represents a critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant [...]. Domination generates a hegemonic public conduct and a backstage discourse consisting of what cannot be spoken in the face of power.¹

This paper seeks to articulate the resilience and efficacy of the folktale as a hidden political text and to examine the thematic and literary undercurrents that have made it a rallying force for protest in Ghana's contemporary political history. It is largely informed by the voice of a master narrator whose songs, spanning a quarter of a century, have virtually become a political charter, defining power relationships, lampooning political aberration, and advocating the restoration of ideal political values.

Noted for their skills in indirection, the Akan of Ghana would rather "speak to the wind" than directly speak to the Supreme Being. The construction of protest discourse under the surveillance of state and political authority could become a hazardous enterprise in power-laden situations. Prudence would require the deployment of revokable cultural representations in the construction of political dissent. Political critique under these conditions is handed over to the singer of tales, a culturally revered voice of the dominated, who creatively manipulates cultural symbols to convey themes that celebrate the resilience of the deprived and expose the gluttony of the dominant.

Not all tradition-based constructions of critical discourse have succeeded in withdrawing into comparative safety. In Africa, a few such clandestine texts have been met with executive censorship and other forms of sanction. In Malawi, Mkindawire, a 42-year-old musician drawing inspiration from the oral traditions of Tumbuka, became a victim of Kamuzu Banda in 1988, when he sang the tale of a


© FonTomFrom: Contemporary Ghanaian Literature, Theatre and Film, ed. Kofi Anyidoho & James Gibbs (Matatu 21–22; Amsterdam & Atlanta GA: Editions Rodopi, 2000).
bird that could not be stopped from singing about an incident involving a mysterious death and subsequent cover-up attempts. The Government banned the song from the radio, concluding that the singer was singing about atrocities allegedly committed by the Banda regime. At the time of writing, Kamuzu Banda, former President of Malawi, is being tried for the very murders of which the visionary bird sang years ago.²

Discourse interaction centering on crisis has been expounded in a variety of disciplines (sociology, politics, sociolinguistics, discourse analysis) and subsumed under related rubrics such as ‘conflict,’ ‘protest,’ or ‘problem’ encounters. In face-to-face encounters, it expresses itself in situations where identities are threatened, interactions are disrupted, and people’s convictions are diametrically opposed or not in harmony.³ Under such conditions, participants may voluntarily negotiate various interactional manoeuvres, or bargain a resolution to remedy the problematic situation and restore harmony.⁴ In other situations, the encounter may further degenerate into straight verbal abuse, or physical violence unmitigated by negotiation or any attempt at conflict resolution.

A significant aspect of everyday conversation in Africa is its close interaction with other discrete verbal economies. Here, interpersonal discourse is not restricted to ordinary talk. Conversation is a mega-genre that embraces related modes of interaction such as song and tale. Depending on the social context, song and other genres could constitute interactive or dialogic discourses in their own right,⁵ or they may have the potential to be evoked within the matrix of ordinary talk, to heighten emotion or argument.

In conflict-oriented song, interactants linked in time and space may take positions, lyrically registering protest, lampoon and disagreement, or verbally assaulting


