

Autochthony in the Midst of Afro-pessimism in Chirikure Chirikure's Poetry

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Abstract

This article exposes and interrogates Chirikure's depiction of autochthony. It is an effort towards discussing Chirikure's social vision which is torn between positive and negative images of Africa. It establishes that a sharp sense of belonging manifests in Chirikure's poetry but such a sense is clouded by a pessimistic attitude to life which breaks the ability to transform Africans' lives positively. This effort is energized by the idea that as Eurocentric critics have invested and continue to invest their time and energy in projecting negative images of Africa, Chirikure is committed to challenging the Eurocentric dehumanization of Africa with a view to empower African multitudes. While Chirikure challenges Eurocentric perceptions of Africa which by and large benefit the creators of the stultifying negative images of Africa by crippling Africans' sense of belonging, such a literary position is obliterated by the stultifying negative images of Africa in some of his selected poems. While Chirikure celebrates indigeneity or autochthony, this sense is clouded by Afro-pessimism and such a literary position kills the creative force. The rallying point of the article is that negative images of Africa break the spirit to struggle while positive images are developmental and liberating.

Key words: Shona poetry, autochthony, Afro-pessimism, Afrocentricity, development, underdevelopment

Introduction

'Negative reports [about Africa] break the spirit and undermine people's ability to make positive change or attract goodness into their life. Showing the positive side of Africa can manifest better dreams and results for the continent...indeed there is a beautiful side of Africa,' Atime in Ankomah (2008: 9)

Atime underlines the necessity of inculcating positive attitudes towards life among Africans. Such attitudes unlock African people's creative potential while negative attitudes push Africans into positions that compromise agency. This article grapples with the images of Africa in a selection of Chirikure Chirikure's poetry in *Rukuvhute* (1989), *Chamupupuri* (1994) and *Hakurarwi* (1998). The article explores the sharp sense of belonging in the poetry under study. The article begins by defining and exploring the tenets of autochthony or indigeneity as it finds expression in Chirikure's poetry. The Afro-pessimism that clouds the autochthonic perspective is exposed and grappled with and in the process Afro-pessimism is castigated as an impediment to development. In fact it is a tool of underdevelopment. Mbembe (2002b: 635) cited in Ferguson (2006) describes the term Afro-pessimism as "a red flag waved by those afraid of radically confronting the abyss at those wishing to escape the dead end of developmentalism and populist romanticism." It is stressed in this paper that a celebration of autochthony is indisputably Afrocentric while Afropessimism is a borrowed tradition from European culture. It is argued in the article that autochthony is developmental while Afro-pessimism is detrimental to positive change. The literary perspective which revolves around Afro-pessimism dislocates and disempowers Africans. The appreciation of the selected poetry is guided by Mazrui's redefinition of Africanity, especially the five elements that define Afrocentricity.

Autochthony and Africa's Development

Chirikure explores various themes such as African leadership, corruption, the land question, the war situation, Africa among other themes. His poems that comment on Africa are of two types; those that present Africa positively and those that present her negatively. In his anthology *Rukuvhute* (1989) Chirikure has poems in which he presents Africa positively. He presents Africa as the mother of all nations. To begin with, the cover blurb testifies the importance of Africa to the rest of the world. The cover page carries the map of Africa on which there is a foetus and umbilical cord that spreads from the kid and goes beyond the bounds of the map of Africa. Africa is presented as

being pregnant and it is the umbilical cord that is connecting Africans from across the world and those within Africa to their mother which happens to be Africa. The umbilical cord is reaching out to all those Africans who are scattered around the world. It is important to note that symbolically, the purpose of the umbilical cord is to suggest a connection between the foetus to its mother, to imply autochthony which is 'a sense of belonging as a result of ancestral rights to land,' (Boas and Dunn 2013:1). The umbilical cord is therefore, is the life line that attaches an unborn child to its mother. It is a life support system and without it the child cannot survive. The African continent is presented as a nourisher. As the mother is the source of life to an unborn child, Africa becomes the source of life for both Africans in Africa and diasporan Africans. There is a sharp sense of belonging in 'Rukuvhute in which the poet underlines the idea that the sacred and sacrosanct connection between the individual and Africa must be hailed and preserved. He stresses that the African is spritually connected to his/her land of ancestry. He or she must be located to some base which becomes a site of struggle and progress. The voice in the poem reveals unreserved autochthony as follows:

*Chaivapo chaindisunganidza naamai, munhumbu
Mwedzi mipfumbamwe, kudya ndichiwana
Chiripo chinondibatanidza nemhuri, panyika
Upenyu hwose tsigiro neyamuro ndichiwana
Chiripo chinondisunganidza nevadzimu
Kurarama kwose mudonzvo nemwenje wangu
Chiripo chinondibatanidza naZame Musikavanhu*

*Chiripo chichazondisunganidza nevari pasi, ndiri nyikadzimu
Kufara, kusuwa; kuguta, kushaya ndichizovabatsira.
Chiripo chinondisunganidza neivhu rababa-Afrika!
Kupondwa, kushushwa, kuremadzwa, ndichingoishingirira (p.9)*

(The is something that connected me to my mother in the womb
For nine months I was fed
There is something that connects me and the family on earth
There is something that connects me to the ancestors
The life support and compass that directs me
There is something that links me to God, the creator

There is something that will link me with the departed when I die
In joy, sad moments, abundance, poverty, I will help them

There is something that connects to the soil-Afrika!
In murderous acts, trouble, violence, I will stand by Africa)

Dominant in the lines above is an unapologetic and unreserved commitment to endogeneity and celebration of Africa as the centre of life and rootedness. The image of the umbilical cord is used to capture the spiritual relationship between the African (both continental and diasporan) and his/her roots. It is this relationship that cultivates a sense of resistance despite various challenges, problems and crises as is aptly captured in such images as murder (kupondwa), abuse (kushushwa) and maim (kuremadzwa). The poet does not adopt defeatist attitude to life but rather derives impetus from the atrocities committed against Africans to resist and struggle. He echoes Simon Chimbetu's words in a song entitled *Maneno Yawongo* (2005) that "no matter what, no matter where, no matter when, Africa I will forever love you." In 'Rukuvhute', Chirikure reveals that Africa is home and "as the sacred centre of religious life, the home operates as the "umbilical cord" that connects people with that spiritual reality," (Chidester 1997:13). Belizaire (2008:38) concurs as follows:

This is the spiritual aspect of self that connects the self with the spirits of the ancestors. It connects yesterday's generation with today's generation and today's generation with tomorrow. This dimension of the self is the one that also connects the Negro man in Jamaica to the one in Mali, the one in Senegal to the one in the United States.

The poem above is a voice of an African either in Africa or the diaspora who is tied to Mother Africa, historically, culturally and spiritually. The poem is an affirmation of belonging to Africa and like all people, Africans "have always been seeking the attachment of belonging to something. This 'something' can be manifested in land, religion, flag, an institution or anything else that makes us feel more secure and comfortable," (Boas and Dunn, 2013:1). In 'Rukuvhute', this something is Mother Africa; a nourisher. In this poem, Chirikure depicts Africa as centre and not periphery. In actual fact, belonging is empowering while alterity is dislocating and paralyzing; an opium of African people. Emphasis on belonging is indeed a strategy to locate the African in his/her rightful place in order to facilitate holistic Afrocentric action. The sharp sense of belonging to Africa that is evident in the poem paves way for an "Afrocentric worldview [that] informs African thought and behavior as diverse as politics, economics, geography, history, archaeology, medicine, architecture, love, marriage, mining, agriculture, religion, and literary and cultural criticism, among others," (Gwekwerere 2010:109). Chirikure is writing in defense of African history and culture in order to locate Africans in their

rightful place. In the poem, 'Rukuvhute', Chirikure demonstrates the importance of rootedness. Mosby (2003: ix) makes a pertinent observation which is befitting to capture the underlying meaning of 'Rukuvhute' when he observes that:

To say 'me [my] navel-string bury [is buried] dere [there]' is an affirmation of belonging to a place and a challenge to those who deny the cultural contributions of the descendants of [Africa]. To bury your 'navel-string' or umbilical cord in a place is, in effect, to plant the self in a particular space or territory...it is to literally take a piece of the developing self and inter it so that it becomes part of the land and, in doing so, represents an indelible bond between the self and place.

In 'Iwe Africa' Chirikure provides a positive image of Africa. In this poem Chirikure refers to the land as a place where the ancestors, his umbilical cord, the blood of comrades and brothers, the sweat of parents and tears of the mother are buried. He views Africa as the mother and protector and guarantor of life. In African societies the umbilical cord of a new-born child is buried in the soil and this signifies the intrinsic relationship that exists between individuals and Africa. It is also in the land that ancestors are buried, the blood and sweat of the people is buried. Because of all this there is a great connection between people and Africa and there is so much sacredness that is attached to the African land. Africa is referred to as centre of life:

*zvese zvinomedzwa newe,
iwe nyakuzvibereka,
iwe nyakuzviodzeka,
iwe nyakuzvichengeta,
iwe, Afrika (p.7)*

(Everything is swallowed by you, Africa
You, the Motherland
You, the breeder
You, the nurturer
Africa)

The poet emphasizes that Africa is home; a home that humanizes Africans. 'Ndiri Mhiri' revolves around rewriting African history or 'reinventing Africa,' to use Amadiume's (1997) words. The poet presents an African on a train journey in the diaspora. The poem is centred on self-definition and self-naming. Chirikure records the experiences of the African at the hands of the white race on the train. Racist attitudes of the whites

are exposed when two white passengers frown at the African and decide to change sitting position. The African on the train is isolated and what the poet seems to underline is the segregationist nature of white supremacist system. While the African is dejected at first there is belief in him/her. The poet says *Ndiri munhu mhani, iyeni mwana wevhu!* (I am a human being, a son of the soil!). The African, therefore, realizes that the white supremacist objectifies the African and hence the African has to name his/her own world. Pervasive in the poem is a sharp sense of belonging to Africa in the poem. The concept of *mwana wevhu* (son of the soil) demonstrates the fact that ‘people have always been seeking the attachment of belonging to something. This ‘something’ can be manifested in land, religion, flag, an institution or anything else that makes us feel more secure and comfortable’ (Boas and Dunn 2013:1). In the poem, this ‘something’ is Africa. The African on the train journey gets an opportunity to define his/her own world as follows:

*Mune nyika inoyevedza
Chando chete kani! Kwedu izvozvi imbaura!”*

*Adavira ndiye ashaikwa kwezinguva ziguru
Pava paya mumwewo wechikuru ozobvunza:
“Kwako kunopisa kwaunoreva kwacho ndepi?”
“Afrika!” Ndiko kwandakazvarwa, kwandakabva”
“Kwete, hakuna hondo. Chikoro ndakaita chekurutsa!”
Kuzodaro, vamwe vacho vorebesa nzeve nemeso,
Ini ndongoti pamwe nane ndibate zvangu muromo (p.49)*

(You have a beautiful country
The problem is cold weather! In Africa now it is hot!

There was no response for a worthwhile
It was after some time when an elderly asked
“Where do you come from where it is that hot?”
“Afrika! That is where I was born, that is my home”
“There is no war. I am very much educated!”
When I said this, the other white passengers paid attention
I thought it was better to keep quite)

It is apparent that the African on the train who represents multitudes of Africans across the globe “ask for one thing alone-to be seen for what they are: human beings,” (Achebe, 2009: 89). The poet employs autochthony discourses to underline the sense of belonging to Africa. Chirikure recreates the image of the African by repudiating the myths created by whites about Africa with all the impunity that it deserves. The reference to ‘*mwana wevhu*’ (son of the soil) in the poem demonstrates the historic link of the African in Africa and the diaspora to Afrika, which implies:

...localist forms of belonging, referring to someone with a supposedly indisputable historical link to a particular territory [which is a way in which the African in the diaspora] links identity and space, enabling the speaker to establish a direct claim to territory by asserting that he or she is an original inhabitant, a ‘son of the soil,’ (Boas and Dunn, 2013:2).

In the poem the African in the diaspora converses with the West and offers one African perspective of Africa. On the whole, in ‘Ndiri Mhiri’ the poet is ‘seeking to negate the negation ... seeking to negate the negative portrayal of the most distorted history in the world, that of the African people,’ (Mazrui, 2002:23). Chirikure is writing in defense of African humanity and in the process demonstrates the intention to humanize African people. Despite the sharp sense of belonging a dark cloud of Afropessimism hovers over Africa-centredness contrary to celebration of location. Africa is reduced to a threat to survival and development.

Afro-pessimism: When the African Life-world is Reduced to a Threat to Survival

While Chirikure projects Africa as a nourisher in as far as it is a bastion of spiritual resources, in *Chamupupuri* Africa is rendered ineffective and anti-life. This section holds that in some poems the poet’s perception is a footnote to Eurocentric notions of Africa. It is largely ‘colonialist’ art to paraphrase Achebe (1988:68). The poet presents Africa as a continent in intensive care which is in dire need of rescue. Contrary to the positive images discussed in the poems discussed above, in essence there are poems that present Africa as a symbol of underdevelopment. The poet does not seem to see the possibility of Africa sustaining free subjects who enjoy the resources of their abundant resources. To the poet, Africa is just but a threat to the very fact of survival and progress. Chirikure seems to echo the sentiments of notorious Eurocentric scholars and writers who saw Africa as belonging to the Dark Ages. In the poetry, there is stark hopelessness

and despair to the extent that there is virtually nothing to justify survival. Chirikure reduces a continent that has contributed immensely to world civilization to a threat to humanity.

The poem, 'Heano Mimirire Ekunze' (Weather Forecast) presents a dreadful image of Africa. The structure of the poem coupled with the images provided by the poet point to the idea that all is not well and there is very little, if anything, worth celebrating in Africa. Chirikure emphasizes that Africa is ravaged by a plethora of challenges such as diseases, extremely hot weather conditions, high death rates among others. The images in the poem point to Africa as a continent with many challenges and in a different context, Achebe (2009:93) makes the following apt observation:

Disaster parades today with impunity through the length and breadth of much of Africa: war, genocide, military and civilian dictatorships, corruption, collapsed economies, poverty, disease, and every ill attendant upon political and social chaos.

The poem revolves around the precariousness of the African life-world. The poet notes that life is threatened by harsh weather conditions for example drought which breeds hunger and strife. Death is the thesis (*makuwa mitsago*) while hopelessness is the pervasive mood. In fact, existential nihilism is the defining feature of the poem. The Africa that is projected in the poem is one that cannot guarantee the fact of survival of its people. The poet presents an image of Africa which borders on hunger and strife as follows:

Pasi rufuse
Denga ibaravara
Nzizi majecha

Hupenyu rufuse
Mutsago makuwa
Makuwa mitsago

Hameno tikaona ramangwana. (p.30)

(The land is very hot
The sky is bare
Rivers are characterized by siltation

Life is excruciatingly painful
Pillows are graves
Graves are pillows)

African life conditions are depicted as seemingly threatening the survival of its inhabitants. In this poem, Chirikure highlights one existential concern-nihilism which West (1994) cited in Johnson (1997:249) defines as a 'life without hope that constitutes a severe threat to the very survival of [the African].' Misery abounds in the poem. The poet seems to argue that the African is in a very precarious condition and that Africa is equated to the biblical 'garden of Eden' but this time the "Garden of Eden is in decay," to use Mazrui's (1980:1) words.

In the poem above, Chirikure depicts Africa as a society which is anti-life to the extent that there is no guarantee for any future. The nation is in a state of decay, a cul-de-sac. The future is unimaginable and the poem presents a sense of utter meaninglessness and self-loathing. While the poet is saddened by life conditions, the attitude of the poet which borders on despair is not adequate to confront the imperialist and neo-colonial forces that breed hunger and misery in Africa. 'Heano Mampirire Ekunze' is not filled with profound hope and a sense of struggle because the poet does not situate his poem in the history and philosophy of existence of the people he is writing for and about. The African people hold victorious thought crucial in their ontological existence. In fact, in this poem Chirikure does not hold *Njia* as theme. Contrary to the fact that Africa is the cradle of humanity, the poet invests a lot of energy in projecting Africa as a life-world that dehumanizes its own people. In the poem Africa is reduced to a symbol of poverty. Be that as it may, it can be argued that by showing such egregious weather and life dependent on rainfed agricultural seasons needs people who utilise their creative potential for example transforming African humanity by building dams in such an environment that poses serious existential challenges. By so insisting Chirikure can be argued to be hopeful.

In the context of the stark negative images of Africa, in Heano Mampirire one cannot imagine the possibility of Africa having contributed to world civilization. To use Mazrui's (2002:25) words, in this poem "African contributions to world civilization have been so underestimated, or even denied..." The poet falls short of understanding that African people may indeed be the Chosen People of history, a people of the day before yesterday and a people of the day after tomorrow.' Contrary to the idea that 'Africa is a concept, pregnant with the dreams of millions of people—from Lusaka to Lagos, from Marrakech

to Maputo' Mazrui (2002:37), the images of Africa presented in the poem point to a continent where people cannot realize their full potential. Osundare in Chiwome (2002: vii) observes that:

A proper understanding of our history will put our present anomy in clear if not more bearable perspective; a more tough-minded dialogue with the past will reveal how much we have gone through and how far we are capable of going. A philosophy of Africa not informed by historical wisdom is most likely to end in a kind of pessimism borne out of prognostication without diagnosis, a sure way to the ontology of defeat.

In another poem, 'Zvirahwe nedudziro dzacho' the poet paints a gloomy picture about the African life-world. Furthermore, there is nothing worth celebrating because pain and agony are the defining elements of the continent. Contrary to the positive images of Africa noted earlier on, in the poem 'Zvirahwe...', the poet dispatches a 'vast arsenal of derogatory images of Africa...' (Achebe (2009:79). In the poem by Chirikure it is said:

*Tsoro yekwedu inofa ichiri kugadzirwa kurongwa:
Africa!*

*Uriri hwekwedu hunodzurwa nemazvizvi avanhu
Africa!*

*Setswa nehope zvinosvodzwa, misodzi ichiponewa
Africa! (p.34)*

(In Africa, programmes are abandoned before implementation
In Africa, our floors are made of human waste
In Africa, joy and peace are unheard of and it is a land of angst)

What is not clear in this poem is who poisons African lives. It is critical to note that the poet is expected to help his society understand whether it is Africans poisoning themselves, foreigners poisoning Africans or both. He offers a surface interpretation of the African condition. The poet exposes the horrifying phenomenon in Africa where life is defined by despondency and impotence. The poet laments the degeneration of Africa into a continent where nothing good happens. Chirikure shows a sense of nihilism which is "a state of mind that views life as meaningless: a life without hope that constitutes a severe threat to the very survival of [Africans]," (Johnson, 1997:257). At the centre of this state of mind is despair, emptiness and an utter loss of hope. The poem

is a perfect exemplar of Afro-pessimism which is a “dark and hopeless place where no African mind should dwell,” (Tuma, 2004:136).

The greatest weakness of Chirikure’s poem is that he fails to transcend hopelessness and despair. The poet emphasizes suffering to the extent that it appears natural. It is Chiwome (2002:239) who reminds us that ‘without hope life crumbles like a clay doll in the tropical rain; resolve loses its essences and impetus, struggle becomes impossible as the wheel of progress is deprived of its vital hub.’ Against this background, Chirikure seems to be bogged down by capturing the seemingly insurmountable challenges that the African continent poses to the people. He seems to proceed from the premise that there is a continent somewhere which is more habitable than Africa which to him is anti-life. The Africa that Chirikure creates in ‘Heano Mamirire ekunze and ‘Zvirahwe (nedudziro dzacho)’ is rather imaginary. On the contrary, Africa is the cradle of civilization and to suggest that it is a threat to humanity is to belong to the Eurocentric school of thought which denies Africa history, culture as well as the potential to sustain humanity.

Chirikure fails to beam forth the fact that Africans are the parent people of humanity and African civilization is the parent civilisation. The poet peripherises Africa’s contribution to the building to world civilisation. In the process Chirikure fails to satisfy proletarian afrocentricity which is a story of victim as creator in that Africans were are victims of European colonisation where their resources were taken to develop European countries and their people taken into slavery where they provided cheap labour, (Mazrui 2002). The weather pattern suggested by Chirikure is dreadful that it could not or cannot nurture civilization. ‘Heano Mamirire Ekunze’ denotes chaos in Africa and the poet erroneously contends that death is more important than the very fact of survival. While it can be argued that Chirikure is awakening in Africans that climate changes need plans to mitigate such changes which render the African a victim, the poet fails to notice that Africa has one of the finest weather conditions in the world. Instead of simply lamenting about African climate and the threat it poses to life Chirikure fails to note that Africa is “a great continent, wherein live a proud and varied people, a land which is the new world and was the cradle of civilization...,” Malcom X (1992: 53-54). Preoccupations with negative perceptions about Africa tend to obliterate the good that Africa stands for.

On the whole, the idea that Africa is a land of hopeless reprobates as suggested by some of the poems is rather flawed. In the poem ‘Zvirahwe (nedudziro dzacho)’ like ‘Heano mamirire Ekunze’, Chirikure sounds like the Eurocentric artist who is notorious for denigrating Africa by creating myths that are meant to keep the African in a dominated

position. Instead of fighting domination Chirikure seems to be plucking a leaf out of the racist scholars' books and depict Africa as a continent of chaos. Despite facing challenges it is a falsehood that everything in Africa comes to naught as the poet seems to emphasise. In the poem, 'Zvirahwe' Chirikure seems to be preoccupied by the bad afflicting society without turning his art into a spring of hope. He seems to be harboring the colonialist view of Africa that it is a continent where nothing good happens. The two poems are instances of, 'poisonous writing, in full consonance with the tenets of the slave trade-inspired tradition of European portrayal of Africa,' Achebe (2009:87-88). Therefore, when the African life-world is reduced to a threat to all life processes, development remains a myth.

Conclusion

The article has been concerned with autochthony in the poetry of Chirikure Chirikure. The article established that Chirikure projects a sharp sense of belonging to Africa to prove an Afrocentric point. However, this autochthonic perspective is obliterated by an utter sense of pessimism which is detrimental to efforts towards social transformation. It has been stressed that literary practice needs to emphasise more on the positive side of Africa since it manifests better visions. Chirikure and other literary creators need to understand that 'with all its imperfections' Africa is not marginal in world affairs but is the centre of development. Literary creators need to strike a balance between the evils in Africa and the good that comes out of the continent. Presenting the African continent as anti-life is tantamount to destroying a whole race. The thoroughgoing existentialist preoccupations evident in some of the poems extirpates African agency while positive perceptions of Africa are ennobling and life-affirming.

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