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Tribute

Kofi Awoonor (1935–2013)

Somebody is dead. Agosu himself
Alas! A snake has bitten me
My right arm is broken,
And the tree on which I lean is fallen.
— Kofi Awoonor (“Songs of Sorrow”)

I have a theory that the artist is the one who goes in front of the people and therefore his experiences, sharpened, focussed and multiple as they are, do locate him at the frontier of the totality of human experience. He is the one who sees more if he has the gift; if he’s a real artist, he sees more than everybody else.
— Kofi Awoonor (“Conversation”)



Kofi Nyidevu Awoonor (also known as George Awoonor Williams) was born on March 13, 1935 at Wheta, a rural town in the Volta Region of Ghana. Wheta is also the birthplace of his “twin brother,” Kofi Anyidoho, another prominent Ghanaian scholar and poet. Awoonor had his early education in the then Gold Coast at Achimota Secondary School, from where he proceeded to the University of Ghana, Legon. He also studied in London and at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, USA where he gained his PhD in Comparative Literature in 1972. Awoonor chaired the Department of Comparative

Literature at Stony Brook University after the completion of his doctoral degree. He also taught at the University of Texas. It was because of his extended stay abroad that Kofi Anyidoho in his collection *Earthchild* dedicated a poem titled “The Song of a Twin Brother” to him in which he insistently reminds Awoonor “not to forget the back without which there is no front” (54). Before Awoonor left Ghana to study and

teach abroad, he worked as a Research Fellow at the Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, Legon. He also became the Managing Director of the Ghana Film Corporation.

Awoonor returned to Ghana in 1975 to teach at the University of Cape Coast in the same English Department as Ama Ata Aidoo, another prominent Ghanaian writer. The English poet, Percy Bysshe Shelley, strongly argues in his essay in "Defence of Poetry" that "poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world." In Kofi Awoonor's creative book of essays, *The Breast of the Earth: A Survey of the History, Culture and Literature of Africa South of the Sahara*, he has a variation on Shelley's position. Awoonor writes: "[i]n Africa where despair deepens in the practice of politics and in the lives of the ordinary people, the writers must represent the vanguard of the armies that will liberate the masses from cultural strangulation and restore for them their earlier attachment to life" (355). In an insightful essay on Christopher Okigbo, Dan Izevbye writes that Okigbo "created and lived his myth" (13). It can be argued that Kofi Awoonor also created and lived his myth. The irony of his death through a terrorist attack at the Westgate Shopping Mall in Nairobi, Kenya, on September 21, 2013 sharply reminds us of this. Awoonor was imprisoned not long after his return to Ghana by the Kutu Acheampong military regime for sedition. He became the General Secretary of Colonel Frank Bernasko's People's Action Party when the party was formed. From 1984–88, Awoonor was Ghana's Ambassador to Brazil, and from 1990–94 he was Ghana's UN Permanent Representative, where he also headed the committee against apartheid. During the government of the late President John Atta Mills, Awoonor was the Chairman of Ghana's Council of State.

In *A Selection of African Poetry*, K. E. Senanu and T. Vincent write that Awoonor is "very conscious of his roots in traditional Ewe poetry and folk songs and among Ghanaians writing poetry, he is perhaps the most successful in attempting to recover the rhetorical vehemence and the metaphorical intensity of vernacular poetry" (209). Kofi Awoonor's immortality is through his poetry. It is through his poetry that the world knew him and it is through his poetry that the world will remember him. Among his many collections are *Rediscovery and Other Poems* (1964), which he wrote while a student of the University of Ghana, Legon, *Night of My Blood* (1971), *Ride Me, Memory* (1973), *Guardians of the Sacred Word: Ewe Poetry* (1974), *The House by the Sea* (1978), *Until the Morning After: Collected Poems, 1963–1985* (1987), *Latin American and Caribbean Notebook* (1992), *Praise Song for the Land: Poems of Hope & Love & Care* (2002 with Kofi Anyidoho), and a posthumous collection with Kofi Anyidoho and Kwame Dawes, *The Promise of Hope: New and Selected Poems, 1964–2013*. This collection is due to come out on March 1, 2014. In addition to his poetry, Awoonor has two novels, *This Earth, My Brother . . .* (1971) and *Comes the Voyager at Last* (1992). Awoonor was also a critic, scholar and commentator. In *Contemporary Literature in Ghana 1911–1978: A Critical Evaluation*, Charles Angmor suggests that the "subject dominant in

[Awoonor's] writing is Africa's cultural transformation under Western influence" (103). Angmor is right, but Awoonor goes further: Awoonor also laments the trauma that the colonial experience has been for Africans. This is evident not just in a poem like "Sew the Old Days" but in his critically acclaimed *The Breast of the Earth: A Survey of the History, Culture and Literature of Africa South of the Sahara* (1975), in which he describes in the preface as his "personal testament of and salutation to that spirit of Africa that continues through strife, tribulations, and dramatic upheavals to seek her own true self" (xiv). Further in *The Breast of the Earth*, Awoonor writes that in traditional African society "[l]ife and death exist in an indistinguishable continuum" (50). Perhaps Awoonor has already asked the ancestors "while they idle[d] there" ("Songs of Sorrow") as he so tragically died in the dramatic upheaval at the Westgate Shopping Mall. Some of Awoonor's other writings are *The Ghana Revolution: A Background Account from A Personal Perspective* (1984), *Ghana: A Political History from Pre-European to Modern Times* (1990) and *Africa: The Marginalized Continent* (1995), and *The African Predicament: A Collection of Essays* (2006).

In one of the epigraphs I used for this tribute, Awoonor speaks of the artist as seer. He was indeed a seer. Kofi Anyidoho, Ato Quayson, and others have so eloquently spoken of Kofi Awoonor's integrity as a human being. Perhaps it was because he saw what others were too blind to see, too preoccupied with the acquisition of power just for its sake. His life was a commitment and dedication to a country and continent to which he felt deeply attached. That he died educating others in the service of his continent reminds us all of the life we too often take for granted, and the service we too often forget to render to the continent that continues to be marginalized and exploited. Awoonor, through his works and life, bequeathed us Africans a legacy, a legacy to remember the past in order to forge a better future. No legacy could have been greater.

Works Cited

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