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## Book review

Taban Lo Liyong, *Homage to Onyame*. Lagos: Malthouse Press, 1997, 103pp

*Homage to Onyame* reinforces Taban to Liyong's already firm reputation for versatility. He is equally at home in creative writing, literary criticism, philosophy and cultural studies. His publications to date include several volumes of poetry, at least two selections of largely polemical essays and collections of oral literature. The book under review presents an appropriately composite picture of this Sudanese writer, showing him as a skilful poet and a keen student of African institutions. The reader is also allowed to see both the private and the public sides of the author as he spiritedly searches for a belief system that will both satisfy his restless soul and provide a shared African vision.

The title of the collection sets the tone for the two major parts that constitute it, namely the poetry selection and the review essay. The word 'homage' accurately expresses the attitude of respect and reverence that the scholar-poet adopts toward his chosen subject, the Akan supreme deity, Onyame. The God himself represents the pantheon which Lo Liyong constructs from his extensive reading on traditional African religions. For reasons which are given in the text, the status Onyame is made to enjoy among African gods is well above that of a *primus inter pares*. At one point, for instance, the writer calls him his Maker, thereby giving him a rank superior to that of his tribal deity, Ngun.

The preface states that both the poetry and the essay are religious responses to religious materials about African gods which Taban Lo Liyong has personally encountered. They are 'hymns and meditations' intended to help those who, like the author, yearn to return to their indigenous gods but have had no literature to guide them. In this connection, the reader will discover that although they are drawn mainly from East and West Africa, the deities, ancestors and elders invoked in these prayer poems cast their shadows over the whole African continent and the black diaspora.

The poetry component of the volume is divided into 12 parts, running from category A to L. Included here are over a hundred pieces dealing with a miscellany of issues. There are specimens of prayers offered on almost every imaginable occasion; descriptions and explanations of numerous rituals; the writer's own meditations on gods and ancestors; compositions on the rights and obligations accompanying kinship, marriage,

chiefship and the priestly vocation, as well as reflections on life and death. Celebrated throughout the selection is the eternal circle joining the unborn, the living and the dead, according to African cosmology.

Unlike Taban Lo Liyong's earlier poetry which some readers found difficult because of its obscure references, the compositions in this collection have the simplicity of most oral poetry. They usually proceed by means of repetition of word, phrase or line. Parallelism and the rhetorical question are also used to great effect.

Quite a few of the statements and observations made have the weight of proverbs or aphorisms. That is how close Lo Liyong gets to the style of the anonymous or collective authors of wisdom literature. This is a clear indication of the writer's maturity.

A striking feature of the verse is the way the author lets spokespersons for various points of view speak in their own voices. The result is a chain of voices, some individual and others collective, conferring a dramatic quality on the experiences. The writer himself is a participant observer in this drama, and it quickly becomes evident that he is undertaking a quest which has both private and public dimensions. It is in this spirit that Taban Lo Liyong aspires to the role of canon of traditional faiths rather than that of a priest:

My soul is polluted by foreign faiths to be the abode of  
our Gods:  
I cannot be a priest:  
Let me be a watchdog of our faiths  
Let me be a fighter for our faith  
Let me [be] a canon. (p.67)

In the poetry component of the volume, the culmination of the writer's search is to be found in category L: 'Ecumenical horns are full'. Here Taban Lo Liyong shows his readiness to embrace all the religions of the world. After dismissing religious fanatics as 'barking dogs', he argues that deeply religious men are brothers under the skin.

Called 'Afterwards', the review essay at the end of the book complements both the preface and the poetry. In fact, it is offered as a justification for the entire project. Taken up again here are issues that have already been discussed at some length in Taban Lo Liyong's earlier works. For example, he laments the absence of a truly unifying African philosophy, pointing to the failure of such concepts as the African Personality and

Negritude to prepare the continent for genuine independence. He then proceeds to attack most studies of African religion by western or western-trained scholars, arguing that most strive to prove the supremacy of the Christian God. In this fashion, Lo Liyong dismisses one by one the pioneering efforts of such scholars as John Mbiti, E. B. Idowu, Geoffrey Parrinder and J. O. Lucas.

At the end of his intellectual quest, the Sudanese writer adopts the Akan system of beliefs as it is expounded by the progressive thinkers Kofi Asare Opoku and Kwabena Amponsah and as it is captured in the 'Song for the Far-Flung Family of Ebibirman', of which fragments are heard throughout the black world. This system is chosen because it tallies with Taban Lo Liyong's own conviction that indigenous African religions are principally for the welfare of man in his society right here on earth rather than for aspiring to heavenly life or escaping hell fire after death. Moreover, the Akan model in its complexity subsumes numerous disciplines, including ethics, theology, psychology, cosmology, literature, anthropology and sociology. It is thus a natural centre for the study of man.

*Homage to Onyame* is an important contribution both to the heritage of African poetry and to African thought.

In Taban Lo Liyong's hands traditional institutions come to life and they are used to analyse a wide range of problems currently plaguing the African continent. Revealing itself finally as the scholar-poet's own powerful rendition of the 'Song for the Far-Flung Family of Ebibirman', the work offers hope for eventual re-integration of black people everywhere.

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