BLACK AMERICAN DIRTY DOZENS AND THE TRADITION OF VERBAL INSULT IN GHANA*

BY

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INTRODUCTION

Two apparent irreconciliable attitudes seem to inform Black American perception of its historical and cultural links with Africa. The first is a move towards a close identification with Africa in terms of a common Black consciousness defined by a stress on similar historical, political and cultural experiences and aspirations of all Black peoples in the contemporary world. From Marcus Garvey to Du Bois, George Padmore, C.L.R. James and Aime Cessire, there has been a consistent projection of a common Black world with its own values and creative expressions mainly on the political-artistic level. This is balanced by a second consideration namely, the need to 'move away' from Africa in order to establish a new identity for Blacks in the American Diaspora on the basis of equality and integration with White American Culture. While this second view is less vocal and less visible in the form of a movement, it has nevertheless acquired roots in intellectual and cultural circles in Black America.

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A clear embodiment of these conflicting attitudes towards Africa was the Civil Rights Movement of the sixties. The success of the movement gave rise to manifestations of a collective desire of Black Americans for closer ties of identification with Africa. The upsurge of Black consciousness gave rise to academic and research programmes and the establishment of African Studies centres with a focus on understanding Africa. Similarly, exchange programmes and study tours of short duration were encouraged on State Department level to foster a new perception of Africa. Another positive end-result of the movement was perhaps Alex Haley's film version of his book, Roots, which 're-opened and vastly popularised the African "survivals" arguments and issues'.[1]

The Civil Rights Movement also, paradoxically, embodied a definite drive towards acceptance and integration of Blacks in the mainstream of American life. It sought to emphasise the right of Black Americans to 'white respectability' and a denial of Africa as a focus of Black consciousness. The concept of 'Afro-American' was replaced by a 'Black-American' one by which the point was forcibly made that there is indeed a relationship of colour with Africa, but that, this does not deny the essential 'Americaness' of all Blacks in that country.

The tendency of Black America to repudiate or embrace its links with Africa has generally influenced the 'question of locating sources and signs'[2] of the African past of Afro-Americans. In the area of Afro-American folklore research and scholarship,

the denial of cultural continuities with Africa has been based on the theory of deculturalisation of African institutions, values, practices and behavioral patterns that were brought to the New World. This view contends that since African cultural institutions and practices could not be sustained in their entirety in the New World, continuities cannot be meaningfully established. In their estimation, a decisive abandonment of Africa in the New World did occur among Black Americans and this would seem to suggest a progress towards separate cultural development and an integration with white American civilisation.[3] Yet, as Szwed and Abrahams have pointed out, 'too much contrary evidence exists for one to accept (such) argument without some real qualifications'. As they argue:

> ...Wherever Afro-Americans could interact with each other (whether or not in the presence of Euro-Americans), shared expectations, attitudes, and feelings emerged drawing upon the commonalities of past experience in Africa and in the New World. Wholesale carryovers of community-based culture need not be posited to argue that African cultural continuities are obvious and long-lasting.[4]

This paper takes the position that there is a basis for establishing an affinity between the Black American dirty Dozens and the tradition of verbal insult in one geographic area in Africa, Ghana. Using Ghana as a starting point, a base-line, this paper intends to show that both traditions of verbal insult constitute

'parallel processes' and therefore reveal identical functions[5] in terms of what Simpson and Hammond have identified as 'the profounder philosophic principles and psychological attitudes which are frequently more persistent and tenacious because they exist beneath the level of consciousness'.[6] As will also be seen, this paper relies almost exclusively on two authoritative articles on the Dozens for analysis. The first is by John Dollard, whose 1939 paper was on "The Dozens: Dialectic of Insult". The second is by Roger D. Abrahams whose paper on "Playing the Dozens" came out in 1962. Both articles are reprinted together in Critical Studies on Black Life and Culture, issued in 1982 and edited by Alan Dundes. This paper is greatly indebted to Dollard and Abrahams for information on the American Dozens used in this analysis.

II

In the poetic traditions of Africa, praise and insult may, in a sense, constitute twin concepts. Their intimate concerns with morality and human achievement in society practically suggest a close identification, and a 'flow' of themes from each other. Awoonor has observed that within many traditions of poetry in Africa, 'the transition between praise and blame can be swift'.[7] Where praise is the focus of attention, and the valuable in human life is the point of celebration, those who are so lauded may also be advised or admonished. Similarly where violations of social

integrity call for public attention and rebuke, direct insult may also include admonition, criticism, invective and wit depending on the severity of the offence. Quite clearly then, the borderline between praise and insult is extremely fluid, filled as it were, with satire, criticism and admonition. Hence the poetry of insult is not conceived primarily as an opposite concept to praise because the former derives some of its sense of meaning from considerations of negativity embodied in praise poetry.

In spite of this affinity, the poetry of abuse and insult also exists as a separate and distinct form. Early accounts of European visitors to the west coast of Africa observed the existence of insult, ridicule and lampooning as a serious pre-occupation in African society.[8] In Ghana - the central focus of comparison in this paper - there has been a long history of research and documentation in verbal insult dating from the 18th century. From the coast to the hinterland, Bosman (1704), Cruickshank (1853), Ellis (1887) and Rattray (1923) found it a widely-distributed form in ceremonial contexts. As we shall see, most Ghanaian festivals offer occasions for direct verbal insult, In addition they may also incorporate distinct dramatic sketches and caricatures - remarkably similar to masquerade traditions in Nigeria and Zambia - whose central orientation is towards satire and ridicule.[9] Similarly, in Akan recreational dances, participants who enter the arena may use

costume and specific gestures and movement patterns to suggest confrontation and insult. More recently, as a result of social change, female urban dwellers in Ghana have cultivated the tradition of insult through the use of hairstyles and textile designs whose meanings have a verbal basis and whose insult-expressions are intended to provoke confrontations in the form of quarrels and fights.[10]

The development of verbal insult in Ghanaian society is not unrelated to the speech peculiarities of language communities in the country. Of the four speech styles which Nketia associates with the Akan (the dominant population group in Ghana) only one - mmaa kasa, 'speech style of women', characterised by intemperance - seems to suggest a drive towards impoliteness. The rest, obuo kasa, 'polite discourse', mpanin kasa, 'speech style of elders' and adehye kasa, 'speech style of royals', is characterised by politeness and poetic speech attributes.[11] Similar differentiations are true of the speech traditions of other language communities in Ghana, so that the preponderance of these speech styles in language traditions of Ghanaian cultural groups will seem to suggest important consequences for the way in which insult and blame may be conceived. In other words, already in existence in these language traditions in Ghana is a predetermined framework of politeness and poeticity which is bound to influence negative turns of speech. For example, the Akwapims, an Akan sub-group, enjoy the reputation

(1971:733)

of couching their insults, even in ordinary discourse, in a framework of politeness. The paradox therefore seems to exist in Ghanaian speech traditions where 'bad language' enjoys the protection and cover of 'poetic politeness'.

Moreover, as Warren and Brempon have observed of the Bono, (1978: 141) these language communities 'also possess many poetically abusive phrases ... which may be used for stylistic oral display by the artistically challenged or sufficiently angered'[12] person. This repertoire of 'poetically abusive phrases' falls under the speech style of elders which Nketia defines as the 'most important culturally defined speech style' of the Akan characterised by an ornate style which suggests depth:

> ....The general effect is not only to make the style elegant but also to restrict its comprehension to those familiar with this style. Hence mpanin kasa, the speech style of elders is also referred to as 'deep' language, kasa a emu do, meaning that the implication of a statement must be sought 'deep-down' and not at the surface.....[13]

The central quality of this 'deep language' is its inherent feature of allusion and indirection. The Nzadwene, (poetic abuse) of the Nzema of South-West Ghana embodies such a feature particularly in its choice of old Nzema words of abuse normally associated with the wisdom of the ancestral elders as in the following text:

Ananzeama dwodwonlodwo la	People of Ananze, forever stupid.
be da be be le be koasea la	They have shown again that
be nee ye vi azelenwo	They were ordained, from Heaven in stupidity.

Beva tomiamagba la	They have chosen a nincompoop
bezie agya kpole la	as king and entrusted him with
ole amgbana	power,
oti a benwu akpule	That is why they will continue
amozio o o	to suffer on end ....[14]

With the exception of koasea, 'fool' or 'foolishness', which is used in everyday situations, the other two - dwodwonlodwo and tomiamgba - are associated with the language of the elders. Both of them describe degrees of inherent stupidity with strong religious overtones. The 'deep' negative implications of these poetically abusive words among the Nzema make them unsuitable for use in daily human intercourse and are therefore exclusively reserved for occasions when the Ancestors are abroad and come to join the living to chastise departures from the society's collective morality.

In addition, incepient forms of verbal insult are also embodied in cradle and Maiden songs. Here, there is a heavy reliance on allusion and indirect reference as a means of containing emotional violence. Themes of strained relations, envy and jealousy constitute the content of cradle songs. In polygamous households, these emotional pressures may be expressed to the hearing of one's rivals in marriage. In this context, a crying child may be the immediate occasion for provoking verbal insult:

.....Someone wished you were hers
she would put you on camel blanket

But I have you to rear you on a torn mat
Someone wished she had you,
But I have you.[15]

Although such situations are often intended to provoke confrontations, quarrels and fights, the ultimate motivation is to provide a release from emotional strain. Similarly, in maiden songs which also harbour verbal insult as part of its repertoire of texts, the framework of laughter and good humour becomes an avenue for emotional release. Against the background of a bright moonlight, a group of maidens may gather in a circle at the village square and sing, with apparent wit and satirical humour, about the transgressions of their loved ones. Where rivals in love decide to bring their private quarrels and jealousies into the open, they are constrained to express their emotions humorously as we find in this text from Nzema maiden songs:

You enjoy a short prick
I enjoy a short prick
Why do you tell me
I enjoy a short prick?

A participant who feels so insulted may await her turn, jump into the centre of the arena and provide an appropriate response:

Yours is a loose vagina
Mine is a loose vagina
Why do you tell me
I have a loose vagina?[16]

One's efforts at 'outdoing' the other in the arena may only be rewarded with appreciative laughter and applause, but this is never

allowed to lead to direct confrontation or fight in the course of the performance.

In some festivals in Ghana where insult performance is ritualised, texts are characteristically direct, profusely obscene and deliberately unpoetic. On the second day of the Elmina bakatue festival, a rite of defamation known as nsee is performed. In it, children of all ages 'thank' their mothers for their upbringing in a language characterised by insults and exaggeration:

> "Away with your watery and tasteless soups."
> "a bad cook of a mother", "A witch who makes it impossible for your children to prosper".
> "A liar and a source of disgrace to us."[17]

Songs of acrimony, villification and provocation may be sung by drunken young men of two opposing factions - royalists and commoners - in the Wenchi Apoo festival when they meet on sacred grounds to recount the shortcomings and misdeeds of each other in the course of the year. Similarly, as a prelude to the Ewudole cleansing ceremony in the Adoabo kundum, terse statements and utterances of highly obscene nature are addressed to womanhood as two groups of adult males parade in total darkness from one end of the town to the other at dawn. No light is allowed anywhere near the area and it is forbidden for women and children to be in sight. There is a strong emphasis in these terse, derogatory statements on sexuality. Obscene statements and shouts of insult are in particular addressed to female

sexual organs. All these expressions are intended to be a serious encounter in collective social expiation and purgation.

In contexts where insult is conceived as a poetic activity, similar motivations of revenge, psychological release and moral considerations may inspire the performance. The predominant themes of abuse and insult still centre around women and their sexual parts. In the Ewe halo, poets are specially commissioned to dig into the history of opposing groups for 'juicy bits' about whose grandmother was a whore or whose grandfather built a wealth on stolen goods'.[18] The following text from the Nzema poetry of abuse in the kundum festival about women and their new craze for cosmetics and face fashions evoked gales of laughter from the crowd:

....Look at them again
These women
Look at the faces they wear;
While their faces shone red
their private parts remain dirty!
who has not seen this?

If you meet these women
behold! the odour on their bodies
is worse than the smell of
Akanyi, the balck ant![19]

The audience at such performances are there to enjoy the subtleties of wit and sarcasm or show appreciation for the imaginative use of

language of the performers. While the language is down-to-earth, and the insult is direct, it is really the comparisons, allusions and striking imagery which have the total effect of creating laughter and 'covering up' intense feeling:

> Kodzo this imbecile, evil animal
> who fucks other's wives fatteningly
> his buttocks run off, his teeth yellow
> his penis has wound a rope around
> his waist pulling him around and away.....
> .....his mouth as long as the pig
> blowing the twin whistle..
> Something indeed has happened.[20]

Through their skill with words and their ability to evoke laughter and entertainment, the poets in the Ghanaian tradition of abuse and insult insist that their poetry is essentially for enjoyment. Although their poetry provides avenues for emotional release, villification and victimisation, their primary aim is to reconcile negative feelings and emotions through laughter and wit.

III

In an early article on "The Dozens: Dialectic of Insult" in 1939, John Dollard states that the American Dozens exists as a 'pattern of interactive insult which is used among some American Negroes'. It takes the form of a 'game', 'play' or 'sally' of words

between two youths who perform it only in the presence of others. Accordingly, 'a playful attitude surrounds the whole affair and it apparently gives great satisfaction to the participants'[21].

The subject matter of the Dozens concern infidelity, impotence and homosexual tendencies, and these are conveyed by means of 'innuendoes and indirect references'.[22] Although Dollard admits that similar forms have been known and transmitted in remote parts of the earth, 'no relationship is presumed between the American Negro and any other similar form.' This assertion probably encouraged Roger D. Abrahams to believe that the Dozens is a peculiar Negro institution:

> ....As an institutionalised mechanism the dozens is most important to the Lower-class Negro youth in search of his masculine identity. It represents a transition point in his life, that place at which he casts off a woman's world for a man's, and begins to develop the tools by which he is to implement his new found position, as a member of a gang existence.[23]

It is significant that in spite of the obvious play element in the Dozens, both Dollard and Abrahams see the Dozens in relation to turbulence: 'misplaced aggression', 'ready brawls and street fights', a 'gang existence'. In a racially fragmented environment which also harbours dispossessed Blacks, it is perhaps consistent, as one finds in much of the literature on Blacks in America, to associate the symbol of violence with an important activity of that

discriminated minority in American society. However, an unfortunate impression is created of the Dozens in the sense that outward violence, rather than a verbally entertaining violence, is an essential feature of the American Dozens.

Indeed, outward violence is also a feature of less poetic contexts of insult in some festivals in Ghana. In the Apoo festival, songs of acrimony and provocation are sung by drunken youngmen who, on that occasion, may initiate fights and brawls, sometimes ending up in wounds and injuries. Even in the more artistic context of the halo, it may at times degenerate 'into fist and minor skirmishes'.[24] Nevertheless, these are either unimportant considerations or they are deliberately encouraged as a dramatic expression of momentary cosmic disorder. In the latter case, violence can occur in any form because there is a general awareness of a situation of disorder, a 'created' chaos, where human and non-human forces suspend their control on life and no one is expected to play God. Accordingly, normal social sanctions and retributions also cease to be enforced. Violence here is sustained by a collective awareness of self-destruction as a necessary prelude to regeneration and restoration of order. Hence violence becomes synonymous with a psychological condition of expiation, emotional release and growth.

Moreover, the 'psychology of growth' which characterises verbal insult in the Dozens, also finds parallel expression in some verbal

art forms normally associated with adolescence in Africa. Riddles, folktales and maiden songs for example, are significant signposts in the growth of the child in African society because of their emphasis on self-discovery and self-awareness in relation to the social environment. Through these forms, a child is enabled to acquire language competence and verbal maturity to handle and conceptualise complex relationships in his social environment. He is adjudged 'mature' when he demonstrates a certain kind of verbal competence in cultural perspectives. This process of growth is, in effect, similar to the one Abrahams associates with the Dozens as played by Black American Youths:

> .....As sexual awareness grows, the vilification of the mother is changed to sexual matters, the contests become more heated and the insults more noteworthy. Many of them take the form of rhymes or puns, signalling the beginning of the bloom of verbal dexterity which comes to fruition later in the long narrative poem called the "toast" and indicating the necessity of applying strict formal structures to highly volatile matters.[25]

The process of acquiring 'verbal dexterity' then is an expression of boys in transition to manhood. More important, it is indicative of a kind of creative verbal maturity when 'volatile matters' are contained by 'strict formal structures'. "Signifying" or the technique of indirect argument or persuasion becomes important because as Abrahams points out, it is 'more subtly utilized in the

Dozens'[26] giving rise to a dominant poetic interest that effectively helps to realize the 'play' or 'entertainment' element in the Dozens. Interestingly, as we have earlier noted, in the Ghanaian tradition of verbal insult, the formal structures of song, chant and recital have direct relationship with the techniques of indirect reference, allusion and imagery. Structures and devices provide an immediate framework and unity of approach for the poetic expression of insult. Together, they constitute a 'clever' artistic means of expressing emotions in words. In this sense, the American Dozens may be said to manifest a similar concern with its Ghanaian counterpart in the need to control and discipline intense feeling and emotion through purely literary means.

Related to this, as earlier noted, is a concern with laughter and entertainment in the Dozens. The following excerpts from the American Dozens are a case in point:

(a) "I fucked your mother in a horse and wagon
She said, 'scuse me, mister, my pussy's dragging".

(b) I fucked your mother between two cans up
jumped a baby and hollered, "superman".

(c) I fucked your mother on city Hall
William Penn said, "Don't take it all".

(d) I fucked your mother on a ten-ton truck
she said, "God damn, baby you
sure can fuck".....[27]

Embodied in the texts are insult-expressions whose total orientation and drive is towards ridicule, exaggeration and humour. Although insults are highly personalised in the Dozens this is balanced by a dominant intention to cause laughter and to entertain through humour, and deliberate exaggeration. In the Ghanaian tradition, where a similar mode of personalisation is often the case, sometimes leading to the actual mention of the names of living persons, it is the poet's imaginative twists with language, what Awoonor has described as 'the verbal genius of the poets, their inventiveness, and their fantastic imaginative powers'[28] to evoke ridicule and laughter which counts. Participants at insult-sessions do not go there to witness fights, quarrels and misunderstandings. They go there to delight in the poet's wit and sarcasm as well as in his imaginative appeasement of human feeling and emotion. It cannot be said therefore that verbal insult functions as a psychological release for only those who directly indulge in the performance and subsequently may fight among themeselves. It is important for the performers to realise the need to establish a framework of laughter and entertainment so that the audience can make a meaningful psychological identification with the performance. Only in this way can the performance become a functional tool for the audience as well. Both traditions of insult in effect provide the means for such an audience identification through the poet's imaginative use

of language to evoke laughter and humour.

In addition to all these it can also be seen from the texts that there is a strong presence of anti-feminine feeling in the Dozens. Attitudes and poses ranging from hostility, censure and humiliation of females seem to characterise the creative utterances of the predominantly male participants in the Dozens. This has led Abrahams to contend that verbal dwelling among Black American youths provides an escape from the stronghold of matriarchal values. It enables participants to assert their virility and masculinity at a time when female dominance has to be repudiated or cast off. For a seemingly different reason, there is also a strong element of negative utterances about females in the Ghanaian tradition of insult. While both male and female moral detractors in Ghanaian society may be lampooned in satirical songs, the predominance of anti-feminine feeling in Ghanaian verbal insult can be explained in terms of a certain perception of womanhood in relation to collective morality, just as in the American tradition of the Dozens, the assertion of masculinity can be explained in relation to a certain perception of Black American womanhood. It seems that in both traditions, women are regarded as a symbolic barrier to the aspirations of the group concerned. In the case of African society, women are considered barriers to moral righteousness, while in Black American society, this has to do with the aspirations of youth groups towards 'manliness'.

Thus, as moral or psychological barriers to positive aspirations in male-oriented societies, women inevitably become the target of 'serious' and 'playful' insult in both traditions.

IV

One, of course, is not saying there are no differences between the American Dozens and the Ghanaian tradition of verbal insult. Differences exist in the degree of institutionalisation in relation to the local culture. While the American Dozens, for example, limits itself largely to a projection of a psychological situation of malaise in adolescent behaviour, the Ghana tradition of insult projects several areas of human relevance whose orientation is mainly cultural. In the Ghanaian context, verbal insult is deeply rooted in the culture as a creative tool for defining the moral priorities and sense of direction of the culture. Yet, in the pursuit of these apparently different objectives, both traditions reveal an inner resilience for common 'philosophic principles and psychological attitudes', as we have tried to demonstrate. Thus in their relationship to the development of group consciousness, both traditions reveal a firm awareness of ritual, psychological, linguistic and literary processes whose parallel motivations are

so strikingly similar that one is tempted to conclude a common origin. Thus one consideration seems to stand out: there is a recognition that distance, environment and acculturation alone cannot erase the deep-springs of humanism that inform art and its expression in human society. In a cursory look at both traditions of verbal insult, it can be said that Black consciousness in art, a reflection of a common Black humanity, has been able to sustain both traditions over time, irrespective of distance and changes in environment.

NOTES

1. Russel L. Adams, "An Analysis of the 'Roots' phenomenon in the context of American Racial Conservatism" in Presence Africaine No. 116, 4th Quarterly, 1980; p.129.

2. Adams, 'Roots' p. 129.

3. The whole argument of acculturation has been brilliantly reviewed by John Szwed and Roger D. Abrahams in their article, "After the myth: Studying Afro-American cultural patters in the plantation literature" published in Research in African Literatures Vol. 7 No. 2 (Univ. of Texas Press, Austin, 1976) pp. 211-232. Bernth Lindfors, ed.

4. Szwed and Abrhams, R.A.L. p. 212.

5. Szwed and Abrahams, p. 228.

6. Quoted from Szwed and Abrahams, p. 215.

7. Kofi Awoonor, The Breast of the Earth (Doubleday, New York, 1975) p. 85.

8. There is a thorough review of the literature on this in William D. Piersen's article, "Putting Down Ole Massa: African Satire in the New World" in Research in African Literatures Vol. 7 No. 2, 1976. pp. 166-180.

9. See Agovi, J.K.E., Festival Drama Among the Ahanta-Nzema of South-West Ghana, Unpublished, Ph.D. Thesis, Institute of African Studies, Univ. of Ghana, Legon 1979.

10. This is extensively discussed in an article by Kofi Agovi entitled, "oral tradition and social change in contemporary Africa" in The Ancestors Speak: Oral Art in Contemporary Africa (A special issue of PACIFIC QUARTERLY MOANA) Newzealand, Outrigger Publishers, 1985. Philip Noss, ed.

11. J.H. Kwabana Nketia, "The Linguistic aspect of style in African languages," in Current Trends in Linguistics Vol. 7 (mouton and Co., The Hague, 1971) Thomas A. Sebeok, ed.

12. Dennis Warren and Owusu Brempong, "Attacking deviations from the norms: Poetic insults in Bono (Ghana)" in Maledicta Vol. 2 No. 1 (Maledicta Press, Wisconsin, 1978). Reinhold Aman, ed.

13. Nketia, Current Trends, p. 734.

14. Agovi, Festival Drama, p. 323.

15. J.H.K. Nketia, "The techniques of African Oral literature" in Proceedings of the Ghana Academy of Sciences Vol. II (Accra, 1961) p. 14.

16. Texts collected on field research in the village of Ehoaka in Nzema traditional Area, Western Region of Ghana in 1976.

17. K. Ampon Darkwa, "Observers Report on the Apoo Festival" field notes presented to the Institute of African Studies, Univ. of Ghana, Legon, in 1968.

18. Kofi Awoonor, Breast of the Earth, p. 85.

19. Agovi, Festival Drama. p. 371.

20. Kofi Awoonor, Guardians of the Sacred Word: Ewe Poetry. (Nok Publishers Ltd., New York, 1974) p. 84.

21. John Dollard, "The Dozens: Dialectic of Insult" reprinted in Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel. Critical Studies on Black life and culture Vol. 7 (Garland Pub. Inc., New York, 1981) p. 279 Ed. Alan Dundes.

22. J. Dollard, The Dozens, p. 279.

23. Roger D. Abrahams, "Playing the Dozens" reprinted in Mother Wit, Vol. 7 (Garland Pub. Inc., New York) p. 307, Ed. Alan Dundes.

24. Kofi Awoonor, Guardians, p. 7.

25. Roger D. Abrahams, 'Playing the Dozens', p. 300.

26. Abrahams, p. 302.

27. Abrahams, p. 307.

28. Kofi Awoonor, Guardians, p. 7.

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