CONVERGENCES ET DIVERGENCES IDENTITAIRES

REMINISCING THE BLANK SPACES OF SOJOURN: SUBLIMATING EMOTIONAL FLIGHTS IN TABAN LO LIYONG'S *Words That Melt a Mountain*

Niyi AKINGBE
Ondo State University Of Science & Technology
Okitipupa, Ondo State, Nigeria
E-mail: deniakingbe@yahoo.com

Abstract:

Taban Lo Liyong's profundity as a prominent writer from East Africa is often showcased by his wilful eccentricity and dogged iconoclasm, which exuberantly dot the lines of his poetry collections. For much of his writing career, Liyong has sustained a cultivated equanimity towards the paradox of being widely accepted by the budding African literary critics, while being deliberately neglected by the Western critics. His maverick disposition to literary craftsmanship is stridently exhibited in the thematic strands of *Words That Melt a Mountain*: an unabashed treatment of controversial subject matters; an intrusive and digressive narrative technique; a confident assertive ego; an effervescent erudition in his writing and a disturbing frankness in the treatment of sex.

This paper examines how the poetics of *Words That Melt a Mountain* are grounded in the experiences of Liyong's sojourn in Japan. It highlights the way in which these reminiscences ferment the interplay of themes which oscillate between an audacious narrative of erotic explorations and a penetrating introspection into African mythopoesis.

Key words:

Reminiscing, the blank spaces of sojourn, sublimating, wilful eccentricity, emotional flight, Taban Lo Liyong.

Rezumat:

Rememorarea spațiilor vide ale străinătății: sublimarea evadărilor emoționale în *Words that Melt a Mountain,* de Taban Lo Lyong

BDD-A4015 © 2013 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 20:51:32 UTC)

Profunzimea lui Taban Lo Liyong ca eminent scriitor din Africa de Est este adesea pusă în valoare de o excentricitate deliberată şi un obstinat iconoclasm, care punctează cu exuberanţă versurile volumelor sale de poezie. Pe parcursul carierei sale poetice, Liyong a afişat o cultivată seninătate în faţa paradoxului de a fi unanim acceptat de noii criticii literari africani, dar neglijat în mod deliberat de către criticii vestici. Atitudinea sa nonconformistă în arta literară este strident ilustrată de ramificaţiile tematice şi discursive din *Words That Melt a Mountain*: tratarea fără ocolişuri a unor subiecte controversate; o tehnică narativă intrusivă şi digresivă; asertivitatea încrezătoare a ego-ului; o efervescentă erudiţie a scriiturii şi o franchețe tulburătoare în abordarea sexualităţii.

Prezenta lucrare examinează maniera în care poetica volumului *Words That Melt a Mountain* îşi trage seva din experienţele trăite de Liyong în timpul sejurului său din Japonia. Este ilustrat modul în care această rememorare alimentează jocul tematic care oscilează între o îndrăzneaţă narațiune despre explorarea erotismului şi o introspecţie pătrunzătoare în resorturile unui mitopoesis de tip african.

Cuvinte cheie:

Rememorare, spaţiile vide ale străinătăţii, sublimare, excentricitate deliberată, evadare emoţională, Taban Lo Liyong.

Introduction

Arguably East Africa's most pedantic and controversial writer, Taban Lo Liyong is perhaps South Sudan's most prodigious and colourful poet. The poetic of his *Words That Melt a Mountain* constitutes a landmark in African poetry. It is a poetry collection crowded with weird symbols and libidinous metaphors. Embedded in Liyong's poetry is a resonant tone of defiance and lingering air of non-conformism about the established norms of the poetic craft. Liyong' poetic is drugged on anarchic gusto, nuanced by shifts in time and place, and accentuated by the intersection of fantasy and reality. His witty philosophy, overbearing pedagogical disposition and suffocating penchant for vulgarity have earned him an unparalleled enmity from the established critics of African literature. Adrian Roscoe, for instance, has described as eccentric and curious the way he unconventionally used lowercase letters without punctuation in *Another Nigger Dead* (Roscoe, 1977:114). This is subtly paralleled by the surmise of Eldred Durosimi Jones, who considers the maverick poise of Liyong's poetry as 'sometimes straight, sometimes ironic, serious, parallel, contrasting, are massed together to produce a prickly, jumpy effect' (Jones, 1973:176-77). But the most incongruous of the critical salvos ever fired at Liyong was deleteriously delivered by Peter Nazareth, when he unabashedly blurted out that Liyong is ideologically irrelevant as a

BDD-A4015 © 2013 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 20:51:32 UTC)

spokesman for the Third World peoples and that he is an artistic failure (Nazareth, 1978: 38).

However, F. Odun Balogun has strongly underscored the artistic significance of Liyong in the distinguished African literary hall of fame when she relentlessly rallied a deserving support for his literary candidature in the African literary enterprise 'Taban does not flatter the people of the Third World, just as he does not condone the weakness of the people of the developed nations. Rather, he uses his art to challenge the former to match the achievements of the latter. Taban believes in the unity of all men, 'in the final analysis', he says, 'society is also one', and he sees the differences in human beings as only a matter of 'difference in degree', for, as he points out, 'A reliable balance sheet of innate qualities of the Blacks and Whites and the Yellow has not yet been drawn up. For all practical purposes, there are no differences in them. This is why Taban applies the same rule to all and believes the Third World has the capacity to catch up with the developed nations' (F. Odun Balogun, 1998:260-261). While this paper does not intend to serve as a propagandistic platform for eulogizing the stupendous proclivity of Taban Lo Liyong's literary provenance, it aims, however, to highlight how the avant-garde and the iconoclastic disposition of Taban Lo Liyong has shaped the poetics of *Words That Melt A Mountain* (1996) and captured the emotional shifts grounded in the staccato bursts of reminiscences of his stay in Japan.

Words That Melt a Mountain fervently coalesces Liyong's cultural incursion into Japanese society and the attendant social disequilibrium he experienced during his sojourn there. Liyong's position as an outsider affords him a rare privilege of probing perceptively into the socio-cultural fabric of Japanese society. Unlike Aime Cesaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal,* whose fauna, landscape and images are depressingly emphasized instead of the individuals figuring in the landscape, Liyong's *Words That Melt a Mountain* mediates the individuals' exhibition of cultural nuances. Liyong's often obtrusive voice reverberates consistently in the poems. None of the poems in this collection has a title, they are rhetorical, loosely structured, and each poignantly narrates the poet persona's exuberant, hilarious and convivial experiences. They display a verbal erudition which betrays compelling emotional shifts. The structural-linguistic significance of these emotional shifts in the *Words That Melt a*

BDD-A4015 © 2013 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 20:51:32 UTC)

Mountain strikingly reflects Sunday Anozie's views on the linguistic criticism of literary works. He observed that there are two underlined assumptions in the structural-linguistic method of literary crafting:

"*The first is the realization that a poetic work contains a system of ordered variants which can be isolated and represented vertically in the form of superimposed levels, such as phonology, phonetic, syntactic, prosodic and semantic. The second is that modern structuralism-especially in the form of its offshoot, generative grammar – provides an adequate theory and method for accounting for such levels and in dealing with the internal coherence of the given work of art*". (Anozie, 1984:106)

Liyong has adopted this stylized approach of stringing together scraps of experience rendered in poetry because it is the most convenient way of rendering life lived in fits. While European and Western literatures copiously advocated a reduction of the author's presence within the work, evoking James Joyce's injunction that 'the artist, like the God of creation', ought to 'remain within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails' (Joyce, 1984: 194), Liyong often assumes the role of obtrusive commentator in *Words That Melt a Mountain,* offering explanations and illustrations when necessary.

Facilitating the Dialogue between Writer and Reader in Literary Production

The collection starts with an invitation to the readers, by the Poet's persona, to a literary dialogue. The writer has most often constituted the cynosure and bastion of literary creativity, but Liyong reverses this omnipotent role of the writer, by emphasizing the collaboration and synergy between writer and reader towards the aesthetic fructification of a literary work. He argues that the success of any literary production only thrives on dialogue, rather than on the selfish monologue which only justifies the writer's gratification, thereby alienating the readers:

"*Dear Reader,*
Writing is an invitation to a dialogue.
First the writer chooses the theme and expounds on it.
The reader is provoked to respond; silently or loudly,
Prosaically or poetically.
The debate that ensues amplifies the theme...
The mind's empire is enlarged, and the heart
Can understand
what it would never have condoned

BDD-A4015 © 2013 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 20:51:32 UTC)

before.
Toleration is the answer
To a multicultural
uni
world." (i)

Liyong has unambiguously demonstrated, in this introductory poem, that writing should not be the exclusive prerogative of the author, but it should rather be an exchange of ideas between the writer and the reader. This reminds one of Chinua Achebe's opinion that 'the triumph of the written word is often attained when the writer achieves union and trust with the reader, who then becomes ready to be drawn deep into unfamiliar territory, walking in borrowed literary shoes so to speak, toward a deeper understanding of self or society, or of foreign peoples, cultures, and situations' (Achebe, 2012:61). It is only logical for the writer to sustain this link between him and the reader, because the reader axiomatically constitutes the vibrant audience of any literary production. Such exchange is deemed beneficial to literary enterprise because, when 'the writer chooses the theme and expounds on it/the reader is provoked to respond; silently or loudly, and the dividend of such exchange strikingly 'amplifies the theme'.

Mythologizing African Cultural Consciousness in the World Literary Order

The exploration and adoption of mythology in the works of contemporary African writers is no doubt designed to re-write African cultural consciousness in the world's new literary order. It will not be out of place to acknowledge the fact that contemporary African writers, even though they write in non-African languages like English, French and Portuguese, have their inspiration rooted in the sacrosanct African culture, its cosmology, landscapes and social patterns obtainable in their respective cultural milieu. Suffice it to say that 'Modern African literature right from the beginning has drawn upon two major traditions and their respective thought and imaginative systems: the Western literary tradition and the African oral tradition.

One insists on the epistemological difference between history and fiction, the other on the pragmatic identicalness of both. For the majority of African writers, the two traditions exist to be of mutual assistance in the

BDD-A4015 © 2013 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 20:51:32 UTC)

evolution of the new literature in Africa, and the distinction between history and fiction is accepted as valid' (Ogundele, 1992:9). In an untitled poem whose first line begins with 'When I hit my right foot against a stone', the poet points to the interrelationship between man, inanimate objects and the supernatural elements in African cosmology. Africans maintain a corresponding anthropomorphic attitude to stones, water, forest and animals. This is significantly emphasized in the words of Mazisi Kunene 'Each society is concerned with its destiny within the cosmic arena. Without this perspective, the society can only be stampeded into directions it does not fully comprehend or does not feel ready to follow...myth can take many forms. It can reorganize the historical content in terms of modern perspectives. It can create an attractive vision defining in familiar cosmic terms the future possibilities of society. Myth can be used to celebrate the achievements of society, making them fall into an acceptable social order' (Kunene, 1980:190). The poem is deftly anchored in the stylistic influence of African mythopoeia tropes, employed in the poem to reiterate African cosmological exegesis:

"*When I hit my right foot against a stone*
It portends bad news ahead.
So it happened as I walked to work.
A letter from Kampala, a fax message from Khartoum,
lunch at the canteen; all went well.
But you were not at your desk...
your friend later told me you had a cold.
The secret of your heart is out
mother earth already knows." (3)

Liyong's almost obsessive, but avowed fidelity to African mythology is effusively demonstrated in the poem: 'When I hit my right foot against a stone/It portends bad news ahead'.

Despite the poet's being away from Africa, his mind flies between Japan and Africa. Consequently, myth serves as a conduit for bridging the distance. The poem is grounded in the anthropomorphic signage derived from African mythology which the poet has telepathically harnessed to probe accusatorily into a supposed friend's whereabouts. But the friend's gender is not disclosed in the poem. However, no sooner had the persona started to pursue this train of thought on mythopoeia than the poem's

BDD-A4015 © 2013 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 20:51:32 UTC)

coherence was interrupted by another, non-mythological, discourse which was not conclusively pursued: ‘ But you were not at your desk.../ your friend later told me you had a cold/ The secret of your heart is out/mother earth already knows’. This veering off the discourse of African mythology remarkably denotes the eccentric characteristic which usually ricochets off the poetry of Taban Lo Liyong. Nevertheless, the signification of African mythology in the poem finds a striking parallelism in another untitled poem in the volume:

> “*The shrines to the ancestors we also have.*
> *My mother long ago cleared with my father*
> *long dead*
> *If in the East he had friends and kindred spirits*
> *who would look after me.*
> *My dear ancestors said man goes by plane*
> *But they, the spirits, are all in the air or underground*
> *Linked and interlinked all the time.*
> *They already hobnobbed with eastern spirits.*
> *So I went and had a good time.*
> *So I came again*.” (69)

Here the aesthetics of African culture is explicated from the levels and depths of mythopoeia. The poem essentially reiterates the African belief system, whose signification would be incomplete without its accrued appurtenances that admit the inextricable communion between the persona and his ancestors. There is an invocation of sufficient divination of mysteries of the future concerning the persona, reminiscent of Wole Soyinka’s word in *Myth, Literature and the African World*: ‘The past is the ancestors’, the present belongs to the living, and the future to the unborn. The deities stand in the same situation to the living as do the ancestors and the unborn, obeying the same laws, suffering the same agonies and uncertainties, employing the same Masonic intelligence of rituals for the perilous plunge into the fourth area of experience, the immeasurable gulf of transition. Its dialogue is liturgy, its music takes form from man’s uncomprehending immersion in this area of existence, buried wholly from rational recognition’ (Soyinka, 1976:148). Juxtaposed on the Japanese religious belief system, which is also replete with the concept of ancestral veneration, the ubiquity of the ancestors is remarkably emphasized in the

BDD-A4015 © 2013 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 20:51:32 UTC)

poem: 'But they, the spirits, are all in the air or underground/Linked and interlinked all the time.'

Soyinka has acknowledged the African mythopoeic perspective on the divine assistance of the ancestors as the protective and filial duties of the ancestors to their wards. This is not limited to the shores of the African continent, but, as suggested by Liyong, it covers other areas of the universe. This ontological relationship between the ancestors and the persona in the poem is accomplished by the conviction that the African ancestors can naturally interlink with the Japanese ancestors so as to ensure his safety and well being. Even though the poet lives in Japan, he is confident that the ancestors' aura is always with him, because the ancestors are 'linked and interlinked all the time' and since 'They already hobnobbed with eastern spirits', his sojourn in Japan will be hitch-free, because they will constantly attend to his spiritual queries. The paraphernalia of African cultural consciousness in the poem, such as 'shrines', 'ancestors' and 'spirits', fittingly sublimate the linguistic and cultural enigmas that revolve round African anthropology.

Cultivating Affection and Delineating Emotion

The notion of 'love,' like all notions delineating human beings from the animals, is based on a fundamental contradiction, which emphasizes human emotion in rationalizing the individual's erotic gratification, contrasting it to the particularity of the bestiality of sex which usually accompanies the coital performance. Among other things, love initiates a bond based on affection, which can blur racial differences, reinvigorate the universality of humanity and recuperate the emotional warmth between lovers. This is ambitiously pursued and sustained in the pages of *Words That Melt a Mountain.* In the untitled poem below, Liyong demonstrates the import of a seamless blissful link between man and woman, which needs to be jealously guarded:

"How does it feel to be in love?
It feels liberated: nothing matters any more...
Not even the whip on the back.
It makes one feel warm, and breathe quicker;
It makes the impossible look possible.
After a while, you cannot see anymore
with your outer eyes.

BDD-A4015 © 2013 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 20:51:32 UTC)

You only know the warmth that envelopes you
And the pull towards the beloved.
For me I start talking – anything that comes to mind.
For you I notice the glands make your mouth water". (61)

Although love is complicated by the passion it generates between two individuals, neither the tenderness of its cultivation nor the fervency of its consummation is strong enough to obliterate its appeal to humanity. Despite the blissfulness that love connotes, its capability to generate petty bickering and mutual distrust is acknowledged in the poem. In another untitled poem, Liyong also alludes to the possibility of infidelity in a relationship:

"Friendship or love involves opening up.
Baring the heart of one
to let in the fire of the other.
It is self-obliteration
In favour of the other.
Where there is a seed of suspicion there is distrust.
Where both are rock-bottom weak and harmless,
There will grow a joint strength to protect the duo.
Since even I distrust myself at times,
most times
A friendship that gives one some other soul
Who is as foolish as one is just too good to miss". (66)

Selflessness in the pursuit of the love game is succinctly advocated and treated in terms of its mystique. Love between a man and a woman is situated between two fundamental trajectories: outright sincerity and wilful deception. Between the two are embedded altruism, sacrifice and dedication, pitted against selfishness, deceit and suspicion. Liyong didactically pontificates on the challenges to pure and seamless love, which he rhetorically enunciates in the poem: 'Friendship or love involves opening up/Where there is a seed of suspicion there is distrust'. These challenges are rendered in a simple language, whose forcefulness is accentuated by the poet's magisterial tone. In advocating a commitment on the part of the two lovers in the poem, however, Liyong points to a commendable balance of judgement:

'Baring the heart of one/to let in the fire of the other./It is self-obliteration/In favour of the other.'

BDD-A4015 © 2013 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 20:51:32 UTC)

If the lovers are to savour the passion accrued from a love feast, Liyong suggests that the two individuals engaged in a relationship need to remind each other that love is naturally demanding, tasking and unconditional.

The place of sex/love in search of Global Harmony

In most African societies, individuals often choose not to discuss sex openly. When this occurs, it is usually expressed through snatches of overheard conversation or in subdued tones. To openly broach sex in a traditional African setting represents a daring act, which somewhat attracts a prescribed level of sanction. But Liyong believes that every society must seek out its space and create a convenient platform where sex could be discussed with brutal honesty, for the overall benefit of society. Sex is a topic which paradoxically generates both passion and revulsion in Liyong's *Words That Melt a Mountain:*

> "*This is a town where traditions are broken silently.*
> *There is a tacit understanding that you understand*
> *the hunger within and permit the other,*
> *Nay, cooperate with the other,*
> *In slacking her thirst from the forbidden well.*
> *In the bus a girl came and placed her front against my knee.*
> *The bus jerked and swerved, she gasped and sniffed.*
> *I looked and saw the appeal and let things be*." (15)

The comparative evaluation of African and Japanese reactions to the issue of sex constitutes the locale of this unnamed poem. Liyong sets in counterpoint African and Japanese approaches to sex. He obliquely condemns the African girl's reticent, coy approach to sex, but unobtrusively does a clinical riff on the psychological disposition of Japanese society's brash approach to sex: 'this is a town where traditions are broken silently/there is a tacit understanding that you understand'. The complementariness between the milieu and the Japanese girl is strikingly demonstrated in the poem. It bears out the suggestion of Hallie Burnett that the 'writer must give thought to each word and weigh each one spoken or written for its true sense, its effectiveness, and colour, because each word a writer uses must have meaning, weight, feeling, and particularity' (Burnett, 1983:46). To get this point across, the poet chooses some metaphors and images of eroticism such as: 'the hunger within', 'In slacking her thirst

BDD-A4015 © 2013 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 20:51:32 UTC)

from the forbidden well', 'a girl came and placed her front against my knee', 'the bus jerked and swerved, she gasped and sniffed', 'I looked and saw the appeal and let things be'. Liyong abundantly demonstrates, through these metaphors and images, how 'discourse [...] is in fact one of the places where sexuality [...] exercise[s] in a privileged way some of [its] most formidable powers' (Foucault, 1981: 52). He exploits and manipulates these metaphors and images to heighten the anecdotal evidence of a Japanese libidinous disposition. Liyong's maverick treatment of sex is replayed in another untitled poem:

> "*Sex is tedious.*
> *Ask a mating dog, mated bitch.*
> *Saint Paul was right; do it for perpetuation of the species*
> *for goodness' sake.*
> *Holding hands, stirring up the heartbeat,*
> *Loving by the eye, lying side by side*
> *and hearing the tom-tom of hearts,*
> *kissing caressingly,*
> *Kissing succulently, kissing vacuumly*
> *and letting time pass;*
> *Feeling the little hairs, the nape, nipple,*
> *beckoning the guard.*
> *The result is exhalation.*" (6-7)

There is no doubt that Liyong is a controversial poet whose audacity most often unsettles the contemporary African literary orthodoxy. His unambiguous treatment of sex calls to mind its paradoxical functions of pleasure and stress: 'sex is tedious', 'kissing caressingly' and 'kissing succulently/the result is exhalation'. Liyong's broaching of the subject reflects Julia Kristeva's opinion on the process of creating a text and her suggestion that, in the process of writing, the writer needs to lose his or her worldliness, as it were, so as to ensure that: 'The subject of narration(s) is drawn in, and therefore reduced to a code, to a nonperson, to an *anonymity* (as writer, subject of enunciation) mediated by a third person, the *he/she* [here I] character, the subject of utterance' (Kristeva,1980:74). Even though the ambience of the poem is pervaded by an aura of eroticism, sex becomes synonymous with both fun and suffering, rather than with unlimited

BDD-A4015 © 2013 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 20:51:32 UTC)

hedonism. This paradoxical function of sex is further pursued in another untitled poem:

"*For love of making love*
Is wearing out, is wearing down.
It is the tiring of the body,
It is the exercising of the body
It is driving of the muscles to the rigor
mortis
of ejaculation.
And then the bathing in sweat
And the re-forming of the iron files
Into a future usable instrument." (45-46)

As in the poem discussed above, the paradoxical theme of pleasure and exhaustion is tenaciously pursued in this poem. It is imperative for the reader to pay unbiased attention to the layers of meaning inherent in the poem and consider attitudes to sexual activities in all lands and climates. Liyong unequivocally reiterates the idea that, for all the intensity of sexual desire, the act itself can be energy sapping and undoubtedly emotionally tiring afterwards. However, sex is believed to be the prelude to the much needed love between man and woman and the aspiration for building a harmonious world. Liyong's representation of sex as an antidote to global hatred and acrimony reads like a romantic manifesto for harnessing global peace. This notion is effervescently inscribed in another untitled poem:

"*When man-and-woman come together*
In the communion of the spirit,
And the entanglement of limbs and flesh,
There shall have been re-enacted
That divine fellowship
Of the union of kindred spirits
To which humanity owes itself;
And which alone
Will keep the world rotating
And give humanity an existence guaranteed." (104)

Liyong basically foregrounds the theme of a harmonious global relationship among people of the world by two fundamental motifs in the poem. The first focuses on the bond between men and women. The second

BDD-A4015 © 2013 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 20:51:32 UTC)

emphasizes the exchange of love between man and woman, which he sees as the harbinger of enduring affection. Liyong perceives love in sum total, as the definitive elixir, ostensibly needed for the transformation of the turbulent world, while sex serves as the much needed tonic that could kick-start this transformation.

Appraising Transcendental Wanderlust through Divination

Liyong appropriates the subtlety and the traditional undercurrents which abound in African oral tradition in the form of symbols, images, proverbs and divination, to essentially explicate some mysteries peculiar to African cultural experience. This practice has been fittingly corroborated by Charles Bodunde, for whom 'the influence which the various elements of oral traditions exert on modern African writing, especially poetry, is indeed tremendous. In fact, major African literary texts indicate attachment to the African cosmic setting' (Bodunde, 1992:25). Divination is a practice common to all African ethnic groups and societies. As a cultural practice, its signification has attracted an overwhelming subscription from most people living on the continent. Like other African writers, Liyong utilizes the divination motif to shed light on his wanderlust trajectory in *Words That Melt a Mountain.* This motif underscores the influence of African oral tradition in foretelling the future of Liyong's wanderlust, as shown in the following poem:

"*After my father had consulted his ancestors*
And had been told that I would belong to the world...
I do not know how hurt he could have been,
But I think my elder brother had already gone out
Into the world and fought a war
With other Africans, and under the British,
Against Japan and Hitler's men in Europe.
And, my father had been donated
to the colonial government
As a policeman in Kajokaji..." (94)

Liyong suggests, with hindsight, that he seems to have assiduously prepared to globe-trot right from his infancy, tenderly evoked in the poem. His sojourn in Japan, as well as in other countries where he previously sojourned, seems to confirm the plausibility of African divination and

BDD-A4015 © 2013 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 20:51:32 UTC)

oracular practices which he evokes in the poem. His continuous sojourn in different countries of the world is symptomatic of a transcendental wanderlust of his family tree, towards which he has, in turn, taken an insufferable glib attitude:

> "*And his own father had been a headman*
> *In the royal household of Limi...*
> *We left enclosures over a hundred years ago.*
> *And, with all the movement of peoples*
> *up and down, east and west*
> *all over Africa,*
> *Who knows where we had come from?*
> *The Berlin Conference pegged us in the Sudan,*
> *But where would we have been by now*
> *With our wanderlust?*
> *perhaps in Japan!*" (95)

Liyong is building up to his most impassioned moment in this poem, in which his authorial voice is ostensibly delineating his ambiguous identity. Appropriately, he ingeniously betrays an uncanny attitude towards his genealogical migratory history, hedged about with the continuous movement of his ancestors from 'the royal household of Limi', to being 'pegged in the Sudan' by the Berlin Conference of 1884-1885, which conduced to the scramble and partition of African countries among the European colonial powers. This partitioning metaphor is poignantly used to criticise the European colonial powers. He recalls the tragedy of the internal displacements in Africa, the social crises suffered by the bulk of the African ethnic groups, taken from their kith and kin in one country and yoked with different ethnic groups of another country, whose linguistic and cultural inscapes they did not share. Liyong essentially sees himself as a victim of this historical mishap, because he has often been mistaken for a Ugandan or a Kenyan in most cases. But his identity is further complicated on account of his coming from the fledgling republic of Southern Sudan, who had to fight a long war of independence with the Arab-Islamic government of Northern Sudan.

BDD-A4015 © 2013 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 20:51:32 UTC)

Conclusion

In examining Taban Lo Liyong's poetics in *The Words That Melt a Mountain,* the reader comes across a multiplicity of poetic fermentations, distilled from the reminiscences of Liyong's sojourn in Japan. Liyong reminisces on and analyses the traditional African values as they shape collective African attitudes to the issues of identity, culture, sex and religion. The fact that all the poems in this collection are untitled reflects an eccentric and iconoclastic approach to literary production. This attitude has often pitched him against the contemporary African literary orthodoxy. Much criticism was levelled against him and his literary works on the grounds of his non-conformism. But what is indisputable about Liyong is his erudition, his penetrating imagination and unabashed frankness in discussing sexual issues. Although most of the poems in the collection are written under the guise of scraps of thought, they remain essentially grounded in and germane to the topical issues which impact on African cultural consciousness in relation to cultures from other lands.

Bibliography:

ACHEBE, Chinua, 2012, *There Was A Country: A Personal History Of Biafra.* London: Allen Lane.

ANOZIE, Sunday, 1984, 'Negritude, Structuralism, Deconstruction'. In Henry Louis Gates (Ed.) *Black Literature and Literary Theory.* New York: Methuen.

BALOGUN, Odun, 1998, F. 'Taban Lo Liyong's *The Uniformed Man:* A Reconstructivist and Metafictional Parody Of Modernism', in Edmund L. Epstein and Robert Kole (Eds.), *The Language Of African Literature*. Asmara: Africa World Press, Inc..

BODUNDE, Charles, 1992, 'Oral Traditions & Modern Poetry: Okot p'Bitek's *Songs Of Lawino* & Okigbo's *Labyrinths*'. *African Literature Today*, p. 25.

BURNETT, Hallie, 1983, *On Writing the Short Story*. New York: Harper & Row.

CESAIRE, Aime, 1983, *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal/ Notebook of a Return to the Native Land. Aime Cesaire: The Collected Poetry.* Trans. Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith. Berkeley: University of California Press.

BDD-A4015 © 2013 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 20:51:32 UTC)

FOUCAULT, Michel, 1981, 'Order of Discourse'. Trans. Ian McLeod. *Untying the Text: A Poststructuralist Reader. (*Ed.) Robert Young. New York: Routledge.

JONES, Eldred Durosimi, 1973, 'Taban Lo Liyong: Review'. *African Literature Today* 6, pp. 176-77.

JOYCE, James, 1916/1984, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man.* London: Jonathan Cape, Reprinted in Panther Books.

KRISTEVA, Julia, 1980, 'Word, Dialogue, and Novel'. *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art.* (Ed.) Leon S. Rougiez. Trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, and Leon S Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press.

KUNENE, Mazisi.'The Relevance of African Cosmological Systems to African Literature Today'. *African Literature Today*11, p.190,1980.

LIYONG, Taban Lo, 1996, *Words That Melt a Mountain.* Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers.

LIYONG, Taban Lo, 1972 *Another Nigger Dead.* London: Heinemann.

NAZARETH, Peter, 1978, 'Bibliography, or Six Tabans in Search of an Author'. *English Studies in Africa*, Vol. 21.1(38).

OGUNDELE, Wole, 1992, 'Orality versus Literacy in Mazisi Kunene's Emperor Shaka the Great'. *African Literature Today,* Vol. 18, p. 9.

ROSCOE, Adrian, 1977, *Uhuru's Fire:African Literature East to South.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

SOYINKA,Wole, 1976, *Myth, Literature and the African World.* London: Cambridge University Press

BDD-A4015 © 2013 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 20:51:32 UTC)