



Autocracy and Poetic Resistance in Tanure Ojaide's *The Fate of Vultures and Delta Blues and Home Songs*

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Abstract

Contemporary African poets either consciously or unconsciously utilize their art in scrutinizing the consequences of the actions of state operators on their societies. This essay explores the imaginative configuration of the trauma, civil violations etcetera visited on citizens by corrupt politicians of Nigeria's Second Republic and the succeeding autocratic military rulers. Tanure Ojaide's *The Fate of Vultures and Delta Blues and Home Songs* are therefore scrutinized in their depictions of the chicanery of politicians and the tyranny of military rulers in a postcolonial African State. This study adopts a contextualist template that locates the poetic constructs within Nigeria's recent experiences. It highlights the corruption, violations of human rights, and muffling of critical voices by the rulers. It equally notes the poet's celebration of the heroic acts of some citizens who defied the draconian rule. Also the study stresses the poet's deployment of satirical devices in embellishing his art as he seeks to highlight the deleterious activities of both regimes. The essay concludes that the poet's optimistic vision distinguishes his generation from the preceding one that had been less optimistic in its artistic works.

Key words: State; Autocracy; Satire; Optimistic vision

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... I will like to be remembered for my creative effort to raise *themes which have relevance to my society*, my rootedness to the Niger Delta, and for bringing something from the oral tradition into the written tradition.

Tanure Ojaide [emphasis added]¹

INTRODUCTION

A historiographical view of modern Nigerian poetry as the poet Ugah argues, places J. P. Clark, Christopher Okigbo, and Wole Soyinka in the first generation, while Odia Ofeimun, Niyi Osundare, and Tanure Ojaide and several others are in the second generation (2004, p.16). But the latter generation, Ugah insists, unlike their predecessors who exhibit a mild temperament in their poems, are less sedate and consciously deviate from the inherited modernist tendencies of the former (p.16). However, Ugah's claims may have to be modified as even the latter poems of Okigbo, as Egudu argues, reveal Okigbo's indelible indebtedness to the oral poetics of Yoruba *oriki* [praise poem] (1981, p.302). It is perhaps more accurate to insist as Aiyejina (1988, p.113) rightly does, in our view, that the second generation of modern Nigerian poets effectively took off from Okigbo's "Path of Thunder," which in reality was an ideological and aesthetic "re-Africanization," as Cabral would couch it (1980, p.145). Ojaide's two volumes, *The Fate of Vultures* (1990) and *Delta Blues and Home Songs* (1998), can be said to belong to this stream of pungent ideological content and a pluralistic aesthetic mode that blends African and Western poetics.

¹ Tanure Ojaide, in an interview with Oyeniyi Okunoye, "Writing the Homeland: Talking with Tanure Ojaide." In Onokome Okome (Ed.), *Writing the homeland: The Poetry and Politics of Tanure Ojaide*, 230.

DISCUSSION

Ojaide's major thrust in the two volumes may be said to be ideological as the poems cover matters on Nigeria's political, socio-economic and cultural terrains. It is indeed this crop of poems that is most dominant and pervasive in both volumes. Perhaps due to the ubiquity of politico-cultural issues in Ojaide's poetry, the Nigerian critic Olafioye subtly critiques Ojaide's "favourite motif" as "the harangue of the state or rulership for corruptive practices" (2000, p.94), which Olafioye styles Ojaide's "usual political humdrum" (p.138). But Ojaide's poems that dwell on the ideological state apparatuses (ISAs), of the Nigerian State, as Althusser (1992, p.56) would say, do not constitute a monolithic catalogue of the inadequacies of these ISAs. Rather, what Ojaide achieves is a layered segmentation of the contradictions of the operators of the Nigerian State and their state policies at different historical moments of Nigeria's existence.

In contextualizing the two volumes, it is evident that they both fall within Nigeria's post-Independence period of the Second Republic and beyond. This was a period that witnessed civilian chicanery and military dictatorship, as the accounts in Akin Fadahunsi et al.'s *Nigeria Beyond Structural Adjustment: Towards a Popular Democratic Alternative* (1996) and Tunde Babawale's *Nigeria in the Crisis of Governance and Development in Retrospective and Prospective Analyses of Selected Issues and Events* (2006) and *Reflections on Culture and Democracy & the Quest for A New Nigeria* (2012) clearly demonstrate. The *Fate of Vultures* and *Delta Blues and Home Songs*, are etched with the distortions and contradictions that have afflicted the nation's substructure pillars and superstructure institutions. Placed on a historical continuum, Ojaide's poems provide vistas on the political actors of Nigeria's Second Republic of the Shagari era, through General Buhari's draconian brief spell, General Babangida's windy years of the implementation of an International Monetary Fund-inspired Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP), which effectively disarticulated Nigeria's sub-structural economic foundation and inaugurated the political experiment of "new-breed" politicians, and the inglorious days of the maximum ruler, General Sani Abacha.

The poems exhibit an anti-hegemonic temperament as instanced in their thematic concerns and technical choices. As Osundare couches it, Ojaide's generation was primed by historical forces to "match accessible, elegant style with relevant content" (1996, p.10). In an interview with Uduma Kalu (2000), Ojaide stresses this dimension of his poetic art:

[...] Our poems [Osundare's and Ojaide's] are pro-people, then you have to use the sort of the style, the technique, the language that will best suit the message you want to pass to the people.

The folk language of Udje songs, I think it works well talking about pro-people type of ideas. (p.13)

It is perhaps salutary that in spite of Ojaide's disavowal of radical ideological leanings, he consciously rejects the "art for art's sake" principle and champions an anti-autotelic apprehension of artistic production. In the same interview with Uduma Kalu, he confesses:

I have been in a warrior spirit in a way; it defines in a sense what I have been doing all along. [...] [Y]ou see. . . , among the Urhobo people, there is a certain spirit irin [Ivwri] and it's sort of like either a shrine or some things [thing] built during the slave trading era and was supposed to be imbued with the power to escape being captured and also; recapturing those who had been captured by raiders. In a way, it has, to me, become the symbol of existence. (p.13)

This counter-hegemonic view of poetic production animates most of his poems in two volumes.

In fact, Ojaide's poem, "The Music of Pain" in *The Fate of Vultures* vividly encapsulates his poetic manifesto as he celebrates his counter-hegemonic deployment of poetry in the service of defending the dispossessed segments of society:

Listen
I do not cry in vain.
For my song I sought
the chorus of resistant cries
to excoriate the land's scurvy conscience.
I invoked Aridon for trails
of victories against overlords
who clamped reins upon the jawbones
of upright words.... (1990, p.2)

The poet's recourse to the Urhobo divinity of "memory and muse" Aridion as an antidote to the hegemony in the poet's society, symbolized in "overlords / who clamped reins upon the jawbones / of upright words," affirms his belief in the supremacy of autochthonous mores over transient ones imposed on the people by contemporary rulers.

Nigeria's political elite of both the Second Republic and the succeeding military junta of the Generals receive satirical barbs from Ojaide in several poems in *The Fate of Vultures & Other Poems*. In *The Fate of Vultures* (11-12), the persona laments the profligacy of the politicians of the Second Republic. Incensed by their wastage of the communal wealth, the persona, deploying an apostrophe, invokes Aridion, the Urhobo god of memory and muse, to restore justice to the abused people. The gluttony of rulers is etched in gargantuan imagery:

Memory god, my mentor
blaze an ash-trail to the hands
that buried mountains in the bowels lifted crates of cash into
their closets. (11)

The mountains symbolize the commonwealth appropriated by the politicians.

The poet's image of the ruling politicians is unflattering as they are rapacious leeches. He excoriates them: "The

Chief and his council, a flock of flukes / gambolling in the veins of fortune. / Range chickens, they consume and scatter..." (Ibid.). The wanton display of unseriousness by the symbolic Chief and his council irks the poet, who sees the wealth of the community being frittered away in the creation of a new Federal capital for Nigeria in Abuja: "Alexius, architect of wind-raised mansions, / a mountain of capital. / Abuja has had its dreams!" (12). The poet's metaphor of Abuja as a "mountain of capital" aptly connotes first, the city as the nation's capital, and second, as a centre of investment; i.e., capital which may signify corruption. The poet's pun on the lexical item "capital" enriches the poem's meaning.

The poet's artistry is signalled when he makes a deft allusion to the names of some prominent political actors of the times, especially the country's President, Shehu Shagari, and his Vice-President, Alex Ekwueme. Transmuting the President's name through neologisms, the poet hints at the callousness of the ruling politicians: "Shamgari, Shankari, shun gari / staple of the people / and toast champagne"... (11). Also, by scrambling the President's name to "Shamgari" suggests the idea of shoddiness in managing the economy and providing effective leadership for the citizenry. It is ironical that while the Nigerian people could not afford Nigeria's staple food, *gari*, her political elite could order customized exotic drinks like champagne, which was the vogue among its members.

Appalled by the level of corruption by the politicians, the persona believes that Nemesis may eventually catch up with them: "Pity the fate of flash millionaires / If they are not hurled into jail, they live in the / prison houses of their crimes and wives" [...] (12). Perhaps, the poet's prayer was justified later as the General Buhari *coup d'etat* of December 31, 1983, saw most of the Second Republic politicians sentenced to prison-terms of multiple lifetimes.

If the poet has been overt in his denunciation of the power wielders in society, he adopts an antithetical mode in poems like "Compatriots" (13-14) and "Players" (15). In both poems, the poet's strategy is the deployment of innuendoes, oblique references and symbols in his excoriation of the new rulers in society who subvert the communal ethos. In "Players," the persona satirizes the new ruler personified as a pretentious King who lacks integrity:

He'll not remember his oath;
it was mouthed, he will argue,
to fulfill the inauguration ritual.
Rather, he'll flash his toothsome pearls,
and congratulate himself in the royal media
on superbly acting the demanding role of a king
who failed his seemingly cursed people. (15)

The new ruler's autocratic regime is symbolized in the media that merely echo the antics of the "king," while the people's supine state suggests the enormity of the tasks ahead.

The persona, in "Compatriots!" raises alarm about the enthronement of falsehood in his society, as he screams:

My worst enemies are gathering strength.
They not only brought down the eagle
but felled *irokos* on sight, incapacitated
the savior-totem and razed its winghold. (13)

The eagle may be seen as encapsulating the wholesomeness of communal vision while the *iroko* may symbolize the institutions that sustain this vision. No doubt, the poet's image of the "felled *irokos*" as the "savior-totem" has echoes of one of Soyinka's characters, Demoke, an artist in *A Dance of the Forests* (1973) charged with carving a commemorative totem for his community. Also, the poem may refer to Nigeria's first military coup which terminated the reign of politicians of the first Republic as the arrest of the coup plotters by General Aguiyi Ironsi incapacitated them.

The ideological vacuity of the new rulers is lamented by the persona: "My worst enemies are gathering strength / Priest without a creed, / See nailed to their shrine-door / forged tablets of faith; [...]" (13). These rulers govern without a constitution and rule by decree. Through the repetition of the first line of the first stanza in the next, and the antithesis "forged tablets of faith," the persona's anxiety is heightened. His reason is unassailable: "As soon as they had their hold on the land, / they upset the customs of truth" (Ibid.). The usurpers abolish the constitution and abrogate basic human rights. To the persona, this is ironical as the nation's despoilers are fellow citizens: "My worst enemies, my compatriots!" (14)

The poet, in "The Arrow-Flight" (16-17), utilizes innuendoes and symbols to rail against the tyrannical rulers in his society. Consequently, images of predatory animals are invoked to symbolize the rulers: "And for them, there's only one advantage / the hare's over the crestfallen cock, / the lion's over the goat" (16). Even the image of a vampire is pressed into service by the persona: "And they exact it to the last breath of their victim.... / Shylock is a dim star in their galaxy of blood; / they have closer mentors ..." (Ibid.). The new rulers are ruthless in their oppression, exploitation, cruelty and wickedness and these exactions may lead to death. The Shakespearean allusion reinforces the ruthlessness of the rulers as they bleed their victims to death through their greed:

They only have what it takes to seduce hungry patients placebos
and fufu-ful promises of wellbeing.
Of course, the sick will fall back on their beds, dead,
after the quacks have made away with their cash
into asylums in their masters' coveted caves. (Ibid.)

The alliance of the local rulers with foreign mentors who provide sanctuary for the stolen communal wealth stashed away in "coveted caves" suggests the Siamese relationship between indigenous and foreign predators in the persona's society.

The reign of this hegemonic order, however, is not eternal as the persona terminates his poem on an optimistic note, with the eventful triumph of the victims of the hegemonic order:

May this arrow-flight pick wings from the angry wind and pluck
the spider in the centre of his web,
the tortoise in his moving fortress,
the hyena in his bone-furnished den...
And no Ogiso, a plagued dynasty of beasts, should be allowed to
live a full life. (16-17)

The persona's recourse to an odious image of a legendary Benin tyrant Ogiso emphasizes his anger against the hegemony in his society. His optimism is a reflection of the poet's subscription to a "revolutionary" ideological template.

The poet's utilization of innuendoes, oblique allusions and symbols achieves poetic intensity in "When tomorrow is too long" (18-19), where the persona alerts his audience to the wiliness of the simulator in power. With a parable of a juggler in town and his glittering cage, the persona cautions: "beware of gilts and numbers / Beware of the season, beware / of twilight and worse" (18). The itinerant juggler merely seeks self-interest in the options he gives his audience:

His closed fist presses
a honeyed cake into an ashen loaf.
With his gap-toothed shine for a wand
he throws out one thing
with one hand
and with the same five
takes in more than seven. (18)

The persona's allusion to "his gap-toothed shine" is to Nigeria's military dictator General Babangida who is gap-toothed. The General had several political transition programmes that he aborted midway. In the popular media, he was generally referred to as "Maradona" on account of the deft and devious application of his "evil genius" to the manipulation of the political process of an endless transition programme to civil rule. He succeeded in deceiving all classes of Nigerians—the intellectuals, the politicians, the armed forces, students, workers and peasants. To guard against further deceit, the persona alerts his listeners:

If there's ever a juggler in town
with an eagle in glittering cage,
shun all the trappings of democracy,
do not allow him perform;
he is bound to be the beneficiary
of all accounts
and you the victim
of that gap-toothed shine of a wand. (18-19)

Three years after the publication of this poem, the alter-ego of the "gap-toothed" General, Professor Humphrey Nwosu conducted a Presidential election which was widely acclaimed as free and fair, but like the juggler in the poem, a magic wand was used to annul it in June 1993.

The poet's further excoriation of Nigeria's rulers of the Babangida regime finds ample treatment in "The Funeral of the Hyena" (72-73) and "Ward 6" (87-88). In the first poem, repulsive images of animals are employed to depict the rulers when the persona says:

[...] the anthem's not composed
for the likes of
Scorpions
hyenas
vultures
[...]. (72)

These metaphors not only accentuate the persona's distaste for the Ogiso rulers but also portray them as predators that must be resisted and removed from power:

There's no dying without a closed fist
.....
the gun lies in open state
to revive with thunder. (73)

The reference to the gun and thunder signifies an armed resistance to the tyranny of the contemporary Ogiso in the motherland.

Ojaide's "Ward 6" takes a cue from the Russian writer Anton Chekhov (1860-1904), who had written realistic stories denouncing the living conditions of Russians in the Tzarist era. Like Chekhov, the persona in "Ward 6" views his motherland as an asylum:

Pain ravages the land
contorts the mind to tears . . .
the whip reviles justice
hunger dismisses fair play
and the poor know it best. (87)

Unlike Russian serfs that were oppressed by their indigenous kulaks, the Nigerian people in the poem are victims of economic policies generated by international financial institutions. The persona suggests that such policies are appropriate for developed economies but harmful to impoverish Third World countries:

It always hurts at the bottom
and Dr. Ragim's philosophy is meant
for the likes of the London Club,
not for the South or the fourth world. (Ibid.)

The London Club houses the financial institutions of Western industrialized countries whose economic policies negate the national interests of countries that are considered as "fourth world," among which the persona numbers Nigeria. The persona's relief can only materialize from a complete overthrow of the oppressive system:

We await dawn, a new birth
when killing the damned rotter isn't enough
but drowning him in the pit latrine
for great grandchildren to live in another country,
free of excoriating pain, free of this disease. (88)

The political activities of the Abacha years and their tragic consequences for the polity dominate a large

percentage of the poetic space in *Delta Blues and Home Songs*. In fact, two streams are clearly visible in the poetry, with the first being satirical in mode and the second elegiac. Several poems in *Delta Blues and Home Songs* lament Nigeria's lack of development in the comity of nations. The poet, in "Witchcraft" (2), for instance, takes a hard look at his beloved motherland and laments her underdevelopment, engineered by an inept leadership:

No other spell than witchcraft explains
Nigeria's closed eyes in the open world.
Everyday spreads such a dizzying cloud
that people trip on stumps of beheaded dreams. (32)

With personification, the poet's image of Nigeria is graphic and pathetic. Contrastive images of health and disease are used to paint other countries and his motherland respectively. The former are full of energy, vigour and vitality, while the latter spreads contagion: "Other elephants pace with strength, / this only rattles the airspace with fart; / there's no cover from the silent infection" (Ibid.). The Nigerian polity from the persona's point of view is "bewitched" as its rulers have no redeeming features and are "satanic": "There's an incubus on top of the nation, / wears out the body and smothers smiles" (Ibid.).

The imagery of diabolical powers continues in another poem, "Fetish Country" (39), where the ruling junta of General Sani Abacha is portrayed as a coven and foundry of sorcery: "Inside the rocky cave they offer sacrifices / to the god of power, a cobra with a hooded face" (Ibid.). The "rocky cave" symbolizes Nigeria's seat of power in Abuja, Aso Rock, while the metaphoric "cobra with a hooded face" represents General Abacha, notorious for his dark goggles. Repulsive imagery is evoked to etch the nation's seat of power: "Piles of bodies deck the altar with overabundance. / The stench from the court shrine asphyxiates the country / The world fears contagion of gun-festered wounds." (Ibid.)

Power is abused; the altar is desecrated; too many lives are wasted; and the entire polity is polluted. The tyrant's reign is, however, aided by a coterie of sycophants, "his roundtable of flies" (Ibid.). In spite of the gory dominance of such a bloodthirsty dictator, the poet evinces optimism when he registers the human limitation of the despot: "[...] the executive hand cannot touch the sky [...]" (Ibid.), thereby signifying a possibility of redemption for the oppressed citizens.

The strategy of the Abacha junta in co-opting people to support its dictatorial rule finds poetic space in "The Chieftain and His Tribe" (40). The persona unravels the tyrant's trick:

A chieftain boasts of herding a far-flung
tribe His people cannot live without bribes.
He spits at them, still they follow him;
They have given up on where he's going. (Ibid.)

The weapons of the tyrant's seduction of his accomplices include: "money, sex and power" (Ibid.). Thus "bewitched," the accomplices:

The tortoise-brained people invent praise-songs to get to the
leftover of the chief who throws confettis of *naira* at them—he
knows no dog will bark with its mouth full. (Ibid.)

The tyrant is thus not the only villain in the abused nation, as his accomplices are equally guilty: "If you accuse the chieftain of being an evil idol, / don't spare his tribe of willing worshippers; / they share the same monstrous faith" (Ibid.).

Ojaide's diatribe against military rulers of the Abacha era resonates in two lyrical poems, "Army of Microbes" (43) and "Pregnancy of the Snake" (44). Adopting a two-line verse structure in the first poem, the persona in a mock-heroic tone unleashes caustic invectives on the military rulers:

To the usurper-chieftain who has set his rabid guard dogs against
streets of impoverished ones
To the uniformed caste of half-literate soldiery
who close people's mouths with trigger-ready hands
.....
To the army of insatiable microbes
that have brought plague to the land
.....
to the cabal of loyalty and fealty
that sold the rest for coded Swiss accounts
.....
To the petty head in his lair of Aso Rock who spreads sorrow
into every home.
I say, shame on you and your kind. (43)

The poet's anger against the military is expressed in vivid colours. He refers to General Abacha as "the usurper-chieftain" since he seized power from Chief Shonekan who was the interim Head of State after Chief M. K. O. Abiola's election of June 12, 1993. Invectives are deployed to cast the regime in negative colours thus it is a "caste of half-illiterate soldiery" and the "army of insatiable microbes" indicating their ravenous appetite for corruption. The poet's condemnation of the perfidy of the tyrant, the military as an institution and, the civilian traitors who collude with them to destroy the land is total.

The second poem, *Pregnancy of the Snake* (44) dispenses with innuendoes and oblique references. Rather, the persona employs demotic language to castigate the corruption in his motherland:

Armed robbers are waiting in ambush
to tear off the womb of the nation for sale.
Police are collecting their only earnings from travelers,
the road gutted with abundant holes. (Ibid.)

The callousness of the rulers angers the persona: "A uniformed cabal ride a caparisoned horse to death, care not whether they are stranded in an eternal cemetery" (Ibid.). The fate of the nation is compounded as the head of the Nigerian State is ill-prepared for rulership:

“A misinformed head stands on tottering feet accepting salutes” (Ibid.). Despondent, the persona’s verdict on his nation’s future is chilling: “Nigeria already carries a full-term pregnancy & we wait for more ogres...” (Ibid.). The first stanza has echoes of Okigbo’s “Come Thunder”:

NOW THAT the triumphant march has entered the last street
corners,
Remember, O dancers, the thunder among the clouds...
.....
The smell of blood already floats in the lavender-mist of the
afternoon.
The death sentence lies in ambush along the corridors of power.
(66)

Also, the last stanza of the poem resonates with Soyinka’s tragic worldview in *A Dance of the Forests*.

Ojaide in other poems like “A General Sickness” (50) and “The Desert’s not Infinite” (51) equally decries the tyranny of military rulers and the abnegation of democratic rights. To the poet, the ruling junta asphyxiates the creative potentials of the entire country as the persona in “The Desert’s not Infinite” (Ibid.) laments: “From the year the soldiers broke out of their barracks / to share the pumpkin and march in a mad frenzy, / the streets felt crushed by their loaded boots.” (Ibid.). Beyond appropriating the communal wealth symbolized in p’Bitek’s famous metaphor of the pumpkin, the military usurpers’ oppressive policies are embodied in their metonymic “loaded boots.”

The persona’s litany of the negative consequences of military dictatorship in his motherland continues through a simple narrative:

There’s never been a bright day since the first decree—
only soldiers have seen a full moon all the years. Road became a
string of potholes.
Water hyacinths closed waterways for boats. (Ibid.)

With transportation infrastructure in shambles and the people in penury, only the gilded elite, the military, is well nourished: “Officers carried potbellies to parade-grounds, / while an epidemic of anaemia razed ordinary homes” (Ibid.). In this “season of anomy,” as Soyinka would describe it, hope is not lost as the persona is optimistic that the reign of dictators is time-bound:

But every thinking head knows it’s a matter of time for the
people to punish soldiers for the murders,
erase the name of the tyrant from the presidency.
Our deserts not infinite, for beyond burning sands
a stretch of green advances from across the horizon. (Ibid.)

The deleterious consequences of state policies on the Nigerian polity during the Abacha dictatorship transcended infrastructural decay, the abridgment of civil rights, and the pauperization of the populace to include the summary execution of citizens who dared to challenge the hegemony of the military rulers. The Nigerian writer and environmentalist Kenule Saro-Wiwa and eight other Ogoni environmental activists were extra judicially killed

by the Abacha junta. Also, the old nationalist Pa Alfred Rewane was killed with a self-dissolving bullet in his bedroom by state agents after he published an advert seeking the validation of Chief M. K. O. Abiola’s electoral victory. In the junta’s savage attack on the champions of democratic rights, even the women-folk was not spared as Alhaja Kudirat Abiola was gunned down in broad daylight by a state assassin, Sergeant Jabillah Rogers who later confessed to the heinous crime. These are the murders the poet recounts in his poems. Thus, November 10, 1995 execution of the Nigerian writer Ken Saro-wiwa and his eight Ogoni compatriots receives the attention of Ojaide as several epigraphs in *Delta Blues and Home Songs* memorialize this tragic historical event. Ojaide’s elegies in honour of the “Ogoni 9” include “Wails” (17-19), “Immortal grief” (20), “Elegy for nine warriors” (25-29), “Journeying” (30-31), and “Remembering the town-crier” (52-54).

Ojaide in “Wails” hoists Ken Saro-Wiwa as a diviner-poet whose absence from a convention of the Association of Nigerian Authors diminishes the congress of artists. The persona in a hyperbolic tone laments:

The world needs to hear this:
there’s one absent in the assembly,
the singers will never be complete
without the elephant in their midst. (17)

The persona’s metaphoric “elephant” is Ken Saro-Wiwa, who in life was small in frame but now gargantuan in poetry. In his celebration of the executed poet, the persona enumerates the titles of literary works of Ken Saro-Wiwa:

Who will make me laugh,
who will bring *Bassey & Company* to life?
who will speak to me rotten English?
the lingua franca of the coastline?
Who will tell the forest of flowers?
Who will traverse the darkling plain of the delta?
Who will stand in front as the *iroko* shield
to regain the stolen birthright of millions? (18)

With rhetoric and repetition the persona’s anguish seeps through these simple prosaic lines.

Perhaps it is in “Elegy for nine warriors” (25-29) that the poet is most threnodic in his denunciation of the murder by the Nigerian State of the “Ogoni Nine.” Structured into six movements the poem narrates in a pathetic tone of the sadistic and ritualistic elimination of Ken Saro-Wiwa and his eight compatriots. The first movement of the poem commences on an incantatory note affirming the eternity of the victims of State violence:

Those I remember in my song
will outlive this ghoulish season,
dawn will outlive the long night
.....
Those I remember with these notes walk back erect from the
stake. (25)

The poet's allusion to nature's constancy through a positive correlate, "dawn will outlive the long night" reinforces the ephemerality of those of power as both the executioners and the General who gave the order are primed for karmic consequences:

When ghosts sit down the executioner,
let him plead for neither mercy nor pity;
the General will meet the Master Sergeant
and share the naked dance to the dark hole. (25)

The poet's reference to the Liberian dictator Master Sergeant Doe is instructive as Doe had thought himself invincible until he was executed in a gruesome manner by one of his erstwhile comrades, Yormie Johnson, and was forced to chew his own ear, which was videotaped and broadcast globally.

The execution of the "Ogoni Nine" has cosmic reverberations as nature partakes in mourning them in the second movement:

The sun's blinded by a hideous spectacle
And the boat of the dead drifts mistward
They will embrace the Keeper of Urhobo Gate even as the soil
that covered their bodies despite guards rises into a national
shrine. (26)

But triumph for the dead is affirmed as:

Birds that fly past click their beaks in deference,
the community of stars makes space for the newborn;
they will always light the horizon with hope....(Ibid.)

The third movement castigates the military ruler in demotic language:

The butcher of Abuja
dances with skulls,
Ogiso's grandchild by incest digs his macabre steps in the womb
of Aso Rock. (Ibid.)

Cast in the figure of a legendary Benin tyrant, the military dictator is also into sorcery as "skulls" and "jawbones" litter his court, Aso Rock.

It is ironic that the murder of a poet by the Nigerian State is celebrated by some poets who claim that "Tragedy provokes laughter" (27). The persona-poet therefore places a curse on such state collaborators in the next movement:

In these days of mourning
Some of my fellow singers laugh. Muse, reject their claim on
you!
These children who laugh at their naked mother incur the
wrath of their creator-goddess. They forfeit their kinship, these
bastards. (Ibid.)

Perhaps the poet's lexical choice of "bastards" is harsh, yet it registers his agony at the perfidy of fellow "poets" and asks: "Only a fool fails to reflect his lot / when an age-mate dies, / & I didn't know there were so many in the trade" (Ibid.). Still in agony, the persona's torment continues as the tyrant is still in power in the next movement: "The sorcerer to my shame still lives / as

I drown in tears over my brother / he sent away at noon
from this world" (Ibid.).

But Ken Saro-Wiwa's example becomes a mantra that rouses Niger Deltans to challenge the hegemony of the military dictator:

He forgets he has left Ken's name behind
& the communal chant of the singerbird's name
rising along the dark waters of the Delta
will stir the karmic bonfire
that will consume his blind dominion. (28)

With this optimism, the poet-persona in the last movement invokes a nationalistic regeneration of his motherland: "We'll surely find a way in the dark / that covers and cuts us from those waiting / to raise the white-and-green flag to the sky" (Ibid.). Though this movement's nationalism defies the logic of other segments of the poem, it may be said that the poet here betrays what can be categorized as an unbridled nationalism steeped in utopian fantasies.

In two other poems, "Journeying" (30-31) and "Remembering the town-crier" (52-54), Ojaide isolates Ken Saro-Wiwa from his eight compatriots and celebrates his heroic resistance to the despoliation of his environment and people which oil exploration companies unleash through the connivance of the Nigerian State.

The poet-persona in "Remembering the town-crier" utilizes a simple narrative form to describe the hanging of Ken Saro-Wiwa and his compatriots! "When the singer-god's favourite and others were arrested for / murder by voodoo, the world dismissed it as the joke of / illiterate soldiery" (52). The poet's hyperbolic reference to Saro-Wiwa marks his heroic stature as a literary artist who later assumes the figure of Okigbo, the "town crier": "The sun witnessed the spectacle with clear eyes; / the town-crier dangled from a state-tall post / a sacred animal caught by a vagabond trap" (Ibid.).

The victimhood of Ken Saro-Wiwa is pathetic as he becomes a scapegoat to appease the longevity of the Head of State: "They could not bear to tear his big heart with shots, / So they chose to bring him down from the air— / human sacrifice to prolong the chieftain's dying rule" (Ibid.). But this ritual killing of the literary artist and environmentalist Ken Saro Wiwa has the connivance of transnational interests: "The partnership of soldiery and usury / more than racks the land. Sweet Bonny, / a universal delicacy; ..." (53). The metonymic "usury" signifies Western financial institutions and may be extended to transnational companies with interests in Nigeria's Bonny Light. The poet terminates his verse on an optimistic note as the persona joins a league of freedom fighters: "Let me join the guild of smiths to forge iron / to break the cycle of "You are wrong and I am right" (54). This revolutionary guild echoes Ogun in Soyinka's poetry.

Ojaide's gaze on Nigeria's political landscape reveals some titanic figures and institutions that resist the tyranny of the military rulers. He, therefore, celebrates some of these personages and movements in some laudatory poems. The veteran anti-establishment lawyer, Chief Gani Fawehinmi, Nigeria's Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka, and the anti-fascist movement, the National Democratic Coalition (NADECO) find poetic space in *Delta Blues and Home Songs*.

Ojaide's "The Prisoner" (48) for instance is a two-stanza poem in honour of Chief Fawehinmi, who was incarcerated by the military in several prisons including the most infamous, Gashua, in the North East Sahel:

And jail has been his home
more than his self-built house.
They drop him at will in the desert
for sand dunes to bury him alive,
but his soles sanctify the sands
that fortify him to come out of the dead. (Ibid.)

Pitted against elemental forces like the desert and the harmattan by the Nigerian State, the protagonist of the poem Chief Gani Fawehinmi triumphs over trials and travails as nature transforms all adversities into sources of strength: "They also put him on a rocky plateau / for harmattan nights to freeze his voice, / but he imbibes dew that redoubles his words" (Ibid.).

Framed in titanic colours, Chief Fawehinmi enters into wedlock with nature and acquires "magical" powers that neutralize the stratagems of the State. The poet in his celebration of the protagonist deploys what Daniel Kunene would call "eulogues" as the poet addresses the protagonist as "[t]he ironwood that torments the executive axe..." (Ibid.). In a hyperbolic tone, the poet apprehends his protagonist as "a warrior god in a human incarnation..." (Ibid.).

Also in "Exceptions" (49), the poet conjoins Wole Soyinka and the National Democratic Coalition (NADECO) in the poem as emblems of resistance to the General Abacha junta. The temerity of Soyinka and the resistance movement is garlanded: "The emperor persecutes the upright clan of diviners / whose words ring ominous bells for his power-play" (Ibid.). Cajoled by the State, Soyinka and NADECO reject state patronage and overtures:

If only they would be dogs whose mouths closed with food,
he would stuff them to their necks with the national cake
baked with the same oil that incinerated Ogoni heads! But
they would not taste of forbidden foods that invite the world,
even if it meant they starved and fought with only bones. (Ibid.)

The poet's laudatory verse thus eternalizes the sacrifices some individuals and institutions made in the struggle against the military hegemony of the Abacha regime. The poet's metaphors and personifications are vivid: "They preferred being black ants stinging his buttocks / borne by the high stool that's daily daubed with blood" (Ibid.).

CONCLUSION

In sum, Ojaide's two volumes highlight the sordid consequences of the abuse of power by politicians of the Second Republic and the draconian decrees and arbitrary rule of military dictators on Nigerian citizens in a postcolonial era and the heroic resistance championed by individuals and organized movements during the age of despotism. The poems also reveal the poet's indebtedness not only to the inherited *udje* legacies of satirical poetry, but also the poetic techniques of the West. All these are pressed to serve the Muse of poetry.

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