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History, Vision and Craft in New Nigerian Poetry

MODERN AFRICA'S poverty and political instability has furnished the background for the lamentation poetry of her younger poets. Not even the economic exploitation of Africa by Europe, and neo-colonialist politics of the New (economic) world order: themes of actual historical significance in African studies, have preoccupied the new poetics of Africa as much as the issue of black man's betrayal of motherland has affected her bards. Images of Africa's self-inflicted reversals are thence presented with emotive poignance and expressive clarity in the new poetry that have emerged from the region of Nigeria.

These new brands of mournful poetry are expressed in voices not alien to their surrounding despite the several occurrence of modern styles. Of interest in this study is the poetic threnodies which style of rendition is drawn from spheres of human endeavour. It could be the loss sustained from betrayal of trust, disappointment in relationships, denial and deprivation of rights and the sense of atrophy experienced from inured visions.

Wherever a poet utilises the threnodic voice in his poetry, such

poems differ in terms of sentiment. Nigerian poets are thence caught expressing despair, gloom, hopelessness, melancholy, despondency, discouragement, bitterness, desperation, and shock. These feelings are also expressed through a language of ire, anger, passion, fury, exasperation, trepidation, cynicism, bitterness, sarcasm, ridicule, derision, irony, grief, distress, misery, woe, and anguish.

In spite of the mass of voices, however, only a few of these poetry achieve a harmony of rhythm and meaning, where surface layers of poetic expression yield their underlying message. This perfect blend of medium and message, when successful in the hands of the poet, becomes the measure of the beauty of his verse. Equally important is the relevance of a poet's art within a given time and age. T. S. Eliot observes that, the great poet, in writing himself, writes his time. It is the poet's business to express the greatest emotional intensity of his 'time' based on whatever his time happened to think. (Hayward 23)

Many of Africa's new generation poets reflect the quality of an age that is being swept in a woolly reverie of failures. They have therefore become lamenters or dirge singers by extension. They lament the atrophy of national aspirations as envisioned by her founding fathers only a few decades ago. To this group belong such poets led by Chinweizu, Niyi Osundare, Funso Aiyejina, Ezenwa Ohaeto, Odia Ofeimun and Ossie Enekwe. Others, more recently, are Peter Onwudinjo, Joe Ushie, Chin Ce, Ismail B. Garba, Toyin Adewale, Osita Ezeliora, Remi Raji, etc. all of Nigeria. With the upheavals of 1963 and 1966, which degenerated into a mindless civil war, Nigerian poets continue to be inspired by these experiences after the fact.

Generally, these 'Jeremiah' breed of poets lament the betrayal by the political leaders, or the dilapidated state of the Nigerian nation. Their anger over the corruption that afflicts the nation is unmistakable. It is this form of threnody ushered in by these young men and women that has come to be known as the new poetry or third generation poetry:

Where are you oh Olokun
 They rape you and raid your children
 They march on your fertile brows
 And rig rods of crude pain in your veins...
 (Raji *Webs* 34)

These are the brand of poets whose impatience with national slogans that fly in the face of glaring contradictions is hardly disguised. For them, political sloganeering, when juxtaposed with the serial betrayals by their own leaders becomes meaningless. Ethnic and racial divides no longer hold in a nation where the individual has, perhaps, never been more traumatised by any other generation than his.

The feeling of betrayal finds evidence in a history of civil war and post-war divisions. Other legacies of dishonour by political leaders include widespread unemployment, poverty and inflation, crumbling educational institutions, endemic corruption and sheer buffoonery in statecraft. Onwudinjo moans in his *Women of Biafra*:

Great ancestors of Ejimoke
 Mourn the silting and the trickle
 Of a house that thundered once
 Like youthful stream
 ...

Today laughter is snuffed
Out of the fireplace...
(59)

The new Nigerian poets react to these times with a poignant feeling of disillusionment and a near-disregard for the corporate entity called Nigeria. The hallmark of this brand of poetry, as opposed to those of earlier generations, is the militancy of spirit often conveyed with threnody of voice and mood. Their manners of poetic expression are informed by the visionary pursuits of these poets. The dearth of purposeful vision in all spheres of life of the Nigerian nation is too overwhelming an issue to agglomerate in 'mild' language, hence they 'scream' these problems in a voice that is discernible to the masses whose woes they chronicle.

Woe to you who plunder our peace
And cast the jewels of our love
To beasts and birds of prey
You will pay a dreadful price.
(Onwudinjo 59)

The disillusionment and frustration brought about by these experiences inform the mood and tone of their poetry. In this paper, a few samples from the works of Funso Aiyejina, Niyi Osundare, Chin Ce, and Toyin Adewale would suffice.

Funso Aiyejina is one of the foremost younger Nigerian poets. His collection of poems, *Letter to Lynda* came out in 1984, blazing a trail in rhythms traditional rhythms. Such poems as 'Growing Up', 'Before the Dawn Dawns,' and 'The Year of Hopeless-Hope' explore contemporary politics. The political themes of these poems emerge

through the art of invoking the conditions of desultory living among the masses of his country and the predatory instincts of their rulers. Aijejina projects mistrust, disillusionment, and even disaster for the political future of the nation. He identifies those responsible for Nigeria's political and economic problems. Where death, in traditional dirge, is bemoaned at the demise of a loved one, Nigerian politicians are held responsible for the virtual death of the Nigerian nation.

Till date, this state of anomie persists in Nigeria and, as far politics is concerned, the poets may crow themselves hoarse. Elections are still won through unabashed rigging and blatant disregard for constitutional ethics. In the poet's vision, we are being herded towards mined futures because those presumably 'voted' into power derisively 'tell us to go and feed on (our) votes,' boasting shamelessly that 'they were victors long before the people voted.' These crystallise in a powerful sense of hopelessness. Just as one stung by death's misfortune, the poet stung by the abuses of military despotism sees a bleak future ahead for the nation.

Niyi Osundare's 'Siren' and 'Rithmetic of Ruse' explore similar political themes with Aiyejina's. 'Siren' bewails the arrogant parade of power by local leaders through a graphic depiction of starving nature and malnourished humanity:

kwashiorkored children
 waving tattered flags, land
 disembowelled by erosion
 ... yam tendrils yellowing
 on tubers smaller than a palm kernel
 (*Songs 21*)

Their 'Excellencies' manage not to see the seeds of tomorrow's famine because they are not there for the begging and bickering of the faceless rural crowd. The mourner of a national tragedy is a satirist who sketches the modern poverty of the Nigerian people whose contorted babies on their 'mothers' back/ are question marks for tomorrow's answer.'

Osundare's lamentation is typical of the revolutionary temper that dominates African dirge songs. The poet's lament, inspired by sensitivity to the anomaly of prevailing leadership, acutely shares the feeling of loss and frustration.

Similarly, 'Rithmetic of Ruse' shows how power-sick civilians inflate census figures in order to gain political ascendancy over their opponents. We are told how their politicians go to the extent of adding their cattle to census figures and engage in all sorts of deceit in order to grab power. Osundare's poetry creates a feeling of despondency in the reader. But undaunted by this evil, there is the underlying note of confidence on the triumph of knowledge: 'our search/for the fragments of truth' over ignorance.'

We have to concede the necessity of economic hardships, ceaseless power struggles, election rigging, squandermania, ethnic irredentism and mindless exploitation of local resources that lend enormous impact to the sensitivity of modern laments especially in the African society where art is both functional and entertaining. African poetry is always in the service of society, not of necessity, but from the relevance of its existence. Poetry is not merely the 'spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings.' It is also a calculated, creative response of talent to environment. The poetry of Chin Ce, for example, reveals an awareness of shared experiences in relation to the singularity of individual destiny or purpose whether in

collective or personal degrees. *An African Eclipse* would ring shrilly, and bristle with contempt while the poet's is so full of experimentations to the point of eccentricity. Yet the overall threnody of the *African Eclipse* takes the quality of an African dirge. The prologue comprises a single poem, 'Farewell,' wherein the poet sets the tone for a new direction:

But I have taken now the day is bright
 (the shining light of
 Soul lights) the other route.
 (*Eclipse 6*)

We may assume that this is a parting of ways, from old to new but it is the 'old ways' that Ce confronts us with. In a traditional sense, 'African Eclipse' mourns the atrophy of Africa's future. It is the truncation of hopes for a great black African nation by the 'generation without a soul,' the responsibility of which must be traced to military and civilian collaborators in national ruin.

This tendency to load the enemy with negative images has become a continuing tradition with popular lamentation poetry. Nigerian politicians are vultures, and their military turncoats are reptiles.(7) In any case, the military are the precipitators of the eclipse. In 'Darkness,' we are left in no doubt of the vicious wheel of counter-military interventions which the nation was made to revolve since independence in 1960. 'All borders closed' is only but diplomatic 'blundering in the dark.'(11) the metaphoric darkness accentuates the benumbing of total loss and desolation experienced at the instance of death, time being an extended allusion to its fatal certainty.

time only crawled

...
and who began to curse?

Probably the most acerbic lamentation of political corruption can be found in the four-part movement to the 'Eclipse.' (16-19) 'The sun shall not wait...' begins the poet, in admonitory locution to the president who barricades himself in office and is now alienated from his people. The image of time which does not wait but hurtles down the decline is ominous of impending doom:

Time does not stall
It hurtles
Dangerously down the decline
And every penny must be paid
(‘Eclipse’ 19)

World events attest to the veracity of allegations of public misconduct of our so-called leaders and the irony of their basic immaturity or inadequacy for such positions. The president, in his 'drunken dream' of office accoutrements fondles his mistresses behind the primitive seclusion of his estate. In many cases, all he volunteers are mere speeches and unoriginal public declarations. To his retinue of sycophants, he offers bacchanal feasts and medals of service seen in the glamour of publicity: 'the gourd of honour' ('The Second Reptile') and 'dog medals around... necks' ('Eclipse').

Of course such sights as 'bony heads of children,' and homeless street dwellers are safely shut from the view of public officials who do not see very much from their seat of indulgence. Added to empty slogans, public figures further insult the people's intelligence with human rights violations:

Cries of torture and murder
Sweep the streets
Where your mad dogs roam

Nigerian poets in the manner of visionaries, warn of dire consequences. 'Time,' is no 'respector' of persons. The style of rendition in the Eclipse presents time as the great leveller: that which equalises the imbalance among men, nations, and races. 'Every penny must be paid,' is the refrain that presages future consequences of present decisions.

Yet one of the finer points of recent Nigerian poetry is the critical assessment of varied nuances of speech. In Ce's 'Prodigal Drums,' Fuff is made to approximate the juvenile dereliction of moral values. As a city immigrant his language changes to the fast, racy banter of modern lifestyle. However, the tension from two opposing forces of conformity and rebellion snaps very soon and predictably too in a rebellion that anti-climaxes from an uncoordinated, one-man squad, not founded on a strategic base of social dynamics, yet enough to make a victim of the hero. The moral fable seems to be that no resistance to a corrupt society can be successful by just one man's indignation and physical protest. The society that breeds corrupt electricity officials, police officers, judges, etc., ensures that Fuff, one of its rebels, permanently remains behind bars until his psychic derangement (a treatment Nigeria has given to some of her writers e.g. Wole Soyinka in the heat of her civil war). In 'The Prodigal', loneliness comes across in pithy lines.

There was no one, not one
to pay the bail
and for nine hundred weeks
far in the northern heat

did the sun of the Sahara
blank his mind in jail (*Eclipse* 39)

But Chin Ce's typically New Nigerian poetry is not all a lament of 'stinging stench,' 'stalking hyenas,' 'barbarian boot,' and 'tired drummers.' The constellation changes hint at some future determination and is symbolic of an after-eclipse. The sun in the epilogue amplifies the concept even before the succeeding four poems enforce this hope of a renewal. More striking is how a mournful chronicle now presents this sense of renewal *aposteriori*. In the loud denunciations of the preceding sections of Chin Ce's *African Eclipse*, none could have thought such deep sense of optimism possible. But such is the real vintage of an African lamentation which lifts the veil of sullen grief to reveal a landscape of glorious fortune.

Toyin Adewale's *Naked Testimonies* starts on a night of weeping. We are struck by the poet's ability to make of general interest such personal themes. Like the African dirge singer on a mission of introspective and communal purgation, *Naked Testimonies* overcomes the mournful perplexity of broken truces with studied, deliberate renunciation of all that discredit the villainous object of her mourning:

I tell a tale of sour tangerines
And shrivelled penises
In the furnace of testicle crushers
Diamonds are mere stones
In the trauma of dry sentences ...
(56)

These ruined hopes, as of death, are further extrapolated in images of ruin and desolation:

...
 hearths crumble
 in courtyards of ruin
 absurd altars say I am sacrifice...
 (57)

Echoes of tragic loss reverberate along the third and fourth sequences, unearthing more benumbing spectre until the fifth movement where the poet unravels a visionary triumph. It is also an emotional and psychological triumph. In spite of all our tribulations, let us all in humanity stand firm and resolute:

Striding upon my high places
 Shield my voice
 I walk in fire (60)

There is a cold cynical stance typical of Adewale's poetry which strives to belie the depth of the hurt residing within.

...
 scowls that decrease our face value
 This is the night
 ...
 vigil of septic pits
 This is the storm
 ...
 solid sheet of shattered eggs
 (54)

Feelings of loss and disappointment also run through *Naked Testimonies* with intense, private and imaginative rhythm. This

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symbolic loss, very much like that of a cherished dream, has the power of creating a new awareness in the individual. With this awareness comes faith in the self:

There are lacerations
But we shall salve our wounds
Calm sandstorms...
(68)

The poetic gift of optimism is neither squandered nor inured
...on the trail/of light
...
soaring and prideful like an eagle in flight
(68)

It is rather enhanced by the promise of an eternal significance.
We have in 'Untitled' the promise of

hope (that) flutters
...
Like a quaking foundation
(67)

Adewale's *Naked Testimonies* subtly leads into deeper knowingness and awareness that prod mere human sentiments and emotions into the realm of indomitable spirit.

...
I'll hold your sure word
Knowing it's spirit and blood
(67)

The poets of the third generation reflect cultural sensibility. 'Unfolding Season,' by Osundare is full of traditional imagery drawn from an agrarian landscape:

the smoke of burning bush ...
 antelopes and grass-cutters
 scuttling out of the flames
 (71)

Osundare's 'Cloud Watching' is pastoral poetry. Prominent in the style of modern African expressions is the 'rich imagery of African environment ...unstifled by far-fetched allusions'(Ohaeto 13) The poems are replete with '...storm-ravaged banana leaves,' 'like the epidemic laden-noon heat,' also 'fireflies,' 'soldier ants,' 'like greying creepers on dying trees.' (Aiyejina 23) etc. There are attempts to retain the reality of local flora and fauna: 'Skins scaly like iguana's,' 'feet swollen like water melon' (Osundare 7) Drawn from local environment to bring vivid pictures to the mind's eye, these images serve to validate the experience of both the poet and the audience.

A further point of artistic convergence among these poets is the use of simple language, as against the convoluted diction of the previous generation but this has been stated by several local scholars. This may be an attempt to make their art accessible to the people whose experiences they seek to register. Of striking interest in this convergence is the incidence of common connotations and symbolisms. Aiyejina's predatory images: 'dog,' 'snake,' and 'eagle,' for Nigerian leaders echo in the laments of Chin Ce and Ezenwa Ohaeto. Niyi Osundare and Funso Aiyejina explore the image of 'soldier ants' as metaphor for oppression. The poetry of the new

threnodists is also characterised by code switching where local nomenclatures take their position with formal English. Here, names like 'tanwiji,' 'molue,' 'danfo,' and 'dagbere,' abound in Osundare as a matter of conscious artistry. In Aiyejina Yoruba and Hausa codes are virtually switched. In 'The Year of Hopeless Hope' the lines '*lai lai Alamu O le dede la eewo Orisa*' express the Yoruba thought that 'nothing happens from nothing' in a manner that retains the collective belief in that truism where its English equivalent may truly not have sufficed. From Ce's poems, local nomenclature: 'Dodan,' 'agbada,' 'menini,' 'surugede,' retain their cultural trappings in spite of the formal language of artistic expression. Aiyejina plays with syntax and morphemes of the language, breaking words into segments in order to achieve pun and ambiguity. In 'The Year of a Hopeless Hope,' linguistic truncations: 'Of/f course,' 'con/tract/or' imbue the poem with levels of meaning. We are struck by Osundare's manipulation of diction to create a sense of rhythm. Copious allophones, alliterations and assonance abound in his art. In 'Siren,' 'buntings and banners ... brazen bombasts...' call to mind the festive mood that squalid towns are made to wear when the 'big shots' come to town. Cleverly manipulated alliterations and assonance: 'begging bickering,' 'clangorous convoy,' 'acrobats and motor bikes,' render musicality and rhythmic motions to his poetry.

Most poignant in the poetry of Adewale and Ce are the ethereal images. Recurrent images denoting the elements: fire, waves, water, wind, clouds, light and nature: 'hills,' 'waterfall,' 'mountain paths,' 'sands,' 'sun,' 'moon' flow through their writings. Adewale and Ce make no deliberate attempt to speak in the traditional high flown proverbial language and imagery remarkable of their contemporaries. But this is not to say that the language of both poets does not reflect local environment. There is rather a preponderance

of urban mirrors reflecting influences that have come to be accepted as a part of emerging African societies with which they are more accustomed. For example, Adewale's 'jigsaw puzzles,' 'Gethsamane,' 'diesel,' 'knife,' 'spoon,' 'fork,' 'peak,' 'cap,' 'car,' 'tarmac,' and 'sunglasses,' amplify the urban presence. In his second collection, *Full Moon*, Ce's poetic landscape is replete with 'polythene,' 'jazz,' 'siren snouts,' 'ships,' 'revolution,' 'doctrines,' 'sentry,' and 'missiles.' In style and technique Chin Ce's deployment of alliterations and assonance have been largely successful in establishing alternate or varying attitudes.

Passions potted with pomp...

...

against your yeoman's yoke...

...

Prints in sinking sands ...

(26-27)

Greed grabbed the gritty mask

For prize fight at Vanity Fair...

While the 'men of the people' (Nigerian political class) in spite of obvious rumbles of discontent in the polity can only

Strut and fluff

Feathers in the gathering clouds ...

(29)

In a local funeral ceremony ('Fun Rail) the drummers "prattled their practised hands ..." This expressionist deployment of images, employed for the effect of scorn or ribaldry, is reminiscent of the 'age

of reason' in English poetry, that era in verse which witnessed works of satire against social and political anomalies more than any other period in English literary history (Thwaite iv).

The examples of Aiyejina, Osundare, Adewale and Ce, acting on the influence of their times and age, succeed in exploring the range of emotions to delineate the near tragic complexities of their society. They have employed these varying elegiac emotions in their inward and outward creative outlets without hindrance. This marks the dawn of a new kind of poetic or creative liberty in serious African writing now and probably in later years to come. That Africa has produced leaders who rank among the mediaeval lords of Europe in mendacity and bestiality is almost a blessing to Nigerian creativity which has imbued global literature with contemporary art whose imagery and linguistic experimentations have allowed for the truer representation of those transient realities that can only indicate a quality of art in touch with its times.

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Chin CE

A Dance of the Ether: Four Decades of African Poetry in English

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IT truly challenges a writer's critical sense, and probably some other personal convictions, to attempt a view of the 'tide and times' of some African men and women who had lent their creative vision to the art of poetry. Many of us in English speaking West Africa have sometimes tended to think no less like Woolf, the stately Englishwoman who, tempted to compare her contemporaries with the Victorians before them, proclaimed rather boyishly that there were no two living poets of her time "as great as Tennyson and Christina Rossetti" for these latter were better poets whose lines "one responds easily, familiarly, without troubling to check the feeling" as against the moderns about whom "one cannot remember more than two consecutive lines of their poetry".¹

However, ours have taken a different turn by only few years of –at the most one or two decades– for certain developments in modern African poetry, particularly when viewed from the nagging point of our forgotten past (griots and masters of craft) and the constricting present (enunciation of Western) aesthetics of written poetry in English. Thus

after four decades much reservation may be held, and re-said, for modern African poetry as we chart its tendencies through decades of postcolonial misadventure: from so-called political independence to our continued economic dominance by Europe and America “aided and abetted”, as Uka had rightly noted, “by some indigenous disaster-fermenting middlemen” (19).

Agreeably it has been a fascinating mixture of flashing meteors on African skies, for it was twenty five years ago, when introducing his *Anthology of West African Verse*, that the Nigerian scholar, Nwoga, categorised some poets of English-speaking West Africa as 'pioneer' and 'modern'. Poets of the first generation: Azikiwe, Babalola, Osadebey etc., whose works chronicled the historical struggle in Africa against colonial denigration of traditional values, fell with the pioneers. We recall Dennis Osadebey's 'Young Africa's Plea' which admonished with pride: “Don't preserve my history /as some fine curios /to suit some white historian's taste”.¹ 'The Fisherman's Invocation' did engage the refrain to “cast our nets” to the “rightside, leftside and back” of our canoes, even if only to discover,

It's only the Back caught
in the meshes of Today
and ... past moons past suns
past nights and past gods reflected
by the Back trying to slip
through the Meshes like a fish. (3)

To these poets and their expressiveness, the erudite Nwoga had

condescended the admission that they were continuing the tradition of “vernacular” literature in which stories and songs were employed in entertaining correcting and maintaining social norms and traditions. Thus their verse was “not poetry” for its inability to follow the modern pattern which had “moved away from the regular rhythm, from the simple image, from logical organisations to the more complex distortion of syntax” (121) and the intense privatization of images common among modern poets. Nwoga would state his admiration for his own (second) generation of poets for emulating the methods of their European godfathers. Sentences in these modern poems he was glad to note “become more involved and difficult to restore to logical order...syntax was distorted diction became universal... because the poets were now addressing a more limited audience they began to indulge in private symbolism” (122). Five years later, in 1987, Nwoga also reiterated this literary dictum to Chimalum Nwankwo, a poet who apparently imitated, but truly doubted, the communicative efficacy of muddled syntax and private symbolisms, not eliminating all other obscure accoutrements that resided in the vast reaches of the artiste’s mind. As a “disciple of Okigbo” Nwoga told him, “you make the reader accept that he, the reader, has to supply some of the connecting words which poetic concentration has squeezed out of the printed page, that dramatic presentation is a viable alternative to lyrical exploration...” (vii).

By this time, however, this prescription had begun to be challenged on its own ground. Nwoga was dismissed with much vitriol by the band of Chinweizu, Jemie, and Madubuike in their historic *Toward the Decolonisation of African Literature* coming a few years after the *West African Verse*. These new breed of scholars held that Nwoga and his

colleagues had erred by encouraging African poets to imitate foreign models. It mattered seriously to them that this modern disaffection with simple diction and lyrical expression inherent in traditional poetry was quite typical of an African elite that saw their poets, “unhindered by ideology” in their backward neo-colonial third world economies, praised in the words of Clive Wake as “modern poets in the modern world” (235). In the opinion of the trio, western modernism was mere cultural servitude. “The problem facing the (African) writer is not in transferring from ‘indigenous’ to ‘modern’ poetry” they argued, “but in transferring from the modern in which he has been educated ... to the traditional modes of poetic expression” (208). Michael Echeruo who had also encouraged a “more subtle and complicating of narration, reflection and resolution”² was similarly demeaned. Employing the modes of expression common among the modern school to wit: archaic patterning of language after 16th and 19th century convention, obscurantism (whether deliberate or unintended), imported imagery drawn from Greco-Roman mythology and unsuccessful mimesis of foreign and local techniques resulted in poor resolution of both oral and modern European traditions, the band argued.

For many years this argument set in motion spirited discussions about the problems of the educated African elite whose alienation and contempt for roots had been traced to many a cursory examination of their creative enterprise. Indeed for the second generation African poets of English expression, the social and historical hiccups of nationhood while offering a wide range of themes for poetic exploration were cast in western cultural avant-gardism. The complication and mystification as noted of the works of the African Euromodernists only proved useful

more for its high sounding and erudite quality. Apparently, very little indigenous experience could temper the grand eloquence of our educated elites who sought for their works equal ranking with Occidental literary accoutrements in copious pastiches of

wordless wit (and)
shades of silence reaping
soft frangipines...(even as) Decay
caulks (our) earth centre.
(Soyinka, "Easter" 21)

Thus clad in "ash bespattered bangles/in meshes of sorrow" (Uka, "The Silver"134), it was not much of a constraint for public and social phenomena to be esoterically deepened with arcane allusions. Ultimately these could only constrain African poetry and her Negritudian pride to lie, not only low and

... dormant like the anger of
Aetna (134),

but also cold, really cold, as

"in the teeth of the chill maymorn" (Okigbo, "Newcomer" 53)

Today poets celebrating their cragginess of lines, their verses lacking in distinctive clarity, will expect that their message should fail in impact like a grandstanding town crier who leaves his bemused

audience behind the shifty ambience of his dramatic utterance. Even the reversion to traditional rhetoric as witnessed of Okigbo's later verses signified the ultimate collapse of the luxuriant world of art for the sake of western erudition. Yet by 1971 Taban Lo Liyong, one of the best products of African modernism from East Africa, had begun to sing about the tragedy that hovered over our landscape in a song not only about the pending collapse of the useless political experiments in nation-states but, to one's mind, the danger of its cultural and literary decumbence as well:

ho that odysseus is here
telemachus doing own thing
white ants desecrate umbis cord
blazers of foreign ways
root; and smothered in darkness (18)

De Graft's "Silver Dewdrops and Golden Shadows" also began to mollify our assaulted ear drums in his saddening lines that must remand our losses forever in memory:

Lonely bird flitting away to the forest so fast,
Gold-speckled finch, your feathers wet all fading,
Tell me, shivering bird, have you seen her
Have you seen my crying baby's mother?

She went to the river at early dew,
A pot upon her head;

But down the water floats her pot,
And the path from the river is empty. (4)

And J. P. Clark, who struck a brilliant note with De Graft with his
“Streamside Exchange,” proved quite refreshing:

River bird river bird,
sing to me a song
Of all that pass
And say,
Will mother come back today?
...
You cannot know
And should not bother;
Tide and market come and go
And so shall your mother. (129)

Adding Dennis Brutus at some early period of his craft, African poetry
had retained some profundity that came from the symmetry of truly felt
and deeply imagined experience, deeper than the superficial intellectual
resonances of the neomodernist school and borne from sensitivities that
remained true to nativity:

over our heads the monolith Decalogue
of fascist prohibition glowers
and teeters for a catastrophic fall;

boots club the peeling door.

But somehow we survive... (4)

And some of his countrymen, like bard announcers, had learnt the power in the art of proclamation to bear aloft the spirit of those times in which they gallantly fought, although sorely manacled, against apartheid:

Our arms are steel
and keen to meet you,
our hearts are meat
but steeled to beat you.

...

Each freedom day Vorster
brings your long night nearer;
our freedom day Vorster
is your nightmare now.
("Freedom day" 118)

The lone, vibrant and original eagle in their midst, however, was the unheeded voice from Malawi. He had deigned to inspire succeeding craft by his own inimitable examples and tireless lectures. "Literature," Okot p' Bitek had reminded his westernised black colleagues,

is the communication and sharing of deeply felt emotions...the aim of any literary activity must be to ensure that there is communication between the singer and the

audience, between the story teller and his hearers ..feeling,
not knowledge, is the central aim of any expressive activity.
(in Heron 1)

His *Song of Lawino* seemed an apt enough warning for practising poets, scholars, educationists and political leaders in their emerging states:

When you took the axe
And threatened to cut the Okango
That grows on the ancestral shrine
You were threatening
To cut yourself loose,
to be tossed by the winds
This way and that way. (41)

Helmsmen – and New breeds

The brief position that Euromodernism had occupied among African scholars soon found itself untenable with changes in literary and cultural awareness instigated by p'Bitek. The so-called Euromodernists having found poetry inadequate for the representation of personal and general social predicament seemed to go into the deserved silence of retirement. In their stead came a new generation of poets to rework the Pyrrhic victory of our songs. There was certain vigour and expressive power that came to distinguish the qualities of this new voice from their elite vanguards. The new helmsmen had cast off excessive modernist preoccupation with private grief and emotions, linguistic derivationism, obscurantism and esotericism. As GMT Emezue notes, these

helmsmen from Nigeria include Chinweizu, Niyi Osundare, Odia Ofeimun, our “implacable plumber of reality” (Update ii), Funso Ayejina, Ezenwa Ohaeto, Ossie Enekwe, Tanure Ojaide and a host of others (“History” 28). These are the intellectual vanguards of Nigerian writing after the war, a conflict that remains the major factor behind the alternative tradition of poetry in Nigeria.

The Biafran war, among many to follow throughout the nation states of Africa, was a culmination of years of general disillusionment with the modern socio-political changes in the continent. The aspirations of people who had placed so much faith in political independence and national self determination had been dashed by the atrocious greed, violence and barbarism of their leaders. In Nigeria, its literary aftermath was manifest “in the imagery of violence which...invaded its poetry” (Emezue, *Comparative* 27) ushering “a crystallizing experience when everyone was forced to take a stand” (Aiyejina 9), having been, one way or the other, affected by the tragic consequence. Nigerian poetry thus altered significantly in “temper” during and after the period. “Our brutalization”, Aiyejina further claims,

was physical, spiritual and psychological. In such season of anomy the poets could no longer afford to speak in inaccessible riddles and occultist tongues (of the modern poets) and strident voices were needed for the immediate and unambiguous expression of our fragmented psyche. (9)

The result was a pressing need for poignancy of articulation, appropriate and clearer diction which replaced the esoterica of the

African modernist school, and a more fervent patriotism in the treatment of public experiences such as war, corruption, economic mismanagement, military dictatorship and growing repression which had grown in strength. Now the audience began to rouse from lethargy to listen to the new drummers. Many ears were bent subsequently in the direction of our new village songs:

I have borrowed the earful clamour
of the town crier
gained the unkillable clarion
of the gong
cushioned my throat with the velvet feathers
of the dove
charged my words with the fiery urgency
of the thunder
when I sing ears shall bend my way (Osundare, *Village 1*)

Truly did they identify with the plights and conditions of the people –the real victims of ruling-class plunder. They hectored the deepening class stratification, and our modern slavery to Western economic and political precepts. Along this direction, earlier experimented upon in vague, insipid litanies by the old school, and now being depicted with home-grown idioms ever so creatively and much so elaborately, Nigerian poetry was subsequently set to exceed its bounds:

The moon pounds her yam
in the apron of the night

Time to sing time to sleep
Time for the supple-white grub of the sweating sky
Osupa olomi rooro

...

her pestle is iroko
Her mortar a cratered depth
In Oroole's bossom. The yam, when pounded,
Is the clay rump of Agidimo mountain.
(Osundare, *Moonsongs* 29)

In their succinctness we begin to see the poets as our ancient griots now back among us – singing, lamenting, admonishing and occasionally prophesying on the state of affairs. The new verses were cast in local garbs; new formulae emerged commencing in newer and fresher applications. Satire and traditional ribaldry acquire a powerful medium of engagement. “They (our leaders) are not doing a bad job”, sneered Ofeimun, after all,

the messiahs
are still riding high
on the fervid winged horses
of their triumphal entry

The Christs
are still performing miracles
in the market places
heroding the masses with imperatives

feeding the hungry
with 21 gun salutes
for victories that are yet to be won. (10)

At that period Ojaide sang his song of solace and almost revolutionary feeling for Africa's downtrodden majority:

When they savage us, we withdraw to cabal;
our experience over the ages helps us through
our women know how to march naked at twilight
and rid the land of tormentors,
our men know how to bury despots with their paraphernalia;
we always regroup in the shadows of our fallen warriors. (5)

In many cases the threnody is employed to elicit more glaringly the depth of societal anomalies which evoke their interdiction. Their effective and comprehensive combination of local rhetoric remains one of the most successful accomplishments of the new Nigerian poets:

Wearing the smiles of rats
When they bit
And waving to tell us
To catch them if we could,
We could not

But the smart boys did
(They always do here and there)

And brought them down
Erecting theirs in their places. (Aiyejina, "Statues" 9)

Among this group fell two delightful singers from the post-war school; one, in fact, the songbird, heralded the eloquence and true grandeur of trado-modern aesthetic:

They waited long
for the redeeming hush
when an imperial voice comes
to halt the drooping doom! doom! doom! of age old drums.
(Ndu, 'Songs' 7)

Pol Ndu whose "brevity at noon play" made dramatic irony with his tragic demise at that notorious Opi junction in Nsukka was the unsung redeemer of this African tradition:

Toward the silent altar,
we paced; hopeful!

...

Agoat-skin sack
over my fore-head
rubbed rough hair
on my bare back.

...

“Come Earth-god, Sun-god,
Fire, rain, a new bud,
good Spirits repel Evil
live and let live (3)

Ndu's eschatological work in that volume of *Songs for Seers* has been commented upon by scholars as “one of the strongest voices in African poetry since Okigbo” (Uka ii), and

a testament to an enduring poetic tradition in Africa which meets the challenge of expressing contemporary themes and projecting personal feelings in a voice attuned both to its own culture and the heritage of western aesthetics. (Emezue, *African* 99)

And gladly was he remembered by Nwamuo, one of his own who, though nurtured in foreign soil, could yet show us “a new impetus, new vision” (Uka vii):

...life wears off without gloss,
...
oneself now has many selves
leaving this one there
and wearing that one there
as moon-men show their loot
through capital cities. (51)

Close in the trail of Ndu's *Songs* was Enekwe's *Broken Pots* through which this soldier-poet sang routinely to the guitar in his grave and delicate comportment. His was the craft that taught mastery of the paradoxes of our disasters in lines of poetry and song:

I wonder why we're sick of heroes and monuments,
and lie defeated in every victory!
Now that the conqueror, stiff with fear,
floats and farts in the air
and the slave loves his master....(10)

With the graceful simplicity of his lines, and his evocations of both traumatic and tender incidents, this poet, as Ihekweazu noted, "never reverts to euphemism or embellishment....he leads the reader right into pain death and despair" (iv):

Now that every state is enslaved
and the rock stairs that we built
crumble on our heads
and the earth is mortally wounded,
what use are the memorial drums? (10)

Thus did these fine guards of our literary helm join the arena to bring our poetry home to the people where it truly belonged. The community could now pardon the prodigal abuse of African art and begin to give ears, to hearken to the call of this imaginative visioning in recent years.

The Younger Poets

The flame now burns in the hands of drummers strumming angry notes for the rude shocks that have rattled the African land and people from within. A distinction must thus be made between their postwar antecedents and these members of the younger generation who have been called children of conflicts and of whom we had somewhere ascribed the appellation of Younger Poets.³ Guided by helmsmen of African oral traditions –p'Bitek, Chinweizu, and Osundare– some of these younger poets are set to inscribe forever the dreams, sentiments and energies of their history with a trenchant fortitude that has hardly been witnessed in preceding periods .

One of these was Ugah venting his disgust for political lizards of the postcolonial circus and their shameless contrivance in the ruination of their mothers' funeral:

Behind cascades
of ancestral plumes
Ogre skulls in nudity
...
Tourist senators
Window-shop in Warsaw
And holiday
In air-birds
On legislative tours. (92)

It is to this fine poet that Onwudinjo, a member of the group, had paid a glowing tribute for his

total commitment to the poor and deprived masses of African nations who bear the brunt of military despotism and civil misgovernance...(and) consistency toward the expression of the socio-political contradictions that impoverish the Nigerian polity. ("Political" 61-62)

Onwudinjo himself could aptly fit among the immediate post war group where Enekwe, Osundare and company bestride the firmament with their versed modesty:

But let us muster our will
to exorcise the clouds of horror
that gather at the foot of the desert
everyday
to frown at the fragile peace
we pieced together
only yesterday. ("The Curse" 57)

However his strength lies further ahead of his grade. War- and post-war poet he is, but militant and aggressive experimentation had brought him up to date with the tendencies and temperaments of the younger poets:

Let's pull the lion's teeth
from the violent creeds
that sprang from the burning sands
of the desert

...

Time will deal a shattering blow
to those who think
they are born with golden crowns. (57)

The literary harvests of the nineteen eighties have continued. There has come to us, from the high and rolling hills of Obudu, a crow of our 'popular stand', self-avowed member of Nigeria's ethnic minorities and, thus, joint victim of the wretched leadership of the country's majorities:

This suffocating popular stand
Breeds oven-hot creeds:
If we harness those faint voices into a shout
If we join those faint fists into a punch
If we collect these tear trickles into a pool

Our cries the gods will echo
Our echoes will shake that hill

...

Our flood will cleanse the land. (Ushie "Popular" 4)

Ushie is joined by a female voice from Nigeria's own West, lips coated with 'naked testimonies' that shoved through our thick ear-drums truths which, though nasty, must yet endear ferociously in those wounded hearts that carry our experiences and seek to bare our anguish in verse:

If we should slash headlines, pay offs, body copies
if blood would be a canopy over us, diesel inside us
faggots bearing the onus of solid flames
let fires raise the anthems of homecoming. (Adewale, "Day" 55)

After Adewale, the cries have since been carried and hollered more fervently across the Niger delta in notes of violence, in the hostile impetus of militant political poetry and many other corners where we lament our environmental despoliation by some greedy roadside mechanics of Western-brand exploitative politics:

Now the sky is ablaze
Where will the people go?

Flee the flames
Dive into the creek
Fly!
The last tortoise is gone
Escaping the raging flames

Now the sea is ablaze
Where will the people go? (Bassey, "Gas Flares" 48)

Some of these refrains have been echoed by prentices of our groves in a 'harvest' of ironic 'laughters' and spidery 'webs of remembrance' if only to serve as palliatives to the bitter taste of grapes

that the political leaders have conferred upon successive Nigerian generations.

Everywhere we smell
on our harvest tracks
the blighted clouds of a locust train.

Nobody
no body seems to know
how to smile again,
not even a grin colours the face;

the mist of blood is your incense
in the sun, the mist is our incense
of blood... (Raji, "I Rise" 13)

Although the drummers have continued to slam their tried but tireless hands on the hide, in their striving to tell of a dissipating generation, and the doom that lies in wait upon a country where truth is murdered in daily short-sighted government policies, and where

the soil lies barren
purloined of the truth
that nourished her corners
(Ce, "Time's Cry" 54),

perhaps between these notes, 'when the flautist is allowed to pause and

wipe his nose', as said in Igboland, the scale may someday turn in bitter reproach against us. For should we deign to celebrate the literary and cultural gains garnered by the vigorous strumming and dancing, all we might just draw would be the usual sneering from compatriots. For it has rarely been in the achievement lists of our craft to rouse society from the disinterested pleasure of being deaf, implacably cynical or not "understanding the great purpose to sensitize and transform present physical and mental equipment" (Tanner 11).

Still art, like any true philosophy or religion, should strive "step by step toward mastery and attainment of higher individual and national aspirations" (11). So that even if the close-minded political elites of this world can hardly tune an ear to the vision of a just and ordered climate that must endure beyond the material schemes of their perverted class, such contempt for history and memory will be humanity's loss in posterity's judgment. All we know is that in every corner and department of our continental existence, from our long demeaned traditional heritage through the demented echelons of ideal-starved heads of governments, the story will be told not only through poetry but other popular media that engage many artistes of our times.

Nevertheless, in a mollifying gesture or for some other convictions mentioned earlier, it may be conceded that our poetry have begun "somehow to engage other...spiritual and often mythopoeic engagements" (Emezue, "Introduction" 8) that are apt to usher the regeneration of individual and collective consciousness. It will be tempting to believe that this is what makes some of us, even when not uttering our last words, admit of "heart(s) faint... /toil(ing) to turn around /the muzzle of an /upended face" (Ce, "Voyage" 68). But such

indulgence may subsist at even greater peril to social and communal relevance. For if African artistes, like their religious and political counterparts who should remain in service to community, happen again to give up the call of illuminating the higher truth of their world, or working to perfect their nature through the arts, for the flourish of their own erudition, whether for some commercial or other 'great' individual purpose, their work will surely forfeit the confidence of an enlightened progeny, having broken an ontological continuum to become a mere cyclorama of the Western stage.

NOTES

¹The quotation of Virginia Woolf is taken from M. H. Abrams' *Anthology of English Literature*, vol. 2. New York: Norton, 1993.

²Dennis Osaebey's 'Young Africa's Plea' is quoted in *Anthology of West African Verse*. Dennis Nwoga. London: Longman, 1982

³Michael Echeruo's statement is quoted from page 20 of Chinweizu and company's *Toward the Decolonisation of African Literature*.

⁴See "The Art of the Younger Poets": my introduction to GMT Emezue (ed.) *New Voices: A Collection of Recent Nigerian Poetry*. Handel Books 2003

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Poets in Nigeria. 7,090 likes · 229 talking about this. Promoting the heart of literature. Watching CNN's presentation of the history of Tulsa's Black Wall Street massacre/destruction of huge investments/achievements by African Americans by whites in 1921, i am more than ever worried about my race, yet to learn from history. If what is happening to African Americans and blacks the world over is not sufficient reason for African leaders to provide leadership that would see people of a race behaving rightly to pro American poetry is ready for something new because our poets have been writing in the same way for a long time now. There is fatigue, something stagnant about the poetry being written today. The need for something new is evident. Contemporary poetry's striking absence from the public dialogues of our day, from the high school classroom, from bookstores, and from mainstream media, is evidence of a people in whose mind poetry is missing and unmissed. You can count on the fingers of one hand the bookstores in this country that are known for their poetry collections. Poetry's limitations today come not from failures of craft (the MFA programs attend to that) but from afflictions of spirit. American poetry has yet to produce its Mark Twain.