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NNAMDI AZIKIWE UNIVERSITY, AWKA, NIGERIA

# Provisional Notes on a Proposed Poetry Quartet: Historicism as Survey and the Nigerian Scene

**Chike Okoye, PhD**
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Nigeria
University of Muenster (WWU), Muenster, Germany
cb.okoye@unizik.edu.ng
okoyec@uni-muenster.de

## Introduction

This treatise is the first part of a two-piece essay in the preparation of a book that proposes a quartet case for consideration in the literary history of written poetry in Nigeria. It is also part of another book project in progress and serves as part of its necessary historical background. The main case in question presently is of a particular group of poets worth special status as a distinct foursome whose impact and output have been profound by the sheer dint of the qualities and uniqueness of their poeticisms as they remain relatively unmatched in their strengths as bards. First, keeping in mind the efforts made and the conceptual and paradigmatic difficulties in the precarious labours of categorisation and generation delineations, let me nevertheless vouchsafe a grouping of the four for some semblance of form and containment. This will aid in the need for spatiotemporal alignments. Literary historians have left behind a saner yet slightly challenging grouping of Nigeria's poets by largely considering context, content, and intent. While not counting the pre-independence poets for much now, we are left with Wole Soyinka, Christopher Okigbo and JP Clark as representatives of their group. They are commonly called the first generation while the Niyi Osundare, Tanure Ojaide, Odia Ofeimun, and *Chimalum Nwankwo* are generally referred to as the second generation. There is still the military era group that "took over" from the second generation and will be encountered in the course of this essay and or its sequel. The emphasis on the last name of the representatives of the second generation is because he is more or less the *raison d'etre* of this effort as I am convinced that his unsung stature is quite unfortunate. As the trio of Osundare-Ofeimun-Ojaide is already known, the creation of the quartet of Osundare-Ofeimun-Ojaide-Nwankwo needs to exist – fully justified as the important and major poets of Nigeria at the watershed of modernity. This essay does a basic function: the historical survey of the highpoints and landmarks of the poetry journey of Nigeria especially from independence till the contemporary times. While it takes necessary contextual and textual elucidations from the pioneer pre-independence poetry, it does not go into *detail* of works, treating issues only as they point more to the general understanding of the bigger picture. It is multifunctional as a somewhat breezy and cursory hands-on grasp of the literary history of poetry in Nigeria and could serve many a writing project as informative background section. It adopts the historical approaches of the New Historicism and Cultural Materialism theories – fleshing out discourses with the parallel aids and applications of non-literary but relevant and informative texts. These theories are intrinsically woven in as they implicitly guide towards the fuller comprehension of the driving contexts of the poetic contents of the Nigerian scene through the years.

## Background

The prior existence of traditional oral poetry vaguely negates the scope hinted at above, but its operability and functionality is effectively validated by the scope and context of this section. There has always been an uneasy relationship between poetry and politics since the published banishment of the former in Plato's ideal republic. Through the provision of themes and the informing or influencing of a poet's stance, politics has always interfered in the world of

versification, though poetry has on many occasions also been an unwitting intruder into the political sphere. Thus, in furtherance, Dan Izevbaye maintains that "politics has always been a concern of poetry whether as a theme or as an important conditioning factor" (143). Moreover, the fact that politics constitutes a considerable aspect of human life, it is only natural that poetry takes interest and that an entanglement exists.

Nigeria has had interesting episodes of politics featuring in modern Nigerian poetry. Thematics such as the restoration of the black man's lost dignity, varying degrees of rejection of certain colonialist values, reactions toward imperialism, and a conscious move toward cultural revival and assertion featured in most pre-independence era of Nigerian poetry. The post-independence era saw more emphases on the building and sustenance of a better society, one that aggregates from positive colonial legacies and the rich indigenous heritage. The poetry of the era attempted this through critical appraisals of the political arena, subtle condemnations of neo-colonialism, and advocations for alternate syntheses. It also concentrated more on national issues rather than global or African concerns. During the pre-independence era, poems from Denis Osadebay, arguably the most representative of the era, were rather ambivalent in their stances on issues of African culture and its defence. A politician-poet like many of his ilk in the era who abandoned versification at the attainment of independence, his ambivalence and lack of firm stances could be viewed through the lenses of political vacillation; so we see him swinging from bursts of gratitude to the white man for his gifts and in the same breath an energetic but unconvincing defence of African ideals and culture. As confirmed by Okey Umeh, "throughout Osadebay's poetry therefore, what we see is a vacillation between the European and African cultures" (48), so we are treated at the end to a defeatist biblical notion as summed up by Umeh: "Osadebay's solution to the black man's ingrained poverty, his hope for the black man, lies in his affirmation that whether rich or poor, 'Thou art only dust and clay'" (49). For Osadebay's poetry output, critics have been unsparing in their critiques: from Oyekan Owomoyela's "ingrained ambivalence and the insidious feeling of inferiority to which he was subject" (54), through OR Dathorne's "on the whole Osadebay's poetry is unrewarding from the viewpoint of both language and ideals" (160), and then to Clive Wake's collective disparaging of pre-independence African poetry as "not very good, nor…inspiring" (49). However, cases have been made to the tenor of Donatus Nwoga's advocation of contextual considerations for critics to weigh "what relationships (have) existed between the poetic period and the type of poetry that was written" (17), and Umeh's stance that Osadebay's society was that which "hood-winked into accepting that 'colonialism was designed to save the benighted blackman from ignorance, disease and death'" (49). Importantly, Umeh maintains that Osadebay's poetry being the most representative of the pre-independence era succeeded in spite of its shortcomings, in portraying the socio-political realities of the period in his 1952 collection, *Africa Sings*. Other poets of the era such as Gabriel Okara and Frank Aig-Imhoukuede are guilty of the same vacillation seen in Osadebay though to a lesser degree.

Okara and Aig-Imhoukuede possess more clarity in their stances and choices. In "Piano and Drums", Okara especially shows his choice against the background thematic of the straddling of two cultures through the effects of the piano and drum in the poem. Lamina Diakhate sees it that there is a "faithful maintenance of the cultural values of (his) people while remaining open to all the good influence that may come from Europe" (80), but there is no definitive sign that the poet/persona would want a wholesome return to the indigenous. This signifies vacillation albeit not as stark as Osadebay's. Insightfully, Izevbaye observes that "there is no active attempt at synthesis, adaptation and functional imitation" (147), but Umeh maintains that "the poet has failed to show a light in this morning mist of an age where people are most

in need of a guiding light" (51). Aig-Imhoukuede on his own part singles out Christian marriage as the representative Achilles heel of the new culture and bashes it in comparison to African traditional marriage in his "One Wife for One Man". However, this parochialism and the pretended naivety of the poem's disposition weaken rather than strengthen the supposed strong sociocultural and political posturing.

What one sees here is still far from Izevbaye's assertion that the main problem of political poetry is "control of material" (160) as most notable pre-independence Nigerian poetry had culture at the centre rather than politics as a system of government. Essentially, Umeh's summation is apt: "The repudiation of colonial claims of cultural superiority became a political action" (51), and it extends to the assertion that Africa is not culturally inferior. This became a political action – thus, using the broader culture framework as differentiated from the post-independence versifications that squarely tackled political situations, appraised and also critiqued specific governments and its functionaries.

**Changing Polities, Shifting Concerns**

The critic Abiola Irele makes references to a shift in Africa's concerns as moving more away from the colonial phenomenon and closer to its internal issues in his *The African Experience in Literature and Ideology*. His references to these new directions consolidate the nature of and instances of thematic developments – basically from concerns with colonialism and its evils to frustration of hopes, dampening of zeal, disillusionment resulting from failed promises of independence, gross corruption, tribalism, nepotism and the scary prospect and reality of oppressors and suppressors being our own fellow Africans, not the imperial masters. The gravity of the situation in Nigeria tragically snowballed from political instability, ethnic rivalry, social disaffection, military coups, to the Nigeria-Biafra War (Nigerian Civil War) of 1967 – 1970. This, as rightly observed by Sule E. Egya, caused through shades of concern and nationalism, two seminal essays: "The African Writer and the Biafran Cause" and "The Writer in a Modern African State" from the foremost literati of the era, Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka, respectively; ultimately setting up and setting off "far-reaching consequences on Nigerian…poetry" (and) providing "ideological, cultural, even *textual connection* among…*'generations'* of writers in Nigeria today" (2) (emphasis mine).

Poets of the post-independence era in Nigeria who concerned themselves with the politics of the period such as Soyinka and Christopher Okigbo wrote dark-themed, prophetic, warning and haunting poems on the political terrain deteriorating into catastrophe. Soyinka, in his "Idanre" took a deep and disturbing swipe at the mismanagement of power being witnessed at the time. Through the myth, allegory, and parable of Ogun, he showcases the consequences of irresponsibility and recklessness with power-wielding. The lines "Lust-blind god, gore drunk Hunter/ Monster deity, you destroy your men!" is an apt and revelatory indictment of the mismanagement of power that marred the fabric of Nigeria's 1960s polity. According to Umeh, "most of 'Idanre' is a critique of the political power structure of post-independence Nigeria period, a period of violent political conflicts among political parties and politicians" (56). Soyinka himself says this in the introduction to "Idanre": "'Idanre' lost its mystification early enough. As events gathered pace and unreason around me I recognised it as part of a pattern of awareness which began when I wrote *A Dance of the Forests*. In detail, in the human context of my society, 'Idanre' has made abundant sense" (*Idanre and Other Poems* 60). To Soyinka's credit is the advocacy for revolution in the same poem in the character of Atunda who acts in the face of challenging events – a trope that is common both in Soyinka's real life and fictional

worlds. Atunda's action in destroying the Yoruba pantheon's status quo is validated in Soyinka's praise: "All hail Saint Atunda, First revolutionary/ Grand iconoclast at genesis…". For Christopher Okigbo, the imageries of "storm-tossed ship at mid-sea" ("Lament of the Silent Sisters") and other allusions suggestive of the absence of direction, vision and morality are some of his tools employed to drive home the already sorry state of affairs in the early sixties in Nigeria. He wrote in an introduction to the sequence of poems that "Both parts of 'Silences' were inspired by the events of the day. 'Lament of the Silent Sisters' by the Western Crisis of 1962, and the death of Patrice Lumumba; 'Lament of the Drums' by the imprisonment of Obafemi Awolowo, and the tragic death of his eldest son" (xii). His other sequence of poems "Path of Thunder" contain the foreseen consequences of his insight and warnings which were mostly true and also catastrophically claimed his own life fighting as a Biafran soldier. However, the beginnings of the sequence were briefly optimistic before cascading into irretrievable chaos. Sunday Anozie observes rightly about it thus: "a description of the general euphoria which marked the public mood between January and May 1966, after the first military coup in Nigeria" (177). It is a most interesting development of thematics and tenor in verses which begin with the joy and celebration in "Thunder can Break" through "Hurrah for Thunder", "Come Thunder" down to the more ominous "Elegy for Slit-Drum" and to the palpable fear and cry of deathly premonition in "Elegy for Alto". Okigbo and Soyinka as notable poets of the era felt and radiated the pulse of the political times in their poems and alongside others who also were representative feelers of the times in related trends. An interesting difference in their recommendations for progress in the face of troubles is that while Soyinka preferred a radical and revolutionary shove to disrupt any oppressive status quo, Okigbo advocated for a healing return to the indigenous and traditional.

Some of the other issues in early post-independence Nigerian poetry include ethnocentrism. The forceful yoking of different ethnicities in the sake of colonial imperialism has remained with a dangerous, concurrent, and often volatile price that has been continually paid with losses, destruction of properties, violence, maiming and killings till date. Joseph Okpaku is apt in this observation on the imperialistic political structure:

> This superstructure owed its stability not so much to its intrinsic validity, which is questionable, but to the essential fact of its being imposed and kept in effective operation by the strength of political and military as well as economic power and authority. (4)

Ethnic tensions simmered subterraneously as they continue till date. Incidentally and interestingly, the majority of the tensions held in check during the colonial presence burst the lid after the attainment of independence, continually and incrementally rearing its head in ever multiplying proportions. Soyinka captures inter-ethnic killings of the sixties in "Massacre, Oct '66" and "Malediction" where the imageries depict the sombre and macabre horrors of human savagery perpetrated on the basis of ethnicity. This debilitating ethnocentrism is salient throughout JP Clark's *Casualties* where it features guiltily in the cracks in the relationships among Nigeria's writers and literati. The infamous tone in his "Skull and Cup' has been critiqued as lacking in empathy and reeking of indifference, and in extension to the poet himself as regards his negatively affected writer-friends – Soyinka was imprisoned because of the civil war, Okigbo was killed in action, while Chinua Achebe was an emissary on exile of sorts canvassing support for the embattled and suffering Biafra. Other poems also portrayed varied degrees and shades of Nigeria's endemic ethnocentrism: "Reign of the Crocodile" (about General Aguiyi Ironsi), "Seasons of Omen" (on the coup plotters), "Leader of the Hunt" (on the controversial Major Ifeajuna), etc. However, Clark does not shy away from condemning

the wanton killings. He strongly decries the killings of Eastern Nigerians in "July Wake" and "Exodus" and pleads the cause of the suffering innocents in Northern Nigeria of that period in "Dirge". The title poem "Casualties" like Soyinka's "Civilian and Soldier" deeply and disturbingly brings to light "collateral damages" in the construct of people suffering who know nothing about any conflict and have no hand in the dealings but are dealt the "helpless victim" card by fate.

Through a survey of the themes covered in select poems of Clark, Okigbo, and Soyinka and the critiques of a few scholars, the trend of the major poetry of the sixties in Nigeria has been seen to focus primarily on the pressing socio-political developments and upheavals of the era. We once again resort to Umeh's succinct view that "what is common to modern Nigerian poets that have taken on political themes in their poetry is their condemnation of their society whose politics they see as unsatisfactory and unproductive in terms of the people's wishes and aspirations" (75). Though concern for the socio-political fabric of the nation would never wane, other relevant issues would come to share the stage also as pressing concerns, problematics and thematics.

**Military Meddlesomeness and Arrested Developments**

From the mid-seventies, through the eighties and up to the early nineties to mid-nineties, there was a largely repressive military tyrannical interregnum punctuated only by a measly four years of civilian presence (1979 – '83). Most literary productions out of Nigeria especially poetry reacted, their reactions and poetic output marking the hegemony of a different era and generation of writers distinct from Achebe, Clark-Bekederemo, Okigbo, and Soyinka. The stage set for what should be functional literature by the aggregated views of what I call the Achebean and Soyinkaesque stance – that is, in the manner of, or according to Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka. This stance as contained their earlier essays on the role of writers in certain situations, took its cue and cemented its justification in the disastrous sixties and beyond, and also found more breeding ground a second time. Sule Egya puts it this way: "it will be seen later on that the second time such a condition would manifest itself in Nigerian polity was in the aftermath of cancelling the 1993 elections by the dictatorship of General Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida" (2). The conditions in Nigeria naturally bred activists. Writers fed on the social and political (military) contexts to ply their trade of opposing and satirizing the oppressive military regimes. This was natural as the radical literati remained relevant. For Egya, immediately after the war, a literary sub-tradition in Nigeria emerged, "with such powerful exponents as Niyi Osundare, Festus Iyayi, and Femi Osofisan" (2). Again, relevance is "that an artist, a writer, must make herself relevant by concentrating on the most pressing socio-political issues" (2). These radical writers and poets not only clashed with the repressive regimes with their sentences and lines, they were also involved in pro-democracy demonstration, literarily living and functioning as radical literati in words and action. What Egya terms (rightly so) "military era poetry" is basically functional and somewhat austere because what matters "is the desire to produce dissident discourse" (10) as poetry naturally comes in handy for emotional release.

The major poets of this era despite all the confusions, conflations and intersections of the efforts at classification into generations, traditions, and eras given the fluid difficulty of demarcating borders, are Niyi Osundare, Tanure Ojaide, Odia Ofeimun, and Chimalum Nwankwo. The issue of grouping into generations of Nigerian writers has been an interesting one. Modern writers in English in Nigerian literature are loosely grouped into generations (by some scholars): pre-independence (first), post-independence (second), and military (third), and the

era from the 2000s. Egya has done quite an impressive job of making meaning of the problematic:

> This general, often loose periodization implies the thematic and stylistic preoccupation of a group of writers responding to a distinct circumstance, partaking in the same narrative, consciously or unconsciously gravitating towards a category of discourse. (14)

His support of Harry Garuba's "The Unbearable Lightness of Being" cements the notion above with a pertinent twist, one that points out the inadequacies of theme and style especially in the peculiarities of the African context.

> …theme and style as markers of a specific literary period are obviously inadequate especially in modern African literatures because of their strong connection to a boundless extra-literary context. There is therefore a continuum that thwarts any attempt to neatly categorise Nigerian writing into specific eras. For instance, Niyi Osundare and Tanure Ojaide, prominent poets of the post-civil war era, widely regarded as the second generation, are still active and have also, along with the new poets, reconstructed the recent phenomenon of military oppression in Nigeria. (14)

He further joins Garuba in building on Remi Raji's postulation that most Nigerian poetry could be referred to as "the nationalist imagination" by terming the first generation poets – Gabriel Okara, Christopher Okigbo, and Wole Soyinka – "Modernist-Nationalists", and the trio of Odia Ofeimun, Niyi Osundare, and Tanure Ojaide, "Marxist-Nationalists" (14). The key words, "Modernist" and "Marxist" refer to that blend characteristic of tradition-meets-Europe for the former, and the populist masses-oriented anti-military tropes for the latter. Egya maintains that "what has been seen as the first, second and third generations are in fact not generations" per se, but "sub-categories or sub-traditions within a literary tradition, *based on historical markers*" (emphasis mine) (15). At a glance, this means that there is not much change in the shared canvas of literary hues, colours and pigments for these "ages" of poets except for the dynamics of the informing and influencing fabric of socio-political constructs.

The Soyinka and Okigbo generation have come under severe critical flak that focus more on the charge of their being Euro-American modernists. In its kernel, this Modernist-Nationalist generation tried to push forward the thematics of colonialism and its attendant inhumanity and racism, socio-political and ethnic tensions in a nascent independent country. The other half of their versified discourse is couched in the stylistic mix of traditional orature and salient slivers and elements of Euro-American modernist influences. Abiola Irele in *The African Imagination* terms this quality "aesthetic traditionalism" (57). Invariably, critics ignored most of their topical thematics and focused on their largely inelegant style, and as seen earlier, the greater crises and later disintegration of the country in the form of war was also their lot.

Some writers and poets of the succeeding generation witnessed these events and subsequently reacted in response, style, output, and stance. Odia Ofeimun's *The Poet Lied*, a monumental signpost of disagreement with the poets and poetic art of the Modernist-Nationalists first generation era, especially against the backdrop of the sixties and the civil war, and also a symbolic cornerstone presaging an immediate inauguration of a people-oriented and socially responsible art, was especially viewed by Clark-Bekederemo as attacking his person. The generational shift heralded by Ofeimun's outing became starker with Niyi Osundare's *Songs of the Marketplace* which according to Egya is "a collection of poems, like Ofeimun's, distinguished by its coherent thesis on the plight of the peasant and the poor" (16). To add more

chutzpah to the burgeoning poetic consciousness are two prescriptive pieces, again by Osundare – "Poetry Is" (a meta-poem) and "The Writer as Righter" (an essay), and the philosophical, traditional, masses-oriented, and sublimely quotidian output of Tanure Ojaide who had first appeared in 1973 with *Children of the Iroko and Other Poems*. These three poets had an interesting bond in tenor and influence, and it is necessary to quote Egya's accurate insight that they share and propagate

> …an artistic ideology…a radical return to artistry more traditional than the 'traditional aesthetics' of the Okigbo generation, and an overtly de-individualised thematic space that embraces only the estate of the masses. The claim at the core of this ideology is a movement towards what was perceived as authentic African art, authenticity being rooted in traditional oral aesthetics. (16)

Chinweizu et al's radical view in *Towards the Decolonisation of African Literature* which advocated for a more "down to earth" versification (as opposed to the heavily chastised "highfalutin" poetry of the Okigbo generation) was quite influential to the Marxist-Nationalist second generation group of poets. An interesting description that became a badge of sorts for them is espoused by Funso Aiyejina whose essay title rider, "An Alter-Native Tradition" (from "Recent Nigerian Poetry in English: An Alter-Native Tradition"), became their marker with the pun on "alternative"; putting them more in contrast and comparison with their forebears of the Nationalist-Modernist of "aesthetic traditionalism" – apropos of Abiola Irele (*The African Imagination* 57).

More bulwarks for the populist bent of the trio's (Osundare-Ojaide-Ofeimun) generation came from prominent Nigerian Marxist scholars. The theoretical prong of being alternative (pun: Alter-Native) lies in their return to native sensibilities, idioms, and wisdom in order to be commonplace enough to talk to the people whose plight is paramount. So the generation enjoyed robust theoretical construct and support from the Nigerian Marxists and critics, Biodun Jeyifo, Omafume Onoge, and Chidi Amuta, whose views in aggregation revolve around the fact that as Africa is a third world it should be disturbing enough to warrant materialistic readings of her creative works. Their stances however did not go uncontested. A formalist school of African literature made up of Dan Izevbaye, Charles Nnolim, Donatus Nwoga and Pius Olusegun Dada stuck to their opposition to the Alter-Native Marxist-Nationalists in what they saw as over-commitment to socio-political issues, disregard for finesse in form and language, inadequate technical excellence, bland styles and banality, etc., culminating in what Nnolim in evaluative lenses sees as a failure of the whole effort. He says this because according to him there is still "the confounding ascendancy of socio-political crises in Africa today" (Egya 18). Nevertheless, it is worthy of note that both sub-traditions of the Modernist-Nationalist/Aesthetic Traditionalists (first generation) and the Marxist-Nationalist/Alter-Natives (second generation) have had tremendous influence on the succeeding(?) generations of the military era poets and the millennials.

Though both generations shared some similar socio-political tensions, the second did not necessarily have the luxury of exquisiteness and finesse of the first due to the debilitatingly long stretch of oppressive military rule of the eighties and early nineties which naturally brewed the reactionary Marxist and populist bent in their works. They simply had to communicate and reach out to the people in local idiom – native, oral, traditional, and pidgin – what the common and suffering can relate to easily. The military and its oppressive regimes has not been new to Nigeria given that it started in the mid-sixties with Generals Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi (1966), Yakubu Gowon (1966 – 1975, through the civil war and beyond), Olusegun Obasanjo (1976 –

1979) Muhammadu Buhari (1983 – 1985), Ibrahim Babangida (1985 – 1993), Sani Abacha (1993 – 1998), and the last before the millennium, Abdulsalami Abubakar who transited to the civilian dispensation via general elections of 1999. Nigeria probably groaned more under the highly repressive regime of Buhari and his notorious Decree Two which he used to incarcerate journalists and activists without trial and handed outrageously high jail terms through special tribunals without due legal process over poorly and sometimes totally un-investigated accusations. The coup and take over in 1985 by Babangida saw the removal of the infamous decree much to the relief of people only to bode more sinister tragedies as Dele Giwa who widely considered as one of the finest journalists in Nigeria, was murdered via a parcel bomb in 1986. The proverbial last straw in Babangida's regime was his insidious truncation of his purported transition to democracy in 1993 with annulment of the 1993 general election. This election was supposed to usher in MKO Abiola, a generally accepted civilian candidate in what is still adjudged as the freest and fairest elections in Nigeria, but much to the dismay of the yearning masses was never to be. As he stepped aside due to pressure, Abacha took over and the woes continued and even the Nobel Laureate for Literature, Wole Soyinka, had to escape abroad in order to evade the regime's reaches. Egya describes the period:

> Against international outcries, General Abacha was said to have personally monitored the judicial murder of the writer and environmentalist Ken Saro Wiwa. Prominent activists such as Kudirat Abiola and Chief Alfred Rewane were killed by unknown gunmen in daylight. The dictatorships of General Babangida and the late General Abacha, according to social commentators, turned out to be the worst in Nigerian history. There were all kinds of killings reported in the media: parcel bombing, frequent bombing of public places, hanging, shooting, and dying in prisons. There was a heavy, oppressive silence in the land. (20)

In such dire conditions, such that Soyinka had to run for his life, the lawlessness and threat to life suffered by writers, journalists, human rights activists and intellectuals who dared speak up or had the potential to, was almost unthinkable. The repression saw an increase in exiled writers, decline in literary groups and activities, dearth in the production of creative works and disinterestedness by publishing houses. Interestingly, it was from the middle towards the end of this period that we witness a gradual dovetailing of two literary sub-traditons, a kind of baton handing over between the second generation (Marxist-Nationalists/Alter-Native) and writers born around and after independence. Most witnessed the civil war as children, grew up in the seventies and eighties and witnessed the oil boom and of course the repressive military regimes. These military era poets and writers include Uche Nduka, Ismail Bala Garba, Toyin Adewale, Chiedu Ezeanah, Maik Nwosu, Remi Raji, Emman Shehu, etc., and of course have their own differences and disagreements with the previous sub-traditions that came before them. This is understandable. We have hinted earlier some of the peculiarities of the Nigerian literary tradition – one that is always affected and influenced by its socio-political dynamics.

A fortuitous development was also brewing around the period of this new era growth that has links with the dynamics of the Nigerian society. The oral form was slowly but steadily developing, mutating, and reforming sometimes into slivers and strands not easily recognisable at first cursory glance, and reinventing itself into the verses of the years. What could be referred to as varied elements of orality (32) and DI Nwoga labels "a major component of African imaginative activity' (32) in "Modern African Poetry: The Domestication of a Tradition", is what Ezenwa-Ohaeto says "the contemporary Nigerian poet is striving to achieve (in) this range of oral poetic composition in the written modern poetry" (11). In essence, a manipulation of the written poetry to accommodate varied elements and transmutations of orality which is a

major component of African imaginative activity was gradually being felt in different interesting ways. These ways are found in the reactionary poems that were written from the eighties. Ezenwa-Ohaeto sheds more light:

> This quest for and manipulation of orality was given an impetus by a somewhat unfortunate development in the African continent. (The) economic recession had a great impact on the publishing industry which made it impossible for many of the poets to be read. (12)

As severe as the situation was, two things were happening simultaneously according to Robert Fraser: "while the indigenous publishing sector gathered strength, there was a growing tendency for African poets to reassess their priorities' (314). He goes ahead to offer this interesting remark:

> The positive result of these developments was that they thrust the oral transmission of verse, hitherto chiefly as a standby, into the limelight, and hence procured a much needed rethinking of the way in which highbrow art could learn from the oral tradition. In many cases the consequence was a rediscovery of the immediacy of orality as a means of communication. (314)

What this resulted in is a paradigm shift of sorts. Poetic techniques became reconsidered. Ezenwa-Ohaeto relates it to Mineke Schipper's term "written orality" and explains further as "a narrative mode inspired by the oral art. She (Schipper) states that 'written orality practised by African writers directly continues after age-long tradition of fully alive African story-telling'"(12).

One interesting outcome of this form of orality is the written pidgin language as used in the poems that became known as pidgin poetry in Nigeria. Ezenwa-Ohaeto, who wrote pidgin poetry is of the opinion that "the pidgin language provides an appropriate medium for this exploitation of oral traditions in poetry, for it acts as a bridge between the orality of verbal communication and the formality of the written word" (23). With pidgin being basically a language formed at first along and among coastal settlements of Nigeria and some other countries along the African coasts because of contact with European maritime traders and later spread inward and throughout the country in varieties, it has permeated almost all corners despite its lowly and "despised" status.

Pidgin's seemingly troubled growth and lack of official acceptance and status has been as a result of sociocultural factors which include its association with lower social classes and the feeling that it is merely a corruption of *higher* European languages – in Nigeria's case mainly but not entirely English as Portuguese traces exist. However, despite the contempt and stigma with which it has been held and the snobbish and hypocritical condemnation by some educationists, for many in Anglophone countries (especially Nigeria), pidgin has remained the main linguistic medium – and literary vehicle too. In Nigeria, many writers – Ken Saro Wiwa (*Sozaboy*), Segun Oyekunle (*Katakata for Sufferhead*), Tunde Fatunde (*Water no Get Enemy*, *Oga na Tief-Man*), Mamman Vatsa (*Tori For Geti Bow Leg*), Frank Aig-Imoukhuede (*Pidgin Stew and Sufferhead*), Ezenwa-Ohaeto (*I Wan Bi President*, *If to Say I be Soja*), and so many other pieces in anthologies and applications in other mainstream language and literary texts, have shown that it is a fit enough language. These are testimonies of its reach and they are just a few of the pidgin literary publications in almost all the popular genres that have flourished in Nigeria. Numerous critiques are also available on these works that tackle all the problematics

a unique postcolony such as Nigeria has been home to, proving it as good enough a medium with the capability of carrying a society's sensibilities as any other would.

For poets who have written in the pidgin medium, Ezenwa-Ohaeto has this to say:

> These Pidgin poets have established a viable poetic tradition and in their achievement they have bridged the gap between oral communication and the written medium. In addition, in their use of language they exploit its resources through the use of a folk poetics and a sensitive deployment of a range of rhetorical styles while synthesizing formal features of poetry and verbal resources to generate a new vigour in the Nigerian poetic tradition. (39)

**Parting and Preparatory Notes**

These provisional survey notes have been light and breezy – and intentionally so. We have seen so far what the journey of poetry has been in Nigeria as a third world postcolony laden with its cocktail of peculiar vicissitudes. We have also seen how literature (in this case, poetry) has tried to mirror the dynamic society by reacting in varied tones and shades to the societal flux it has been submerged in. the role of politics and bad leadership has accounted for most of the themes as well as the harsh living conditions and the mutant effects of the negativities on and in the long run. Being a survey, deep analysis of particular works has been avoided but more focus on the quartet is discernible as a necessary structure for the overall project. Again, we can also appreciate the "terrible beauties" being born out of the macabre and gloomy polity in the form of interesting and enduring sub-genres, techniques, concepts, theories, and experimentations. These terrible beauties have come to stay – a la William Butler Yeats.

As this first part has employed historical survey approach heavily, with sufficient doses of cultural materialism, the next instalment tentatively titled "The Nigerian Poetry Quartet: A Case", will go in-depth with the essences of the foursome and lean more on Chimalum Nwankwo as the first three need little introduction. Suffice it to say then that the major literary approach will be textual with accompanying reviews from scholars and critics who have done some critiques on them.

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