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## **Forms of Political Consciousness in the Poetry of Tanure Ojaide: A Study of *The Endless Song* and *When It No Longer Matters Where You Live* (Pp. 168-176)**

**Bassey Ude Bassey** - Centre for General Studies, Cross River University of Technology, Ogoja Campus, Cross River State  
E-mail: [bu\\_bassey@yahoo.com](mailto:bu_bassey@yahoo.com)  
Phone: +234 803 6014 263

### **Abstract**

*Tanure Ojaide has become a major force in contemporary Nigerian poetry. Indeed, in the generation of Nigerian writers after the Achebe – Clark – Okigbo – Soyinka era, Ojaide's ascendancy is incontrovertible. This relevance is not just in the prolificacy of his output, but also in his social relevance as the voice of the voiceless. With particular emphasis on The Endless Song and When it no longer Matters where you live, this paper shows how Ojaide uses his craft to comment on the political reality of his day. The paper also posits that far from being an indifferent commentator, the poet is a fully partisan recorder of the struggles that play out on the Nigerian national political scene.*

### **Introduction**

Poetry as poetry ought to be able to deal with any experience that is human, and the political experience is certainly human. No man interested, as the poet must be, in the life of the society to which he belongs can possibly ignore it.

Archibald MacLeish  
"The Poet and the Age"

Literature and politics have a long relationship. Right from the days of the ancient Greeks, the Dionysian dramas have been used to comment on political issues. Plato's recommendation in *The Republic* of a ban on the poet in his ideal republic is instructive here. Plato felt that the poet was undesirable in his ideal state because of his propensity for the fantastic. That ability to conjure up possibilities, Plato thought, was unhealthy for the stability of political regimes. The artist in traditional African society also recognized that his art can serve political ends. As Ojaide in *Poetic Imagination in Black Africa* put it, in "modern African Poetry as in Traditional African songs, there is the focus on current socio-political issues that affect the poet's people" (23). Ruth Finnegan's *Oral Literature in Africa* also notes of the traditional poet that his songs "can be used to report and comment on current affairs, for political pressure, for propaganda and to reflect and mould public opinion" (272).

It is imperative therefore to start this discussion with a survey of the issues that give rise to the production of these literary responses. Recent Nigerian history, especially since the military intervention of December 31, 1983, has been replete with unpopular regimes. Osofisan writes in "Press Freedom and its Enemies" that ever since Nigeria became a nation:

First by the fiat of colonial masters, then under the post-independence local rulers, we have had no other experience of governance but of unfortunate leadership. Virtually all our governments have been illegitimate --- either it is a government of civilians who have rigged themselves into power ... or it is a government of soldiers who have shot themselves into power (47 - 48).

This comment is painfully true today as it was a decade ago when it was first made. Earlier on, Achebe had also identified the leadership problem as Nigeria's developmental clog:

The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership. There is nothing basically wrong with the Nigerian character. There is nothing wrong with the Nigerian land or climate or water or air or anything else. The Nigerian problem is the unwillingness or inability of its

leaders to rise to the responsibility, to the challenge of personal example which are the hallmarks of true leadership (1).

The failure of the political leadership is universally recognized as a barrier to the development aspirations of any country. Brian May's *The Third World Calamity* believes that third world countries like Nigeria and Iran are socio-economically stagnant due to factors ranging from a cultural hangover from traditional beliefs and attitudes, to leadership failure. May even goes further to prove to be a prophet when he notes that the 1979 military handover "merely provides the machinery with which an elite minority may pursue a political game that is more like to disrupt than improve the live of most Nigerians" (178). May's pessimism actually plays out as he acknowledges the ephemeral nature of civil rule in Africa. "whether... the civilian rulers will prove worthy of the institutions that the army has bequeathed them is certain" (178); "the question is how long civilian rule will continue" (188).

In this particular case, civil rule lasted just over four years as the army took over in December 1983. The civil regime of Alhaji Shehu Shagari was adjudged corrupt and extravagant, piling up foreign debts and indulging in an orgy of importation of even the most basic things like bottled water and toothpicks. Maier notes that this:

civilian administration performed extremely poorly; gross mismanagement, widespread corruption and continuing political and ominously, increasing religious turmoil sent Nigeria into a spiral of economic decline (15).

Between December 31, 1983, when the army took over and installed General Buhari as head of state, and May 29, 1999 when General Abubakar handed over to the civil regime of Chief Olusegun Obasanjo, there had been two other military regimes. Generals Babangida and Abacha both unleashed almost irreparable damage on the nation's infrastructure, economy and social services. But while Babangida's regime had populist pretensions, Abacha's made no secret of its raw and crude display of military might. Abacha's mysterious death in June 1998 paved the way for General Abubakar to conduct elections and handover to Chief Obasanjo.

Most of the poems under study here were written during the regimes of these two most vilified military leaders. The poet being, as usually acknowledged,

the barometer for gauging social perception cannot be expected to keep quiet in the face of such misgovernance as has been Nigeria's lot. For a sensitive writer like Ojaide, nothing less is expected.

**Poetic Consciousness in *The Endless Song* and *When it no longer Matters where you live***

The poetry of *The Endless Song*, especially the first section "Looking Out", bristles with indignation at the ineptitude and selfishness of the political leaders. In "The Vision", the poet foretells the fall of the anti-people regime. Here the poet fuses the role of a prophet/seer with that of a teacher. The poem begins with the vision, the prophesy: "The leopard that haunts us will die, / maybe in our lifetime, maybe not" (3). Using the analogy of the hunt, appropriate to the leopard images, the persona advises the hunter not "to blind himself with drinks" for "he must have a clear vision of the game / then listen to movement, breath and smell" (3) before the big hit at the big game. It is a measure of his conviction that the persona ends the poem with a repeat of the vision: "As for the leopard that haunts us, / it will surely die, the ambush taut" (3).

The revolutionary intent of "We keep watch over them" is obvious from the beginning. The "we" of the poem, including the poet-persona, is indicative of the people's resolve to fight oppressors and tormentors. Digging into Urhobo legend and folklore, the poem shows that people-power had worked before and can do so again:

our women know how to march naked at twilight  
and rid the land of tormentors,  
our men know how to bury despots...

When *Orodje* ordered us to hold back a falling  
palm-tree,...when *Ogiso* wielded his sword  
against his own

subjects,...we knew what they loved most and  
what would ruin them (5).

This last line is especially prophetic as one of the most tyrannical of the military despots is said to have died of overindulgence while in office.

The poem ends with a strengthening of the people's will to oversee the overthrow of tyrannical regimes. The people's will has been so strengthened that it is described as "the iroko tree rooted in [their] hearts" (5). The people also have acquired the instruments to facilitate the violent change of government that they desire:

The matchet is our fan  
the rifle our swagger-stick in the dark; ...  
Our will has become our god, and  
from the iroko tree aloft in our hearts  
we keep strict watch over them (6).

Ojaide's love for the common people shows itself in his celebration of two such people who carried out acts of selfless kindness to others. The little school girl who donates "her recess-rice coin to a beggar" (8), and the bus driver "who rescues his van from a treacherous puddle, / then stops to plant there a red flag" (8), as a sign of warning to other drivers, are a "rarity [which] gladdens the heart" (8). But while these separate but heart-warming incidents do not make prime news broadcast, and so are not nationally recognized for awards, the unstated comparison is with government officials who publicize even their ill-motivated token acts of charity

The poem then asks the politically relevant questions:

Has it ever happened here that the priest offered  
his blood  
to stave off the resuival scourge he foresaw,  
has it happened here that the sharer forgot himself  
to raise the spirit of the eight per cent lowlies? (8)

These questions are of course, a way of pouring imprecations on the political leadership which as Achebe notes does not recognize "the challenge of personal example" (1) as these two commoners have. The last two lines, highlighted by their being a stanza on their own, also drive home the message:

Even the ant knows the other's stronger need,

and no prescription cures a sick country nobody  
loves (8).

In *The Endless Song* therefore, one finds that the poet-persona shows political consciousness as a revolutionary, a teacher, and a prophet/seer.

The tone of lament prevalent in the poetry of *The Endless Song* continues in *When it no longer Matters where You Live*; as the dominant mood is that of regret at the wrecking of the land by its leaders. "Libation", for instance, begins with a series of impossibilities that have become reality in Nigeria: a situation of abject lack in an environment of plenitude:

the grubs emaciate in the groins of the palm  
the tadpoles of the hurricane season are stunted  
in a dry bed; departed, milk from coconut ---  
the droves of fish abandon rivers ... (39).

These seemingly improbable scenarios have been played out in Nigeria where the leaders, "the bees of Abuja wreck havoc on the public" (39).

Images of deprivation and want suffuse the poem as one finds "the sack folds without storage of corn or millet", "days of shriveling hardship", "cassava farms are gone" (39), "rusty plates and scurvied mouths" (40). These images pile up and take a bloody turn in the last stanza where "stetson guns pluck heads like coconuts" (40). This state of affairs leads to the questions: "Who will shave the beard of the wounded lion / what finger will burn itself to save others?" (40). The image of a tottering and symbolic elephant ends the poem provoking thoughts of the future of the nation tottering on the brink of self destruction.

"Dateline: Abuja" expresses sympathy with the misused and twisted word as the national "town crier" (43), the Minister of Information or any other government spokesperson misinforms the world: "Fiction has become a staple diet, / truth to the many parrots of state" (43). A particularly poignant turn of phrase is found in "They say the people beg the sorcerer of Aso Rock / to continue with human sacrifice in his lair" (43), where the occupant of Aso Rock, the official residence of the Head of State is described as a "sorcerer", a witch-medium who engages in "human sacrifice" instead of human development in his "lair". The word selection shows the poet's perception of the political leadership of the day.

Whereas “Dateline: Abuja” deplores leadership ineptitude, “My turn” exemplifies the democratic and humble nature of an ideal leadership. Using the simple and rustic image of a hunter and his pack of hounds, the poem shows the helplessness of leaders without loyal supporters. The simple question “who is king without subjects?” (46), is actually loaded with implications for Nigeria’s political leaders. Since there can be no king without subjects, it means the subjects give legitimacy to the rulership of the king. This same sentiment is echoed by Joe Ushie’s poem “King Tree” in his *Lambs at the Shrine*. Ushie’s 15-word poem makes this ruler/ruled relationship very clear: “You rule --- / this forest as the tallest tree --- / only if there are the / shorter ones” (25).

The “Home song” sequence is also very relevant to the present discussion. These poems sub-texted I to IX summarize for the exile that the poet had become, the state of the homeland. This sequence was developed more fully in *Delta Blues and Home Songs* published in the same year, 1999. The dominant subject of the sequence is the pauperization of the nation through corrupt and inept political leadership. “Home song: I”, for example, describes the leaders as “robbers” who “assemble from all the states / to share the loot of faith” (48), and the head of the government as an “ogre” who “voraciously on homes to devour” (48).

It has been noted that the quality of leadership of a nation depends to some degree on the followership. “Home song: IV” reinforces this belief. It addresses itself to the role of the people in ensuring the socio-political health of the nation after all “the hump of the camel’s bound to its arid fate” (55). The poet-persona concludes the poem by restating his perceived role as teacher of his people:

When I come upon a tale tall or short

that needs to be aired

I tell it to my people hard of hearing (56).

The last of the Home songs, IX, compares the disproportionateness of households in the land. The poem notes that there are “homes where the day’s dessert and snacks” only “could relieve a hundred deficient families / of the parlous pain of *kwashiorkor* and *beri-beri*” (67). This stark contrast is even more poignant when the poet remembers the traditional habit of giving

a bit of one's food to the spirits, a habit which present generations of leaders do not extend even to the living.

The issue of literature's relationship to politics is one of continuing relevance as the writer constantly finds that the political terrain of his environment affects his output. Angmor notes that the two subjects relate because "the social situation from which literature springs is very much determined and controlled by political forces" (2). But whereas Angmor may have had the mirroring of political concerns in literature as his focus, Ngugi wa Thiong'O believes that an African writer has no choice but to be politically committed in his writing. The writer has no choice of whether to remain neutral, because he must take sides:

the side of the people or the side of those  
social forces and classes that try to keep  
the people down.... Every writer is a  
writer in politics. The only question is  
what and whose politics? (xi)

Eko's answer to the question is as unmistakable as Ojaide's. Eko believes that because of the nature of his calling, "and given the unique trend of politics, Africa style", the African writer "almost inevitably finds himself on the wrong side of the fence from politicians" (2). Ojaide himself notes that the "criticism of political leadership and the 'ranging on the side of the masses' are major concerns in contemporary African poetry" (23). As his work shows, Ojaide practices his preaching. Olafioye notes of Ojaide's connectedness to political themes:

The poet sees himself ... firstly as an  
individual, as well as a member of  
the collective whole. Hence, the  
metaphor alludes that the writer is no  
unattached airplant, dangling loosely  
without roots. It must have roots,  
cleavage, and a sense of belonging. He  
must connect himself to events,  
especially politics, that affect the lives of  
his people (50 - 51)



## **Conclusion**

Ojaide's cleavage to socio-political reality can be said to be in the form of a prophet/seer, going into the future and foretelling of later events; a mild revolutionary, rousing the people to action, but only so far; and a teacher, educating his people on their own duty in the political development of the nation.

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