

The poet as a social crusader: Tanure Ojaide and the poetry of intervention

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Introduction

Tanure Ojaide uses poetry as a vehicle for political mediation and social control. The task in this paper is an exploration of his use of poetry to expose the socio-cultural and political dilemma in his Delta landscape. The Niger Delta region of Nigeria suffers great social deprivation, political marginalization and economic alienation in spite of its abundant natural resources.

The problem of the Niger Delta is further complicated by an instituted economic conspiracy of the moribund Nigerian civilian and military regimes and the various exploiting multinational oil companies. It is this condition of social injustice and destruction that poets in the like of Ken Saro-Wiwa and Tanure Ojaide and other human rights activists from the region endeavour to resist. Naturally such resistance would attract a counter resistance and this was readily found in the reactionary violence of the power machinery of the Nigerian Military symbolised in the General Sani Abacha military junta¹.

Tanure Ojaide's poetry no doubt serves as a framework for a discursive understanding and analyses of the Niger Delta and its historical as well as contemporary woes. For the purpose of this discussion, we would draw illustrations from selected poems in his *Delta Blues & Home Songs* and *Daydream of Ants and Other Poems*. Here, fundamental issues that are salient to the socio-political, socio-economic emancipation and survival of the Niger Delta people form the basis of Tanure Ojaide's aesthetic vision.

The writer in politics

Creative writing and literary criticism are propelled by a number of motifs. Thematically, such motifs could aim at protest against oppression, political emancipation, demystification and demythologization of phenomena etc.

Writers and critics adopt different literary approaches and strategies to drive home their messages. Literary approaches such as the sociological, historical, psychological, moralist, formalist and other approaches usually form the framework within which creative writing and literary criticism are channeled. However, in spite of these multi-divergent approaches, their effect is always social. In other words, art is essentially committed to practical social realities. The artist is saddled with the task of practically assessing the contemporary situation in society with the mind of identifying and proffering solutions to the different prevailing contradictions.

Tanure Ojaide uses poetry as a vehicle for political mediation, and social control. The concern of this paper is to explore how Ojaide uses art (poetry) to regulate and moderate the socio-economic and socio-political modus operandi in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria in particular and all other oppressed people in general. He sees art as a potent instrument to expose the dilemma of his Niger Delta landscape vis-à-vis the neglect of the former by the successive regimes of the Nigerian political scenario. It is undisputable to assert that the people of the Niger Delta region suffer great deprivation, political marginalisation and economic alienation. Very importantly, the landscape itself is reduced to a land receded by her citizens in spite of its abundant natural resources. The problem of the Niger Delta is further complicated by an instituted economic conspiracy of the moribund Nigerian military regimes and the various exploiting oil companies.

It is this condition of social injustice to their people that poets, artists, scholars and critics in the like of Ken Saro-Wiwa and Ojaide and other human rights activists from that region endeavour to resist and reject. It is unfortunate, also anti-social and anti-human for such moves to be rebuffed. It is more pathetic and more dehumanising that the political structure expected to pursue and defend the cause of its subjects is responsible for their frustration and affliction. The picture of a people suffering from devastation is revealed as the poet says:

I beat my path through a wild lifestape
with nobody insight.
Everybody has an estate
of lonely stretches
overgrown with great shrubs.
There you rehearse fantasies, overtaking
your shadow in a marathon,

knocking down the lion
that has made your resting place a den.
(*Daydream of Ants*, p.23)

The reactionary violence of the power machinery of the Nigerian military symbolised in the Ibrahim Sanni Abacha military Junta contributed immensely to the misfortune of the Niger Delta people. Because of the exploitative ploys informed by the capitalist motif of the military and the multinational oil companies, the survival of the people of the Niger Delta region became a great illusion. Their struggle for survival culminated into the gruesome murder of Ken Saro-Wiwa (an uncompromising and an illustrious son of the Ogoni tribe in the Niger Delta region) and eight other Ogoni martyrs on November 10, 1995 by Ibrahim Sanni Abacha's dictatorial regime. This development opened a new era in the Niger Delta struggle.

For the purpose of this discussion, we would draw illustrations from selected poems in Tanure Ojaide's *Delta Blues & Home Songs* and *Daydream of Ants and Other Poems*. In these texts, fundamental issues that are salient to the socio-political, socio-economic emancipation and the survival of the Niger Delta people form the ethos of Ojaide's aesthetic vision. In other words, his art (poetry) serves as a discourse on the Niger Delta Saga.

History and the Niger Delta question

An articulation of historical contradictions is expedient for a clear understanding of any discussion on the development of the Niger Delta region. Colonialism and the domination of the region by the exploiting multinational oil companies on the one hand, reinforced by the gluttony of the successive political structures/structures in Nigeria (the military in particular) are historical antecedents that have provoked the contemporary Niger Delta discourse.

What we term the Niger Delta question here is a product of the abundant endowment of natural resources in the region versus the inordinate quest of an imperial force for wealth and materialism at the expense of the former. This in turn is colonialism born out of capitalism and breeding oppression. Accentuating this abundance, the poet says:

The planks smelt fresh,
sardine-packaged for export

they came in rafts by water,
and left by water,
plywood obeying the rule of commerce....
When a decade later I went home
to the delta of hardwood,
a big clearing welcomed me;
no longer the unending sheet of green.
(*Daydream of Ants*, p.30)

The above confirms the abundance of wood in the Niger Delta as a part of the natural resources occasioning the scrambling by multinational companies for possession in the area. The African Timber and Plywood Company (AT&P), located in the sleepy backwater called Sapele, is the multinational cabal trading in the lucrative wood products.

Also, petrochemical products form the major commodities being manufactured in the Niger Delta region. An evidence of their abundance are reflected below:

This share of paradise,
the delta of my birth,
reels from an immeasurable wound.
Barrels of alchemical draughts flow
from this hurt to the unquestioning world ...
My nativity gives immortal pain
masked in barrels of-
I stew in the womb of fortune.
(*Delta Blues & Home Songs*, p.21)

Historically, the Niger Delta question in the context of the present struggle for the emancipation of its people was not conspicuous in the colonial Nigeria. However, it became a question, albeit a fundamental issue, in the post Nigerian socio-economic and socio-political setting in particular, from the early 1990s. In specific terms, the Niger Delta question became a national and more importantly an international phenomenon with the consciousness of its people in particular, as the radical elements among its elites articulated their people's poor living conditions, in the context of a land flowing with milk and honey. Anchoring this struggle was Ken Saro-Wiwa under the platform of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP). Biodun Jeyifo (1998) sees the endeavour of Saro-Wiwa and MOSOP as a legacy that Africa, the third world and the developing nations should emulate to liberate their

oppressed people from the shackles of impoverishment borne out of exploitation. Alluding to this position, Charles Bodunde (2002: 196) posits that Saro-Wiwa and MOSOP's efforts are human rights struggle "imperative in seeking to restore the people's well-being". Femi Abodunrin (2001) describes Saro-Wiwa's life and writing in theoretical terms within the larger context of what he calls the tripartite phenomena of "politics as material for the writer ('the writer in politics'), politics as a threatening power over the pen ('The writer under politics'), and politics as a viewpoint held by the writer ('The writer with a politics')" (p.45). From whichever perspective we view the Niger Delta question, it suffices to perceive it as a historical phenomenon whose analysis and resolution are better articulated from the materialist dimension.

Contemporary issues and the Niger Delta crisis

The history of the Niger Delta crisis is the history of capitalist struggle. On the other hand, it is the quest motif of an oppressed people in postcolonial Nigeria to procure freedom and assert a meaningful identity and a more meaningful condition of living for themselves.

It is imperative to situate our analysis of the Niger Delta situation within the purview of dialectical materialism. Balogun (1990:14) contends that the theory of contradictions forms the essence of dialectics. The teachings of Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels metamorphosed into dialectical materialism which is a description of an economic domination of an "inferior" being by a "superior" power. What obtains in the Nigeria Delta region is a question of interpreting the provisions of dialectical materialism as a philosophy of exploitation and oppression. Thus the fundamental contemporary issues in the Niger Delta region are political marginalisation, economic alienation, environmental devastation and pollution, social injustice and deprivation, man's inhumanity to man and an endless list of the allies of these social-economic idiosyncrasies. In Marxist dialectics, the economic situation is the base around which other aspects of entity – politics, the educational system, the judiciary etc., etc. – constitute an elaborate superstructure.

Through his poetry, Tanure Ojaide succinctly articulates all of the above social features in the context of his Niger Delta home. Through metaphors, images and other literary devices, he takes us to his Delta landscape where the political participation of his people until recently had almost gone into oblivion. We could find in him, the voice of a poet telling freedom for his people. Could there be any better way of describing the ordeal of his Delta kith and kin in the

extract below other than political marginalisation? “Nigeria sleeps in a makeshift grave” (*Delta Blues* p.24) is a symbol of a people already buried while still living. Also, “A gunful of children broke the tetrarch’s eggs” (p.24) symbolises efforts made by the people to decry this political abandonment. “You can tell from one stone country” (p.24) on the other hand, is a metaphor for people living in psychological and spiritual prison as we find in Alex La Guma’s classic illustration of apartheid South Africa, *The Stone Country* (1967). The degree of the political marginalisation witnessed by the people of the Niger Delta is more nauseating as their land is the custodian and major supplier of the oil wealth with which the entire Nigeria nation is run and sustained. The poet says of the new political capital Abuja, it “is where chiefs celebrate on the sweat of slaves.” (p.41) “The sweat of slaves” here equates the negligence with which the Niger Delta people are subjected, while they are represented by the hare and the chiefs (the powers that be in Aso-Rock), are represented by the hyena in “this is where the hyena cornered the hare.” (p.41) Sample-extracts of the images of political marginalisation in the anthology *Delta Blues and Home Songs* are here and there but for the constraint of space, the analysis would shift to a discussion of economic alienation.

It is incontrovertible to assert that the driving force of imperialism is economic domination and oppression. Imperialism of the 19th century colonial age or imperialism and those of post-colonial Nigeria as we find in the Niger Delta experience are undoubtedly motivated and sustained by economic factors. Economic alienation is a conspicuous product of economic imperialism. The desire to maximize profit by the multinational cabal is responsible for the impoverishment of the Niger Delta people even on their own soil and in the midst of plenty. Tanure Ojaide in his characteristic manner does not mince words in making his audience see the pauperization of the Niger Delta people by the multinational companies – the chiefs of whom are Shell-BP and Chevron in the oil sector while the African Timber and Plywood Company, Sapele represents the timber sector. “Robber baron championing charity” (*Daydream of Ants...*p.55) is a symbol of exploitation which produces “workers will chase out drones” (p.55) The latter extract is an image of economic alienation. In Sembene Ousmane’s *God’s Bits of Wood* (1962) we see the railway workers in the colonial Senegal rejecting the oppressive maneuvering of the white man symbolised in Isnard the foreman. In Ojaide’s *Daydream of Ants and Other Poems* (1997) from where this extract is taken, the reference to “workers” here is in the context of company workers who also function as the economically

alienated natives. It is the same symbol of economic alienation that Ojaide attempts to pursue in “I beat a calabash and sing for every ear, but I am not a beggar” (*Delta Blues...* p.34). A calabash and a beggar are used in this context as metaphors for somebody not economically relevant or viable. The relationship between the people of the Niger Delta and the multinational companies in the region is not better than that of a beggar and his benefactor. This is obviously a development that is undesirable for the Niger Delta people.

A product of the political marginalisation and economic alienation witnessed by the people is social injustice and deprivation. In spite of the gracious blessing of nature to the people, they still suffer in plenty. Until recently when government presence is just being scantily and sparsely felt in the different communities of the Niger Delta region, their experience had been the story of woe and wretchedness. Again the poet unmistakably expresses this as he says:

But what of the many proud names that flaunted the flag before the world?
Destroyed by barbarians invited to be allies. What of the heart
that expelled dirt despite the allure of making love in mud?
Sunk into a naira-bed of stench.
What of deference to elders, mothers, children and the disabled of the
land? Strangled by testy nerves. (*Delta Blues...* p.37)

The above is a handsome and wholesome description of the social life of the people. A contrast of the living condition of the people with the managers of the multinational companies shows a high degree of compartmentalisation. While “what of the heart that expelled dirt” (p.37) represents the shanty and ghettoish life style of the Niger Delta people, “barbarians invited to be allies” (p.37) symbolises the administrators of the multinational companies and “allies” (p.37) symbolises the joint trade partnership of the Nigerian power machinery with those multinational companies.

Perhaps a very traumatic experience of the Niger Delta people is the environmental devastation and pollution of their land by the exploiting conspirators – the Nigerian military dictatorship and their civilian allies in conjunction with the multinational companies. The people’s experience is more traumatic as theirs could be described as “multi-tragedy” – exploitation of the human and natural resources, inability to have access to the throne of economic and political grace and a pathetic destruction of their land with little or no economic compensation. Detesting the conspiracy of the government and its allies for devastating the land, Ojaide says:

From the year soldiers broke out of their barracks
to share the pumpkin and march in a mad frenzy,
the streets felt crushed by their loaded boots.
There's never been a bright day since the first
decree-only soldiers have seen a full moon all the
years. Roads became a sting of potholes.
Water hyacinths closed waterways for boats.
(*Delta Blues & Home Songs*, p. 51)

There is no doubt in the fact that, the above extract summarises the destruction of the Niger Delta landscape by its invaders – the government and its allies. “From the year soldiers broke out of their barracks” (p.51) has dual interpretation. Since the soldiers were the political rulers of the Nigerian-nation state during the period under study, Ojaide’s use of soldiers is an appropriate description of their coming and the subsequent evils perpetrated by them. On the other hand, the phrase is a validation of the presence of the multinational companies and their exploitative ventures in the region. The effect of their advent is tantamount to the wretch they made of the land.

A final contemporary issue in the Niger Delta that we would like to discuss in this paper is the incarceration and in extreme cases the killing of the Niger Delta people. In particular, the state murder of Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight other martyrs of the Ogonis by Abacha’s Provisional Ruling Council is the peak of literary censorship. Though the act was a setback in the struggle of the Niger Delta people for their emancipation, it is no doubt a morale booster for those left behind to keep the flag of political and economic emancipation flying. As a matter of fact, the likes of Tanure Ojaide and other human rights activists are not relenting in the struggle for the meaningful survival of their people.

An expression of this resoluteness is found in Ojaide’s “Wails” where he mourns his departed compatriots symbolised in Saro-Wiwa and the other eight martyrs of the Niger Delta. While he mourns these martyrs, he also reiterates the needs for the world to know more about the Niger Delta saga. Thus he says:

If I don't open my mouth,
I will be a dumb-and-deaf
who's unable to forewarn
after a bad dream (*Delta Blues...p.17*)

Ordinarily, the gruesome murder of his colleagues would have instilled a terrible fear in him to shut his mouth. Rather than shutting his mouth, he opens it wide to talk more about what others had died for. That is a symbol of bravery and continuity. No wonder, criticism is employed by him as a potent weapon of liberation in the Niger Delta experience.

Criticism and the emergence of a new Niger Delta

Balogun (1990) opines that: “art which is not committed to an assessment of practical social realities is a purposeless art”. The above is the implied and applied function of criticism. In particular, the art of Tanure Ojaide studied here validates the belief that there is a close affinity between art and society. Though his works studied here are anthologies of poems, they are products of a sturdy creativity by a critical mind. In the struggle for political emancipation and the liberation of the down trodden, authors, critics and other human rights activists suffer incarceration, murder and other forms of literary censorship. However, to them the end justifies the means. Tanure Ojaide in the contexts of his *Delta Blues & Homes Songs* (1997) *Daydream of Ants and Other Poems* (1997) proves to the world that criticism is very germane to the emancipation of the down trodden. His publication of the two anthologies was quite symbolic and historic. This is so because they symbolise a post Saro-Wiwa Niger Delta struggle. They are particularly symbolic because it is after the demise of those martyrs that the attention of the world and particularly the interest of the born-again Nigerian political machinery are more vigorously awakened. A noticeable effect of this endeavour could be the establishment of the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) and the review of the revenue sharing formula with a strong emphasis on oil derivational formula. The effect of criticism on the Niger Delta struggle is specifically embedded in the subtitle “I carry no weapon.” The subtitle itself is antithetical. He says he carries no weapon but his “weapon” of poetry is stronger than the weapon of war symbolised in guns:

Let those who will plot against
me open their mouths helplessly as if buried by ripe
pepper fruit.
Their secret will spill into the street
& abort before their unbehaving eyes;
they will never reach their goal
of hurting me and celebrating a coup ...
I will foil their stratagems

with a steam of songs that please my god. (*Delta Blues & Home Songs*:p.36)

“Abort before their unbelieving eyes” (p.36) is a symbol of defeat. How does he hope to defeat his enemies when he carries no weapon. The foiling of his enemies stratagems “with a stream of songs” implies the use of his art (critical poetry) to dethrone oppression in his Niger Delta region. Tanure Ojaide in his two texts studied in this paper calls himself a singer and his work, song, which in his own context and by implication our context are critical materials valuable in liberating his oppressed and impoverished people of Niger Delta.

Conclusion

What we have done so far in this paper is to examine the place of art in society. Our conviction is that art is a product of social dynamics. From the foregoing discussion, Tanure Ojaide uses his poetry by means of various literary devices to accede to the interdependence of art and society.

Throughout the two anthologies, we see the coalition of the artist and his art at work to bring to the limelight a society foregrounded by forces ready to send it to extinction. In the contexts of the two collections, we could be right to describe Tanure Ojaide as a poet-crusader who uses his poetry to mediate and intervene in social contradictions as noticeable in the pre-Saro-Wiwa Niger Delta. In other words, his art transcends the theory of art for art’s sake, but his is art for transformation and illumination. This is visible as we appreciate the embittered pre-Saro-Wiwa Niger Delta translating into a better post-Saro-Wiwa Niger Delta home.

Notes

1. Described by Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka as an intellectual and spiritual dwarf, Sani Abacha's unparalleled profligacy has attracted a range of condemnation and psychoanalytical studies. See, among others, Femi Abodunrin, "Oratory in the tongue: Ken Saro-Wiwa's *A Month and a Day* and *The writer in politics*", *Journal of Humanities*, No. 15, 2001

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