LWATI: A Journal of Contemporary Research, 7(4), 128-136, 2010
ISSN: 1813-2227

Paradoxes of Nationhood: Despondency and Belief in Tanure Ojaide's Delta Blues and *Home Songs*

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ABSTRACT

It is an incontrovertible fact that the Nigerian nation depends, in fact, survives on the wealth of the oil-rich Niger Delta. The intriguing paradox however, is that this most productive region is the least developed, as its wealth is used to develop the rest of the federation. This is the reason for the unrest in the region which has taken worrisome dimensions in recent times. The poetry of Tanure Ojaide, and indeed most poets from the region, is a reaction to this situation which they see as not only grossly unfair, but also patently aggressive. Delta Blues and Home Songs is Ojaide's reaction to the killing of Ken Saro-Wiwa, a poet and martyred campaigner for a more equitable allocation of national resources. This paper shows how Ojaide balances acerbic criticism of a cannibalistic and cabalistic national leadership, with a patriotic belief in the corporate existence of this same nation. The paper shows that the poet's interrogation of the Nigerian situation is his way of expressing his desire for the continued existence of his fatherland which he sees as capable of greater accomplishments.

I

The blurb of *Delta Blues and Home Songs (DB&HS)* describes it as "a poetic diatribe against the environmental degradation of the Niger Delta and the unjust system which makes the people to be chief mourners and paupers in the midst of their oil wealth". The fulminating invectives poured on the Nigerian state, through its political leadership, and the understated, yet present belief in the corporate existence of the same nation underline the paradoxical nature of this book. It begins as if its author would rather have nothing to do with his nation from which, incidentally he had "fled", yet it also contains poems which mutedly though, preach hope and salvation for the poet's nation.

II

The paradox begins even in the phrase "Delta Blues". The delta is for the poet, an image of security and plenitude. In the Ojaide oeuvre the delta, as Olafioye (2000) notes, is "an economic, social and cultural life force…. a life-giver, a mother-earth, benevolence to the destitute, a reviver of forlorn people" (11). For this place of such positive attributes to give rise to such a depressive mood therefore can only be contradictory. The paradox is also highlighted by the general recognition that the delta is probably the most naturally endowed part of Nigeria. That this abundant wealth is not harnessed for the wellbeing of the people from whose lands it literarily oozes, is nothing but paradoxical.

These contradictions though, are highlighted because the poet believes he has a duty to sing normalcy to a world that is becoming less than ideal. He notes in "Poachers" for example that: "The world's now upside-down ─ / we must bring it back to its feet, upright" (71). These lines refer to the duty of the poet to work towards the enthronement of moral values in the society. Niyi Osundare, a kindred spirit with Ojaide makes the same point about artists generally in an interview with A. S. Adagbonyin (1996): "I believe very much that there is a lot the unites the world, and what art should do is to promote those things. Politicians divide the world; I think artists should really re-unite" (23). Additionally, the poet's insistence on doing the "upright" thing for his "world" shows a patriotic fervour that belies the generally condemnatory tone of *DB&HS*.

"Seasons" confirms the patriotism of the poet as he condemns the social ills of his nation with a view to correcting them. With the Delta as his base and focus, the persona tells of his disillusionment in the nation of his birth. He notes that when the delta "waters sustained colouring from oil slick", as a result of the oil exploitation activities of the multinationals, the people, patriotic democrats as they are, "selected delegates to take [their] prayers to Abuja, / but guns scared them from the promised land" (15). Obviously the guns refer to the military which was in power for over thirty years. The point here is that while the people believe in the process of dialogue in seeking solutions to their problems, the military authorities make that patriotic desire impossible as they scare off the delegation. That has been the bane of successive governments in Nigeria; the unwillingness to listen to the genuine wishes of the people, especially of the smallest ethnic groups. The poem continues to catalogue these ills including minority marginalization: "But we faced only one clouded direction / and failed to catch the cries of minority kins" (15).

The problems continue to bedevil the nation because of its dishonest and self-seeking leadership. As has become normal with Ojaide, the leadership is referred to in very uncomplimentary animal imagery: "We didn't need to follow the hyena to its house / to confirm the trickster-cannibal we entrusted our fate"(15). The cannibal motif shall recur again and again in *DB & HS* in

reference to the nation killing her own children. The cumulative effect of this bad leadership is the lack of trust and confidence in the nation. In *The Fate of Vultures*, the poet shows this by showing the image of the national totem, the eagle, being shorn of its feathers. In "Seasons", the poet uses another national icon, the flag:

No one doubts anymore the truth of where we lie.The flag we fly is a whetstone for matchets often bloodied in closed-door rites… (15).

The unfortunate incidents of the seemingly never-ending ethnic/religious bloody clashes are the issue here. Many years after these lines were written, the scenario has not changed. If anything, especially in Ojaide's delta, it may have taken varied and frightening dimensions.

The cannibal motif earlier spoken about is the result of the execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa, a writer and environmental rights campaigner, by the government of General Abacha in November 1995. The poems of the "Delta Blues" section of *DB&HS* are Ojaide's reaction to that killing. "Wails", "Immortal grief", "Delta blues", "Elegy for nine warriors", and "Journeying" especially, deal directly with this subject. In "Wails", a poem with a strong traditional flavour, the poet mourns the death of Saro-Wiwa whom he compares to an elephant, so great was his worth to the to community of writers:

If I don't open my mouth I will be a dumb-and-deaf who's unable to forewarn after a bad dream. The world needs to hear this: there's one absent in the assembly, the singers will never be complete without the elephant in their midst.

I must raise the loud wail, so that each will reflect his fate. Take care of your people, they are your people, the boa thoughtlessly devours its own offspring's, Nigeria's boa-constrictor in the world map (17 - 18).

The persona in "Wails" comes across as a distraught bereaved person loudly bemoaning his fate. Traditionally, African mourners sing their panegyrics in honour of the departed. Ruth Finnegan's *Oral Literature in Africa*, (154 - 156) lists several qualities of traditional elegies that we can find in Ojaide's "Wails": the use of praise-names to refer to the deceased, who is the focal point of the whole song; the laudatory tone used to refer to the deceased, and his (the deceased's) identification with one or several ancestors. In "Wails", Saro-Wiwa is referred to as an "elephant", "the warrior-chief", and "the hardwood shield", praise names which exemplify his worth. We also find apt reference to *Ominigbo*, the ancient Bini diviner who foresaw the coming of the white men to the Benin kingdom, but was instead executed for his warning. His death did not prevent his prophecy from being fulfilled. Saro-Wiwa's death, the poem tells us will not stop the vision of the slain poet:

After the warrior-chief's fallsomebody else will carry the standard---Boro left for Saro-Wiwa to take over,the stump will grow into another *iroko* (19).

Saro-Wiwa himself is quoted by Maier in *This House has Fallen: Nigeria in Crisis* as stating after his conviction, that he was "a man of ideas in and out

of prison --- [his] ideas will live" (109). Okome in "The Fear of Colonization: Reading Ken Saro-Wiwa's Political Thoughts in the Public Spheres of Nigeria's Politics of the Late 20th Century", also quotes Saro-Wiwa's retort to the tribunal (as recorded in *Africa Today*): "You can kill the messenger, you cannot kill the message, you cannot kill the message" (93). These quotes emphasize the belief in the invincibility of the message, the ideas and vision of the diviner-poet. The current and recurrent unrest in the Niger Delta, a decade after Saro-Wiwa, could be seen as a vindication of his position.

The poem also refers to Saro-Wiwa in very laudatory language --- "they have murdered a favourite son" (18), "Nigeria has lost her true diviner" (19) --- and recaptures the global protests that attended his killing: Capitals carry his pictures to the clamour of marchers the world rebounds with tearful wails --- the death of a king, president or general will not raise a tenth of this wail (19). The prophetic nature of Ojaide's poetry again plays out in the case, ironically, of General Abacha whose own death in June 1998 did not raise any wails at all except in his immediate family.

Meanwhile the mourner-patriot continues to count his losses:

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

Two things immediately strike the reader of these lines: the musicality of the parallelisms, and the inter-textual reference to Saro-Wiwa's own literary creations. The repetition of the rhetorical questions in parallel structures, apart from lending the poem the garb of a traditional mourning song, also helps in stating the worth of the deceased. The mourner bemoans his colossal loss in a series of graded questions beginning with a personal deprivation and climaxing on a more public and nationalistic note.

A traditional mourning song will usually allude to the deceased's good deeds that are left behind to speak for him. In Saro-Wiwa's case, Ojaide remembers some of his numerous works which he creatively incorporates in his questions. Among Saro-Wiwa's works were *Basi and Company*, a farcical drama which was adapted into a television drama series of the same title; *Sozaboy: A novel in rotten English*; *A Forest of Flowers*, a collection of short stories, and *On a Darkling Plain*, an autobiographical account of the Nigerian civil war. The poem "Wails" ends as it begins: with reference to the indispensability of the slain poet:

> The singers will never be complete without the elephant in their midst. *Uhaghwa,* give me the insuppressible voice to raise this wail to the world's end (19).

"Delta blues", like "When green was the lingua franca", juxtaposes the situation of the Niger delta area before and after the coming of the

multinational oil companies. The latter poem, for instance, begins almost in story form:

My childhood stretched one unbroken park teeming with life. In the forest green was the lingua franca with many dialects (12).

The natural, unpolluted state of the tropical and mangrove forests of the area provided for the inhabitants as they peacefully coexisted with their habitat. But the coming of the oil prospectors shattered that idyllic environment:

Then Shell broke the bond with quakes and a hell of flares. Stoking a hearth under God's very behind! (13).

We note the change of fortunes indicated by the word "then". In the context, it is a transition word showing a change of direction, indeed, an about-face from the earlier state of affairs. Even the name "shell" has an ominous connotation in the Niger delta context for it forebodes the "explosion of shells" (13) that Ojaide notes a few lines later. Apart from this connotation of ordnance or armaments, foretelling the violence that has become the norm in the region, "shell" also evokes the meaning of hollow emptiness as if the intention is to suck life out of the area and then leave an empty lifeless shell. Indeed, that meaning may have given rise to the images of desolation, despair and destruction that are found in:

I see victims of arson wherever my restless soles take me to bear witness. The Ethiope waterfront wiped out by prospectors ---so many trees beheaded and streams mortally poisoned (13).

The use of these personifications enables the poet to make the destruction more painful: "beheaded" and "poisoned" being more brutal than just "cut down" or "polluted" which may have been used in their places.

The juxtaposition of the state of the delta before and after the arrival of the oil-exploiting companies produces yet another paradox. Writing about "Delta Blues", Charles Bodunde in "Tanure Ojaide's poetry and the delta landscape: A study of *Delta Blues and Home Songs*" notes that the poem "amplifies the delta paradox of hunger in the middle of feasting"(202). This is clear from the first stanza where Ojaide shows a deltaic paradise mortally wounded by the oil companies with the connivance of an acquiescent world:

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 that lights up its life in a blind trust.The inheritance I sat on for centuries now crushes my body and soul (21).

The poem then chronicles the resources of the delta lost to the "cabal of brokers" (21), the "prospectors, and money-mongers" (22) who have undermined the economic viability of the commoners. Salt, fish, palm oil, yams, garri, plants and birds are some of the items listed as lost because of oil exploitation activities. The poem thus raises the issues of ecological damage, resource control, and minority marginalization. All these problems, the poem sarcastically identifies as "the constitutional reward of plentitude" (22).

Having listed the delta's problems the poem identifies Saro-Wiwa as a potential saviour cut down by corroborators of the cabal, and gives, as in "Immortal grief", a few more details of the hanging:

The standard-bearer's betrayed in the house by thieves, relatives, & the reapers of the delta crop could care less for minority rights! And I am assaulted by visions of the foreign hangman on a hot Friday noon, the administrator witnessing failed snaps, the cries in the garden streets of the port and the silence in homes that speak loud in grief that deluged the land's memory (22).

The hanging of the "standard-bearer" led to the outpouring of grief as expressed in the last three lines of the extract above. In the expression, "silence …that speak[s] loud / in grief" (22), there is yet another of the complex paradoxes that define the life of the people of the Niger Delta. One notes the deployment of images of death as encoded in the word choices. For instance, "reapers of the delta crop" brings to mind the grim reaper, death himself, and the words "hangmen", "snaps", "cries", "silence", and "grief" all conjure up pictures of death, dying, and the aftermath of death. The poem ends with yet another pair of paradoxes in showing the superiority of the murdered over their murderers, and the burden that the delta resources have become on the people:

These nine mounds woke into another world, ghostly kings scornful of their murderers. The inheritance I have been blessed with now crushes my body and soul (23).

A major feature of Ojaide's poetry is the repetition of certain lines, with slight variations, usually at the beginning and end of the poem. The repeated lines emphasize the message of the poem, which in this case is the antithetical situation in which a blessing turns out to be a malevolent force. This unacceptable phenomenon which rankles in the poet, is what Saro-Wiwa fought and died for. Generally, the poetry of *DB&HS* is strident and harsh, corresponding to the very harsh reality (of the Abacha government) that it portrays. Shija equally makes this observation when he notes that;

there appears to be an aesthetic co-relationship between the physical destruction of the Delta landscape and the decay of social life of the common people in the area, the state murder of Ken Saro-Wiwa also correlates with the shift from Ojaide's temperate agitation for the rights of the Niger Delta people to a harsh and combative mood. Henceforth, Ojaide's poetry becomes more blunt and bereft of its ornamentation…. (198).

The lack of ornamentation Shija speaks of could be a deliberate effort on the part of the poet to show the reality of his society as starkly as he finds it. David Evans, an anti-apartheid South African poet who found himself in a situation of harsh reality believes that poetry born of such circumstances cannot be beautiful. In "If Poets Must Have Flags", anthologized in Barry Feinberg's *Poets to the People: South African Freedom Poems,* he speaks of the need to dispense with embellishments and, instead give vent to feelings, crude and raw as they may be. For him the poet must expose the societal viscera for all to see. The society must face its entrails however unpleasant and unsavoury they may look:

They ask for graceful poetry to decorate their tyranny poems to make the hideous picturesque entrails look like streamers blood like wine death like

sleep. We refuse. We'll go ugly and free exhuming the corpses releasing the rot revealing the holes ripped by the shot. (20 - 21).

While it could be argued that the situation in Apartheid South Africa was a more compelling one for the poet, it cannot be denied that Nigeria under Abacha was becoming as dangerous for anybody as decidedly anti-government as the poet.

III

The stridency of the "Delta Blues" section of *DB&HS* gives way to a more temperate poetic tone in the "Home Songs" section. The harsh tone of the "Delta Blues" section of the text is a reaction to the harsh reality of the desecration and despoliation of the Delta landscape. It is fitting therefore that the tone changes when the poet turns his attention to more pleasant issues. "Serenading the republic" thus, is a song celebration of the triumph of the Nigerian spirit over adversity. From the imprecations and righteous indignation of the first section, one would have thought that the fire-breathing poet cannot find any cause to sing with a joyful heart. This is actually what we find in this poem as the poet sets about the praise of the Nigerian spirit of quick recovery from, especially self-inflicted tragedies.

The poem begins with the realization of the full potentials of the nation which he identifies so much with:

This abused soil, the republic of my soul, tingles with warmth & spontaneous explosion. The heart throbs; each reinforces the other in a possessing rally. What's beyond reach, if we build a pyramid into the clouds? (92)

This heart-throbbing beginning prepares the reader for the very patriotically positive things said about the nation. The paradoxes that we have identified as vital to the Ojaide oeuvre are also deployed to effect in this poem. In the first four lines for example, we note the warmth and spontaneity that the poet insists exists in his land in spite of its "abused" state.

The second stanza also is actually a series of paradoxical statements that show the victory of the Nigerian spirit over debilitating conditions:

You would not think this is a barren country with this momentous harvest, you would not think this is a rotten place with the glistening display, you would not think this is an unhappy land with this carnival of laughter, you would not think these sky-blazing eagles were hatched on low brushes (92).

The recognition of the unfavourable conditions shows that the poet understands the inadequacies of his society, and that makes the triumph even more praiseworthy. This accounts for his equating of that experience to seeing "a giant recoup / after being on life-support", or witnessing… a dry river overflow from a season's storm…I have witnessed pessimists break
the jinx of failure (92 - 93).

This realization of seemingly impossible situations in the extract above portends hints of the poet's optimism. All hope is not lost, the poet seems to

be saying, and to further boost his belief that the task is a communal one; he notes the contributions of every member of society: I am one of millions keeping the night awake with songs, I have seen every face brighten in the dark (93)

The celebratory mood of the persona, as seen in the extract above is the result of a feeling of the rejuvenation he feels. In spite of tottering on the brink of self destruction, the poet's nation somehow always manages to pull back and survive. This brinkmanship gives the poet the hope of a rebirth, and a new beginning. It seems the nation's ability to reclaim for itself a fresh start after near calamity, imbues the poet-persona with a new vitality, a fresh vigor, and renewed zeal:

The touch of this soil multiplies my energy into a cosmic piston & I am young again happy to reclaim my height, my praise-name in the crowd (93).

It is in keeping with the complex paradox of the Ojaide vision in *DB & HS* that this poem of hope, revitalization, and rebirth ends this volume that began on such a harsh and condemnatory note.

IV

This paper has shown the poet's patriotism as he alternately expresses despondency and belief in his nation. Paradox, as employed by the poet symbolizes the love/hate relationship the poet has for his nation. On the one hand he finds a land so richly blessed and showing the occasional spark of potential; on the other hand, there is a nation so intent on self destruction that it is a wonder it still exists.

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