

The Prophet, The Pirate and The Witch

A narrative poem

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Abstract

This thesis comprises a narrative poem and a commentary that traces its inspiration.

The struggle for the control of the Niger Delta has fascinated historians, anthropologists, journalists and Nigerian writers, poets and memoirists; *The Prophet, The Pirate and The Witch* is a unique narrative contribution to this intriguing subject at a time when the region has become an ongoing trouble spot and flashpoint of conflict between Christian, Islamic and African traditional cultures.

The protagonist of the narrative, Isaiah Kosoko, becomes a prophet to escape the clutches of Falila Soares, the witch who loves him. Isaiah's best friend Segida Okokobioko marries Falila on the rebound but is forced to become a pirate/freedom fighter – fighting the state and oil conglomerates for causing pollution and unfair distribution of resources from oil wells. In the midst of the love triangle, land and people suffer.

The critical commentary provides a context for the inspiration, crafting and interpretation of the poem. It explores my debt to the Bible, situating my narrative in relation to the similarly inspired poetic works of Christopher Okigbo of Nigeria and the Ghanaian-born Caribbean Kwame Dawes. It also examines Nigerian poets across four generations and demonstrates my indebtedness to the political and social agitation that has been a major aspect of their work.

I am particularly interested in the tradition of poetic prophecy, exploring the figure of the poet–prophet as a commentator on, and an instrument of, social–economic–political–cultural change. The metaphors that might position some Nigerian poets as possible prophets, others as pirates and yet others as witches, have been sketched. The prophetic agitation for change as an intrinsic part of African orality and its influence on modern African writers has inspired this creative work, which uses a written mode to express an oral form, in a prose–poetic amalgam typical of biblical narratives.

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The Prophet, The Pirate and The Witch

A narrative poem

Prologue

To the bones that weep

I will sing to *Olodumare*, who made all things,
the tale aflame in the crucible of my heart.

I will pestle consonants and vowels in a rhythm
till idioms stir and begin to live. I will leap

as one intoxicated with the treasured wine
of the oracles. I will roar like Sango

the god of thunder, whose axe sculptures
mountains in the sun. I will sing

of ancestral wells, I will sing of *Yemonja's*
breasts. I will sing of the ways

of '*merindinlogun*', I will sing of the sacred
secrets of *Ifa*. I will sing of the wells

of knowledge now forgotten like roots
in Sahara sands. I will sing an elegy

of coastlands where bones weep. I will sing
of lands mined and shelled in oil, wasted,

so 'sweet and light crude' can flow, where
life bleeds and souls decay like seeds

planted in fetid soil. How long till I'm weary
of songs? How many more messiahs?

xxx

Who should bear the blame of ruined lives?
This pawn-play of masters who insatiably

contend on the oil-soaked chessboard of the dead
and dying, those without reprieve? Our

sacrifices are warm on clay altars, the blood
we shed thicker than oil in our mayhem

of lust for power and struggle for wealth, yet
the gods have not smiled. How long

will the land languish as souls sigh and youths
are spirited away to an eternity of agony

to lament their unfulfilled dreams. I will sing
for the living who envy the dead in five-

hundred-billion-dollar bottomless black-hole
greed, where youths wait in vain to live.

Olodumare, how long? We cover dead skin
with fine robes as marrow wastes in toxic

fumes that serpentine heavenward as bones crackle
in the heat, flesh sizzles and our tears fry;

how long shall we sing, bruised, crushed, throttled?
We grasp at pipes, till rivers of blood flow

with the devils' excrement—the oil that they seek.
I will cry like Job in Satan's smouldering furnace,

I will cry against the ravaging AIDS, the damaging
poverty, against the odious arrest of my song

in flaring gas, I will cry till aghast with deep rage,
till my tears irrigate this forlorn earth; perhaps,

ample tears will salve addiction to this opium of oil;
let me cry freedom, freedom for Niger Delta

—that cesspool where oil addicts shit and vomit,
yet insist on more. Let me mourn the graduates

and undergraduates out of the colleges, destitute,
jobless, destined to a bleak future; let me

voice the anxieties of civil servants pushing
the system, hobnobbing with conmen

hunting for scams; let me speak for desperate traders
on the fringes, tending their cancerous anger.

Shall we continue this song in the sun,
with muddied lingerie worse than

menstrual rags? Shall we dance with shamed
and tattered robes that tear in acid rains

that burn in Angola, Equatorial Guinea, Congo,
Gabon and, above all, Mother Nigeria?

Part One

1. Lagos 1993

*Eko Akete Ilu Ogbon, to ba duro ko sora
Eko o gba gbere, Eko o gba gbere rara o¹*

In slowly softening lilac mist, light rays
rip clouds like fingers cotton wool,

Lagos, the ancient city of our fathers waits;
she waits for sunrise, for the horizon

to lift its mask, for the day to break out,
for dust and rust to drift in the air,

for birds to twitter and soar, for the rush
and crush to begin; she waits till

‘bus boys’ begin to yell their destinations:
Ojuelegba, Yaba, CMS, Oshodi;

And bodies will cram into tin boxes — ‘Danfo’
will pack in sixteen with bus boys

dangling by the tail for tickets; ‘Molue’
will load up ninety-nine for its space

of forty nine; in the roasting heat and sweat,
chaos will crawl in the sun; in crowded

streets, urchins will hustle, dart, skip
and hop over potholes, daring traffic

and death, peddling pirated books, newspapers,
CDs, DVDs, cassettes, cell phones, fake drugs.

Fraudsters with sugar-coated tongues will sell
cure-all potions, African Viagra and charms.

Drivers honk and honk; tyres squeal, rubber burns
in the smog of running engines, as eyes smart,

and nostrils drip; men, women and children
will flood the streets like termites in holes,

with deft hands and swift feet. Evangelists, too,
will jump from bus to bus brandishing Bibles,

¹ Lagos, the home of wisdom, if you stand, be sure to stand with care, Lagos tolerates no fool.

spitting hell and fire: 'Lagos is a talking drum
without a drumming stick; its rhythms

have faded; Lagos is a book of clichés and platitudes
that no-one wants to read; can you not see

how Lagos serenades the rich and ignores
the poor; have you not heard of sheep

without a shepherd, waiting for a messiah?
That is Lagos, a ship at full sail, heading

for the rocks—yes, heading for damnation, final
destruction, unless political leaders repent.'

An old woman with blazing eyes concurs,
'Don't scare an old woman with a huge penis!

We have seen it all; these leaders are witches
and wizards; they will never repent of looting

and their *do or die* elections of terror; like
a goitre that engulfs a neck, they are entrenched

in wickedness; even now, their kidnappers
are deployed to prowl to abduct man, woman

or child for ritual sacrifices and quick money;
so you who claim to be men, hold on, hold

your balls with both hands, brush not against
strangers lest your balls vanish into calabashes

spewing fresh devilish juju money; and you
who claim to be real women, hold on, hold on

to your breasts against foreign hands, for shameless
leaders have raped Lagos. They will rape us all.'

2. The making of the prophet

At twelve I began to learn the secrets of *Ifa*,
secrets you never tell; after school,

I would sit in father's room and watch him light
incense amid musty smells of ancient books,

fat books that sat pompously on high shelves,
beyond reach, books I had not begun to read:

Seven Books of Moses; Secrets of the Kabala;
Ancient Oriental Practice; 'They wait for you!'

father would whisper. Father was a mystic
with a marketing degree earned in London

with an eye on the oil companies that were the talk
of the nation, in every city. He would remove

his red and yellow mats and the beaten leather
of antelopes—his hunting trophies—from the floor;

he would mark the ground with chalk and align
triangles and squares with the glow of the sun.

He would anoint me with oil from a pouch;
he taught me, not with seashells or cowries

but with white paper, folded in four, each sheet
hiding a symbol. '*Ifa* is mathematical,'

father would explain: 'It's a spiritual code
that rules our universe.' Later, we would sit

listening to spirit voices, to the pulse of our
street, to the heartbeat of Lagos, to hawkers

calling their trade, cars driving past, dogs barking
at strangers, radios crackling, children wailing,

women chit-chatting—melodies of my youth
that contest the secrets I share with father, secrets

that mother, strictly Catholic, must never hear.
In father's desk one day I saw an envelope

with my name, my heart skipped a beat
when the words leapt at me: 'He is a prophet...'

3. Home, sweet home

It was how Ruth said it, ruthless concern
wrinkly on her brow, her scarf hung

angled like a soldier's beret as she wept;
quaking mildly, breasts heaving.

Ruth, my mother's best friend at school
where they taught nursery, spoke of Jesus Christ,

who delivers from hell; she spoke
of the cross and pain that took sin away,

the blood that paid eternal debt and restores.
I would become born again, if I accepted

Christ. I would become forgiven, liberated
and free. Her words were seeds on freshly

turned soil; her tears were dew on my heart;
I wept. Her passion was more than mother

ever showed: when I asked mother at home,
she said, 'Son, the Bible is life,' but dad insisted,

'Son! Be wise; learn to tell good from evil!'
Then he dashed off to take up a job with a newly

arrived oil company, to mother's distaste.
I lamented life, at that fork of indecision between

my mystic father and catholic mother.
I watched the masks each wore—their anger,

obstinacy and guilt—but I blended in, as a river
into a harsh sea, as their beliefs tore them apart.

'How dare your dad, in good conscience, leave me,
then use oil money to get another woman?'

Mother would sulk while I bit lips of discomfort.
At college, I met Segida. Lecturers were on strike;

we began to trade in cannabis. I became a businessman,
facilitating 'grass' from the village to the city crowd.

With Segida I made money to supplement college
upkeep; I became a 'senior boy' with cash to spare.

4. Mimi's Joint

Segida and I are delivering grass in Mimi's joint.
Mimi serves 'crack', 'NNG'² and liquors; with flair,

her waist is adorned with beads, visible threads
under her gown; incense burns in the corner.

She glides across the floor, from one customer
to the other smiling, swinging; she laces

our gin with *dongoyaro* herb—the malaria cure.
Everyone comes here as moths to flame.

'Shinning tie' is nickname for a jobless graduate
in threadbare suit who rails against the state,

'This government is shit, pure shit.' There is an echo
of agreement. 'That's why Fela Anikulapo calls them

VIP, Vagabonds in Power; Dem All Crazy. Yes
we are all Demon Crazy!' IMF austerity

measures have demonized us,' someone quips;
'Ali Mazrui calls us a laboratory, an experiment

of western, Islamic, and traditional Africa in a melting
pot, may God save us all!' Mimi's Joint rocks

with laughter, and music; Bob Marley's poster
is held up by chewing gum. With lungs

burning, we are haloed in dense smoke like flared-off
gas in the delta; we drink, we smoke, we shake

our heads, not sure whether to laugh or cry.
Some day, perhaps, I will grasp what value, if any,

is in the stoned-out vacuous soul—the mindless lone
traveller trying to make sense of the quarry

where men are stones hacked and chipped into shape
by conditions, flattened into footpaths for others

to tread on. At Mimi's Joint, we dreamlessly gaze
and let marijuana play games of imagination.

² NNG or Nigerian Natural Grass was coined by Fela Anikulapo Kuti as street name for Cannabis

5. Falila

She ambles in, stealthy, elegant as a star
of the East, cool as night; we are entranced.

Segida hisses and mutters, ‘*Ashewo!*’³
‘How do you know?’ I retort, furious.

Her figure locks into my stare, she sits
by me, sips *ogogoro*,⁴ lifting her *ganja*.⁵

‘Call me Falila and light me up!’ She purrs
in my ear, like a cat, so fragrant; I nibble

her ear; she flinches; she touches my cheek
tenderly; I tingle as her fingers linger;

her smile is coy; we lock eyes, smiling
and clasping hands. Then police sirens

blast rudely; the joint explodes; lights
flicker and pan; a harsh voice jolts us:

‘Stay where you are! This is the police!’ Fear
grips like cramps; Mimi turns the light off;

a gunshot cracks out, rifles are cocked; tension
sharp as razor draws out blood; then we

scramble, like demons on fire. I duck swinging
batons, hit a policeman’s nose; my face is wet

with his blood; a baton hits my shoulder, stings
like pepper on open flesh. I dive into a maze

of cubicles, race past a scrap of stalls; scurrying
over a wall, I startle a squatting lady who

drunkenly jerks up and rambles off. I crouch
in the stinking piss and vomit that irritate

like pricking needles: if I can get into Rose’s room
they will not catch me! I wonder if Segida made it?

³ Prostitute

⁴ Oogoro is locally brewed illicit gin, mixed with local herb dongoyaro, it is reputed to be a cure for malaria and an antidote.

⁵ This is the word for cannabis or Indian hemp made popular by Caribbean reggae artistes.

6. Rose's Bar

Policemen barge in, breathing hard, ignoring
the jolliness and music in Rose's bar,

peering at faces they want to pin down; they trawl
table to table, but none will grass on drinking pals.

Rosé meets me in her secret room.
'Wetin happen?' she asks.

'Na raid! You fit get me clothes?'
'I go try, but you no fit stay here.'

She brings a shirt and gropes me lustfully.
'Rosé not now!' I protest.

'Which time we go see then?' 'Next week?'
Back in the bar, the lady I startled at the wall

babbles to a cop who shields his nose from her
flying spittle. I tap a lady, whose painted face

stares back at me; her lips crumple a cigarette;
thin like a mannequin, she stinks of beer,

'Oga you want fun?' she asks.
'Na how much?' I whisper.

'Make we go talk?' she winks. Grey hair
peeps under her old wig. We lurch

to the door; she holds me like a trophy.
A sergeant stops us. She rubs her chest

with my hand, sticks out her tongue and giggles.
'We dey go my place?'

Sergeant makes way in disgust; we stagger out.
On the street, the victims of the raid in a van

curse their luck, pelting police with invectives,
but the drunks begin to mock, wagging fingers

at me: 'See mum and son!' Suddenly, a man
yells as a sergeant at the door hits him,

slams him against the door; other policemen
begin to rain baton blows on him.

The man holds the door knob desperately,
bemoaning his bad luck, turning attention

away from me; he appeals to the drunkards.
A crowd begins to gather; one onlooker

attests his innocence; then I spot Falila
in the police van with Mimi. I slip

out of the lady's hand and shout,
'Falila na you be dat?'

Falila's face lights up with disbelief.
'Sergeant see me see trouble o!' I plead.

'Who are you?' he demands.
'Na my sister O, this stupid girl!'

Bank notes slide into his shirt pocket.
'You, come down here,' he calls her,

glancing at his pocket; I add more.
'You know this man?' he barks.

'Na my brother,' she answers.
'Get down! Na your mama god save you;'

I slap her face; Sergeant restrains me;
the old lady watches us, poking

her nose with her little finger. I offer
her loose change; she walks away.

I slap Falila again; she yells; the men laugh,
leaving us alone. I drag her down the road

till we stop round the corner, panting, giggling,
shaking; we hug and kiss; no words

are needed, her eyes hold promises, her kiss
speaks volumes: 'My place or yours?'

7. In the Lair

Later, languid in her bed, he sits,
bathing in light rays that kiss

his naked flesh through lacy curtains;
he feels the enchantment of morning.

He is caught in the femaleness of her room—
the aroma of her; the bedside table

strewn with oils, lubricants, creams, perfumes,
as her spirit pervades the room; her shoes,

belts, bags, make-up, lingerie, clothes
all neatly set in hues and shapes:

‘Gone to work, shut the door.’ He kisses
her note and finds his clothes folded

neatly beside hers; he buries his face
in her clothes; her scent fills his head;

he is ensconced in her fragrance like a bug
in a spider’s web. The risk of her rescue

was worth their fiery dance at dawn!
The day shines with new sparkle;

he hums a song as he steps out
to hail a taxi, unaware of Sikira,

Falila’s mum, who waits in the car.
She waits and watches like a vulture—

stringed neck, dirty beak, talons
sturdy and all—she waits to scavenge.

Sikira watches till Isaiah taxi’s off,
then she enters Falila’s flat to search,

upturning every nook and corner;
her face lights up in devious glee

when she finds used condoms
discarded in the bathroom bin.

8. Lydia's Altar

Lydia's battlefield is the patch between
her bed and closet. She kneels

at her makeshift altar, where her knees
would bleed on the concrete floor,

where her prayers have received many
victories before; she contests

with powers in spirit realms, contending
for space in heavenly places, displacing

forces of evil, taking demons captive;
she is a gate-keeper in the spirit,

bargaining for people's destinies.
The street lamps cast a sleepy glow

on her window; someone had touched her!
She sits up, feels the handprint still fresh

on her flesh, she knows she has to pray;
something ominous was about to happen;

she must intercede. She grabs her Bible
and stares at the sky; she begins to pray

in 'tongues', seeking the mind of the Spirit,
travailing to enter the spirit world.

She seeks the peace of His presence—
that serene clarity of thoughts,

the elimination of doubts—she struggles
to remain in thresholds of radiance

until embers of glory twirl and shine—
she is caught up in the splendour, in floods

of inexpressible ecstasy; her altar
is dense with revelation: suddenly

she knows it is about her son—
she sees that Isaiah is in danger.

9. Falila

She is a deep lake; her eyes
are tunnels into the darkness;

her voice is a broken song;
her life is a scarf flung

in the wind; her fragrance
is now as crushed petals.

She was once the light of summer.
She was once first rain after harvest.

She was once clean cotton in the sun.
She was once a flowing stream.

She was once a chrysalis waiting to open.
She was once a waterfall in first light.

But now she is a gravestone;
her heart is dark as a root;

she craves the love she lost
and roves in misty plains—

a bird seeking a branch to settle on;
when will her salvation come?

She is a sacrificial lamb on an earthen
altar abandoned by the gods.

10. Nightmares

'Falila!' I demand, trembling; 'three
nights and I can't take it any more!

Have I dived into water without
knowing how to swim? Have I

gone to bed with a snake on my roof?
Tell me, do you have a *mermaid spirit*,

or some jealous *spirit husband*?
I have heard stories of ghost girls

who disappear while making love;
but who are you? After three

sleepless nights I must ask you
what's going on? The nightmare

begins in your bathroom, as we bathe
in gels under the shower and a rain

of continuous melody drains off, as we
swathe in fragrances and music sieves

through every pore, a sharp cry abruptly
cracks our rhythm, a piercing evil

that lacerates the ambiance and then birds
begin to flap furiously at frosted glass,

you turn to me and say, 'they are mine,'
then your pupils begin to dilate, your face

becomes enraged, your bare teeth like a dog,
you begin to throttle me, pinning me down.

You metamorphose, ageing before me
into an old woman with deep-set eyes

that threaten to swallow me in a vortex
of unblinking stare. Then you hit my chest

with your palm and I float out of my body
like a kite gliding in the sky above the city,

till we hover over a brood of men
and women in hoods, prancing

round and round a crackling fire.
Behind them, a river ripples through

a spire of trees that circles the groove.
In the centre is a huge tree, its roots

gangly like an octopus and its branches
reaching at the sky like beggarly fingers

seeking alms. We wait in naked terror.
I begin to bargain and plead with God,

a repentant Jonah in the whale's belly.
As I pray, tearfully, there is a rending

of lightning, then rippling thunder
shakes the purple skies, a flow

of raw electricity sizzles and strikes,
it splinters the tree; the roar echoes

long and shrilly; we all stand still
till the rock of the shock finds

the bottom of our well of fear;
then it's mayhem as cultists scatter,

screaming; a gust of wind blasts out the fire,
sweeping embers and briars, away; I tingle

all over, air rushes through me like a ghost
and in a flash I am standing over

my body, a foetal curl on your
bathroom floor. I reach out

to re-enter my body but will not fit;
fighting like a swimmer against

the tide as a horde of demons
runs towards me, to drag me back

into the evil vortex; as they close in,
I scream, my lungs raging as I wake up,

thrashing wildly, sweating. Falila, three nights
I've had this same dream! What's going on?'

11. The Witch

Flashes of anger in her eyes quickly
fade like the sparkle of a shooting star.

She stares ahead, speaks in soft monotone:
'I'll tell you the story of a happy girl

who loved nothing more than a swing
in the park, to have winds in her hair;

she was a giggle, a delight to other kids.
But, one day, her joy ended. Her brother

Fatai died. He was her only brother,
he was like her twin; although everyone

knew she was her Dad's favourite—
his special queen. Isaiah, I was that girl!

My Dad worked for Madras Singh & Co.,
and our house was the talk of the area,

filled with decorations, many souvenirs
of Dad's travels. Our evenings were taken up

by one thing only—the television. We had
the only set in the block of six flats; it sat

in a corner like a god in a sacred shrine.
Kids would crowd at the window

and parents often sat on the settee or floor.
It was my pride and joy and I would

threaten other kids with my TV
I was the most popular girl

till my innocence came to ruins
one night, in pitch darkness

of the usual electricity blackout.
Kids all ran out in glee to play

hide and seek. I hid away
in my mother's kitchen, watching

flames dance in the silver Tilley lamp
perched on the kitchen table.

I heard anxious mothers shouting
at children to be careful; I heard

footsteps dragging up the stairs.
They stopped at our flat and I peeped:

it was my mother I saw, giving away
Fatai's shirt to a woman in the doorway,

but she was in tears; fear struck me!
A knot in my belly began to choke me!

Pee trickled down my legs, and pans
and pots clattered around me!

Mother's visitor scurried down
the stairs; my mother demanded:

'Who is there?'
'It's me, mama!'

'Did I not warn you not to eavesdrop?'
'We are just playing hide and seek!'

'What did you see?'
'Nothing Mama, I saw nothing!'

Her face was a grotesque mask
of hate in the flickering light

as she un-wrapped a dark parcel
which stank. 'Eat it!' She grabbed me,

she pinched my nose, she force-fed me
till pain tore at my throat, my belly

burst into fire. She led me and sat me
down in my room: 'Lie down!'

But I could not sleep: something
began to move inside me.

The next day, Fatai fell sick;
he began to wilt like a vegetable;

he died that day at the hospital.
I asked Dad about the wriggling

thing in my belly. I wanted him
to touch it; I wanted him to comfort me,

to feel the eel-like creature in me!
But Dad's eyes became a pool

of torment; he ran from me in terror.
That was when he called *Olosanyin*

the traditional healer, who said,
'Too late, his flesh has been eaten,'

and I recalled the rotten meat I ate.
When Fatai died, father tore hair

from his skull with his bare hands.
After his burial, Dad accused Mum

of witchcraft; verbal abuses and fights
erupted; thrown plates splintered

on the wall and the neighbours came.
I was unnoticed, confused and helpless.

Mother threw things at Dad; the neighbours
wept; father cried, refusing any comfort:

'My own wife has killed my son!'
Two days later, as Mum still raged

in her anger, father left us. Our TV-
watching neighbours became

strangers. The TV, broken
in a corner sat in the shadow,

a sad reminder of my shattered life.
It was then the nightmares began,

same as you are having now; there
were nights I knew Fatai was across

the room looking at me. I would
open my shoebox, bring out Dad's

empty Old Spice bottle and Fatai's photo,
blotted with dad's tears; these I would

hug tight to my chest as I tried to sleep.
Then the bird I had acquired was fed

by mum and her friends, till it was strong
enough to fly. That's how I became a witch.'

xxx

‘Falila! Dress up, you are leaving now!’
Isaiah flings clothes at her, eyes wide

as he backs away; the room steams
with fear. She dresses up silently

in the dark gulf that seems to suddenly
separate them. He hears his Mum,

in her room across the hallway,
shuffling. Lydia begins to sense

danger and her prayers erupt suddenly
from behind her door as Isaiah leads

Falila out of the house into the street.
‘Isaiah, don’t leave me!’ she pleads,

holding on to him. Isaiah doesn’t know
what to say or think, but finds strength

to stop and turn; he is scared.
‘Isaiah, I swear, I’ll never leave you;

I love you, you can’t leave me now!’
She grabs at him. He jumps back.

‘You’ll come back to me!’ she threatens.
‘You will come back and I’ll be waiting!’

12. Prophet Obadiah

The prophet is buried amidst flickering
candles, ringing tambourines, beating drums,

as ecstatic chanting devotees dance
in white garments. Lydia and Isaiah

listen to the bells, to the rhythm
of feet on rock; they are entranced

by the transcendent cadence
of Prayer Mountain, where life

stands still as the sick and needy
come to drink from the springs of grace.

Like island garlands, clouds
rest on protruding necks of rock.

The mountain of prayer glows at dusk;
it is Prophet Obadiah's home;

it is where men and women come
for answers, and Lydia has brought

Isaiah for deliverance from the nightmare
that engulfs him every night—the old

woman and her horde of demons.
Isaiah expected a tall, bearded man,

like Moses in the movie 'Ten Commandments'.
But this prophet is smallish and clean shaven.

On his second night, flames of vision
consume Isaiah; a deluge of words

infuses his being, like petals unfurling.
He begins to dance to the music of words;

truth and peace embalm his heart,
till he is so inflamed with words

he chants, orgasmic in an unknown language:
'You are a prophet, Yahweh has chosen you!'

Prophet Obadiah's eyes brim with meanings.
'But son, you must flee away like Joseph

and Jesus to Egypt; you must serve God
to be safe. The mantle of Yahweh is woven

upon you—the mantle of prophecy. May
Yahweh wash your eyes with salve; may He

bear you on eagle wings, carry you across rivers
of dreams, return you from this mountain

purified and at liberty; may His countenance
shine on you and may you enjoy His grace.’

13. Goddess in slacks

On a sun-drenched day, perspiration
is fresh in the nostrils as tingling heat

clings to the skin and waves hiss
across blades of grass on the football field.

Isaiah still savours the heady scent
of Prayer Mountain; it's been two weeks,

yet he wears his new-found spirituality
with awe. In college, Segida is curious

to know what has transformed him so.
When Falila steps out of the taxi,

she is simply a stunning goddess
in red shirt and black slacks.

Isaiah knows he is no match
for her elegance, beauty, subtlety,

or her determination. As she gets closer,
he decides to hide in the box room.

'Segida! Please tell her I am away!'
'You're crazy, she's so beautiful!'

Segida lets her in and makes excuses.
'When will he be back?' she demands.

'I don't know—want a drink? No?'
'I remember you from Mimi's place.'

'Oh yeah!' They laugh as she recounts:
'But for Isaiah I would have been jailed!'

But she must take the taxi back.
Segida is excited to have met

the 'working girl' and in disbelief asks,
'Why ditch her? She's crazy about you!'

'Nightmares!' Isaiah replies. 'Nightmares!'
Segida doesn't understand, but laughs and laughs.

14. The Tigress and The Bear

Falila was still madly in love.
She wanted Isaiah to know

she was pregnant, and with his baby.
'That should jolt him!' she thought.

But she met his best mate, Segida,
who promised to bring Isaiah to her.

She found him alone, at the hotel
where he'd gone and booked a room.

She was suspicious, but confident
she could thwart his advances.

She should have left; he was
too desperate; he ignored her protest:

'But, I'm your friend's girl!'
Segida swore he'd rather die

than leave such a beautiful girl
without making love to her.

After much struggle,
as he was too strong for her,

she gave in; later, resting her hand
on his chest, she traced incisions

on his shoulders, on his back,
marks on his knees; she saw

those deep cuts on his elbows.
She recognised immediately

the tell-tale signs of initiations
into the higher occult. She recognised

who he was—a wizard ranked
higher than her in the spirit world.

Falila stared at his naked back.
She did not know what to think.

15. Farewells

We were nervous after final exams.
We had no prospects as fresh graduates:

the hopeless eyes of recent and older
graduates hanging around the street corners,

still unemployed, had taught us to fear
for our lives. Segida and I had grown

apart; for hiding my letter of admission
to postgraduate school we had a fight;

but I forgave him. Yes, he wanted us
to continue business together,

but I knew my path of life
had changed on Prayer Mountain.

I also dismissed his claims that he
had slept with Falila: excitement

about our degree results overtook
all else; also, National Service called

and demanded that we return home—
Segida to Port Harcourt and me to Lagos.

16. Madam Ibadiaran

One night I nearly died—a casualty
of stray bullets—like those commuters

shot by policemen who demand bribes
at the roadside. Yes! I could have

disappeared, like those unfortunate victims
of kidnapers, mutilated for quick money.

But it was destiny that stopped my journey
to an early grave. I had protested against

my father's letter to Madam Ibadiaran,
but he prevailed. 'She is very influential!'

'Dad, I don't need 'long legs'⁶ for National Service!'
'Just get to know her; she is well connected.'

Curiosity led me, with a letter in hand,
to Madam Ibadiaran who dated a politician

in the political era and now dates a general;
it is the military era, you see! She is stunning,

as ageless as she is charming.
'How is your Dad?' Her voice is silken.

'Okay, leave details there!' My dismissal
was with a sweep of hand; then, she asks,

'Do you smoke?'
'I beg your pardon, Ma?'

Fingers on her painted lips, she puffs,
she hits her head—it's the street sign

for cannabis. I'd been tempted
to smoke on my way (I was nervous,

you see, about meeting her) but her
mischievous eyes made me relax.

'Bring some for me next week,' she says.
Subsequently, we drove out to share a joint

⁶ Corrupt means.

and talk. She was such fun! Beneath
her enormous wealth and a streetwise mien

was a lonely woman; she would call,
and I would sneak in like a thief.

In her arms I fell from prophetic grace
and became her willing student till, one night,

exhausted, side by side in her bed,
the General banging on the door furiously,

urgently, her CCTV revealed three men
and armed soldiers standing with him.

She hounded me into my pants, down
the stairs into the cold kitchen store.

A coup d'état had taken place.
Maradona had just stepped aside;

Sanni had chased him off the booty.
These two wolves did not need sheepskin.

These were days of national shame,
days when drug barons roamed freely,

days when a get-rich hysteria gripped
young and old; when men sold their soul,

and women peddled virtue for contracts;
when national morale was as valuable

as tissue paper—good enough to wipe
a dirty bum; cults of terrorists

sprang up everywhere; soldiers invaded
the campus for sex, and every pretty girl

was good for the picking on the bed
of stolen money; gangs roamed

the streets as state security bullied,
killed, arrested and tortured

any opposition. No-one was safe:
despots scurried to build empires,

hiding their booty overseas;
and lion-faced Sanni, he wielded

brutal power and an insatiable libido.
His harem of fleshpots was not enough:

he ordered Asian pussycats
to be delivered to the state mansion,

and he died in style, shooting off.
What a presidential dispatch!

He must have arrived, pants down,
thinking of billions of oil dollars

stashed away, left behind.
Good riddance to bad rubbish!

If the general had had a key that night,
or had forced his way into the flat,

I knew I'd be dead meat—shot,
for stealing from the honey pot.

I left madam, shaken but thanking God
I'd survived the coup and the Madam.

17. Restoration

My farewell to mother is on the unisex⁷
Mountain of Prayer, a picturesque

togetherness as we pray and she restores
my spirituality; mother sings and weeps

and her tears wash the mountainside
with tenderness like the dew at dawn

that wets our heads; mother and son
wait for the day to break; she hugs me,

tense lines on her forehead, her grey
hairs are more noticeable now; I wipe

tears off her cheeks as the mountain stirs
with the call to Prayer and people respond;

prayer bells jingle, mother smiles at me,
'I'll be praying for you.'

I will never forget that moment
holding my mother, making a promise,

the sounds of the prayer bells tinkling,
the coldness of the stone on which we sat,

the damp air of morning, the aroma of lemon
from the grass, the smell of her *Ankara*,

her tears in my palm. I am resolved
to take on the world and succeed; gazing

at the rising sun in the horizon, I submit
myself solemnly to the will of God.

I leave home to confront National Service
and the new world with enthusiasm.

⁷ Mountains of Prayer in Nigeria are classified; some are for men only, others for women only, and yet others for both men and women.

Part Two

18. Segida - The Pirate ...

To make him a pirate
took more than howling seas,

more than the windswept splash
that ravages the beach.

To make him a pirate
took more than irate storms,

more than palm trees raining
down a patter of coconuts.

To make him a pirate
took more than wind melodies,

more than salty sprays that fill
the hair with grainy sands.

To make him a pirate
took more than starry nights, in dug-out

canoes cruising the sea-scented throat
of the river, hailing sea and the sun.

To make him a pirate
took more than acquaintance with nature,

more than the knowledge of earth's murmur,
more than the cry of intimacy within his soul.

To make him a pirate took manacles,
the shackle of oil pipes, the lament

of chains on land, the spills
and the suffocating oil fogs.

His fate is open for all to see
like sunshine on a lonely crag.

He's seen the nakedness of power,
the use of fear in the fight against freedom,

he wishes that, when his sun falls,
when his earth sleeps, that he'll be remembered

as the man who overcame his fear;
the man who lived and died for the land.

19. Masters of the Creek

Segida returns home, where oil is drilled
like water but clean water is as scarce as gold;

he finds old friends too old, smoking cheap
rolled tobacco under the smog of gas flares.

He'd left Lagos an economics graduate, ready
to take up a job; to settle down; to follow a path

different from his father; to join politics; to find
a way to rescue his people from their misery.

He drinks with Solomon his father on his first night;
listens to the stories of the frenzied seventies,

the carefree days after the civil war, the many
foibles of oil boom and mindless spending sprees—

days when men had money for a second, third,
even fourth wife; when every Dick became

a contractor; when millionaires sprang up
overnight like cornstalk; when middlemen—

importers and exporters, forwarders
and back-warders— mushroomed in the cities;

when farmers abandoned hoe and cutlass
for suit and tie; and oil—that jealous new wife—

drove aground every other industry; it was those
days when the shift and pull of market prices

began to rage like wildfire, when IMF kicked
us in the teeth with structural adjustment programs;

when the marginalised and exploited minority
were left behind in the mad scramble for

resources—left to pine in pain, without a voice—
left to bargain for the crumbs under the table.

So, Solomon and his friends took to piracy.
The sea was the only friend they had left.

20. Rotten marrow

Segida walked through his childhood haunts—
creeks, brooks and streams now shallow

graves of freedom fighters against state
and oil companies. Solomon had taught him

to love this land, to understand the secrets
of the forest; the voice of herbs, the measure

of brews, the weight of words, the whisper
of gushing rivers, the echo of fear

in the hiss of darkness; he knew how to
dance to the songs of the howling ocean;

how to embrace life as a blending melody,
one unending symphony— now a dissonant

scream and the sobs of loss, the frail voices
of the exiled: men and women, flora and fauna.

The boom is long bust, and some wives
have become prostitutes out of necessity;

Segida's economic theory was becoming real:
he saw the genocidal mutilation of the land,

the looting of property, the blatant display
of greed by authority figures. Where

were Greenpeace and Amnesty International,
the Worldwide Fund for Nature and UNEP?

Solomon welcomed his son home
with fresh tales of woe:

'I lost your stepmother to brutal soldiers
who shot her in the back. It was a dawn

that exploded with grenades and gunfire.
Soldiers ripped apart our street—rat tat tat

boom! Rat tat tat boom! Machine gun,
and then grenade. Fire engulfed

several houses. My friend Douglas
and his family were burnt alive.

I ran with your stepmother
past children with broken limbs—

past men mutilated by bullets—
past women who sat deranged,

confused. I carried her when she
was shot, with blood gushing

from her punctured chest.
They attacked us because of riots

at an installation; we knew nothing, son!
Segida could see his father's tears;

his own mother had died at childbirth,
but his father had married again

however since his stepmother's death,
he'd vowed never to marry again.

Men and women had mocked him
in a community where polygamy

was accepted, but he did not waver;
he had a new cause now, to lift his people

out of misery. Solomon laughed
when it was rumoured that he

was impotent—how could he be?
He, to whom women came for fertility;

young girls for love potions; men for power,
virility and wealth! Can that repository

of healing be impotent? Segida
had arrived in the land of bones

that wept; he vowed to restore
to the bones the justice they deserved.

21. Andoga

Solomon had a nightmare
on the night before Andoga died.

It was a premonition of sorts:
they were fishing together

at night and a fog of darkness
had enveloped their canoe;

it also draped the moon untill
it was pitch dark. They began to row

for the shore and it was calm;
then, as the darkness wrapped them,

the sea erupted into sudden
violence and their canoe capsized.

Solomon felt the sea dragging him
down and away—and then he woke up.

But then Andoga rarely went to sea;
Andoga was a farmer.

But as Solomon pondered this dream,
the wail of women and uproar

got to him; Andoga was dead!
But Andoga had no wish to die,

not with his two eldest sons!
But the growling earthmovers—

monsters in dawn's twilight,
belching out smoke, saluting

the blue light of day—provoked him.
He saw the tractors grinding

his crops, cassava and yam tubers
being squashed under tyres;

he saw the huge pipes lying
in pyramid piles to replace his crops,

for the encroaching tycoons,
to further line their filthy pockets.

Andoga charged mindlessly with machete
at gun-wielding soldiers. No,

he had not said goodbye to his wives,
nor his two boys to their mothers!

Before the sun mercilessly beat
their corpses that day, their machetes

had severed two soldiers' heads.
The village went on the rampage

at the sight of their dead, determined
to blow up oil installations! It took Solomon

hours to calm their rage
and desire to avenge Andoga's death

as the oil-dredging company dug
into Andoga's land. Segida became more

determined that foreign oil companies
and their cronies must face justice.

22. United Nations Day—Port Harcourt 1994

It was a celebration of a heritage
under threat, yet they marched.

It was the United Nations Day,
celebrating indigenous people.

Three hundred thousand people
prayed for reason and attention.

They chanted and marched—for respite
from the spills and flares, for justice

in polluted marshland, for the innocent
massacred, those buried in shallow graves,

and others nursing unmentionable diseases;
they marched for a fairer share of oil revenues.

‘We want justice! We need royalties, not diseases!’
These fishermen and farmers—men, women,

walking, talking, chanting—had not
reckoned with the ‘kill and go’—the mobile

police unit standing by, reputed to inject
‘crack’ to be inhuman, ready to smash

children against walls and to rip women
apart with penis one foot long. The ‘kill and go’,

encouraged and funded by oil-mining
companies, will gladly impale men

on bayonets to suppress the march;
the money is bloody in the hands paid

to protect who kill the innocent. Segida
met *Umuechem* village mourning; saw houses

smouldering; heard of men killed, women
raped, children abused. The ‘kill and go’,

and the State Attorney General who resigned
to get employment with an oil company, will have

judgement in heaven, and the Attorney General
was even a son of the soil; what a shame!

23. Yolanda

The butchery attracted no worldwide interest;
the oil companies and cronies ensured

it was another paraffin wick in a tin can lamp,
with no oil, soon forgotten. Yolanda's story

infuriated Segida the most. He fell in love
with her solitary figure at her daily shrine;

he understood her need for solitude
at the watery grave of her son.

Yolanda's husband Basil and her baby
died because of the Bakassi oilfield dispute

between Nigeria and Cameroon. Basil
was born and bred in Cameroon, a Nigerian.

He traded across the border as his father
had done before him; he was returning

in a truck with his pregnant bride,
that cruel night of gunfire.

They were attacked; two tyres burst;
the lorry toppled, dragging bodies; flesh

peeled on the tarmac, breaking bones;
screams of pain lacerated metal cracks

in the carnage; bodies were flung like
dolls and lay still. Hostility had begun

between communities who had lived
and intermarried for generations.

Now they fought as enemies, while rigs
like giant mosquitoes drilled and sucked

out their land's resources—their life blood—
leaving parasites and a fever of death.

Yolanda was barely alive when Solomon
arrived and found her, with foetus aborted,

her womb torn; Segida met her in mourning,
mourning the bite of unborn gums

that she would never feel on her engorged breasts.
Basil's relatives hardly waited for his body

to turn cold before scrambling for his property.
They threw out the young bride and hinted

it was her witchcraft that killed Basil
and their baby; only Solomon stood by her.

He took her in, fed her, watched over her
like an elderly uncle a beloved niece.

Yolanda had nothing to live for.
Segida resolved to fight for victims like her!

It was a cause to live for, a cause to die for.
But then he met with more deception.

24. Deception

Segida heard of Falila's pregnancy
and found good cause for fighting

another fight. He bought her costly gifts
to assuage his conscience, for his

deception in getting her to bed.
He became obsessed with thoughts

of her carrying his child
and invited her to meet his father;

he proposed marriage and paid her dowry.
Segida began to love Falila

with all his heart and, months later,
Jemima was born. At Jemima's celebration

Segida was reminded of his resolve
to give his people a better life.

He watched the dancer shake
her waist; watched as bangles tinkled

on her ankles, and big earrings
dangled on her ears as she welcomed

everyone. This was the dance
for the new child coming out

to meet the world—but the drums
and the village poet sang a dirge;

they sang the history of the tribe;
they sang of the signs of the times.

Segida watched the dance and drama
as the dancer stopped and paced

back and forth, striking the back
of her palm on her other palm

again and again, asking what life
held for the newborn.

She began to dance again, this time
she dipped her feet one at a time

into a large basin of water, lifted up
the calabash in her hand, waved it

to the left and to the right. She then
placed the calabash in the water.

The women had eyes brimming with tears.
The little girl's fate was now with Yemoja,

the river Goddess. The priestess began to chant.
But Segida knew that rain had not fallen;

the fishes that once graced the river had gone,
and farmlands had been excavated

for pipelines, without compensation.
Segida was determined not to wait

for Yemoja; he joined the Black Fist
so Jemima could have a better future.

25. The Black Fist

Solomon sent for them to gather
in his 'Adullam'-style cave—and they came—

the angry, the disenchanting, the dispossessed,
the jobless; without regard for age or rank

they came from everywhere: Warri, Sapele,
Patani, Degema, Ughelli. They found in Solomon

the passion for the unity they needed,
so they heeded his call to fight together.

They met in a cave: Ijaw, Urhobo,
Itshekiri, Ogoni and other youths;

they sat by a fire together, listening
to the tide's incoming lap-lapping splash.

Solomon's goal to overcome disunity—
that bane of life in the Niger Delta—

was becoming real. Years of protest
and crying for reparation had failed:

government programmes had been
abortive and oil-company efforts futile.

Bloodshed was fuelled again and again
between Urhobo and Itshekiri clans

in isolated communities, and payouts
for damages to farmland only sparked

more distrust and a scramble for more
payouts. These youths knew each other

by reputation from campus social clubs,
cults and fraternities; gangs with names

like Vultures, Pirates, Black Axe,
Mafia Lords, Eiye, KKK—all veterans

of bloody campus warfare now faced
one enemy— the government! They stripped

naked and swore an oath to stand together;
to fight as one; to die for coastland,

community and country. Alhaji Shalizo
Mujahidin Brown, the military adviser,

like others had turned to militant Islam
for ideology: at the collapse of communism,

he had assumed his Muslim name
and took interest in learning the Koran.

Shalizo, former college Trotskyite, trained in
Tripoli then Islamabad, now trained the Black Fist.

26. Pirates of the Delta

Elders from Andoga's village said to Black Fist,
'We will fight to the last man, woman and child.'

The community called for an election
boycott, but Black Fist made other plans

to avenge the men and women, and children
who whimpered in corners with mutilated

minds—the stain of innocent blood on
the conscience of a nation. Yolanda,

code-named Tarantula, sat up on the bed
of an engineer at base camp; she

had secured details of security arrangements.
The D-day was calm; the sea was blue;

but shadows of mangrove trees held death.
In the serene forest marshes, men waited

with hearts pumping; they waited
for Shalizo's signal, whose gunboat crew

had just overrun an oil-flow station
where he had set demolition charges;

another group waited for the boat
bringing workers from the offshore rig.

The blast shook the entire area for miles!
Later, on CNN, an oil-company spokesman

appealed to Black Fist for the release
of two British, an American and five

other hostages. Shalizo, who was once
a Pentecostal Christian but now an

ideological Muslim, addressed the captives:
'Gentlemen, you are here to experience

our pain; to experience the consequences
of your actions and inaction. If you die

during your residency here, then
it is fate that you die; I assure you,

you will not be missed! If you live,
then you will be our messengers; you

will take the word out to the world.
You will tell them our breath costs us;

our land and waterways kill us; we
are prey to the most callous genocide

on our homeland; we are a generation
that must redefine history!

27. The Messenger

Martin Dodd would not argue with anybody.
He was not keen on ideologies, he was

a home boy from North Dakota. No,
he didn't want to die in this cave!

The rust of the handcuffs was beginning
to irritate his fair skin. He struggled

to collect his thoughts wildly running
through a maze of confusion; would he see

his family again? Tied up in damp darkness,
he reflected on his life. He reckons he's had

a good life till now—a good education,
a good wife, a young daughter. He'd never

thought of these natives as people with families
too, with children who had aspirations;

he was just an engineer doing his job.
He'd never thought about death, either,

nor of how and where he'd like to die,
but each day in captivity had given him options:

would his employers pay a ransom;
was there a rescue operation under way?

He could not stop imagining—would it
be a bullet through his head or heart, quick

and clean; or drowning, slow and painful;
or bone-clubbed to death, messy and brutal;

or the sharp blade of the machete to the neck
or limbs; would he bleed to death on the sand?

28. Dead Man's Head

There was nothing extraordinary
about the naval boat that powered

that morning into the creek, nor
the binoculars perched on the nose

of Lt Commander Femi Bala as he
surveyed the creek for pirates.

It was a routine patrol, and he had orders
to guard ship routes. 'You never know

who is running what,' he'd been warned.
'Oil bunkering is, after all, free for all

these days—for senior officers and top
politicians to stash away cash in tax

havens and finance political ambitions.
Militants use it too, to buy arms and protection.

Pirates and militants continue to follow
the time-honoured practice of collecting toll

from ships and international bunkering
syndicates.' Bala knew the connection

of these cartels was straight up to powers
that be, which meant that no-one would be prosecuted.

The gunshot that splintered Bala's arm
rang out suddenly; the pain rattled his brain;

blood spurted; another bullet spun him
around as his boat glided into an ambush.

With his left hand Bala pulled his pistol
from holster ordering 'Kill on sight!'

But his men were no match for Segida's men,
who blocked the creek exit with flotilla

of timber primed with explosives. The gunboat
was boarded and held at gunpoint.

When Segida put a machete to Lt Commander
Femi Bala's neck, soldiers and militants gasped;

the man's body twitched as Segida
severed his head, leaving a blood trail.

Segida and his men left the dead
and the wounded behind.

Dipreye nauseated confronted Segida
in their speedboat: 'Why did you do that?

That was a man, not an animal!
'And this is psychological warfare,'

Segida replied, deadpan: 'Let them look
for his head; let them learn to fear;

let them feel our hate and know
we can be brutal and unconventional.'

29. The Messenger

Martin Dodd dreamt of freedom.
He wasn't a religious man

but he began to pray to God—
each of the hostages handled things

differently. His instinct told him
Shalizo had no qualms

about killing them if it served
his purpose; his look and his tone

was that of a man consumed by hate.
It wasn't just the violence that frightened

Martin, but willingness by these men
to die! As for Segida, he'd heard of people

under demonic influence and now
he knew he had seen one.

The men had a bizarre camaraderie
and, when one of them died,

they drank and laughed and celebrated.
This was madness to Martin; he had

to get away! But then Shalizo
needed a messenger, so he decided

he would offer to be the messenger
if that would enable him embrace freedom.

He began to learn new values
in the transient captivity: moving

from cave to cave, blindfolded,
he was humbled by the hospitality

of his hosts and ashamed
at the dignity his captors gave them;

he learned the wisdom of their
philosophy that preserving Mother Earth

was worth more to all than earthly
gain to a few. Each sunrise

that stung his skin gave him hope;
the grains of sand that irritated

his toes began to feel more
like encrusted diamonds;

each breath was precious
beyond measure; when the cock

crowed again and chickens clucked and played,
when night brought a symphony of sound,

he was tuned-in sufficiently to appreciate life,
to love the cause, to become the messenger.

30. Port Harcourt Dribblers

Their visit was under duress:
the three local leaders felt no assurance

in the pock-marked face
of the military man, who smiled

as he shook their hands; his reputation
was worse than a rattlesnake;

his sting as readily given as his smile.
The Director of National Intelligence

had received the names of youths
in the community, with promises

to arrange for jobs with the oil
companies—pledges never meant to be.

Months later, the chiefs understood—
too late—that, while they were being cajoled

by the pock-faced monster, the police
were being authorised to go and, ‘waste’

the youths who had been unfortunate enough
for their names to be given. It was when Chief

Barikaba naively rallied militant youths
with promises of jobs and scholarships,

that he aroused suspicion that the three
elders had sold their consciences for gain.

Many weeks later, in Bori town, on a night
when the moon was unsure about sneaking

out of shaggy clouds looking like the edge
of clean silverware—when men with rheumy

eyes drank *tombo* deep into the next day—
a black car cruised into the town, stirring

suspicion as it travelled down Douglass Street
beyond the square towards Romoulla Street

in central Bori. The red flash of light
only stopped briefly at Chief Barikaba’s house.

By sunup, everyone knew the Chief
had visitors in the night. His broadcast

on radio later that day to rescind
the boycott of elections, only confirmed

the suspicions that he'd been bribed;
this enraged the youths, who attacked

and killed four elders—a violent
mob action with brutal police reprisals.

Ken Saro Wiwa and others were accused.
The trial of the Ogoni Nine began.

31. Ogoni Liberation Song

“Naa le be gen le sii, men be puin”
Arise, arise, Ogoni people arise

We will not be oppressed!
Work, work, Ogoni people work,

We will not be oppressed!
Study, study, Ogoni people

We will not be oppressed!
Fight, fight, Ogoni people

We will not be oppressed!
Be proud, be proud, Ogoni people,

We will not be oppressed
We will not be oppressed.

32. On the shoreline of death⁸

(For Ken Saro Wiwa)

You strip down, lashed at on a tatty
shore. Death washes your feet,

fish belly-up in filmy waves. Invectives
drench the fabrics of your mind.

You watch wealth raped, razed and rinsed
away. Your words splash, hurt, uncurl

and ooze. You grapple at visions with
men of prejudice on the edge of darkness.

Elders wearing garments of greed
spread the thighs of the land and plunge.

They dig graves of posterity with shelled
fingers. They cuddle with promises,

but bring death. They rip like a fierce tide,
to suck out your resolve, with bullets

and bombs; you clutch at justice, fragrant
with fortitude. You spout jets of verse,

strewn on their mounting madness.
You become a silhouette, an abandoned

tuneless light, like vestiges of a rainbow,
a gleam of tapestry at the precipice

of dusk that glints insistent, engraving
the rock of conscience, until shackles

of inequity crack off. Your soul, hustled
out of time, glides in immortality.

‘The struggle continues.’

⁸ First published in *Dance the Guns to Silence: 100 poems for Ken Saro Wiwa: a ten-year's memorial anthology for Ken Saro Wiwa and eight others*; eds., Nii Ayikwei Parkes and Khadija Sesay (London: Flipped Eye Publishing 2005), p. 34.

Part three

33. Ordination

After National Service, Isaiah returned
to those austere mountains of prayer

where prophet Obadiah guided
devotees into divine presence.

It was as if sparks of light were
falling with the rain to welcome him;

the night bristled thunder; the atmosphere
heady, intoxicating, with the rhythm

of the prophet's devotees singing
in voices fierce beyond the rumbling skies.

Their faces peered at the radiant
majesty of the throne, reserved

for Yahweh on the mountain
overlaid with gold. Their ardour

infused Isaiah; in tears of delight
he was caught in a trance; he beheld

a mass of people in aimless flow
and a spirit guide appeared and pointed

at some people: 'Those are the chosen ones.'
The spirit guide was so gentle, his voice,

so soft, Isaiah barely heard: 'See, their
foreheads are marked; watch them

as they struggle against the throng';
Isaiah watched as many people struggled

on the fringe of the mob; defenceless,
they seemed to be going against the flow

and were despised by all the rest.
Isaiah was not the only one standing by:

there were other watchers, other eyes
with blurry tears; then vultures

began to pour out from the womb
of the dark clouds and to pick at random

the many defenceless on the fringe of
the crowd, till the ground became

a litter of blood, flesh, bones; then a ring
of men and women rushed out in white robes;

they began to chase the birds, with incense,
swinging censers at the birds. The angel

told Isaiah to look more closely at the men
and women in ashen robes whose

activities seemed futile: their lamps
were cold, their faces devoid of resolve

to fight the world's sin; they were
only going through the motions.

That was when Isaiah began to weep—
'Who will help these people?

Who will fight for the afflicted?'
Obadiah suddenly announced:

'Isaiah, do you see God's poor,
the dead and dying? These are the world's

wounded, those who did not
want to hear or accept God's word;

they are bound for the eternal deep!
Therefore, I anoint you today with

this holy oil. Become Yahweh's prophet!
Go therefore and rescue the perishing souls!'

34. Baptism in Kaduna

Isaiah feels the raw fear and bitterness
of Pastor Oludare's tale as he begins

to narrate his experiences with Kaduna
Islamic extremists: 'There are not enough

graves for the young here—barely born,
they are uprooted in the name of God;

there are no permanent homes for women
either, no sacred honour for the womb-bearers;

Mother Earth is desecrated, her blood is spilled
again and again. Where will the paradise be

in God's holy heaven for those who kill
in the name of God? Will the murderers

live forever? Will they not join their
ranks in the final Judgement?

For those with a mind to think,
what hypocrisy is hidden in the mind

of those who think God is an angel
of death to the irreligious? Those

who don robes of piety or white turbans
symbolic of peace will be torn, their

high wall of knowledge will fall.
The messenger of the covenant will appear,

the day of vengeance will come,
the hysteria of destruction will sweep

through the city and clean it of filth.'
Isaiah had heard of the religious riots

of the sixties and seventies that left
survivors still nursing memories of their loss;

he would never understand such hatred
from man to man—and in God's name?

'It began with a rumour: that someone
had torn a page off the Holy Koran,

no one saw the page, neither could anyone
identify where it took place, but there was

mayhem; Oludare was in his office, praying,
when the phone rang and Miriam, a member,

desperately warned him of the riot.
'Pastor!' she screamed, 'Run for your life!

They are coming towards the church!'
Oludare had lived through the Maitatsine riot,

which was repelled by armed military
members of the Church who stopped

the mob from burning down the church.
But this time he was alone; he heard the roar

as the chanting mob charged up the road.
He began to pray, pleading the blood

of Jesus for his safety. His wife phoned;
she was hysterical, so he switched her off;

he didn't want her to hear the mob.
Someone put an axe to the door,

and then a woman shouted in Hausa,
'Get petrol!' Then the door went up in flames.

He decided he would not wait to be roasted alive,
so he made a run for it. His exit through

the window of the toilet landed him
in front of an axe-wielding young man,

who struck him in the head like he was
a rodent scurrying out of a hole.

Life exploded into a white blur
and his whole life flashed like a film.

It was his wife's hysterical face he saw first,
then the forlorn look of his son, asking

'Where is my daddy?' He felt his blood
draining quickly out of the open gash.

Then white shoes appeared before his face
on the earthen floor, where he lay still.

They belonged to a man; he was impeccable
in his dressing and he spoke flawless Hausa;

in very commanding tones, he shouted
'Leave him!'

The axe, poised to strike his neck,
stopped in the air as the young men

looked at the stranger and then departed.
It was the stranger that brought him

to the hospital where soldiers stood guard.
Isaiah noticed the scar that ran down

one side of the back of his head
as Pastor Oludare narrated his story:

'This church was burnt down and I was
bitter for a few days, asking why?

Why did God not strike them down?
Why did my friend lose his wife and children?

Why were many left dead in their own blood?
But I know God commands us to love and forgive,

so we began again, determined to serve God,
and I am happy to welcome you to serve with me.'

35. Healing missions

The sun rose, even as Isaiah was tearfully
awestruck at the mystery of God's revelations.

God's glowing presence constrained him
to worship as it flowed into his bedroom

in Kaduna—that Northern Muslim city
of religious riots, waves of violence, arson

and murder, where such latent hatred existed
between the North and South, feelings

that pre-dated independence; where the North,
ever suspicious, wanted a larger share

of resources and a hold on power using
census figures as fighting tool against their

southern counterparts. Over the years,
the fight for political power had taken

many shades and colours, and Kaduna
remained notorious for the Maitatsine riots

demanding Sharia law in the 1980s,
and the 1987 fatal quarrel between Christian

and Muslim students that left hundreds
of people dead. This was where Isaiah

had come; it was here that God visited Isaiah;
it was here Isaiah was to take the reins

of Victory Church for Christ. Fires of emotion
raged in him that morning as he prayed

in fiery tongues. Pastor Oludare's tale
of horror was not forgotten, he was afraid;

but Prophet Obadiah's mountain experience
was nothing compared to the majesty

of the presence he felt in his room
or the reassuring voice that resounded:

'Isaiah, what do you want me to do?'
It was the most amazing request

of his life: what does He want?
After agonising on a precipice

of indecision, he blurted out,
'Lord, I want your presence in my mission.'

The Lord replied, 'I will send you a woman
whose pregnancy has been held in the grip

of evil powers for eighteen months.'
Isaiah believed God as Moses did,

he was Paul on the dusty road to Damascus.
At Sabon Gari church that morning,

when the pregnant woman arrived,
Isaiah instantly recognised her and obeyed

what God had told him to do; he told
her how the forces of witchcraft

that had kept her from delivering
her baby would be defeated. Isaiah

wept as the heat from his hands sizzled
onto the woman's distended stomach;

she also began to cry as Isaiah rebuked
the witch, then he commanded her,

'In the name of Jesus Christ, run
to the hospital and have your baby now!'

Her baby boy arrived as soon
as she reached the hospital. The news

of this miracle spread swiftly.
People began to flock to see Isaiah;

each service in Kaduna became a celebration
of testimonies, of healing, of praise, and of joy.

xxx

In the midst of this ecstasy, one day
Isaiah heard God's voice thundering:

'I will not trade memories with this generation!
I will not trade my honour with the putrefied

arrogance of man's intellect! His pungent
ashes will stink like Sodom and Gomorrah.

Those who forsake the right path and spit
at the truth, those who kick their God aside,

those who will not repent? I will multiply
plague in the cities: cancer, diabetes,

AIDS, malaria, typhoid, meningitis;
heart diseases will wreak havoc as their reward,

the evidence of their indulgence; desolation
and despair will reign until my Jonah

is heard. Will this Nineveh not repent?
Will they not seek restoration?'

Isaiah was led out to see the nightlife.
He saw cars comb through streets as men

hunted for drug-crazed, scantily dressed girls
who asked in their dark chambers,

'Skin or rubber?' At the door of ubiquitous death,
Isaiah wonders, is there any dignity?

Why would anyone despise life so blatantly,
why would anyone sell death so pleasurably?

Eager eyes peered at him each day
Isaiah preached; desperate for life,

the eyes hang unto each word he uttered;
glances and nods accented his scriptural references—

sometimes an impromptu voice of the sick—
the dying—would burst forth, and all those

who have accepted Yahweh would start to sing,
waiting eagerly for His salvation on earth.

x x x

And there was Grace, who was a frame
of bones and dry loose skin when she

came to the healing school; her husband
had died of HIV/AIDS; she'd lost

her only girl, Sandra; she and Kevin
her son tenaciously grappled for

a miracle; Grace began to sit in church
on cushions with her tender hipbones

sticking out, but soon her hips began
to smoothen out and Kevin began to play;

then Grace sat up unaided upon chairs;
she returned from the valley of the shadow

of death, her confidence in life restored;
she became the advert of the healing school.

x x x

Then came Kasangana; his family
had put his coffin by him— the inevitability

of his death made them do so;
lack of space made them put it by his bed.

Each day, Kasangana woke up to daylight
shining over the wooden vehicle meant

to take him beyond the sea; but he defied
the darkness, it was not his time,

he wasn't ready. Can death be so mocked?
Kasangana heard of Isaiah's healing school.

He asked to be taken there; Isaiah preached
about Jesus the Christ, who rose from the dead.

Deep within Kasangana something happened:
he rose up, moved the coffin, went out

back to work; the indomitability of his soul
was a mystery! Isaiah laboured tirelessly

at his school—preaching, healing, praying
with men and women so desperate to live,

so desperate to overcome the pestilence of evil.
He caused the sick, ignorant and arrogant

to know God, to know that God cared.
Isaiah showed them that he, too, cared:

he led his church with integrity;
he counselled them lovingly;

but, in the midst of the hope, Isaiah
accepted the inevitability of death.

People with troubled hearts had found
a new prophet! They flocked to him ever more.

36. The caged birds

In the thickets of mangrove trees,
Segida went beyond the path where

warriors dread to tread; in a grotto
he sat, holding another human head.

He waited for the priest to take him
through the rituals. He recalled

his first initiation—how his dad had
stood, proudly observing—but tonight

he stood alone, ready to go beyond
his father, beyond the human barrier.

He was to enter a blood covenant
with Satan; to do the will of darkness;

to give everything and anything;
to sacrifice wife, child, his manhood,

in exchange for power and protection.
Segida wanted to silence his conscience;

there was no turning back now.
Falila had known when Segida's affair began—

it was Yolanda's unease with her
that gave the game away.

Yolanda looked at him in a certain way,
when he called her Tarantula—it was

with admiration. After the kidnappings,
Segida became a wanted man. Falila

and Jemima were under surveillance.
She decided to return to Lagos; she knew

Segida had killed and he would kill again.
For a while she had believed in the cause

to protect the land, to fight for justice,
for sustainable development,

to fight for the rule of law and emancipation
of the people; but there was something

more sinister—an evil spreading, a cancer
that was in his voice, in his eyes;

she could hear it when his demons
began to speak at night; when he hurt her

with rough sex; his sleeplessness
began to frighten her. She knew

he was on the edge—that twilight
between the living and the dead.

He was living on ‘crack’, gunrunning
and drug-trafficking; he didn’t talk

to her of Black Fist any more, for her safety.
Falila began to fear that Jemima

would become an orphan and she a widow.
Segida had neutralised her witchcraft

with his superior occult powers;
she was happy about this, but soon

she discovered she was a slave
of the bird in her; a caged pet.

Since his affair had begun with Yolanda
all talk between them had ended in anger.

She decided to find Isaiah
and tell him the truth about Jemima.

37. Jemima

Jemima, who loved her mum and dad,
was now troubled: Falila, who came

to kiss her goodnight, did so without
the emotion she had known; her dad

had begun to shout at her and her Mum.
Jemima had often heard her parents at night

whisper and giggle while she cuddled
her doll, happy that they were happy.

But soon Segida began to arrive home drunk;
Jemima heard them one night, grunting

and struggling, her mum was shouting,
'Leave me, murderer! Do you want to kill me?

Kill me too! Be happy!' She could hear
blows and her mum's moan of submission.

Falila would beg Segida.
'Please let me go with my daughter!'

'She's my daughter too! Isn't she, isn't she?'
When Falila screamed with pain,

Jemima cried to her dad,
'Leave mum alone daddy, please daddy!'

The house stopped breathing;
Jemima could be heard crying and sobbing;

then Segida stomped out to the car,
the door banged and he drove off to screeching tyres.

Falila and Jemima hugged and held each other
in desperation; the eyes of Jemima's teddy

glowed in the dark room; she stared
at her cabinet, at her special pair of shoes,

that mum had bought her for the school play,
she remembered being the proudest girl once.

Falila didn't want Jemima to see
her bruises, and Jemima promised herself

not to look or touch them, even though
she wanted to. Often, she wished she

could fly like a mutant after her father;
take him by his neck and swing him

through the clouds; watch him beg and promise
not to hit her mum again or make their

household a laughing stock of the part
of Port Harcourt where they lived.

Falila held her daughter's hands,
then hugged her, ran her hand in her

hair, as Jemima listened to Falila's heartbeat,
resting her head on her mother's breasts.

38. Letter to Kaduna

Falila's career had ended abruptly:
Segida saw all her male colleagues

as potential threats; he gave her everything
but happiness. Falila wished life were easier,

particularly for Jemima; she had composed
several letters to Isaiah in her mind

but she tore them up each time, as none
seemed adequate to explain his daughter

after eight years. She had followed his progress
in Kaduna since he became the prophet

in the new-breed mega-church; she'd rehearsed
meeting him and finally one day she wrote to him:

'Dear Isaiah, accept my congratulations on your success,
which has filled the land. I've heard of your healing

schools; I'm very proud you have made such progress.
It's been eight years and I've had no peace; I owe you

an explanation; not that I did not try, but you deliberately
avoided me. You must know that you are part of me

and I am part of you forever because Jemima
is our daughter. I did my best to tell you but met

Segida instead. Now all the men I have ever loved
have been taken from me; first it was Fatai,

then my dad and now you, but if it will give you any joy,
I want you to know that the power of witchcraft

over my life was broken by your friend Segida,
my husband, though I am now truly his slave for it.

Yes we got married; he believed Jemima was his;
I have not told him she is yours. I don't expect much

from you and will not demand anything from you;
all I ask is please come and take your daughter

from the hell that your friend is creating for us,
I remain your friend, Falila.'

39. One phone call

Isaiah read Falila's letter, trembling
as he stared at the photograph of the girl

in school uniform; could a few nights
with condoms produce this beautiful creature?

He was troubled; was it a hoax?
But Falila could not lie, but then why

did she wait so long? Could he
have been a father all these years?

It was not an unpleasant thought; he would,
of course, insist on blood and DNA tests.

Isaiah still cannot imagine Segida married
to Falila, but he will have to respect that;

and if Falila says Jemima is his daughter
then Jemima must be his daughter.

Then a telephone call arrives that strikes
him numb: 'Mama died this morning.'

Isaiah's father was sober: 'What killed her?
How could mama die?' Her admonitions

still rang in his heart; she always desired
to see his children in her letters.

Sixty is too young to die. Was his mother
dying while he was healing the sick

in his church in Kaduna? Isaiah wept bitterly,
'Lord, don't take her now!' Through the night

he sat, reminiscing in the dark, of his mama,
how she loved him, her incessant labour

in the kitchen, her concern and her prayers.
Isaiah sobbed till he slept, but he woke

resolved to wake her from the dead as Jesus
raised Lazarus. He read again her last letter;

why didn't she tell him she was sick?
'Dear Isaiah,' she began and Isaiah

imagined her behind the big brown table
in her room—the one with piled-up newspapers

and documents; he could see her bent over,
her glasses primed on her nose, her Bible

opened at salient passages; he recalled
the nostalgic aroma of *egusi* soup wafting

about the house, its pot on the charcoal fireplace.
'I hope you are behaving yourself. I have

kept my promise of praying for you
on Mountain Obadiah every week, but

despite my prayers, you must have a relationship
with God yourself. I think of your marriage

these days; when will I carry your children
in these hands, son?'

Tears rolled down Isaiah's cheeks
as he read mama's letter.

'You, my child, are the fruit
of my patient relationship with God.

You must guard your mind from
every corrupting influence so you can attain

your goals; you must teach your mind
to think along with God's word in His holy book;

check out these scripture readings; they are
my thoughts for you; meditate on them,

and when you have time let me know how you are.
Philippians 2: 12, 'Wherefore, my beloved, as ye

have always obeyed, not as in my presence only,
but now much more in my absence, work

out your own salvation with fear and trembling.'
Philippians 4: 8, 'Finally, brethren, whatsoever

things are true, whatsoever things are honest,
whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things

are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever
things are of good report; if there be any virtue

and if there be any praise, think of these things.’
I remain your loving mother, Lydia.’

Isaiah wrapped a blanket around his body
and held the letter to his chest; he never felt so lonely.

Did mama know she was going to die?
He pushed aside the blinds and stared at the night.

No stars appeared in the sky; not one blink
of reassurance. Isaiah wasn’t looking for a sign

but he searched the dark dispassionate night,
wishing he could tell mama he would become

everything she wanted him to be.
He wished God would talk to him

but there was no voice.
Only darkness. The wind wept

around the trees; Isaiah wept
with the wind, the trees, the stars.

40. Broken Spirits

Isaiah fasted and prayed; he was trusting
that God would raise up his mother.

But the cold mortuary drained his spirit.
The sight was beyond the image in his mind—

the soft-hearted, soft-spoken woman who wept
on his shoulder and blessed him in prayer

on Obadiah's mountain was no more.
Isaiah was speechless by his mother's corpse.

Death was such a formidable foe, his faith
gave way to despair. Later, as her corpse

was washed and dressed for burial, he determined
to be strong, to share his faith with his father,

who had graciously accepted the responsibility
for burying his wife, although they were separated.

It was his opportunity to tell his dad that the dead
in Christ lived forever; mama was not dead,

she had only slept; Christ has swallowed death
on Calvary's cross. Mama was buried;

she had chosen to be with her maker.
Isaiah wrote her a poem—'Life is a dash':

'Life is as fragile as a bunch of wreaths,
like a march through pews of sombre faces,

a memory soon forgotten; life's last dash
is louder than the first cry, like a motorcade

from an empty chapel where the cross looks on,
it's a case now lost, or won forever. Last dash

would end in flames and ashes, or as dug earth
drawn over rigid flesh like bedclothes. Short

and long dashes from first breath to final gasp,
the path of each life, an account for each breath spent.'

41. The Reunion

Falila and Isaiah finally met
at Lydia's burial. Her smile

was brief but her voice strained
as she touched his hand to express

her deepest-felt condolences.
She was now Segida's wife; Isaiah

was now Yahweh's priest and a prophet.
The past was gone and his desire

for her was gone with it. He admitted,
though, she was still beautiful,

with those daring big eyes;
she was unchanged in eight years.

Isaiah was happy she had come.
Segida was in Port Harcourt, she'd said;

Isaiah longed to see his old friend,
to catch up on the jokes of the past eight years.

Behind Falila's dark sunglasses,
her eyes were intense, they followed him.

Isaiah could not imagine what was
on her mind; why now reveal his daughter

after eight years, and she has not told Segida?
She requests that he visits Segida's Lagos residence

to meet Jemima, his daughter. Isaiah spends time
with friends who had come to the funeral, but

his thoughts revolve around his meeting
with his daughter Jemima. No talk yet of DNA

or other medical tests, mothers always knew.
Losing a mother, gaining a daughter;

no comparisons—but, somehow, Isaiah began
to wish it were true, that he truly was a father.

42. Three kola nuts in a Shaman's plate

Isaiah arrived at the address in Ikeja GRA,
pleased his friend had done well;

the duplex set back in large grounds
was opulent; Isaiah was eager

to see Jemima but Falila insisted
they have a drink and a chat first.

'Jemima is fine; she is in her room!
How does it feel to be a famous pastor in Kaduna?'

'Nothing more than being a committed Christian!
And how is your mum?' Isaiah asked.

'I haven't seen her since I married Segida.'
'So have you told Segida about Jemima?'

'Segida proposed before I could explain.'
Suddenly the lights go off; Falila stands up;

'I'll switch on the generator.' She calls
to Jemima to remain in her room.

Then something hard hit Isaiah's neck;
like the house has fallen on him;

the room in darkness spins round,
stars sparkle as his skull throbs.

Isaiah tries to sort out his neck
to be sure his head is on it;

he tries to focus his eyes, roll his tongue,
swallows what seems like a stream of blood

flowing from his lips. A glare of lights
from car passing outside outlines a man

coming at him. Isaiah scrambles away;
he is groggy as the metal bar crashes

at him again, missing his head.
'Falila, Jemima, where are you?'

Isaiah hears the door as Falila rushes in
and the man hits her on the shoulder;

she screams, sprawled under the dining table;
Isaiah feels raw and warm blood trickle

down his neck, a searing pain pervades
his whole body; his mind cannot make out

what is happening. The blackout
is not unusual— the entire country

is accustomed to regular total darkness;
Lagos electricity chooses when to come

on and off! The metal bar flashes
and swipes again; Isaiah jerks back

into action; Falila whimpers on the floor;
'Armed thief!' she shouts. Jemima cries

for help in her room, terrified. Isaiah
watches over Falila as she crawls

into the corner; her face is a mask
of horror as the man approaches her.

Isaiah must do something; the window
lets in streams of moonlight like an evil halo

magnifying the intruder's silhouette
against the inner wall of the room.

Is this a robber? How did he get in?
What does he want? Why doesn't he

make demands? Within Isaiah's reach
is a chair that he swings with

all his strength at the advancing figure.
The metal crushes the chair; the intruder

punches Isaiah with his free hand!
Isaiah climbs the table to reach

Falila; he lifts the table and rams it
into the man, giving Falila some rope.

This rattles the intruder as the table
falls on him; Isaiah throws his body weight

on the table to pin down the intruder.
'Run Falila, run and get help; this is a robber!'

The intruder speaks: 'I'll kill you both!'
Isaiah stands up shocked; he recognises the voice.

'Segida! What are you doing here?
Falila said you were in Port Harcourt.'

Segida lunges hysterically at Falila;
he holds her at arm's length and bashes her

with the metal pipe; Isaiah rushes
to wrest the weapon from him.

The two friends glare at each other.
Segida stinks of alcohol, they fight,

they grunt, twist, turn; they grapple
for control of the bar, the bookshelf

crashes down, the glasses shatter;
Isaiah addresses Segida, pushing him

to the wall: 'Segida! What's the matter with you?'
'I heard everything you said about Jemima!'

'But I just heard that for the first time myself!'
Segida swings another blow at Isaiah's head.

Isaiah ducks and, without letting go
of the metal bar, he wraps his legs around Segida.

He knows there is something fiendish
about him; he'd been looking forward

to meeting his friend, perhaps to sorting
things out about Jemima— but now

his life is in danger. 'Segida,
stop this madness, listen to me!'

Segida hits Isaiah; the blow lands
on his cheekbone instead of his forehead;

it hurts but Isaiah refuses to relinquish
the metal bar; he rams a fist into Isaiah's midriff

Isaiah attempts to throw Segida down, Segida shouts,
'You deceived me knowing Jemima was your child?'

'I only came to bury my mother.'
Segida tries to gouge Isaiah's eyes;

Falila's ankle bleeds; they shove,
they push, they stagger in fits of rage,

Falila grabs Segida's leg, she sinks
her teeth into it; he screams

and kicks her viciously; this gives Isaiah
the chance to smash Segida's head

against the wall until his grip on the bar
is slackened; his arm locks Segida's thigh

and he heaves up in a fireman's lift
to slam him against the wall,

'I've been in the dark about Jemima I swear'
the metal bar falls from his grip;

Isaiah steps back, he is in shock
as blood pours down Segida's face.

Flashes of light approach the house;
neighbours must have called the police

when they heard the noise and call
for help from Jemima. Falila is lying still

where she fell after Segida kicked her head.
Segida sits in the corner looking at Isaiah;

he shrugs regretfully and weeps.
'Falila,' he calls out to her softly.

Isaiah can see that Segida indeed loves her.
'I came because you lost your mum,' says Segida.

'Thanks'.
'I must go, I am wanted by the police;

tell them it was an armed robber.'
When the lights come back on

Segida is gone. The place is wrecked;
books litter the floor; the metal bar

is in a corner. Jemima is crying
in her room—mute witness

to a potential double murder.
Isaiah catches a glimpse of her—

a frightened, beautiful girl
with eyes blurry with tears;

she watches intently as Isaiah
helps Falila into the ambulance.

x x x x

The DNA test proves Jemima
is indeed Isaiah's daughter;

Isaiah is filled with awe at God's ways,
where the loss of Lydia brings the gift

called Jemima. Each day, Jemima
fills his heart with contentment;

how could such a mistake become a blessing?
Isaiah does not see Segida again, but hears

that, although arrested by Interpol in Italy,
he escaped to head remnants of Black Fist

and continue the struggle for equality,
justice and the destiny of the Delta people.

Falila recovers and settles in Lagos, where
she decides to return to her dental profession.

Isaiah returns to Kaduna with Jemima—
their regular correspondence is a delight to Falila.

43. Epilogue

Martin stands at the podium; lean, bronzed
by the fierce equatorial sun, his face

deadpan, a statue, he watches reporters
as one just returned from the dead.

Cameramen jostle to get their best
angles. He loathes this world now!

Yes! He longs for his wife and daughter,
but his disgust for the vanity and hypocrisy

around him is corrosive, eating him up.
Suddenly it is all very clear to him:

he was once like these people, when all that
mattered was his daily bread, to get back

home to a life, to a wife and child—but
that world has gone now, gone for ever.

He coughs, and everyone looks up, attentive.
The American ambassador, standing next

to him, puts his hand on his arm gently,
reassuringly, and nudges him to speak.

‘These men you call terrorists saved me! My
name is Martin and I have had sixty days

of rehabilitation in the mangrove forest.
These men you call pirates are better educated

than I am, and I stand today to challenge
all who stand here and to condemn those

who look on and do nothing! It is not enough
to do just anything—we must do enough.

I have not been rescued, neither has ransom
been paid for my release. I stand, a free man,

for the cause I now care about and address
you all, men of good conscience, to fight

alongside me for freedom and justice!
I have lived with passionate men for two

months; these are not vagabonds, but articulate and intelligent, yet very frustrated men.

Men, desperate, because the circumstances we created made them so! Those in this nation

and beyond, who love this earth should weep at the desecration, the despoliation of nature here!

It's time to demand more from us who exploit the land for gain but give the people pain...!

The press throng him; the ambassador's face is distraught as he tugs on Martin's arm.

He attempts a smile as he almost drags Martin away. Questions fly and cameras snap away.

Segida heads out of the room, camera dangling on his neck, false moustache twitching in mischief.

Critical commentary to *The Prophet, The Pirate and The Witch*

Chapter One - Introduction

This critical essay acknowledges the various influences that I have had in my creative writing. Within the rich abundance of Nigerian poetry I thought I should develop and explore the notion of poets as prophets interacting with pirates and their resistance movements in a world where witches and wizards still play an important part in people's lives. This takes cognizance of what is going on, not only in Nigeria and Africa today but also in the world generally.

The African continent has been a melting pot of Christian, Islamic and traditionalist values for many years. Ali Mazrui demonstrates this concisely in *The Africans: A Triple Heritage*, a book jointly published by BBC Publications and Little, Brown and Company, which also became a television series co-produced by the BBC, the Public Broadcasting Service (USA) and the Nigerian Television Authority in 1986.⁹ Mazrui portrays the reality of living in the world of Christians, Muslims, traditionalists, witches and wizards, where people no longer know exactly what to believe. This situation cries out for exposition at creative and spiritual levels, as highlighted in my narrative poem.

Writers, confident of the transformative power of their art, often clash with one another at socioeconomic and sometimes spiritual levels; and Ngugi wa Thiong'o is unequivocal when he states that 'the writer should not only explain the world; he should change it.'¹⁰ There is a yearning by African writers to bring about social and economic change in society as chronicled in African literature and Nigerian poetry in particular, to the extent that the African writer has become 'a political statement.'¹¹ The writer engages in interplay of history, reality and imagination, and being both a product of his own time and a prime mover, he/she inevitably confronts societal issues in Old Testament prophetic style.

⁹ Ali Mazrui, *The Africans: A Triple Heritage* (New York: Little Brown and Co., and London: BBC, 1986).

¹⁰ Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Writers in Politics* (London: Heinemann, 1981) p. 71.

¹¹ Syl Cheney-Coker, 'A Poet in Exile', *West Africa*, 3360 (1981), 3055-3059, (p. 3055).

The resulting conflict, as in Old Testament times, incurs the wrath of the rulers as the prophet disrupts the socioeconomic equilibrium to proclaim an alternative vision of peace and stability. The catalogue of writers who have been imprisoned and killed for their views across the African continent and all over the world is akin to that of biblical prophets who paid the ultimate price for their prophecies. This association between the writer and the prophet has a historical precedent that dates back to biblical times and to ancient Greece, where the poet was called ‘a maker’, and Rome, where the poet ‘Vates’ was considered a diviner or prophet.

The Bible has had a great influence on my creative work. What I find particularly striking is how biblical prophets like Isaiah played an important part in nation-building in the Old Testament kingdom of Judah. This is why I have chosen Isaiah to be the name of the protagonist of my narrative. But biblical narratives from both the Old and New Testaments have inspired many great works in Western literature too, from John Milton’s epic poem *Paradise Lost*, (1667) and its sequel *Paradise Regained* (1671) to Soren Kierkegaard’s philosophical work *Fear and Trembling* (1843) and Thomas Mann’s four-part novel *Joseph and his Brothers* (1933–43).

Besides Hollywood has had a succession of epics such as *The Ten Commandments* (1956), *Spartacus* (1960), *Ben Hur* (1925,1959), *Cain and Abel* (1909), *Samson and Delilah* (1949, 2009) and *David and Bathsheba* (1951), which have combined sex, violence and religion to become huge commercial successes. Tim La Haye and Jerry B. Jenkins *Left Behind Series* (1995, 1997, and 2000) an apocalyptic rendering of the rapture and emergence of the anti-Christ became a best-seller that turned into a movie. Howard Jacobson’s *The very Model of a Man* (1992) a complex, post-modern revisiting of the story of Cain, Caroline Slaughter’s *Magdalene* (1978) and Michele Roberts’s *The Wild Girl* (1984), both accounts of the legendary Mary Magdalene, are just a few other examples. Mel Gibson caught the world’s attention with another film, *The Passion of Christ* (2004) and theories about Mary Magdalene were revisited in the controversial and much disputed Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code* (2006) first published in 2003 and released as a film in 2006. This says a lot about the resilience of Bible stories across generations.

Although the vatic image of the poet has diminished in recent times, I have revisited the story of prophet Isaiah of the Old Testament as an example and a model of political agitation. He was a political activist and leader, whose poetic commentaries and predictions had great influence in the courts of kings, and the authority that he exercised on behalf of Yahweh, the God of Israel. In one instance, the kingdom of Judah was on the brink of invasion by Assyria—the superpower of the day; the natural inclination of the leaders of Judah was to make coalitions with Egypt. But Isaiah’s message to them was to trust in God. Judah’s leaders naturally preferred an alliance with Egypt as a better option rather than heed Isaiah’s call.

Isaiah was simply calling for a change in the society’s consciousness; he was looking for a re-evaluation from within, which connotes repentance that will lead to a radical change in people’s values. Isaiah refers to the leader’s choice for military alliances as a ‘covenant with death and with hell’ and rebukes those who have ‘made lies their refuge’ and ‘hidden under falsehood’. Isaiah 28. 15. He calls their plan a recipe for frustration because ‘... the hail shall sweep away the refuge of lies, and the waters shall overflow the hiding place.’ Isaiah 28. 17–19.

Although there are important differences between Isaiah’s days and now, this concept of visionary and representative leadership is as relevant today in Africa as it was in Isaiah’s days. The disparate socioeconomic contradictions and political repression continue to create a demand for activist and prophetic writing, as many African writers put their art to positive use in a climate where leaders invest resources in building ‘a refuge of lies’, instead of weaving together the fabrics that will strengthen and bind society and uphold the cherished values that humanity shares.

In this instance, our understanding of the notion of prophet and prophecy are crucial. The word ‘prophet’ refers in general terms to someone with divine ability to answer the ubiquitous question of what will happen tomorrow, a question that has challenged and filled human beings with awe since the earliest man watched the sun set in all its glowing majesty.¹² David Petersen observes, in his introduction to

¹² See Appendix 1 for more detailed discussion on prophets and prophetic phenomena.

Prophecy in Israel, that biblical influence is so far-reaching that a progressive definition of the term ‘prophet’ and ‘prophecy’ has emerged. He says:

In the late eighteenth-century Germany, prophets were understood to be romanticists, expressing the spirit of natural poetry. In nineteenth-century England and Holland, prophets were understood as sober rationalists expressing strict moralisms, and in the 1960s in the United States, prophets were often viewed as counterculture figures ... each society in which prophets are read and pondered has tended to inject its own value structures and models when speaking about Israel’s prophets. This situation is no less true of the scholarly than the popular culture. In the scholarly discussions prophets have been understood as priests, charismatics, ecstasies, poets, theologians, politicians – the list could go on without limit.¹³

This, however, does not deny the place and validity of the biblical prophet; rather, it strengthens it because, as Petersen argues, the success of the concept of ‘prophet’ as an instrument of change is based on western society’s positive appraisal of the biblical prophets. We find this matter reflected also in African literature.

When Chinua Achebe’s novel *A Man of the People* came out in the wake of the 1966 bloody coup that swept away a corrupt and scandalous regime in Nigeria, it was deemed to be not just a strange coincidence but as prophetic. Achebe had written, and published in the same week of the coup, a novel that predicted the first army takeover in Nigeria. But when I interviewed him in his hotel room in London on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of his famous novel *Things Fall Apart*, he was humble about taking on the mantle of a prophet. He told me that, while some people would call his novel prophetic and others felt he was privy to the plans of the coup plotters, he believed that he was merely a good observer with a hand on the pulse of his society who was able to discern the future, as history often repeats itself. I must quickly observe that, although the coup took place as the novel predicted, the prediction was only partly fulfilled, as the problem it challenged—that of corrupt politics—is still an issue fifty years on.

The influence of the Bible on literary thought in Western society, which associates prophets with Ancient Israel and the Old Testament, would explain Achebe’s admirable modesty when he admits that he is not a prophet in that biblical

¹³ David L. Petersen, ed. *Prophecy in Israel: Search for an Identity* (Philadelphia; London: Fortress Press; SPCK, 1987), p. 1.

sense—a vehicle for the power of God. However, this image of the prophet as an agent of change, someone with sovereign authority, is important to me because, as I argue, it applies to Africa today, where people are waiting for political messiahs with prophetic voices or political visionaries. Astute intellectuals, writers, and social reformers ready to drive home the point paradoxically compensate for the political leadership required in Nigeria. Achebe reflects this in his book, *The Trouble with Nigeria*:

The trouble ... is simply and squarely a failure of leadership. There is nothing 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.¹⁴

This is why, perhaps, Achebe's *A Man of the People* made such an impact: societal perception that he was a prophet was based on the expectation of the type of political role that a Biblical prophet like Isaiah provided in Judah. My interest in asking if Achebe considered himself a prophet is crucial to my argument because there is another way of understanding the notion of 'prophet', which derives from the European Romantic tradition, and which can be said to be applicable to Achebe. The Romantic poets help us to understand the political role of the prophet and to define prophetic writing in terms of political agitation for change.

The Romantic tradition, which emerged in the late eighteenth century, has been associated historically with political revolution and cultural upheaval. Ian Balfour makes this connection in *The Rhetoric of Romantic Prophecy* where he describes the impact of the French Revolution on English and German politics and culture in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Balfour concludes that Romantic poetry became an attractive model of 'prophetic writing', which does not predict the future but calls for change in the present while engaging with text from the past.¹⁵ He also turns critical attention to the use of biblical models and the secularization of religious themes by Romantic poets, which M. H. Abrams had earlier highlighted in

¹⁴ Chinua Achebe, *The Trouble with Nigeria* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1983), p. 24.

¹⁵ Ian Balfour, *The Rhetoric of Romantic Prophecy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

his book *Natural Supernaturalism*.¹⁶ In Balfour's view, the style and rhetoric of prophetic writing helps us to link prophetic language with historical and political events. This is still a popular position in the western world and Africa today.

While the role of poets in the society will continue to be a subject of critical debate, the eighteenth century in many respects can be described as a defining period. This was when the Horatian notion that a poet's main objective was to delight and instruct was challenged. Robert Lowth's model of the prophetic voice, which influenced the Romantics, was drawn from the biblical prophets. He portrayed these prophets not only as poets but also as practitioners of public rhetoric. Their poetic and prophetic narratives were instruments, deployed towards the persuasion of their society or, in some instances public figures such as the king. Thus, the prophetic voice took on the image of one who under some influence had an obligation to adopt a rhetorical voice in persuading an imagined audience and to effect public change for the general good.

Although the element of prediction was relatively popular in eighteenth century versions of the prophet, it is important to observe the important overlaps between the figures of the rhetorical poet and the biblical prophet. They both demand a public and need an audience. Although the rhetorical poet accentuates the result of society's actions or that of particular leaders, the objective is often to support or deter, to praise or condemn. The biblical prophet, on the other hand, usually relates the future as a revelation that is predetermined, and is more of an ambassadorial figure, who represents a sovereign.

The eighteenth century Romantic voices, in their rhetorical approach to issues in society, helped to separate the Horatian link between instruction and delight. This created a new paradigm as regards the nature and purpose of poetry.

As I point out in my discussion of the work of Robert Lowth, which follows, it was at this time that the instructive duty of the poet began to take pre-eminence. According to Arthur Johnston, 'The withdrawn, inactive, luxuriating figure is replaced by the defiant, involved poet, for whom poetry is a kind of action, superior

¹⁶ Meyer Howard Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York; London: Norton, 1971).

to that of the warrior'.¹⁷ The poet became '... a voice of the people and a figure of political opposition'.¹⁸ This is the position I assume in my discussion on the 'prophetic' nature of Nigerian poetry.

Robert Lowth

Arguably the foremost critic who influenced the Romantic reading of the Holy Bible as literature has been Robert Lowth. He succeeded in showing the purely human and historical content and value of the Bible rather than the theology and by doing so gave the Bible a new lease of life. Lowth's series of lectures, which began at the University of Oxford in 1741, were published as *De Sacra Poesi Hebraeorum* in 1753; and George Gregory later translated them into English in 1787.

In the Renaissance, Phillip Sidney had proclaimed the power of poetry to refine man, calling it 'the first light-giver to ignorance, and first nurse, whose milk by little and little enabled people to feed afterwards on tough knowledge'¹⁹ and Shelley two and a half centuries after him defended the divine nature of poetry as 'the centre and circumference of knowledge.'²⁰ Even though Sidney and Shelley saw poetry as 'divine', it was primarily Lowth's work that influenced a new way of reading biblical prophecy in a poetic way while at the same time acknowledging it as God's mediated word.

Lowth observes that 'the poets of ancient Israel were also the prophets'²¹ and his presentation of Hebrew prophecy as the model of genuine prophecy led the Romantic poets to review their reading of the sacred texts.²² This prepared the way for the Romantic notion of the poet as a prophet who, like those of the Old Testament, 'proclaims the great and hidden truths of human existence'.²³ This

¹⁷ Arthur Johnston, 'Thomas Gray: Our Daring Bard', James Downey and Ben Jones eds., *Fearful Joy: Papers from the Thomas Gray Bicentenary Conference at Carleton University, 1971*, (Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 1974), p. 61.

¹⁸ Balfour, p. 31.

¹⁹ D. J. Ernest de Chikera Enright, *English Critical Texts* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 4.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 250.

²¹ Robert Lowth, *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*, trans. by G. Gregory, 1787, vol. II, (London: J. Johnson, 1787), p.18.

²² Balfour, p. 77.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 250.

remains one of the central tenets of Romanticism and is derived partly from Lowth's implicit endorsement of the biblical tradition.²⁴

One of the great achievements of Lowth was to demonstrate parallelism as the means by which Hebrew poetry functioned rather than the devices of verbal sounds like rhyme, alliteration and metre that is familiar in European poetry. Lowth was able to show that there was a thin line between prose and poetry in Hebrew. This line of argument eventually helped to obscure the traditional distinction between prose and poetry as separate literary kinds. It made it possible for the term 'poetic' to now apply with 'scholarly rectitude rather than metaphorical licence, as easily to prose as verse'.²⁵ This, I believe, also partly helped to pave the way for modernist poetry of statement, poetry of protest and other poetic forms of social engagement and to shift critical emphasis from the 'image' focused poetry that tended to dominate the eighteenth century poets.

In this brief introduction I have argued for the continuing impact of biblical narratives on literature in general and on my work in particular— a prose-poetic narrative where the protagonist assumes a prophetic role in modern-day Nigeria. I have pointed to changes in the notion of prophet and prophecy (traced more fully in the appendix), and to Robert Lowth's influence on the Romantic reading of the Bible and, consequently, romantic poetry. The next chapter looks specifically at two poets: Christopher Okigbo of Nigeria and the Ghanaian-born Caribbean poet Kwame Dawes. Some of their work shows remarkable influences from the Bible. By interjecting a biographical note on the protagonist of my narrative poem I hope to highlight the influences of the work of these two eminent poets on mine and, at the same time, to highlight the problems of the Nigerian Niger Delta.

²⁴ Mary Moorman, *William Wordsworth: The Later Years* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), pp. 104-105.

²⁵ Stephen Prickett, *Words and The Word: Language, poetics and biblical interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 42.

Chapter Two - Major Influences

1. Christopher Okigbo, poet and prophet

If I don't learn to shut my mouth I'll soon go to hell
I, Okigbo, town-crier, together with my iron bell.²⁶

Within modern Nigerian literature, the issue of poets as prophets is returning to the fore as critics revisit the work of the poet Christopher Okigbo. Okigbo—who belongs in the post-independence ‘golden age’ of Nigerian poetry and is a contemporary of Wole Soyinka, Gabriel Okara and John Pepper-Clark, continues to stand out as perhaps the most talented of modern African poets. He not only demonstrates a mystical ability of prophetic insight into the history of Nigeria at his time but also remarkably expresses them in his poetry. He was a man ‘dominated by a passion for truth and by fear of compromising his conscience’.²⁷

Okigbo the ‘town crier’ is arguably the pioneer of protest poetry in Nigeria with *Paths of Thunder*, first published in 1960, which predicted the chaos that engulfed the nation and resulted in a civil war (1967–70) that claimed his life. Okigbo’s eminence as a prophetic and visionary voice is built incredibly on a small collection of 72 pages of poetry, *Labyrinths with Path of Thunder*, published posthumously in 1971. But his enigmatic lifestyle—described as restless and adventurous—²⁸ and the prophetic, historical and political elements in his poetry, all add to the mystique that helps to distinguish him as the most influential, and perhaps one of the most studied, poets of modern African sensibilities.

Conflict naturally provides a poetic tool that is necessary to revolutionary aesthetics and, since independence, Nigeria has had— and continues to have— a rich context of chaos to draw from: the Fratricidal war of the late 1960s to the ill-managed oil boom of the 1970s; the corrupt military and civilian governments of the 1980s to the religious riots and terrorist movements that began in the 1980s and continued in the 1990s. An environment prevails that has made it difficult for

²⁶ Christopher Okigbo, *Labyrinths with Path of Thunder* (London; Ibadan; Nairobi: Heinemann, Mbari Publications, 1971), p. 67.

²⁷ Sunday Anozie, *Christopher Okigbo: Creative Rhetoric* (London; Ibadan: Evans Brothers Limited 1972), p. 16.

²⁸ Anozie, p. 7.

subsequent generations of poets after Okigbo to walk away from the protest tradition in their poetry. The burden of the protest trend in the different generations is discussed later in this essay.

Okigbo is also renowned as the poet who stands accused of leaving the path of pure art and making himself a martyr ‘degrading his calling in the process’.²⁹ Ali Mazrui in *The Trials of Christopher Okigbo* made the accusation because Okigbo died at the age of thirty-five in 1967, fighting for Biafra during the Nigerian Civil war. His death stirred up much controversy, especially among poets from West Africa who had labelled Mazrui a gatecrasher into a very sensitive issue.³⁰ However, in my opinion, Okigbo’s international status and influence merited the response from Mazrui; and that this has generated an on-going debate demonstrates how his demise has affected poetic practice in Africa as a whole.

Mazrui’s novel that puts Okigbo on trial is an allegory of the responsibilities and duties of the artist in society. I particularly like how Fraser responds to Mazrui and other criticisms that are levied against Okigbo and other poets of his generation. Fraser explains why it was impossible for them to stand aside and not engage in the political issues of their day. He says of Okigbo, ‘... increasingly, as his art matured and the political environment in which he was working swam into focus, Okigbo came to see poetry and priesthood as synonymous, and priesthood as constituting a state of possession which, in modern Africa as in traditional Igbo land, carried a strong political prerogative’.³¹ Indeed, for a man of Okigbo’s acuity, and as one aware of the cost of the social transformation around him, it must have been impossible not to become emotionally engaged with the prevailing social, political and economic realities.

Okigbo can be regarded as a true artist, according to Vassily Novikov who ‘always wants to create works answering the most urgent questions engaging the contemporary mind. To him the supreme aim of creative work is truth, which he

²⁹ Robert Fraser, *West African Poetry: A Critical History* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 131-132.

³⁰ Ali Mazrui, *The Trial of Christopher Okigbo* (London: Heinemann, 1971).

³¹ Fraser, p. 132.

interprets as man's faith in the triumph of justice.³² Okigbo's contemporaneity and faith in his perception of truth and justice have created not only art but also history. The social integrity of his work is attested by his prerogative to be directly involved in that history. His poetic offering can therefore be likened to a spiritual epistle, an exposé of his inner journey and creativity, where his life and death are transformed into an epic—a celebration of logos, sound, rhythm and vision.

Okigbo's poetry is inspired by classical, romantic and traditional metaphors and symbols. He is said to have had personal preferences for 'Ovid, Catullus, Horace and Virgil'. He also relished 'Keats, Coleridge and Browning'.³³ He puts an emphasis on sound and musicality and would indicate the accompanying traditional musical instrument for his poems, implying that the work is to be read out or sung. The increasing influence of modernist poets on his work, particularly T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound and Gerard Manley Hopkins, also enabled him to 'combine statements of intense personal feelings with an exploration of possibilities of language; of transforming the traditional English syntax into a new poetic idiom', which incorporates Igbo expressions.³⁴ Fraser sums up his palatial offering as follows:

In his delicate cadences, the music of oral Igbo poetry blends with echoes from the modern English poets and with strains of American jazz, which he loved to play on the clarinet while still an undergraduate. Thematically his work may be viewed as an attempt to reconcile these various traditions and, above all, to come to terms with the tension between residual Christian promptings and the claims of indigenous Igbo theology.³⁵

This practice in Okigbo's poetry, which Fraser concisely articulates, is a blend of the spoken and written tradition, which is typical of Okigbo's generation. Similar themes of conflict that focus on the 'rise of individualism and moral liberalism with a concomitant increased range of preferential alternatives and a relaxation of traditional ties' can be found also in the work of 'Achebe, Ekwensi and Soyinka'.³⁶

³² Vassily Novikov, *Artistic Truth and Dialectics of Creative Work* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1981), p. 11.

³³ Anozie, pp. 12-13.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

³⁵ Fraser, pp. 104-105.

³⁶ Anozie, p. 27.

In Okigbo's work in particular, this duality demonstrates the influences that helped to shape his writing, from the local oral tradition to other outside influences. Obi Nwakama, in his biography of Okigbo *Thirsting for Sunlight*, sheds more light. He depicts Okigbo as a man who was deeply affected by both cultural and colonial education. There seem to be possibilities also, that his rebellion against the overbearing Catholicism made obligatory by his father on the family and the ritualistic exploration of Igbo theology, may be his own way of dealing with his 'solitude' and the emotional impact of the loss of his mother at the age of four.³⁷

Rays, violet and short, piercing the gloom.
foreshadow the fire that is dreamed of.

Rainbow on far side, arched like boa bent to kill.
foreshadows the rain that is dreamed of.

Me to the orangery
solitude invites
a wagtail, to tell
the tangled-wood-tale;
a sunbird, to mourn
a mother on a spray.³⁸

In this image of the rainbow in *The Passage*, the first piece of *Heavensgate*, Anozie explains that Okigbo was simply reflecting on the strong impression the sight of the rainbow had on him as a child but also indirectly, how such a sight was a reminder of 'a mother to mourn for'.³⁹ Paul Theroux, however, implies that it resonates more with the Christian religious influences on Okigbo. The rainbow he intimates, is a sign of the Covenant given to Noah by Jehovah and, as a symbol, it embodies good and evil. Theroux explains that 'The dual vision of Okigbo occurs all through his journey; the saint would see only the rainbow, the profligate would see the snake – but the visionary Okigbo sees both'.⁴⁰

This image of Okigbo as a visionary who embraces duality in his spirituality continues to inspire debate. This is of great interest to me because I can relate his experience to the conflict that engulfs the protagonist of my narrative and in my own

³⁷ Obi Nwakama, *Thirsting for Sunlight* (Ibadan: HEBN Publishers, 2010).

³⁸ Okigbo, p. 4.

³⁹ Anozie, p. 43.

⁴⁰ Paul Theroux, 'Christopher Okigbo', *Transition*, Vol. 5 (iii), No. 22, 1965, p. 18.

creative development. While Romanus Egudu would classify Okigbo as an ‘anti-ecclesiastical, anti-clerical poet’, the evidence of strong Christian overtones in his work cannot be denied.⁴¹ In his introduction to *Labyrinths and Path of Thunder*, Okigbo says *Heavensgate* was ‘originally conceived as an Easter sequence. It later grew into a ceremony of innocence, something like a mass ... the celebrant, a personage like Orpheus, is about to begin a journey ... The various sections of the poem, therefore, presents this celebrant at various stations of his cross’.⁴²

Certainly, the whole concept of an Easter sequence, of initiations and mass, a ceremony of innocence, and a celebrant taking a journey through various Stations of the Cross is Christian in origin. Most critics now tend to see the ambivalence of Okigbo’s inner spiritual journey towards enlightenment; he sheds his Catholicism on the way to a ritualistic return to his source and an intense renewal with the mother-goddess Idoto.

With regard to his poetic development, Professor Chukwuemeka Ike, the novelist who was a classmate of Okigbo at Government College Umuahia, was quoted in a newspaper article that eulogises Okigbo. He said that, while they were at college, Okigbo did not stick to the rules of poetry as they were being taught at the College because he was ahead of his classmates; he had read Eliot, Ezra Pound, Baudelaire, Yeats, Keats, Federico Garcia Lorca and Senghor, and had begun to adopt their style of free verse.⁴³ Paul Theroux, writing in the Ugandan literary journal *Transition* in 1965, called Okigbo a ‘poet, prophet, prodigal’ with ‘impeccable craft coupled with a soaring imagination’.⁴⁴

There is also a prophetic aspect to Okigbo’s writing that makes him almost messianic, like prophets of the Old Testament who spoke out against what was wrong with the society and the need for change but who then, like Jesus, paid the ultimate price for their declaration. While the effect of Okigbo’s verse continues to

⁴¹ Romanus Egudu, ‘Defence of Culture in the Poetry of Christopher Okigbo’ in *African Literature Today*, Vol. 6: *Poetry in Africa* (London: Heinemann, 1973), pp. 26-46.

⁴² Christopher Okigbo, ‘Introduction’, *Labyrinths with Path of Thunder* (London; Ibadan; Nairobi: Heinemann and Mbari Publications, 1971), p. xi.

⁴³ Christopher Okigbo – *Reminiscences*, Vanguard Newspaper 30 September 2007.

⁴⁴ Paul Theroux, ‘Christopher Okigbo’, *Transition*, Vol. 5 (iii), No. 22, 1965, p. 18.

reverberate around the world today, it forces us to ask if he was prophetic enough to have gone to war knowing he was going to die.⁴⁵

Okigbo's verse in his posthumously collected works, *Labyrinths*, has been described as 'the product of a deeply sophisticated mind, as steeped in the mythologies of Europe, Asia, and the ancient world as in the folklore of the rural Igbo amongst whom Okigbo grew up'.⁴⁶ Okigbo's reputation as the prophetic poet par excellence began to grow as he made his debut in the second edition of the *Black Orpheus* in 1962 with the *Four Canzones*, where in a display of his 'prophetic gift', he laments the inevitability of 'the fall of a brilliant but doomed generation'.⁴⁷ I use the term 'prophetic' here as earlier elucidated by Balfour.

NO heavenly transport now
of youthful passion
and the endless succession
of tempers and moods
in high societies;
no blasts no buffets
of a mad generation
nor the sonorous arguments
of the hollow brass
and the copious cups
of fraudulent misses
in brothels
of a mad generation.⁴⁸

Anozie sees the *Canzones* as intensely meditative and nostalgic, 'a rejection of Lagos, its "high societies" and "mad generation", its sophisticated pleasures, its night clubs and cabarets'.⁴⁹ Okigbo, in this earliest of his creative pieces, satirises the new Nigerian state, which, in the bid to re-create a European-style high society, had become 'hollow brass' with no idea of what to do. This rhetorical lamentation, a style he develops in his poetry as his work matures, depicts how the euphoria of

⁴⁵ The First International Conference on the Life and Poetry of Christopher Okigbo was held at Harvard University, Boston Massachusetts in September 2007. The theme was, 'Postcolonial African Literature and the Ideals of the Open Society/Teaching and Learning from Christopher Okigbo's Poetry'.

⁴⁶ Fraser, p. 104.

⁴⁷ Fraser, p. 98.

⁴⁸ *Black Orpheus* 11, 1962, p. 6.

⁴⁹ Anozie, p. 16.

independence in the nation had quickly turned to ‘an endless succession of tempers and moods’ of ‘a mad generation’.

My interest in Okigbo relates to his attempt to reconcile in his poetry the Igbo theology, modern English poetry and ‘residual Christian promptings’ in his soul. His prophetic poems show influences from these traditions.⁵⁰ These are some of the features that I bring to bear in the creation of the protagonist of my narrative, Isaiah Kosoko, who similarly negotiates reality between his Catholic mother, mystic father and traditionalist values.

As a young boy, Okigbo was expected to follow in his grandfather’s footsteps as the priest of Idoto, the cult of the river goddess. But when he grew up, after he had studied classics and had begun a professional career as librarian and publisher, he could no longer fulfil the expectations of his people as such a priest.⁵¹ His poem *The Passage* expresses his lament, guilt and regret that he had not taken up the challenge.

The influence of the Bible is evident in Okigbo’s early work. One very good example is in the concluding part of his lament. Fraser says ‘at the very moment of his greatest yearning he gives expression to this feeling in a précis of the opening sentence of Psalm 130, one of the greatest penitentiary supplications of the ancient church’.⁵²

Out of the depths my cry:
Give ear and hearken...⁵³

Compare this to the psalmist in Psalm 130.1-2.

Out of the depths have I cried unto thee, O Lord.
Lord, hear my voice; let thine ears be attentive to
the voice of my supplication.

Okigbo’s background in the classics apparently gave him an advantage over many of his contemporaries. It gave an uncommon depth to his poetry because of his

⁵⁰ Fraser, p. 105.

⁵¹ Fraser, pp. 106-107.

⁵² Ibid., p. 107.

⁵³ Okigbo, p. 3.

familiarity with Latin lyricism, ‘allusions and echoes,’ which other poets were to later discover in modernist poets like Eliot and Pound. Fraser calls this style ‘an unforced cosmopolitanism’.⁵⁴ This poem *On the New Year* written by Okigbo was published in *The Horn* in 1960.

Now it is over, the midnight funeral that parts
The old year from the new;
And now beneath each pew
The warden dives to find forgotten missals
Scraps of resolutions and medals;
And over lost souls in the graves
Amid the tangled leaves
The Wagtail is singing:
Cheep cheep cheep the new year is coming;
Christ will come again, the churchbell is ringing
Christ will come again after the argument in heaven
Christ ... Nicodemus ... Magdalen ...
Ding dong ding ...

And the age rolls on like a wind glassed flood,
And the pilgrimage to the cross is the void ...

And into time time slips with a lazy pace
And time into time
And need we wait while time and the hour
Roll, waiting for power?

II
To wait is to linger
With the hope that the flood will flow dry;
To hope is to point an expectant finger
At fate, fate that has long left us to lie
Marooned on the sands
Left with dry glands
To suckle as die.

Wait indeed, wait with grief laden
Hearts that throb like a diesel engine.
Throbbing with hopes:
Those hopes of men those hopes that are nowhere,
Those nebulous hopes, sand castles in the air –
Wait and hope?
The way is weary and long and time is
Fast on our heels;
Or forces life to a headlong conclusion
Nor yet like crafty Heracles

⁵⁴ Fraser, pp. 87-88.

Devolve on someone else
The bulk of the globe?

III

Where then are the roots, where the solution
To life's equation?

The roots are nowhere
There are no roots here
Probe if you may
From now till doomsday.

We have to think of ourselves as forever
Soaring and sinking like dead leaves blown by a gust
Floating choicelessly to the place where
Old desires and new born hopes like bubbles burst
Into nothing – blown to the place of fear
To the cross in the void;
Or else forever playing this zero-sum game
With fate as mate, and forever
Slaying and mating as one by one
Our tombstones rise in the void.⁵⁵

I have quoted at length Okigbo's piece to show how he laments the unfulfilled expectations of Nigeria at independence. That this poem was published in 1960 just before Nigerian independence demonstrates Okigbo's acuity and unusual depth of political insight. Okigbo in the poem engages with the cyclical rhythm of nature—birth, death and renewal—to express his views on the destiny of the newly independent state. Like the biblical aphorism 'there is nothing new under the sun', he predicts that the euphoria will soon pass and that the new state with no roots will soar and sink like dead leaves blown by a gust. His reflections take various references from the Bible, confirming the influence of his Catholic upbringing.

He uses his biblical allusions to express the inevitability of the fate that awaits the country. Okigbo's early poetry generally shows several influences from his Christian faith, although there were also strong influences from Virgil, Ovid, Eliot and Pound. The engagement with Igbo tradition and theology became stronger much later in his poetry than at the beginning of his writing career. It was when *Heavensgate* was first published in 1962, that traces of his African heritage began to show up, although this was still spiced with rich echoes of biblical tones and

⁵⁵ *The Horn*, 1960 p. 3, 4, p. 4 cont. on p. 9.

Christian references. In *Heavensgate*, it is notable how, towards the end of the sequence, Christian imagery begin to decrease and more references to pagan sources begin to spring up to express what has been called his ‘reconversion to a state of apostasy’.⁵⁶

Before you, Mother Idoto, naked I stand
before your watery presence a prodigal
leaning on an oilbean
lost in your legend...⁵⁷

Okigbo’s poetry is rich with foresight and warning: in the full Old Testament prophetic sense, he engages with preaching, warning and exhortation just like Isaiah’s warning to Israel; Okigbo made it clear that if Nigeria did not put its house in order, it would fall into chaos. In *Path of Thunder* his clear rejection of the new political élite intent on setting the country on a path of destruction is conveyed in very ominous verses. Okigbo was sounding a trumpet of alarm when the civil administration of Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa collapsed in 1966:

The smell of blood already floats in the lavender-mist of the afternoon.
The death sentence lies in ambush along the corridors of power;
And a great fearful thing already tugs at the cables of the open air,
A nebula immense and immeasurable, a night of deep waters –
An iron dream unnamed and unnameable, a path of stone.⁵⁸

He personifies Tafawa Balewa as an elephant doomed and ready for destruction; he might well have been speaking of the Nigerian nation as the doomed elephant. The tone of the entire sequence is severely apprehensive of the brewing tension; Okigbo, in almost biblical tones, like the prophets of ancient Israel, was a man consumed by a prophetic obsession. He brought fresh vigour to Nigerian poetry and certain personal feelings, which have contributed to understanding the political issues, the national life and the character of that time.

WHATEVER happened to the elephant –
Hurrah for thunder—

The elephant, tetrarch of the jungle:

⁵⁶ Fraser, p. 106.

⁵⁷ Okigbo, p. 3.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

With a wave of the hand
He could pull four trees to the ground:
His four mortar legs pounded the earth:
Whatever they treaded,
The grass was forbidden to be there.

Alas! the elephant has fallen—
Hurray for thunder—⁵⁹

When the coup of 15 January 1966 took place, Okigbo assumed his priestly and prophetic role to caution about the consequences of reverting to bloodshed to correct the shortcomings of the newly formed state:

But already the hunters are talking about pumpkins:
If they share the meat let them remember thunder.⁶⁰

Such was the genius of Okigbo that some now believe that he predicted the bombing of Enugu in *Limits VIII*:

Out of the solitude, the fleet,
Out of the solitude,
Intangible like silk thread of sunlight,
The eagles ride low,
Resplendent ... resplendent;
And small birds sing in shadows,
Wobbling under the bones.⁶¹

And, moreover, that he also predicted his own death in *Elegy for Alto*.

O mother mother Earth, unbind me; let this be
my last testament; let this be
The ram's hidden wish to the sword the sword's
Secret prayer to the scabbard-

Earth, unbind me; let me be the prodigal; let this be
the ram's ultimate prayer to the tether ...

AN OLD STAR departs, leaves us here on the shore
Gazing heavenward for a new star approaching;
The new star appears, foreshadows its going
Before a going and coming that goes on forever ...

⁵⁹ Okigbo, p. 67.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 67.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 31.

However, the prophetic art of Okigbo in *Path of Thunder* unmistakably appears to transcend the ‘Balfouric’ sense, in its priestly and ritualistic repetitions, in its clear prediction of war; it begins to reveal the mystic side of a gifted poet whose mind is possessed by divine insights as, like the biblical prophets, he made declarations and pronounced judgements with confidence on the fate of a nation.

In *Path of Thunder*, Okigbo appears to fulfil the two facets of the Romantic concept of the poet—the Orphic and the prophetic. The Orphic emphasises the ecstatic character of the poet, and this similarity and the personification of the figure of Orpheus helps to bring the poet closer to the prophet in the religious sense. The prophetic vision, on the other hand, emphasises the bardic, predictive, messenger-of-God image—someone who is a tool by which God brings revelation and to whom God gives a specific assignment. This image, in Balfour’s view, is not generally a dominant one in Romanticism.

Fraser calls Okigbo a poet who seems to have ‘wandered far and wide in search of the Holy Grail of quintessential human wisdom’ and who ‘in his determination to draw deeply on ancient springs of poetic thought and inspiration, neglected an opportunity to speak more directly and unambiguously to a local audience through a language accessible to it.’⁶² While Fraser’s comment compliments Okigbo’s position as a poet and artist, it does not do justice to the fact that Okigbo saw himself more as an international voice speaking to the world, even though his poetry was focused on the local politics of his time. This perhaps explains Okigbo’s refusal to claim the first prize awarded to his *Limits* at the Negro Festival of Arts in Dakar, Senegal in 1966. He believed, like many other English-speaking African writers that art should go beyond race. It also demonstrates his deep sense of justice, as he claims he did not enter the competition and felt the Congolese poet, U ‘Tamsi should have won.’⁶³

T.S. Eliot in *To Criticize the Critic* says, ‘universality can never come except writing about what one knows thoroughly ... And, though it is only too easy for a writer to be local without being universal, I doubt whether a poet can be universal

⁶² Fraser, p. 168.

⁶³ Anozie, pp. 21-22.

without being local too.’⁶⁴ Okigbo’s blending of classical, romantic and traditional aspects of his verse immortalises it locally and internationally, making it one of the finest on the African continent. This is the tradition that I set myself to emulate in *The Prophet, The Pirate and The Witch*.

2. Biographical note on the protagonist

Isaiah was born somewhere in the mingling splash of rusted roofs scattered like broken china in the sun⁶⁵ within the vicinity of the seven hills of Ibadan in Nigeria. On the eighth day after he was born, wrapped in fresh linen in his mother’s arms he was presented to the community according to Yoruba custom. The symbolic ingredients that day included, *Obi* – Kola nuts, *Iyo* – Salt, *Atare*– Black Pepper, *Epo pupa* – Palm Oil, *Oti* – Gin and a bowl of clean water – *Omi*. An aunt or uncle attending this event must have recited oral verses known as *oriki*— traditional praise poetry in honour of ancestors whose achievements they prayed he would be inspired to emulate. In addition, his Anglican father Amos, who married Lydia his Catholic mother, must have prayed using verses from the Holy Bible. This indicates that he grew up within a blend of the traditional and the new.

Isaiah had a strong Christian upbringing but the traditional Yoruba customs were never very far away. It is this blend of Christianity with traditional interpretation and influences that defined his early approaches to the reading of the Holy Bible. As a child, he readily embraced a tradition where *Olorun* (translated literally as owner of heaven), the supreme God of the Yorubas, is accepted like Yahweh of the Old Testament and God the Father of the Christian New Testament; nevertheless, there are vast differences between Yoruba cosmology and the monotheistic fervour of either Christianity or Islam—the religious influences that came to West Africa across the Atlantic in the south and across the Sahara in the north.

I relate this piece of Isaiah’s personal history to show how in the Nigeria of the early sixties and seventies, tension continued to grow between the promotion of

⁶⁴ Thomas Stearns Eliot, *To Criticize the Critic* (London: Faber and Faber 1965), pp. 55-56.

⁶⁵ Taken from John Pepper-Clark’s poem ‘Ibadan’.

indigenous cultural practices, western education and the religious legacies of the colonial rule. Christianity in the South, like Islam in the North, had set in motion a social deconstruct of societal values. For many people, the acceptance of colonial education, Christianity or Islam often meant the rejection of everything relating to their own indigenous culture; everything became judged as good or bad by western Christian or Islamic standards.

Nigeria as depicted in my narrative, like today's Nigeria, was experiencing an upsurge in the activities of Christian evangelicals and a rise in the number of churches and 'prophets', even as religion continued to be the root cause of the ongoing bloodletting amongst Christians and Muslims—a huge distraction from peace and harmony in the country. I therefore decided to tell a love story (albeit a political one) with a biblical theme that could work as a novel, a film, and a poetic script with dialogues. While my creative work is not in any way autobiographical, I will concede that it was inspired partly by personal experience, especially in maintaining an authentic voice and structure; this has enabled me to position my verse in relation to the experiences of others.

My approach represents a distinctive contribution to the current form and nature of West African verse, which is generally considered to be a cultural hybrid with deep roots in the African oral tradition. This tradition, like the proverbial 'first wife', was abandoned for a while with the arrival and emphasis on written verse from the English tradition with Christian religious influences. The narrative form that I adopt, therefore, has been used before in traditional African epics such as *Sunjiata*, *Mwindo*, *Shaka*, *Ozidi* and others. It is these that inspired me to continue this tradition, as it offers me the poetic roots against which I can position the paradox of my own experience as a writer and a Christian trying to explore the oral tradition.

But I am not the first to be so influenced. In the recent past the various notions of African orality have influenced the four songs of the Ugandan poet Okot p'Bitek; today, African orality continues to command influence among modern African writers; I have in mind two poets—the Nigerian Niyi Osundare and Ghanaian Kofi Anyidoho—who incorporate African oral forms, including chants and songs, in their verse. These are some of the writers who have encouraged me to reflect this tradition in my story and, as with these writers; my creative work

essentially uses the written method to express an oral form in my narrative. I have also found the long narrative verses by Vikram Seth (*The Golden Gate*), Derek Walcott (*Omeros*), Bernadine Evaristo (*The Emperor's Babe*) and Kwame Dawes (*Prophets* and *Jacko Jacobus*) very stimulating.

3. Kwame Dawes

Kwame Dawes was particularly inspirational, as he takes his motivation from biblical texts. The persuasive rhetorical devices that he uses, patently extended from biblical narratives, suggest that the prophetic books had a profound influence on the writer. It is Dawes' brilliant treatment of today's evangelical problems that have encouraged me to write a poetic narrative with a Nigerian flavour. However, as a Christian and a pastor of one of the evangelical churches in the North East of England, my creative work is a departure from Dawes' witty ridicule of the 'newfound' or 'imported colonialist African spirituality'. I see my work in my community, not as a distant observer but as a participant in people's spiritual and emotional lives within the ethnic communities of the North East of England.

Kwame Dawes was born in Ghana to a West Indian father and Ghanaian mother. He grew up in Jamaica but now lives in the United States, where he is Professor in English at South Carolina University and Distinguished Poet in Residence and Director of the South Carolina Poetry Initiative. He is a prolific author and his books, *Prophets* and *Jacko Jacobus* in particular, address contemporary Caribbean realities in prodigious poetic narratives that interweave biblical stories, prophecy, love, deception, sex and, by and large, the contest between good and evil. Dawes' works seem to mock and satirise the fervour of modern evangelical churches and sensibilities, but his characters are portrayed with rich poetic flair and flamboyance.

Part of the appeal of his books is the way Dawes brings alive the Caribbean landscape. Although his focus has more to do with issues of race, gender, sexuality and religion, his work has a unique quality that makes it applicable and appreciable to a cultural context beyond the Caribbean. While his work cannot be classified as overtly political, it contains caustic images of politicians and their political

aspirations that are as true in the Caribbean as in West Africa. He says for instance, with reference to a Kingston district:

This is the watering centre of Kingston's payola district,
where politicians all talk of the shared ideologies
in this basin. Long gone is the socialist Puritanism, gone

the old revolutionaries who have
discarded their bush jackets (hand-me-downs to
gardeners), who now concede without fanfare to

the pragmatic wisdom of the IMF.
With vanishing hairlines, grey wrinkled heads
and eyes that seem to strain in the glare of flashes,

they read softly from the teleprompters like geriatric pimps:
'Come to Jamaica, come to our wonderful
island paradise, where the whores are

spicy as jerk pork and the reggae shrines
await your US green. Come, come, you can buy
a piece of Marley here, get stoned on his

grey tombstone. Come to Jamaica and *I* will
feel alright.' Boom times in Kingston and the cocaine
floats with its dust of sudden dreams. Restoration Kingston.⁶⁶

Dawes mocks here and elsewhere, the ephemeral nature of third world politicians. They are quick to abandon whatever ideological basis they had used to sway the public during election campaigns. They are adept at 'discarding bush jackets' and revolutionary fervour to embrace realities of world politics and their own 'vanishing hairlines' and 'grey wrinkled heads'. There is a desperation, he assumes, that makes these leaders quickly turn into stooges for the foreign powers. Their main interest is the lining of already well-feathered nests instead of attending to the progress and collective destiny of the people they claim to represent.

Dawes's approach uses characters in his narrative to bring out salient issues in the body politic of Jamaica. The image, for instance, of the politician who reads prepared speeches in front of a television prompter, who stands in the glare of flashing lights, but who lays bare the land to be plundered while the citizens take to whoring and a drug-induced criminal race for wealth, is typical not just of the

⁶⁶ Kwame Dawes, *Prophets* (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 1995), pp. 70-71.

Caribbean but of many nations in Africa—of Nigeria in particular. It is an appropriate salutation to leadership failure in the third world polity. Dawes goes on to paint an atmosphere of Kingston town:

The men feel for their airy crotches on the corner,
crawling from door to door discarding their progeny.
the women grind on the rain-slick street corners,

... Infidels skank to the visionless platform
of sweet-mouthed politricksters looking a contract

for their twilight years on stump, rubbing 'risto shoulders
with the muck and blood of the ghetto – this
is retirement time, and every Christ is fixing

a tidy nest up in the sky for the greying times.
As the salt sea breeze catches the scent of the hull –
The rusty manacles, old red iron, the indelicate

farts of the souring bellies – head up always,
the worms crawl from their hovels at night
watching for the quick stealth-dive of the gull.⁶⁷

In the passage above, Dawes captures an image of the society in movie-like panoramic shots. He also puts into context the duality that his story explores—the tension between religion and passion, between the traditional and the modern, the heavenly and the earthly, the Bible and Reggae. He exposes a grey area of humanity where the hidden emotions pander to temptation and lust, the pursuit of fleshly pleasures unabashed. His portrait demonstrates a general lack of vision for tomorrow by this society: there is no consideration for the progeny, except an interest in spawning or 'discarding' them; there is no contemplation of how they will grow and what plans are under way for the provision of their future. This, regrettably, is typically a third-world attribute. (However, since living in the United Kingdom, I can say this can also apply to an underclass in British culture.)

The similarity of Dawes' approach and style to mine can be found in the development of the narrative. The fluidity of Dawes narrative is devoid of the embellishments of prose, although poetry has its own embellishments too. It is the poignant and powerful lyricism in his work that caught my attention—the way in

⁶⁷ Ibid., pp. 23-24.

which he intermingles biblical realities with contemporary expression. For example, he refers to corrupt politicians feathering their nests by saying: ‘this/is retirement time, and every Christ is fixing/a tidy nest up in the sky for the greying times’. This brilliant juxtaposing of context by Dawes has challenged me to use verse rather than prose to highlight these important issues in my creative piece. In the opening verses of *Prophets*, Dawes establishes Clarice the prophetess as his protagonist:

It is this my priestess of the pure,
whose eyes I dared not look into
for fear that my constant indiscretions

would be seen and revealed,
this daughter of holiness who fell
so impossibly hard into the thighs

of unbelievers, it is she whose poem
now translates itself here. And I
confess my reluctance to let her go ...

here in this barren city of silence
I reach for her tarnished flesh,
pull back, afraid to be found out,

and then dare to imagine her coupling
in the blackness of the beach,
her coming, that same mouth

saying ‘Harder, harder, harder.’
I am seeking clues, some explanation
that will reveal the sleight-of-hand

of this fundamentalist miracle,
something to make me look
better than a gullible fool.

I know now that she did have wings,
brilliant multicoloured plumes
that lifted her above the squalor and muck.⁶⁸

Clarice the prophetess and Thalbot, the man possessed by wandering spirits of the land, are the main characters in *Prophets*. They seem to represent a conflict between the Biblical influences on Dawes and the influences of Reggae or

⁶⁸ Ibid., pp. 9-10.

Rastafarianism. In the Nigerian context, this is reflected in the tension that I juxtapose between the traditional orality and the written English verse.

To my understanding, Clarice continues to epitomize Dawes' perceived fallacies of the Christian faith; although he opens some of his chapters with biblical verses, he poses very challenging questions as to why he should continue to be 'gullible' to the practice of the faith. Clarice, who says: 'I am a woman, I am blood, I am water; I have collected, I am collecting all the rivers, / all the oceans; all the salt of the earth',⁶⁹ is deeply unfaithful and simply uses her 'gift' or the 'Bible' to collect societal acceptance and to escape the squalor of her ghetto origins.

In the third chapter, Dawes also touches on the issues of pollution of the environment, which is very crucial to my narrative:

The poison of heaven's sudden curse
blows from Newark's phallic white towers,
spewing their toxic sperm into the fertile sky

seeding her perpetually. She can't get enough,
they've been saying, she just lies there and takes it all,
then she lifts her skirts and blows south for the sun

across the Bahamas sky, too high for Haiti to see
and then over Jamaica she aborts again.
Her rain of gaudy wetness jewels the beaches,

and the natives cough up blood and yellow phlegm,
balancing deftly the tropical rum punches on trays
through the sheets of tanning flesh on Morgan's deck.

In his first poetic narrative *Jacko Jacobus*, Dawes uses the biblical narrative of Jacob and Esau as his framework.⁷⁰ This approach can be considered midrashic in terms of its biblical references and this is very important to me. Frank Kermode, in the *Genesis of Secrecy*, highlights the Rabbinical practice of the Midrash—how interpretation and imagination can be applied to a text in such a way that a new writer brings to it revisions and adaptations to suit another audience. He explains that midrash, among other things, entails 'narrative alterations or interpolations, sometimes very free ... An unfamiliar foreign expression, or the interpretation of a

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 113.

⁷⁰ Kwame Dawes, *Jacko Jacobus* (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 1996).

difficult part of the Law, or a story which, in the course of time, had come to seem ambiguous or even indecent, such as Sarah's sojourn in the harem of the Pharaoh, might prompt midrash'.⁷¹

This is what Dawes brilliantly accomplishes with the reinvention of the story of Jacob and Esau and what I try to embrace in the character of Isaiah, my protagonist. Although my work cannot compare with that of Okigbo and Dawes, I can relate to theirs as my narrative has been influenced by my Christian upbringing and my practice as a preacher. The earliest and most insightful influence on my life was my mother and the Catholic Church. This influence is represented in the early life of Isaiah, who, as a young man, is caught between the Christian Faith and African tradition.

Dawes uses the Bible, as the source of his narrative to illustrate the sheer indomitable will of the African to survive in spite of historical odds. The hero/trickster survives selling drugs for his uncle Al and returns to Jamaica to sell condoms and 'Hustler' magazine. In the biblical story, Jacob runs from Esau and finds shelter with Laban, his maternal uncle the herdsman. Dawes' narrative is built on a similar storyline. Jacko Jacobus leaves his mother and runs from his brother in Jamaica to meet his maternal uncle Al, the drug baron in the United States. He engages in a sexual relationship with his cousin Leah while intending to marry Rachel; but it is Leah who becomes pregnant. In reworking this narrative, Dawes accentuates the midrashic belief in the continuing relevance that is brought about when Old Testament texts are remodelled and set in a new narrative context to enhance truth and to empower a new audience. He also inculcates the musicality and cadences of Rastafarianism in this reconstruction.

Dawes has done this successfully and inspired me to emulate a midrashic pattern in my narrative with the story of Isaiah, the prophet. In *The Prophet, The Pirate and The Witch*, I not only depict love and deception but I also lay bare the pain and loss of the Niger Delta, a land decimated and people spoiled by greed and avarice; I expose the disparity in a society where access to the corridors of power seems to guarantee an easy life.

⁷¹ Frank Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative* (Cambridge; London: Harvard University Press, 1979), pp. 81-82.

4. The politics of oil in the Niger Delta

In thematic terms, I have focused on one of the three areas that seem to dominate the work of present-day Nigerian writers. These are the wounds of the Biafran war (Adichie, Iweala); the ongoing demand for justice in the Niger Delta Region (Yerima, Agary, Ifowodo, Bassey); and the women's struggle for equity in the society (Sefi Atta, Aipoh, Obi, Ezeigbo). My choice has been strengthened by the experience of my personal involvement with Amnesty International and the privilege I've had of extensive travel in the Niger Delta region as a filmmaker, ironically, for the oil industry in Nigeria.

The Niger Delta in the southeastern coast of Nigeria is a mesh of creeks and mangrove swamps filled with fresh and brackish water. Formed by the Niger, the largest river in West Africa, the delta comprises about 8% of Nigeria's landmass, but most of the land is less than two metres above sea level.⁷² The discovery of oil there in the mid-1950s was expected to make Nigeria develop into an industrialized nation—'the giant of Africa'—but it merely compounded the problem of growth. Nigeria gradually declined from being an exporter of cash crops to heavy dependence on oil revenues; it is estimated that today about 90–95% of Nigeria's export earnings come from petroleum and petroleum products, which also represent about 90% of its foreign exchange earnings and 80% of its government revenues.

The state of the economy has mostly affected the poorest segments of the population, and this has sparked violence around the country, especially in the oil-producing areas. Several thousands have been killed in pipeline explosions in southeast Nigeria since the late 1990s; ethnic clashes over rights to a promising oil prospect in the southwest killed several hundreds. Oil and gas explorations run by the British/Dutch oil company Shell has had adverse effects on the Ijaws, Ogonis, Itsekiris, Urhobos and other indigenous people that live in the region. The government readily admits that 'Pollution has affected the atmosphere, soil fertility, waterways and mangroves, wildlife, plant life, aqua life, and has resulted in acid

⁷² Nicholas Shaxson, *The Dirty Politics of African Oil* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2007), p. 194.

rain. Fishing and agriculture are no longer productive enough to feed the area...the population is prone to respiratory problems and partial deafness'.⁷³

In September 2004, a new rebel movement, the Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force (NDPVF), launched a series of attacks against government forces and threatened foreign oil workers. This has turned the Niger Delta into a violent war zone, with rampant kidnapping and threat of attacks on oil installations. At the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of Nigerian independence on 1 October 2010, the national capital Abuja was hit by two brutal car-bomb attacks that killed several people and wounded many more; the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) claimed responsibility for carrying out these attacks.

The effects of violence in the region first began to manifest themselves on the world economy when world oil prices rose above \$50 a barrel for the first time in 2005 because Alhaji Mujahid Dokubo-Asari, a Muslim Nigerian militant, threatened to disrupt the oil industry. Since then, 'militant attacks have caused half a million barrels of oil a day to be lost from the world's oil markets, spiking world prices up further in markets already jittery about Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Venezuela, and much else'.⁷⁴ Nicholas Shaxson, an international oil correspondent, sees oil as the root cause of all the calamities and disasters in Nigerian oil zones: 'The character is not the oil companies but oil itself—the corrupting, poisonous substance.' He concludes thus: 'The oil fuelled vicious circles in Nigeria are generic: bad leaders corrupt countries, and in corrupt countries bad rulers rise more to the top; dependence on oil and gas damages non-mineral industries making the countries ever more dependent on oil and gas ...'⁷⁵

My plan was to address the current socioeconomic and political problems of Nigeria in the form of a novella in verse. To my knowledge, there are only two other book-length poetic works in Nigeria in recent times that deal with major political or socioeconomic issues—namely Wole Soyinka's *Ogun Abibiman* (1976) and Ogaga Ifowodo's *The Oil Lamp* (2005).

⁷³ Nicholas Shaxson, *The Dirty Politics of African Oil* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2007), p. 194.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7, 224.

Soyinka's masterful exhortation *Ogun Abibiman* was a political response to Samora Machel, the revolutionary leader of Mozambique who openly dedicated himself to ousting the discriminatory and apartheid regime of Ian Smith in Rhodesia by armed struggle. Soyinka's was a continental outreach of the protest tradition that held many African writers in its grip. Soyinka adopted the Akan word 'Abibiman' to reflect the Pan-Africanism that the poem calls for. He not only welcomes Machel's ideas, he urges that Mother Earth should support them.

No longer are the forests green; storms
Assail the palm, the egret and snail.
Bared, the dark heart of a hidden nursery
Of embers flares aglow, a landmass writhes
From end to end, bathed and steeped
In stern tonalities.⁷⁶

This rather difficult poem that celebrates Ogun, the Yoruba god of iron, war and hunting moves rapidly from one allusion to another. Ogun's mission is to take back the entire African continent from the hands of oppressors through war; to accomplish this, he seeks out Shaka the Zulu from another generation. Ogun and Shaka are both given some revolutionary awareness and pan-African fervour as they meet and form a pact. The irony is that Soyinka also uses these two characters as metaphors for the African leaders who destroy their own people. Both Ogun and Shaka have tragic ends: Yoruba mythology says that Ogun, in the heat of battle, once killed his own army, while Shaka lost so much faith in himself that he was forced to abandon his kingdom.

Ogaga's *The Oil lamp* is a one thousand-line collection of verse that graphically explores the devastation of the Niger Delta by oil companies and successive governments of Nigeria since independence. It is a unique contribution to what is now gradually becoming the Niger Delta School of Nigerian Poetry; this includes such poets from the region as Tanure Ojaide, Hope Eghagha, Peter Anny-Nzekwe, Fabiawari Brigg and F.B.O. Akporbaro, among others. The agonising and deprived situation of the region continues to fuel the rising tide of social criticism and protest poetry, both of which provide poetic ammunition as well as an

⁷⁶ Wole Soyinka, *Ogun Abibiman* (London: Rex Collings, 1969), p. 1.

intellectual and ideological platform for the armed protest currently going on in the region.

The ninety-year-old woman at the end of the first section of Ogaga's narrative captures the essence of the entire collection in a song.

Oil is my curse, oil is our doom.
Where is my husband, where my only love?
At the bottom of the sea, the bottom of the sea.

Oil is my curse, oil is our doom.
Where is the fish for palm-oil soup?
Dead in the creeks, dead in the lakes.

Oh mate, do you have a cup of garri
to lend me for the children's sake?
Not even a cup, not even a handful!

The fields are tarred where cassava once grew,
you know the fields are tarred and harder
than a shell, too hard for our hoes.

Oil is my curse, oil is our doom.
Where are my children? Where is my husband?
Ashes and bones. Ashes and bones.⁷⁷

Ogaga approaches the subject by picking three specific incidents to illustrate the curse that oil has been to the Niger Delta. In the first, a thousand people are estimated to have died in 1992, owing to an explosion following a burst pipeline in Jese village; the second incident was the ill-fated massacre at Odi on 20 November 1999, when the Nigerian military attacked a predominantly Ijaw town in Bayelsa State; the third was the plight of the Ogoni people and the death of Ken Saro-Wiwa. Although the theme of Ogaga's poetry is similar to mine and both narratives are in verse, our work differs remarkably. My poetic narrative, while addressing the struggle in the Niger Delta, approaches it in a broader way, as a story with definite characters that take on a journey, displaying a range of actions and emotions.

Isaiah Kosoko, the protagonist of my narrative, in his journey metaphorically represents the redeeming qualities of Christianity—radical change and forgiveness

⁷⁷ Ogaga Ifowodo, *The Oil Lamp* (Trenton, Asmara: Africa World Press, 2005), p. 17.

for past mistakes, the power to embrace new realities with strength and courage. He is a symbol of the transformative reality of people across the world that embraces the faith and the intuitive inner guide that the prophetic provides. Segida Okokobioko is the spirit of revolution, the enlightened voice of the people demanding justice; volcanic and destructive in its bitterness; its eruptions are a consequence of the unbearable pressures of the oppression of Man by Man; he is the desperate cry for change by any means, even armed struggle and terror. Falila is the compliant voice of ancestral tradition—the past, caught between the present and the future, not sure of its own relevance, a reluctant lover torn apart by two headstrong suitors.

The Bible, as an edited and translated text, has explanatory consequences: as a religious book, it naturally discourages attempts at modernization of its textual history. However, as I have mentioned regarding the work of Kwame Dawes and the retelling of the story of Jacob and Esau, there is a way that prophetic orientation allows us to look at the future rather than go back into the past. Midrash has provided a method of analysing and interpreting text and giving it new life that concerns itself not just with meaning but also with application to the modern world.

One of the great insights of modern critical study has been that biblical prophets were not clairvoyants, providing their devotees with hidden information about the future or about the mysteries of the universe, but spokesmen for a moral and demanding God who addressed themselves to the state of Israelite society in their own day and uttered rebukes and warnings of immediate application.⁷⁸ It is this same need to apply some rhetorical authority to present day socioeconomic and political situations that continue to inspire writers to engage in Midrash. In my particular instance, I have taken a protagonist, ‘a man of unclean lips...dwelling in the midst of a people of unclean lips’ and made him into a prophet of Yahweh.

This chapter attempts to find a meeting point between art, politics and faith. Through the work of Okigbo and Dawes I trace my motive for creating the protagonist for my narrative. Although Okigbo continues to be controversially accused of putting politics before his art, his life could not be separated from his

⁷⁸ John Barton, *Oracles of God: Perceptions of ancient prophecy in Israel after the exile* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1986), p. 131.

message. In my brief references to Soyinka and Ifowodo's work I have pointed out the inevitability of the connection between politics and Nigerian poetry, which is reflected in the predictability of it being generally focused on protest. With Dawes I have found justification for a midrashic experiment with my own work. I hope the relevance of the subject for the composition of my narrative becomes clear. The next chapter aims to elaborate on the theory of generational writing, to explore how the social and political terrain has influenced various writers in their particular generations.

Chapter Three

Generations in the interpretation of African literature: towards a theory

As I began to craft *The Prophet, The Pirate and The Witch*, I found myself relying on the notion of ‘generations’ in trying to understand what I was doing, and the interpretation of Nigerian poetry and African literature that inspired my work. I kept asking myself what generation my writing might be said to belong to, and whether Tanure Ojaide’s loose theory of ‘generations’ is a viable proposition. Ojaide—a well-known Nigerian poet and critic—not only proposes a generational concept but also concludes that modern African poetry presupposes an older tradition from which writers have broken away to write in new and different ways.⁷⁹

The theory that writers can be understood in the context of the generation they were born in, or in relation to other writers before them, is not new. Jacob Bronowski and Bruce Mazlish confirm the argument in *The Western Intellectual Tradition*: that an era can be recognized by the character of its writing. ‘The style of a period is a vivid expression of its totality, in which we read as it were, the thumbprint of history – or to change the metaphor, we discover the character of an age by its handwriting.’⁸⁰ I have decided to examine this concept as a theoretical framework rather than from a postcolonial theoretical context because it allows me to position my work and experience directly within the landscape of Nigerian writing.

Nigerian poetry has come a long way from the ‘apprentice verses’ of the founding fathers of Nigeria—Azikiwe, Macauley and Osadebey—to the exoticism of Soyinka and Clark; the hybridity and ‘marketplace’ language of Osundare and Ofeimum and Ojaide; to the matter-of-factness of Eghagha, Ifowodo, Lasisi and Angela Nwosu; and it is quite possible to see variations in style and shifts in focus across generations.

⁷⁹ *The New African Poetry: An Anthology* ed. by Tanure Ojaide and Tijan M. Sallah (Boulder, London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1999), p. 3.

⁸⁰ J. Bronowski and Bruce Mazlish, *The Western Intellectual Tradition* (London: Penguin, 1970), p. 150.

Earlier, the British poet and critic T.S. Eliot had, in fact, made a similar point in *Tradition and Individual Talent*, which adds credence to Ojaide's assertion of generational influences. It alludes to the fact that writers shape other writers and no writer stands alone without the influence of others.

We dwell with satisfaction upon the poet's difference from his predecessors, especially his immediate predecessors; we endeavour to find something that can be isolated in order to be enjoyed. Whereas if we approach a poet without this prejudice we shall often find that not only the best, but the most individual parts of his work may be those in which dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously ... No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists ... What is to be insisted upon is that the poet must develop or procure the consciousness of the past and that he should continue to develop this consciousness throughout his career.⁸¹

It is relevant also to observe that, more recently, Harold Bloom in *The Anxiety of Influence*, while accepting T.S. Eliot's assertion that older poems and poets influence new poems and new poets, set out to de-romanticise 'our accepted accounts of how one poet helps to form another'. He argues that poetic history cannot be divorced from poetic influence and that poets are held back in their creative process by an ambiguous connection they continue to have with predecessors. His claim is that older poets actually create anxiety in the younger in their quest for originality because '... strong poets make history by misreading one another, so as to clear imaginative space for themselves', and therefore only strong poets can 'overcome the anxiety' created by their precursors.⁸² Bloom concludes that the idea of originality is just a protective myth that writers use to preserve themselves from the overwhelming influence of their forebears.

Although I accept Tanure Ojaide's concept of generations, which I discuss in this essay, I am aware of its limitations. In the Nigerian context, some poets straddle two or more generations and, in reality, the best writers defy generational cages. Timelessness, I suppose, should be the ultimate sign of good poetry. We must also concede that, whereas it is possible to discern new trends, these have all developed on

⁸¹ Thomas Stearns Eliot, *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and criticism* (London: Methuen, 1920), p. 43.

⁸² Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 5.

the shoulders of, and within the practice of, the tradition of African poetry. The influence of the oral tradition can also be traced significantly. Ojaide himself admits that what is old or new is relative in African history because modern African poetry in English actually started in the 1950s. I now explore these different generations and explain their influence, directly and indirectly, on my writing, as well as the anxieties it creates of being original.

The first generation

The first generation of African writers wrote in the 1930s and 1940s during the colonial period and was mostly unworried about the effect of language imposition. They accepted the English language quite readily as a means of governance and international trade and a way of life. They had no native tradition of written verse to follow or learn from, and the literate indigenous audience was limited, so they catered more for the sensibilities of the colonial readership. Writers such as ‘Dennis Chukude Osadebay of Nigeria; H.I.E. Dhlomo and Benedict Wallet Vilakazi of South Africa; and Kwame Kyeretwie Boakye Danquah, Michael Dei Anang, Gladys Casely-Hayford and R.E.G. Armattoo of Ghana’; were more concerned with issues of ‘race, Christianity and heroism’ than they were with language, style or technique.⁸³

However, even though they accepted the colonialist ideology and sometimes the ‘wholesale obliteration of indigenous cultures, the forced labour of “natives”, the siphoning of huge stocks of natural resources, the levying of unfair taxes, and the repression of local freedom’, by invading colonialists, these writers were the forerunners of the prophetic voice of protest.⁸⁴ Their verses were deployed towards a cultural and nationalist vision in order to achieve the immediate political goals of independence.

Dennis Osadebay was one of the notable voices in Nigeria. He was a lawyer and poet who later became the premier of the Mid-Western region of the Nigerian Federation. The politicians and poets in this generation shared a common ideal, such

⁸³ *The New African Poetry: An Anthology* ed. by Tanure Ojaide and Tijan M. Sallah (Boulder, London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1999), p. 1.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

as political and moral optimism, which had become shattered by the time the second generation came on the scene.

In *Africa Sings*, Osadebay expresses his desire for equality and acceptance by the colonial masters; he doesn't want to be 'shamed to face the world' by neglecting the 'natural way' (traditional African way) for the 'artificial' (the colonialist way); he is concerned about not knowing 'regret'. His plea reflects an appalling inferiority complex, which colonialism instilled in the colonised; the mixed emotions of those who want to 'play with the Whiteman's ways' but 'work with the Blackman's brains'. He does not want the treasures of Africa to end up as 'curios' on imperialist shelves but the colonialists, 'who doubt his talent' should show 'their noble side' and admit the reality of African creativity and government. They should acknowledge the medieval empires of Ghana, Mali and Songhai, the unparalleled beauty of bronze and artworks from Ife and Benin. The colonialists should admit that Africa does have a rich tradition, which should be given time for 'untrammelled growth'. The poem, however, ends with a glimpse of prophetic hope—an expectation of a brighter future: 'Let my affairs themselves sort out/Then in sweet rebirth/I'll rise a better man ...'⁸⁵

What I find fascinating about Osadebay and his generation are the political inclinations and tendencies of their poetry, which reflect the thinking of that era. However, not all of them blindly accepted the superiority of western civilisation; some subtly agitated for the merit of African values. As for the serious call for change and explicit protest against western civilisation and the emerging African states, we had to wait for the second generation of writers.

The second generation

The history of creative writing and the study of successive generations of poets in Nigeria reveal that the social, political and economic circumstances of each generation quickly became the overriding factor driving the direction of creative writing. The role played by higher institutions had an impact on the nature of creative writing that began to emerge. In West Africa, the university colleges affiliated to the University of London were set up in the late 1940s; earlier, anyone

⁸⁵ *West African Verse* ed. by Donatus Nwoga (London: Longman, 1966), p. 17.

with aspirations for higher studies either went to Europe or America or travelled down to Fourah Bay College in Freetown, Sierra Leone, where students were equipped to enter Christian ministry.⁸⁶

The English Department of the University of Ibadan set out a curriculum that assumed that knowledge of the great classics of English Literature would be sufficient for the creative aspirations of their students.⁸⁷ There were two syllabuses: the first was on the Development of English Language; Old and Middle English Texts and Unseens; the History of English Literature to 1500; the History and Principles of Literary Criticism, among others; the second examined work in the Middle Ages and in Anglo-Saxon, together with Shakespeare. Twentieth-century texts were studied within the option of 'English Literature from 1800 to the Present Day' and it included a survey of specified authors such as Thomas Hardy, Henry James, Joseph Conrad, Oscar Wilde, W. B. Yeats, Bernard Shaw, E. M. Forster, D. H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, T. S. Eliot, and others. But the curriculum did little or nothing to encourage creative initiative per se.⁸⁸ Professor Molly Mahood is credited with being the first to encourage a syllabus in African writing and for helping to turn Ibadan into 'a centre of literary activity'.⁸⁹

Nevertheless, the development of African creative potential is credited to younger European expatriate teachers who worked with students from the 1950s onwards. These young teachers include Gerald Moore and Ulli Beier, George Axworthy and Martin Banham. Ulli Beier and Gerald Moore greatly influenced the literary scene; Ulli Beier in particular encouraged such works of art in the vernacular as those by D.O. Fagunwa and was instrumental in the publication of *Black Orpheus*—the literary magazine in which African creative writing and literary criticism throughout the continent was later given expression.⁹⁰

Martin Banham, then a fresh graduate from the University of Leeds, had experience in the student-run magazine *Poetry and Audience*, founded at Leeds in

⁸⁶ Fraser, p. 73.

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 73.

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 74.

⁸⁹ Adrian A. Roscoe, *Mother is Gold: A Study in West African Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 26.

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 27.

1953; it featured editors and contributors such as Geoffrey Hill, George Baker, Phillip Larkin, David Wright and Ted Hughes. Banham persuaded J.P. Clark, one of his students and others, to start an Ibadan magazine, which they called *The Horn*.⁹¹

The magazine highlighted what were the initial focus, themes and problems of the second generation of Nigerian writers and critics at the time. The preface written by Banham in the first edition of *The Horn* identifies outside influences as the problem and the predominant challenge that the new writers had to face.

I believe that it is of far more value to Nigerian school children to read this small selection of unpretentious Nigerian verse than to immerse themselves in the *Golden Treasury*. Some of the verses presented here show only too clearly how deep is the influence of the alien verse of English romanticism upon aspiring Nigerian writers. The more Nigerians can be encouraged to write as Nigerians, about Nigerian audiences, the better for the development of a healthy national literature. This is not, of course, to say that they should ignore the great literatures of other parts of the world – but one must not be enslaved by them.⁹²

The list of Nigerian writers trained at Ibadan during this time includes Achebe, Amadi, Nwakpa, Munonye and Nwankwo and such poets as Soyinka, Clark, Segun and Okigbo. These writers were immediately confronted by the question of language, readership, subject matter and the authenticity of their writing. With regard to the language of the African writer, Chinua Achebe was conclusive about the direction that he and most West African writers were to take. His views are embodied, in an essay entitled ‘The African writer and the English language’. The question he asked was, ‘Is it right that a man should abandon his mother tongue for someone else’s? It looks like a dreadful betrayal and produces a guilty feeling. But for me there is no other choice. I have been given the language and I intend to use it’.⁹³

It did not take long before the focus in African writing shifted from what language to use to a prophetic agitation for social, economic and political change,

⁹¹ Fraser, p. 76.

⁹² Nigerian Student Verse: A selection of verse written by students of the University College Ibadan and first published in *The Horn*, ed. by Martin Banham (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press 1960), p. 7.

⁹³ Chinua Achebe, *Morning Yet on Creation Day* (London: Anchor Press, 1975), p. 29.

and later from the struggle against imperialism to the fight against despotic African rulers. The sheer volume of work produced by these writers was remarkable; it was replete with inventive imagery and visions of an idealistic future. This was the golden age, when the creativity, vigour and freshness of Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Gabriel Okara, Christopher Okigbo, J.P. Clark and others were unleashed to interpret national life and character. This generation began to weave the fabrics of literary and social values that have gone into determining the Nigerian identity.

For many of the emerging writers who trained at Ibadan and those who trained later at Nsukka, the immediate challenge was to preserve their artistic identity as Africans while desiring recognition by a European audience. Although this generation was more critical of colonialism, the poetic models from William Shakespeare, Gerald Manley Hopkins, W. B. Yeats, T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound and the best of European writers provided their inspiration. In fact, some of these great writers were contemporaries to this generation of African writers, whom I christen the ‘poets of transition’.

These poets brought about a ‘convergence in ways of looking at the world between European thought, reacting against its traditional canons, and African thought as apprehended by a new African élite’ who exploited ‘with success those conventions taken from the European tradition and adapted them to their particular needs’.⁹⁴ It is also important to mention that there were several writers who wrote in Nigerian languages at this time but I am focusing on the genesis of English Language verse in Nigeria if only because that is where my literary roots begin.

Gabriel Okara, unlike most writers of this generation, was an exception. He was not trained at the University of Ibadan but was a bookbinder who later worked for the government of Eastern Nigeria. Okara was one of the first to introduce a new and authentic African idiom using transliteration. As a novelist and poet, Okara took pleasure in searching for and experimenting with an African voice. His poetry resonates very deeply with his ethnic background; it is resplendent with cadences of sights, smells and sounds of the creeks where he grew up. It became evident to Okara quite quickly that he needed to blaze a new trail of originality and he

⁹⁴ Abiola Irele, *The African Experience in Literature and Ideology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 15.

eventually discovered a way to an authentic voice by cleverly writing in his native Ijaw dialect and then transliterating to English by superimposing the syntax of Ijaw language on the English language. This is a technique clearly demonstrated in his poem, *'To Paveba'*.

When young fingers stir
fire smouldering in my inside
the dead weight of years roll
crashing to the ground
and the fire begins to flame anew,

The fire begins to flame anew
devouring the debris of years –
the dry harmattan-sucked trees,
the dry tearless faces
smiling weightless smiles like breath
that do not touch the ground.

The fire begins to flame anew
and I laugh and shout to the eye
of the sky on the back of a fish
and I stand on the wayside
smiling the smile of the budding trees
at men and women whose insides
are filled with ashes who
tell me, 'We once had a flaming fire.'⁹⁵

Okara uses many Ijaw colloquial expressions that are direct translations from Ijaw in the above piece. 'The eye/of the sky' for example is an Ijaw term that refers to the sun. Also the reference to 'years being dead and smiles being weightless' is typical of the Ijaws, who are known for 'evaluating abstractions in terms of substance or lack of it'.⁹⁶

The differences between the first and the second generation can be seen by examining briefly Osadebay and Okara, who described at different times Victoria Beach in Lagos. In Osadebay's *Thoughts at the Victoria Beach*, written between 1930 and 1950, the influences of English poetry are evident. Although he had the passion to write about African realities, his imagery rarely captured the essence of his African environment.

⁹⁵ Ademola, Frances (ed.) *Reflections; Nigerian Prose and Verse* (Lagos: African University Press, 1965), p. 52-53.

⁹⁶ Roscoe, p. 30.

The Waters stretched from the tropic shores
And seemed to kiss the sunlit skies afar;
The waves riding in majesty
Glided to and fro like lords of the silvery bar.
The oft washed sands gave forth a smile
To beautify the sphere and heaven extol;
The noble palm and mangrove trees
Stood with their heads aloft as the waters roll
Poor mortal – birds and beasts and men –
Ran here and there in vain attempt to keep
Their lives from the quenching winds of death
And sought in vain to solve the mysteries deep.⁹⁷

Osadebay talks of ‘waves riding in majesty’ but there are no pictures of African realities on the beach he is describing. Gabriel Okara’s poem, published in the 1960s seems to convey a sense of a different place to what Osadebay had described:

The wind comes rushing from the sea
the waves curling like mambas strike
the sands and recoiling hiss in rage
washing the Aladuras’ feet pressing hard
on the sand and with eyes fixed hard
on what only hearts could see, they shouting
pray, the Aladuras pray; and coming
from booths behind, compelling highlife
forces ears; and cars lights startle pairs
arm in arm passing washer-words back
and forth like haggling sellers and buyers.⁹⁸

Okara’s imagery is purely of African origin, ‘waves curling like mambas strike/the sands and recoiling hiss ...’ He captures the religious spirit of the Aladuras who pray on the beach struggling to be heard amidst the cacophony of highlife and disco music; a conflict between western religion and hedonism unleashed on African shores. One writer seems to write about Africa but with a European audience in mind. The other was eager to convey and show off the African actualities of his time. As Roscoe says, the difference is that Okara’s words have a freedom and imagination and abound with such imagery that it brings Africa and the

⁹⁷ Robert G. Armstrong, *Vernacular Languages and Cultures in Modern Africa in Language in Africa*, ed. by John Spencer (London: Cambridge University Press, 1963), p. 65.

⁹⁸ *Modern Poetry from Africa*, ed. and Trans. by Ulli Beier and Gerald Moore (London: Penguin Books, 1963), pp. 98-99.

subject in question to the fore in a way Osadebay's poetry does not; though they are both Africans, this freedom, which Okara displays, is vital, for it allows the African poet, 'to hold the glass up to his own experience'.⁹⁹

Okara's *Piano and Drums* below uses two musical instruments as unique metaphors to resolve his creative tension in his search for a poetic voice. The piano symbolises the intricate ways of European culture and the drums the mystic rhythm of Africa.

When at break of day at a riverside
I hear jungle drums telegraphing
The mystic rhythm, urgent, raw
Like bleeding flesh,
Speaking of primal youth and the beginning,
I see the panther ready to pounce,
The leopard snarling about to leap
And the hunters crouch with spears poised ...

Then I hear the wailing piano
Solo speaking on complex ways
In tear-furrowed concerto;
Of far-away lands
And new horizons with
Coaxing diminuendo, counterpoint,
Crescendo. But lost in the labyrinth
Of its complexities, it ends in the middle
Of a phrase at a dagger point ...¹⁰⁰

Further afield at this time, other second-generation poets from the continent were writing more cynical and sarcastic poetry about their encounter with colonialists. Kofi Awoonor from Ghana in *The Weaver Bird* is the voice of the 'prophet' who seeks to rebuild the old altars; he criticizes foreign religion as the tool used to bring the African into submission:

And the weaver returned in the guise of the owner
Preaching salvation to us that owned the house ...

We look for new homes every day
For new altars we strive to rebuild
The old shrines defiled by the weaver's excrement.¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ Roscoe, pp. 44-47.

¹⁰⁰ *Modern Poetry from Africa*, ed. and Trans. by Ulli Beier and Gerald Moore (London: Penguin Books, 1963), p. 94.

On the other hand, Okot p'Bitek from Uganda in *Song of Lawino*, makes use of oral devices from his Acoli culture to ridicule the arrogant foibles of what he sees as a transient modernity.¹⁰²

Listen my clansmen
I cry over my husband
Whose head is lost.
Ocol has lost his head
In the forest of books...

Bile burns my inside!
I feel like vomiting!
For all our young men
Were finished in the forest,
Their manhood was finished in the class-rooms
Their testicles
Were smashed
With large books!¹⁰³

The second generation began to question what the first generation had accepted; they witnessed the transition from colonial rule to African leadership. They were also the first to engage political satire as a major theme in addressing the corruption and political ills that followed political independence. Like their counterparts in other colonised parts of the world, the second generation of African writers became engaged in a struggle to control their collective self-definition, identity, nationalism and destiny.

There was also a shift in general style, because African verse is more tone-related than European poetry with its emphasis on accent. It was not long before many African poets found the quick answer to the question of form in free verse, which provides 'ample scope for the indulgence of syllabic pitch without encumbering them with accentual requirements' of the English language.¹⁰⁴ However, unending arguments and accusations against this generation abound. Chinweizu and colleagues charged Wole Soyinka, Michael Echeruo, Christopher

¹⁰¹ Kofi Awoonor, *Night of My Blood*, (New York: Anchor Doubleday, 1971), p. 37.

¹⁰² *The New African Poetry*, ed. by Tanure Ojaide and Tijani M. Sallah (London, Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers 1999), p. 3-4.

¹⁰³ Okot p'Bitek, *Song of Lawino and Song of Ocol*, (Nairobi: Heinemann Kenya, 1989), p. 117.

¹⁰⁴ Fraser, p. 80.

Okigbo and others with Eurocentricism, obscurantism, intractable language and straying away from Nigerian realities.¹⁰⁵

With regard to the influence on my writing, Soyinka and Okara represent choices that I could have followed. Perhaps if I had been taken under the wing of the legendary Noble laureate in 1976 at the then University of Ife, where I had presented to him some of my poems, he might have influenced me more. However, this was not to be, as I later went on to read for a Degree in Zoology at the insistence of my father, who was bent on my becoming a medical doctor.

Wole Soyinka's influences on my writing are more indirectly through the generation of students that studied under him. Soyinka is primarily a dramatist, and the strength of his satire and dissatisfaction with the new men of power is best reflected in his plays. Whereas Okigbo and Okara could not be fully described as political poets, this title will fit Soyinka, who from 'the earlier phase of *Idanre*', began to use the Civil War as an outlet to protest in a way that fought against 'a backdrop of comprehensive human evil'.¹⁰⁶

Soyinka very early embraced the essence of the African spirit in his work, and did not have many problems dealing with the question of authenticity because he, like Okara, never renounced his African identity. He combined his African awareness and culture with such modernist techniques as allusiveness and obscurity to make his work both local and universal. Soyinka is quoted as having achieved 'the ideal fusion—to preserve the original uniqueness and yet absorb another essence.'¹⁰⁷

Soyinka's poetry is deeply rooted in Yoruba cosmology; it is often difficult to understand it without some knowledge of Ifa divination in particular, which is the philosophical platform from which he explores his favourite themes of life and death. In the last four lines of Soyinka's poem *Death at Dawn* there is an illustration of his twin obsession with life and death and the influences of Yoruba cosmology:

¹⁰⁵ Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie, Ihechukwu Madubuike, *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature: African Fiction and Poetry and Their Critics* (London, Boston, Melbourne and Henley: KPI Limited 1985).

¹⁰⁶ Fraser, p. 269.

¹⁰⁷ Quoted in Adrian Roscoe's *Mother is Gold*, p. 51.

The right foot for joy, the left, dread
And the mother prayed, child
May you never walk
When the road is famished.
Traveller you must set forth
At dawn¹⁰⁸

The idea of right foot for joy and left for dread is Yoruba in origin. As a child you are taught that when you strike your left foot, it is a bad omen but when you strike the right, something good will happen. It is interesting to note that in English mythology/parlance from Latin, right is 'dexter' - hence 'dexterous' or agile, able, whereas left is 'sinister' with its connotation of impending doom. The famished road in Soyinka's context here indirectly refers to Ogun, the god of iron, who waits for blood, whether human blood shed accidentally or that of dogs slain deliberately to appease him.

The Civil War in Nigeria from 1967 to 1970 had a profound impact on Soyinka, who was incarcerated; the effect of the war was of such proportions that a 'transition from private pain to unselfish indignation' in Nigerian poetry was discernable.¹⁰⁹ This entailed a complete re-contextualisation of Nigerian verse; the war became a rallying cry for protest against injustice. The changes to verse in Nigeria after the civil war are remarkable. The potential for political dissent infused poetry and gave it a new sense of mission. Soyinka, in *The Man Died*, became a voice of conviction that justice must be done, a voice that becomes a chorus of all the oppressed:

I anoint my voice
And let it sound hereafter
Or dissolve upon its lonely passage
In your void. Voices new
Shall rouse the echoes when
Evil shall again arise.¹¹⁰

This radicalism of Soyinka as it influenced his students is what indirectly also influenced me.

¹⁰⁸ Wole Soyinka, *Idanre and other poems* (London: Methuen, 1965), pp. 10-11.

¹⁰⁹ Fraser, p. 269.

¹¹⁰ Wole Soyinka, *The Man Died* (London: Rex Collins, 1972), p. 253.

This personal history makes me identify more with Gabriel Okara, who has actually inspired me to continue writing and to pursue my interest in creative writing as a mature student. Okara's willingness to experiment has also challenged me to be radical in my own creative approach. For instance, in Okara's novel *The Voice*,¹¹¹ the writer embarks on the boldest linguistic experimentation of that era. It was an attempt to resolve the difficulties he encountered as a poet by using the English language and incorporating other influences of local culture. Several parts of the novel, though written in English, simply replicate Okara's native Ijaw dialect and syntax.

The Voice was revolutionary not only in its artistic experimentation but also in its theme, as it criticised the inconsistencies of the Nigerian leadership after independence. Okolo, the central figure whose name in Ijaw also means 'the voice', searches for the meaning of life, what Ijaws call *iyé*; he searches for an inner voice and an African destiny for his people. Okara's experimentation of transliteration, among other factors, stimulated the move towards linguistic hybridism that characterises many of the third-generation poets. It is this that I found particularly inspiring.

In the process of writing my narrative poem I encountered an initial problem as I struggled with form. I began by experimenting with heroic couplets and rhyming verses; then I tried to put each episode in the narrative into sonnets; but none of the forms seemed to fit. Eventually, I found free verse—a close resonance with speech—to be most appropriate for what I intended as a blend of orality and the written form. I literally experienced again the struggle of the earlier generations as they tried to find the right form.

Clearly, the generational approach as I have presented it does not do justice to the works of such writers as Soyinka, Okara and Achebe, as their work is still being discussed and they continue to receive international accolades. Therefore, even when I claim that my work belongs to a particular generation; it would be my ambition to strive to go beyond it.

¹¹¹ Gabriel Okara, *The Voice* (London: André Deutsch, 1964).

Whereas this generation had been preoccupied with nationalist campaigning and poetic protest that tried not to break ranks with national aspirations, the Civil War opened up schisms and suddenly new enemies were revealed closer to home.¹¹² It was during the post-independence period that the poet became radicalized as a political activist and a social critic; it was at this time that poetry in Nigeria began its evolution ‘as an alternative forum for political debate’.¹¹³ The use of poetry as a ready tool against successive regimes in Nigeria after independence can be traced to the increased political and cultural awareness that followed the struggle for independence and the Civil War. This became a prominent theme in the work of the third generation.

The third generation

The third generation began around the 1970s—a time when more and more, poetry became a political tool of protest in Nigeria, recording the conflicts and contradictions of modern-day Africa. It also became a means of exploring modern African experiences in an intimate way—a creative feel for new African expressions and orality. The role of the poet had gradually developed into that of a social and historical witness, who, with a unique capacity to perceive, observe and comment on historical and political issues, began to organise the collective experiences and awareness of the society into a poetic form. Thus, poetry became instrumental in comprehending not only past and present experiences but images, expectations and meanings for the future.

That poetry is used for political debate in itself is not strange within African oral traditions. Before the English language was imposed on the culture, there was an African orality that dated back many centuries—a rich poetic tradition that was passed from one generation to another by griots and bards. Poetry was a means by which traditional societies regulated themselves; oral bards at courts recounted their poems or stories, which encouraged their societies to organise their past and present, to challenge the strong and mighty, to make pronouncements on the powerful and

¹¹² Fraser, p. 270.

¹¹³ Stewart Brown, *Tourist, Traveller, Troublemaker: Essays on Poetry* (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 2007), p. 67.

even to question and contest for power. In European/British medieval courts too, poetry was used to pass on folk tales and histories.

Praise singers at African courts formed what could be considered intellectual classes of their own. It is, therefore, not difficult to see why the immediate motivation and intellectual reaction of that privileged class in the post-independence era was a desire to prove that there was merit in African culture. The new intellectuals believed that their access to, and understanding of, the English culture through colonial education gave them a right to speak on behalf of their own masses. In so doing, they were able to ‘fulfil the traditional role of the oral poets in some West African societies – to literally voice the concerns of the powerless in the halls of the powerful’.¹¹⁴

Abiola Irele tries to make a distinction between traditional and modern African literature but lauds the historical and sociological importance of the fact that the new writings in English and the indigenous African oral traditions have grown side by side, with each one relating to different moments and phases in the collective experience and consciousness of African people:

There is a clear distinction to be made between ‘traditional’ African literature and ‘modern’ African literature, the traditional is accepted as something that exists in our own indigenous languages and which is related to our traditional societies and cultures, while modern African literature has grown out of a rupture created within our indigenous history and way of life by the colonial experience which is naturally expressed in English.¹¹⁵

Although English language continued to dominate education, the oral tradition has grown in relevance and flourished amongst the peasantry—one seems to give life to the other. The written form meant that poetic practice was available only to the élite who could read and write in European languages—including French and Portuguese in other African colonies. However, oral forms and the culture of orality did not disappear: they continued to grow stronger and stronger in Nigeria.

The use of words in oral performance, or as song in storytelling, has also continued to increase over the years in Nigeria alongside the written tradition. This is

¹¹⁴ Brown, p. 67.

¹¹⁵ Irele, p. 27.

because African orality has continued to adapt itself to new technologies and mass communication. The increased number of live performances at weddings and other public occasions is ample evidence of this, as well as the recording of freelance artistes doing poetry recitals on compact discs and DVDs, on radio and television.

The continued interest from emerging African academia to study and revive oral practices, combined with the advent of publishing and the electronic mass media, has also contributed significantly to the pressure that came to be exerted on African writers of poetry to create a hybrid form of verse.

The success of writings such as Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease*, Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Weep not Child* and *The River Between*, Okot p' bitek's *Songs of Lawino*, Soyinka's drama *The Trial of Brother Jero*, began to create a lot of excitement among writers about the emerging written tradition in English that was spreading across Africa. This had an impact on writers of both poetry and prose, as many of the prominent poets to be discussed in the third generation were students of Soyinka and others in the previous generation. There were still many questions being asked about authenticity, and Ngugi wa Thiong'o was brave enough to challenge writing in the English language.¹¹⁶ However, my main point here is that African oral literature (which is now termed orature), introduced into schools in the mid-sixties, greatly contributed to the hybridism in the language of writers in the generation that followed.

To all intents and purposes, the decolonisation of African literature began with the third generation in the 1970s. Chinweizu and colleagues, in their controversial essays *Towards the Decolonisation of African Literature*, raised this

¹¹⁶ That the use of language is crucial to how people define themselves and that an imposed language often undermines indigenous culture, is one of the points Ngugi wa Thiong'o argues in *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. Culture, he says, is a culmination of the reflection of a people's history and the result of that history, and language not only is the carrier of culture, but culture also carries, 'particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world'. He postulates this as the reason why the use of language continues to be at the root of the tension between 'the imperialist tradition and a resistance tradition', in African literature. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: the politics of language in African Literature* (Oxford, Nairobi, Portsmouth: James Currey Ltd, East African Educational Publishers, Heinemann, 1986), pp. 13-16.

issue at the critical level.¹¹⁷ At the creative level, such writers as Niyi Osundare, Tanure Ojaide, Odia Ofeimuna, Ezenwa Ohaeto, Harry Garuba and Femi Osofisan began to shed foreign influences and to become more audacious and audience-conscious—so much so that some critics began to call their work ‘propagandist’. But I believe that this generation refined the hybrid English suffused with African proverbs and other conventions of African folklore, which Achebe, Okara, Soyinka, Okigbo, John Pepper-Clark and others in the earlier generation exploited. This generation, eager to establish their individuality, combined novelty of subject matter, innovative techniques and language to appeal to the reading public whose bias was in favour of the earlier generation generally considered to be the best poets. They turned poetry from being an élitist affair to a pertinent and flexible tool of political and social communication.

There was a sense of moral responsibility or social conscience that resulted in these poets believing more and more that they could be agents of change: they began to write more passionate and rhetorical verse as they addressed an economically and politically marginalised society; they began to query issues of social class, leadership and gender; they boldly confronted the crises of identity of their time and expanded, as it were, the sphere of influence and function of poetry. Poetry also like the conventional genres of novel and drama, became a means by which these poets challenged society to see itself.

The bitter Civil War that ended in 1970 further contributed to the radicalization in ideology of many writers, as the post-independence euphoria had turned into pessimism, rebellion and dissent. This became the new ideological platform of the seventies and eighties. Emerging poets such as Niyi Osundare and Tanure Ojaide, who were Soyinka’s students, began to confront political issues and the excesses of national leaders. These poets represent the spirit of the third generation of poets in Nigeria. It was a time when it became fashionable for poets to align with the economically exploited and the underprivileged members of the society.

¹¹⁷ Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie, Ihechukwu Madubuike, *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature: African Fiction and Poetry and Their Critics* (London, Boston, Melbourne and Henley: KPI Limited 1985).

It is to this third generation of poets, who became aggressive and sought socioeconomic liberation, that I owe most of my poetic influences. They became champions of the masses with populist poetry as they fought the emerging divide between the rich and poor. When, in March 1985, Osundare began to publish his *Songs of the Season* in *The Sunday Tribune*, it marked a new but aggressive effort to put poetry into the public domain—and his poems jolted and stirred people to the reality of everyday issues as regards their political wellbeing and future. Through the newspapers, local and universal ideas were perpetuated as Osundare wrote poems about emerging topics in the national polity. Such poems as *Where are the millions gone*, *IMF*, and *Song of the Sudden Storm* were directly phrased and related to contemporary happenings.

Niyi Osundare and his colleagues began a journey of arousing the social conscience of the society and began to put emphasis on meaning and musicality to reflect the key issues of the day. Osundare, in particular, successfully used traditional Yoruba poetic styles, parables, dramatic exchange, and African idiom and lyricism made popular by Soyinka and Okara to tackle public and political issues. It is this romantic voice of protest against the authorities that is evocative, lucid with a shade of prosaic syntax and characterised by a definite audience consciousness that defines my poetic style in the *The Prophet*, *The Pirate* and *The Witch*.

Osundare is perhaps the best example in this generation of the poet who has mastered the trend towards hybridity. He does not appear to be interested in sounding like any contemporary English or American poet as he engages Yoruba traditional forms. His deep comprehension of African history and its oral tradition is at the heart of his political vision; this is echoed in the lyricism of his poetry. He is a romantic who expresses a longing for the rich spiritual experiences that formed part of his upbringing, such spirituality now deemed lost in a national culture of greed and materialism, as reflected in his collection *The Eye of the Earth*. He has been referred to as the greatest authentic poetic voice after the generation of Soyinka, Pepper-Clark and Okara. His work clearly demonstrates that he believes in the notion of the poet as the voice of the people.

One of Osundare's poems so poignantly representative of the period in which my narrative poem is set is from *Waiting Laughters*. In an unattributed note on the

jacket of this collection published by Malthouse Press in 1990, the sequence is explained as follows: ‘It is about waiting in different and often contrasting circumstances, and the behaviour of time in the waiting process. But more than anything else, it is a poetic response to the gloom and despair which seems to have gripped contemporary African society’.¹¹⁸

Waiting,
still waiting,
like the strident summon of hasty edicts,
bellowed by the smoking lips of vulgar guns,
signed in blood, unleashed in the crimson spine
of trembling streets

And the winds return,
Laden with adamantine thou-shalt-nots
of green gods;
a jointless Fear gosesteps the compound of our minds
with epaulettes of night, belts of fuming cobras;
purple swaggers manacle our days
and trees swap their fruits for stony orders
 These are seasons of barking guns
 These are seasons of barking guns
 They whose ears are close to the earth
 Let them take cover in the bunker of their wits ...¹¹⁹

Osundare captures the essence of the period, ‘the season of barking guns’ when all the poor masses could do was to wait as ‘smoking lips of vulgar guns/signed in blood, unleashed in the crimson spine/of trembling streets ...’ He is unequivocal here in the condemnation of the military dictatorship’s reign of terror.

Osundare is a master of satire in his use of Yoruba conventions of praise poetry and the way he draws attention to the often-neglected aspects of ordinary life. He is able to be humorous in his observation of society, even when writing about such serious issues as corruption.

Waiting,
like the corpulent clergy
for his tithes
like the white-wigged judge
for his turkey

¹¹⁸ Niyi Osundare, *Waiting Laughters* (Lagos: Malthouse Press 1990).

¹¹⁹ Niyi Osundare, *Pages from the Book of the Sun: New and Selected Poems* (Trenton, Asmara: Africa World Press Inc. 2002), p. 157.

like the hard faced don
for his chair
like the policeman
for his bribe
waiting.¹²⁰

I watched Osundare perform his poetry in Leeds at the invitation of Peepal Tree press, and the lyricism and musicality of his verse immediately brought back memories of praise singing by *Ijala* hunters or what is called *Igede* – incantations. In his recent collection, *Pages From the Book of the Sun: New and Selected Poems*, he actually includes accompanying local instrumentation appropriate for each poem song. He recaptures the essence of the African praise singer, who speaks for the entire community, and this seems quite an important role to Osundare as it is to others in his generation who continually fight the destruction of Nigerian society and the gross injustice by the rich against the poor and the haves against the have-nots. In the twenty-second segment of *Moonsongs*, Osundare compares two districts of Lagos, highlighting the growing disparity between the rich and poor, which is a theme that is prevalent in the work of poets of this generation:

Ikoyi
The moon here is a laundered lawn
Its grass the softness of infant fluff,
silence gazes like a joyous lamb,
doors romp on lazy hinges the ceiling is a sky
weighted down by chandeliers of pampered stars.
Ajegunle here the moon is a jungle,
sad like a forgotten beard with tensioned
climbers and undergrowths of cancerous fury:
cobras of anger spit in every brook and nights
are one long prowl of swindled leopards.¹²¹

Osundare uses western images to depict the rich and more traditional ones to represent the poor, in a society where the mentality of consumerism that has engulfed the nation dictates that the more western tastes you acquire, the more successful you are. The laundered lawn is contrasted with the climbers and undergrowths of a jungle; the softness of infant fluff with a neglected beard; the chandeliers of pampered stars to a coiled cobra of anger, and the joyous lamb becomes the prowl of swindled leopards.

¹²⁰ Niyi Osundare, *Waiting Laughters* (Lagos: Malthouse Press 1990), p. 88.

¹²¹ Niyi Osundare, *Moonsongs* (Ibadan: Spectrum, 1988), p. 42.

Osundare's work becomes more significant when we observe how he has engaged oral traditional praise songs in his poetry. He makes a clear distinction between English poetry and poetry in English in his use of the language. He has mastered the 'alternative' way of using the English Language and given it 'a distinctive cultural twist'.¹²² Osundare for me remains a poetic revolutionary, a linguistic juggernaut that has succeeded in widening the local audience of poetry.

It is in praise of this tradition that I have written a narrative poem to be spoken and performed. The English language is a gift that has inadvertently promoted the oppositional and politically radical attitudes of Nigerian poetry and poets. This perhaps explains why 'poets, alongside the novelists and dramatists, began to use literature in English – in more or less radical ways – as a weapon in their struggle to create a climate for change, to inform a national consciousness and to argue the moral, political and social issues that troubled the intellectual classes'.¹²³

The Pirates

Stewart Brown claims that Ochia Ofeimun 'sees himself rather as a literary guerrilla'; I loosely call him a pirate, who believes poetry 'can make things happen' and that poets are 'the scourges of tyrants':¹²⁴

The worshipped word is enough
To expiate crimes and to lay honour
Upon whom the pleaded grace of song has fallen¹²⁵

The generations of poets and political activists in Nigeria who have exerted any measure of influence on the political scene have all belonged to the educated or emergent post-independence middle class and the landowning nobility; they accepted, as part of their right, the authority to address the government and the upper classes. However, as they became more confident, their critical voices began to confront each other. Ofeimun is thought to have initiated a radical literary path with *The Poet Lied*, published in 1980, in which he criticises John Pepper-Clark who, he

¹²² Brown, p. 68.

¹²³ Ibid., p. 67.

¹²⁴ Ibid., p.78.

¹²⁵ Ochia Ofeimun, *The Poet Lied* (Lagos: Update Communications Ltd., 1989), p.118.

claims, did not support the cause of truth in the critical period of the Nigerian Civil War. The lying poet, according to Ofeimun, only asked:

... to be left alone
with his blank sheet on his lap
in some dug-out damp corner
with a view of the streets and battlefields
watching the throngs of calloused lives,
the many many lives stung by living.
He would put them in his fables
Sandwich them between his lions and eagles,
Between elephants and crocodiles.¹²⁶

These verses were taken so personally by Clark as an unfair criticism that it resulted in a legal wrangle that led to the book being temporarily withdrawn. Ofeimun, in *The Poet Lied*, unleashed in verse the frustration of that decade of military intervention in Nigeria. He was uncompromising in his call for a return to parliamentary government.

Ofeimun, like Okara, did not start as part of the educated élite; he went through various odd jobs before acquiring a political science degree. He then became the secretary to Chief Obafemi Awolowo, a presidential aspirant at the 1979 general elections, who was often referred to as the best leader Nigeria never had. This broad experience is reflected in the work of Ofeimun, who is unrepentant and unequivocal in his denouncing of the political ills of the society:

in our model democracy
the magic promises of yesterday
lie cold like moulds of dead cattle
along caravans that lead nowhere
 secular sermons wage war
 for souls denied the habit of thought:
spewed from talking boxes
divine falsehoods protect us from ourselves

in our model democracy
nothing is left of the old humour
the sacked parliament of our collective desires
appraise horizons burnt to dancing grey
by tall threats, tall decrees, tall abominations¹²⁷

¹²⁶ Ibid., pp. 40-41.

¹²⁷ Ibid., p.4

Ofeimum calls the bluff of the authorities here to demand a return to the parliamentary-type government that represents the people's 'collective desires'. The promises of the military he likens to 'moulds, of dead cattle along caravans that lead nowhere'. He protests against the threats, decrees and seeming abominations against fundamental human rights that characterise the military regime in Nigeria.

In a feat of prophetic imagination, Ofeimum's voice still manages to sound triumphant about the future in the final section of *The Poet Lied*—'The Neophytes'—as he declares:

We will sing and dance
because the garbage in the streets
the false houses of prayer
the gaudy sins of robber barons
who licked their fat fingers
at the market-place
will be swept away

We will sing and dance
because our lives will come again to be written
against happy prophecies

No fire next time.¹²⁸

Ofeimum grieves over the waste, the looting, the sheer brazenness of robber barons in government, living luxuriously, stashing money away in Swiss banks, licking fat fingers while health, education and basic amenities suffer. Even the garbage is still in the streets. But ironically he talks of singing and dancing; he believes in hope: 'our lives will come again to be written against happy prophecies'. Such is the hope in the heart of Nigerians and many Africans that they patiently bear abuse and injustice. They sing and dance while their lives are undermined and exploited by weak and uninspiring leadership. But the controversial 'pirate' poet will not relent in asking the leadership to be accountable. Fraser comments on Ofeimum's work: 'To call his poetry indignant is to understate it; it seethes rather with a black, almost jocund rage. It writhes and revels in the pure absurdity of

¹²⁸ Ibid., p. 31-32.

injustice it knows itself powerless to redress ... He is the Jeremiah of modern Nigeria. His zestful warnings have all the impact of prophetic raillery'.¹²⁹

Osundare's *Songs of the Marketplace*, which castigates the University establishment, follows this trend, as well as Soyinka's *My Tongue Does Not Many Slogans*, which also accuses the academic community of the corruption of which they accuse others. In some respects this can be seen as the students following the steps of the teacher, as Osundare was one of Soyinka's students. This further illustrates my earlier claim that the best poets defy the generational treatment as their work timelessly cuts across generations. This questioning of class and the growing self-critical voice of the Nigerian poets in the eighties and nineties, who sought to identify with the masses, emphasizes that there was a drive for integrity; the poets did not assume that, because they occupied a special pedestal, that excluded them from the standards they were setting for society at large.

What resonates with me in my creative endeavour is the way this generation of poets has followed biblical models that have influenced my own narrative content and approach. Biblical examples clearly show that the nature and purpose of prophecy is not only to foretell the future but also to provoke a response of repentance or prayerful intercession that can actually change the future. The aspiration of the poets in this generation, in spite of their scathingly critical poetry, is expressed as hope and desire that change and intervention is possible and the future can be changed by the prophetic word of the poet today. A classic example of change brought about by the prophetic word is the story of Jonah—the reluctant prophet who preached in Nineveh, even though he did not know that Nineveh's destruction could be averted by prayerful intervention; it is implied in the declared word of prophecy that Nineveh could change its destiny. Therefore, the rescue of Nineveh as a result of repentance did not mark Jonah as a false prophet; rather, it can be regarded as the fruit of a truly empowered prophetic word. This generation of poets have continued to sow the seed of poetic truth and are eagerly waiting for fruition.

¹²⁹ Fraser, pp. 307, 310.

One question that has been raised, which I consider pertinent, is how far the weapon of the ‘word’ in the hands of these ‘pirates’ succeeded against the ‘sword’; how much has it influenced any change in society or brought about any lasting reform in the past fifty years? Olu Oguibe in *A Song from Exile* says:

It is arguable to what extent the artiste can influence or turn the course of history and we in Nigeria have had so long a history of battles between the artiste and the state that we have even greater reason to be doubtful ... we are simply saying what we see, for it is seeing and not saying, our people say, that kills the elder. It is hearing and not heeding that will kill the child.¹³⁰

Following the drift of his reasoning, Nigeria has indeed had its fair share of hearing but there has been little heeding; the child is now an adult but an adult who has refused to see. Nevertheless, poets continue to apprehend the political roles they can play and the cultural and traditional demands made on them by the society. This sense of responsibility is what continues to promote an alignment between the poet and his craft. The awareness that there is a vital power in their pen to transform continues to inspire a vatic confidence in the poets. For Osundare and his colleagues, poetry is not a pastime, this is not therapeutic activity, and they actually want to affect change.

Criticism continues to dog the steps of these poets: they have been accused of belabouring issues, of seeking self-promotion and self-projected radicalism. This criticism is predicated on a Eurocentric vision that attempts to judge African poetry by western standards. Western contemporary poetry appears to be more biased towards introspection and conservatism instead of ablaze with the confrontation of social issues. African poetry, on the other hand, cannot afford this luxury: there are millions of people dying and suffering from preventable tragedies as local tyranny supported by foreign powers continues to oppress the masses and to suppress political freedom.

The clarion-call for change—and rapid change—is the preoccupation of this ‘pirate’ generation of poets; their words are their weapons of protest. In *Before Our God* Tanure Ojaide writes:

Neither bullets nor other savageries can arrest words

¹³⁰ Olu Oguibe, *A Song from Exile* (Bayreuth: Boomerang Press, 1990), p. 9.

that have already been aired—
paper is witness to the lone mind

These words file out on the dirt road
To stop nerve-wrecking waves of despots;
They are the charms worn before battle ...¹³¹

Many regard Ojaide as a poet who has ‘practised what he preaches’ and has fired out words like bullets to stop the rule of tyrants.¹³² He is a revolutionary socialist who believes poetry can contribute to the positive change of Nigerian and African life. He has consistently used his poetry to expose the ills in the society. Ojaide is often ‘blunt’ and direct in his poetry and sometimes sacrifices ‘imagistic complexity or formal musicality for a rhetorical outrage that – arguably - overwhelms the ‘poetry’ - insofar as we equate poetry with subtlety, ambiguity and linguistic cunning’.¹³³ The issues at stake, the confrontation of the ills of the ruling élite in their desecration of the civil society is perceived as an all-important duty that continues to inspire these ‘pirates’ who continue to fight with the weapon of the pen, sometimes at the expense of technique, because the urgency of the situation demands unconventionality.

In simple, overt poems such as *When soldiers are diplomats*, *The Leveling rule* and *Song for my Land*, Ojaide simply ‘chronicles the destitution and despoliation of Nigeria in recent times’, engaging revolutionary aesthetics as the tool of raising public awareness.¹³⁴

More and more the land mocks my heart
Where are the evergreens of my palm?

Why is the sun of salvation eclipsed
By coups and intolerable riots

Wherever I pass mockery of the land
Naked trees flaunt sterile bodies at me.¹³⁵

¹³¹ Tanure Ojaide, *The Blood of Peace* (London: Heinemann, 1991), p. 28.

¹³² Stewart Brown. p. 74.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

¹³⁵ Tanure Ojaide, ‘Songs for my Land’ in *The Fate of Vultures* (Lagos: Methuen Press 1990), p. 41.

Ojaide's free verse engages images that are rooted in the immediate but also transcendent, tangible and intangible. Being from the Delta region of Nigeria, he can relate to the economic consequences of the desecration of the land. The 'evergreens of my palm' could refer to economic realities. It is a mockery that the land that produces the nation's wealth harbours thousands of people who are denied an economic future, crushed by repression and starvation. The naked trees flaunt sterile bodies because the sun of salvation is, indeed, eclipsed.

The endemic corruption, profligate political spending, military coups and counter coups, civil wars, energy crises, a buoyant economy that burst, a weakened currency, increasing unemployment and plummeting living standards in the face of growing self-aggrandisement of local élites that has characterised post-independence, have led the poets to maintain an anti-establishment stance and to pitch their camp with the workers and the exploited masses.

The conflicts and tension in contemporary African poetry has shifted from being between Africans and Europeans, as it was in the past; rather, it has become a new war, a class war between 'the exploiters versus the exploited, the working masses versus the indolent élite, the haves versus the have-nots; this is the nature of the new conflict among the new 'tribes' of Africa'.¹³⁶

I can readily identify ideologically with this generation in their protest style of poetry. My work in a way does not condemn but endeavours to show the terrible suffering young people and the Nigerian society in general are going through. Today, the gap between the rich and poor continues to widen; corruption is not abating; and the atrocities of the country's leadership as regards the Niger Delta call for the sense of responsibility that writers and poets have imbibed, to represent the voice of the masses—to become the conscience of society; it is a prophetic voice that must not be silenced.

The experiences of this generation, who have lived under military and civilian dictatorships and other forms of social, economic, and political instability, have empowered them to write from a perspective that differs from that of their

¹³⁶ *The New African Poetry: An Anthology* ed. by Tanure Ojaide and Tijan M. Sallah (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers 1999), p. 3.

forerunners. Their focus has also shifted to engaging with the indigenous oral traditions and techniques exploring the human condition around them. Their preoccupation has become more sociopolitical and economic; they have begun to take more seriously their self-appointed roles as agents of change and have written with the conviction that their collective voices can move the society towards greater social freedom.

By revisiting African orality in all its glory and embracing its conventions and how it enables the recording and appraisal of the immediate world, they have begun to explore the predominantly anthropological essence of African orality and its importance in maintaining relationships that are vital to communal history. They have also started to bring to light that intrinsic cultural process that empowers the African bard and praise singer in the responsibility of safeguarding social systems and values, within the total culture and the traditional world.

The third generation became more conscious of the framework of the African ‘classical oral tradition’ that informs the worldviews of African people and I believe they also became increasingly aware of their public role and the political content and effects of their poetry. This promoted the writing of provocative verse intended to appeal to the masses they speak for and to score points against the political and military rulers whose unrestrained behaviour they confronted.

This has resulted in a number of experimental platforms that developed throughout the seventies, the eighties and nineties, when the tradition of confrontation with government authority by using ‘the word’ became widespread. Nigerian poetry moved beyond the need for authentication by the European audience, which was characteristic of the first and second generation of poets, to a fervent desire for freedom of expression, better life and good governance for the people.

It is not difficult, therefore, to see why my narrative—and, indeed, most Nigerian poetry—has tended towards argument, protest or information. Issues of originality and of responsibilities to oneself and the community have become predominant. The demands of the local indigenous language, the hypocrisy of adopted capitalism and the injustice of an enforced global democracy, with its support of corrupt post-independence governments and barefaced environmental

concerns, colours the poet's landscape. The postmodern virtual world of instant access via the Internet, a brutal and increasingly growing gap between the languishing poor and the ostentatiously rich, and the tongue-in-cheek rhetorics of international agencies in the face of what is, for many, a blatant struggle between life and death, have all contributed to the present trend in Nigerian poetry. The poet must become a messenger. The poet is a messenger. The poet is a prophet. The prophet is a messenger.

But the voice of this messenger is continually being submerged by violence and repression; I have responded as a writer, aware that words may not bring about the change required, but I am unable to suppress my instincts to express my own pain and sense of protest through a creative medium. Therefore, my narrative is taken up from when universities were shut down following the military overthrow of the 1979–1983 civilian regime of Shehu Shagari that had successfully returned itself to power through the infamous Akinjide $12 \frac{2}{3}$ scandalous mathematical manipulation of electoral votes. Unfortunately—or, as some would say, as expected—the military regime that took over under the leadership of General Ibrahim Babangida was no better: these people were as corrupt as (if not more corrupt than) the politicians. This was played out to the international community when the state annulled a free and fair election in 1994, throwing into jail Moshood Abiola, the people's choice of President.

This act provoked much public uproar, and the Nigerian Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka spent his time in self-exile campaigning around Europe for a cultural embargo on Nigeria. This was a time when human freedom was challenged and the military acted with impunity. Shortly after this, General Abacha took over the government in a palace coup, and Ken Saro Wiwa—a poet, novelist, television producer and past president of the Nigerian Association of Authors—and eight others were executed by hanging, in defiance of international outcry. This was the tyrannical answer to Saro Wiwa's high-profile campaign for cultural emancipation of the Ogoni people, whose territory was being wrecked by oil exploration.

The fact that Ken Saro Wiwa was executed on 10 November 1995, right in the middle of the Association of Nigerian Author's Convention (of which he was the immediate past president), demonstrated the impotence of the pen against the

tyranny that Nigerians faced at that time. However, to find a vocabulary for the pain, hopelessness and sense of loss the ordinary people must have felt at the time of my narrative, to express my grief for the environmental disaster that was taking place in the Niger Delta became a great motivation for me. I have had the privilege of personally travelling through parts of this region for many years. I have seen at first-hand the devastation of the area and have met with individuals who live under this cloud of hopelessness. The depth of loss—the bestial depravity and misery that the people experience daily—is unimaginable, and this is more so when they are manipulated against each other in bitter feuds between ‘tribes’ (some would say ‘gangs’) that render the entire area ungovernable.

While reference to the third generation of poets as ‘pirates’ can at best be called loose, it can be argued that their militant attitude and anti-government stance have given fuel and intellectual ammunition to the various guerrilla movements in the Niger Delta. In 2004, one man in particular threatened and triggered the first oil rise in history to over \$50 a barrel. His name is Alhaji Mujahid Dokubo-Asari. He was born Melford Uzodinma Dokubo Goodhead Jnr, and had dropped out of the Department of Law at the University of Calabar and Port Harcourt because of his activism.

Asari is an Ijaw, the fourth largest ethnicity in Nigeria after the Hausa-fulani, Yoruba and Ibo. This is the same ethnicity that such poets as Gabriel Okara, Tanure Ojaide, Ogaga Ifowodo and many other prominent voices hail from. Asari was born into a Christian home; his father was a High Court Judge and within the tribe he boasts a royal ancestry, but he turned to militant Islam. He is quoted on his website as saying: ‘Islam is the only religion compatible with revolution, other religions talk about forbearance, forgiveness, love and peace, endurance in the face of oppression. Islam is the only religion that says that the oppressed must confront the oppressors’.¹³⁷ Asari is said to have had training in guerrilla warfare in Libya and Afghanistan.

In 2001, Asari became president of the Ijaw youth association after serving as vice president and co-founder since 1998. He immediately changed the slogan of

¹³⁷ <http://www.alhajimujahiddokubo-asari.com>

the association to, 'Resource Control and Self Determination By Every Means Necessary'. This signalled his willingness to engage in armed struggle to enforce the 'Kaiama Declaration', which, in 1998, demanded the control of the oil resources by the people of the Niger Delta. It prompted a full-scale military operation against him by the federal government of Nigeria. He was arrested, imprisoned and charged with treason. On 14 June 2007, Asari was released on bail as part of President Umaru Yar'Adua's pledge to try to bring peace to the Niger Delta region.

Although Asari denies ties to al-Qaeda, he claims Osama bin Laden is his hero and has even named one of his children Osama.¹³⁸ He is quoted as saying that his struggle is not religious but nationalistic; however, he 'shares some of their [al-Qaeda's] aspirations to starve the arrogance of the United States in making the people of the world slaves'.¹³⁹ The threat that Asari's militancy posed to the smooth flow of oil has since attracted comments from the highest echelons of government in the United States of America. The Niger Delta region is thought to currently supply about 10% of all US crude oil imports. The intellectual fervour of the poets, as well as the seeming impotence of the pen, may have fuelled the nationalist tendencies of these Robin Hood characters, who have resorted to armed struggle for the environmental and cultural emancipation of the Ijaw people.

The fourth generation

Tayo Olafioye defends individualism and articulates the mood of the new generation who are ready to chart new territories and blaze trails that their forebears did not dare. In the previous generation, such poets as Osundare, Ojaide, Ofeimum and others have already captured the public imagination and expanded the scope and influence of poetry. Nevertheless, it is not surprising that in spite of the huge achievements of the third generation, the new crop of writers is perceived as struggling to come out from under the shadows of the Soyinka and Okigbo generation. This, as I argue subsequently, may be due to the sheer number of

¹³⁸ Osama Ibn Mujahid Dokubo Asari, <http://www.alhaimujahiddokubo-asari.com/children.htm>

¹³⁹ Nicholas Shaxson, *The Dirty Politics of African Oil* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2007), p. 192.

emerging voices and the vast volume of work being published today. Arguing the position of what I call the fourth generation, Olafioye says:

Many still expect contemporary poets to sing their ditties in the codas of Soyinka and Okigbo. When will they shed their Soyinkasque cloak, much as we admire the old boy's orthodoxy. Whatever the imperfections...of the present generation of writers, they should not be expected to be the literary clones of an earlier generation. Differences in collective components of setting, contexts, values, tone mood, directives and internationalism influence the currents of creativity. The relationship between form, purpose and currency is still fundamental to the appreciation of the poetry of the day.¹⁴⁰

Olafioye's reference to the Soyinkasque cloak and Okigbo's orthodoxy of earlier generation and his argument that new writers should not become clones, only supports Harold Bloom's claim that the weapon young poets possess against the great poets of the past is creative misprision; that it takes a successful misreading of the past works to create room for his own voice to be heard. I admit that Olafioye has a good point in claiming a generational setting and that context have changed considerably. The impact of these changes on the fourth generation is discussed briefly hereafter.

In Funso Aiyejina's paper 'Recent Nigerian Poetry in English: An Alter-Native Tradition', he is of the opinion that:

The shift from the obscurantism and eurocentricism of most of the first generation (what I call the second) of modern Nigerian poets to the preoccupations of the present crop of poets, whose focus as well as literary antecedents are more indigenous than foreign, can be said to have signalled a much desired alter/native tradition. Individual poets would, for example, be expected to evolve, through experimentation with the component forms of this tradition, distinctive personal styles, which, while being personal to them, can also be traced back to the base tradition.¹⁴¹

The base tradition, in the Nigerian context, is protest against the government and authority figures. While doing this, it has also tried to shed foreign influences. Since Okigbo's *Path of Thunder*, poetry has followed this pattern of revolutionary socialist questioning of the quality of Nigerian leadership.

¹⁴⁰ Tayo Olafioye, *The Poetry of Tanure Ojaide: A Critical Appraisal* (Lagos: Malthouse Press Ltd., 2000), pp. 8-9.

¹⁴¹ Funso Aiyejina, 'Recent Nigerian Poetry in English: An Alter-Native Tradition' in *Perspectives on Nigerian Literature: 1700 to the Present* Vol.1 ed. by Yemi Ogunbiyi (Lagos: Guardian Books, 1988), (112-128), p. 128.

However, more recently, Femi Osofisan's article, 'Wounded Eros and Cantillating Cupids: Sensuality and the Future of Nigerian Literature in the Post-Military Era', which won the International Resource Network in Africa Awards in 2008, questioned a new development in Nigerian verse. In it, Osofisan reflects on the surprising changes that have taken place in Nigerian writing since the post-military era. One thing he omitted to mention in his essay is the sheer volume of poetry and the emergence of so many strong voices that now dot the landscape of the Nigerian poetry scene. Voices like Tope Omoniyi, Akeem Lasisi, Ogaga Ifowodo, Angela Nwosu, Rotimi Fasan, Toni Kan, Anaele Charles Ihuoma, Hope Eghagha and many others are current, prolific and poignant.

Osofisan's emphasis is on the readiness and lack of inhibition by these new writers to deal with topics such as 'prostitution (Ndibe's *Rain*, Nwosu's *Invisible Chapters*), or abortion (Agary's *Yellow-Yellow*), or sodomy and pederasty (Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation*), or gay and lesbian love (Promise's *In the Middle of the Night*)'¹⁴². These were regarded as almost taboo and hardly heard of in previous generations. Admittedly, there were 'erotic' novels like *Jagua Nana* by Cyprian Ekwensi, but such novels were not taken seriously or given any measure of academic and literary attention because of the unspoken but general consent that serious literature should deal only with important issues. This implicit code demanded that writers maintain a level of modesty and appropriateness; it made earlier writers regard issues of sex and physical relationships as a personal affair to be kept secret and off the page.

Now, however, a new generation of writers is beginning to explore erotic situations in poetry, drama and prose fiction, and the writers are doing this in graphic detail such as those in previous generations never dared. This is surprising to Osofisan, who points out that Nigerian literature, which hitherto has been dominated by the fight against corruption and so on, now seems to celebrate romantic love and sexually explicit content that sometimes borders on pornography. This is radical and

¹⁴² Femi Osofisan, 'Wounded Eros and Cantillating Cupids: Sensuality and the Future of Nigerian Literature in the Post-Military Era' *The International Resource Network in Africa Outliers*, 1, (2008) 64-78, (p. 70).

that much Osofisan admits, in a situation where previously ‘in over four decades there was no instance of a memorable kiss’.¹⁴³

This new generation appears to ignore the concern and moral restraint of previous generations, whose Christian education and missionary influences held them subconsciously bound by a biblical moral code, the famed Ten Commandments and the threat of hell fire. New writers such as Helon Habila, Okey Ndibe, Sefi Atta, Kaine Agary, Uzodinma Iweala, Chimamanda Adichie, Akeem Lasisi and Austyn Njoku seem to have given in to the lure of the erotic.

While it is debatable to what extent the demands of the publishing market have contributed to this trend, I would hypothesise that western cultural influences and the need to appeal to a wider and more liberal audience have contributed to how this generation of writers now explores territories their predecessors dared not. Chimamanda Adichie, for instance, in an interview with THISDAY newspaper on Sunday 13 May 2007, says: ‘I am interested in writing about sex in the most upfront and demystifying way’, and she does this very successfully in her acclaimed historical novel on the Nigerian Civil war *Half of a Yellow Sun*, published in 2006.

However, even when the subject appears to dwell on love and sex, it is admirable that the subtext for these writers is still pungent with the same biting tones of protest of the earlier generations. The present generation is more socially aware and therefore subject to greater emotional pressure brought about by the retrogressive and provocative economic and sociopolitical situation in the country. This is what provided the creative energy for the previous generations—and what these new writers are doing is presenting new ways of considering and dealing with old but ever-present issues. Their sense of indignation has not diminished; they are still firmly preoccupied with the perpetual connection between poetry and politics. They have merely camouflaged their resentment by what can at best be regarded as their desire to be published more widely. Osofisan readily attributes this trend of writing ‘erotic’ content, not just to the influence of western culture and its values and attachment to sex and voyeurism and the violence in popular entertainment but also

¹⁴³ Femi Osofisan, ‘Wounded Eros and Cantillating Cupids: Sensuality and the Future of Nigerian Literature in the Post-Military Era’ *The International Resource Network in Africa Outliers*, 1, (2008) 64-78, (p. 64).

to the pressure of finding willing publishers for new writers.¹⁴⁴

The stories these new writers are writing about are not only of the past but the present and the future. In many ways they are timeless, and I can identify with the need to write about present realities with a firm grasp on the past. That the new crops of writers are using a façade of love and sex to denounce the leadership and comment on the sociopolitical crises in the country is quite a brilliant development. Like their predecessors, they are still depicting corrupt and irresponsible leadership, but in a new way. In Osofisan's words, 'They feel condemned between despair and optimism, between their role as victims and as prophets of hope'.¹⁴⁵ I believe the new generation is caught in conflict between two worlds where, on the one hand, they are victims of history, the society and a leadership that lacks foresight, and on the other they exercise a responsibility of sustaining societal imagination and creating a vision of a beneficial future for all.

When I began to write my narrative I was curious to know what elements in biblical narratives have made them successful in the secular world. Was it merely sex, or love, or the sense of mystery, or a combination of these factors of life? I have found the simplicity and unbiased style of reformative narrative as found in the Bible quite inspiring. It carries both a sense of history, but also an intuition of guidance for the future. Although the narratives never shy away from sexual and loving relationships between characters, they never explicitly detail such encounters. What fascinates me is that despite their strong moral leanings, biblical narratives have the mystique to continuously attract attention, even among secular publishers.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 70.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 76.

Chapter Four

Conclusion: Fela Anikulapo-Kuti – Prophet, Pirate and Witch

I would like to briefly examine one of the famous singers of Nigeria who have influenced my work, as he fits the description of prophet, pirate and witch all in one breath. That Fela Anikulapo Kuti is a musician and singer is significant, because singers have always played the role of poet in African society, commenting on the current state of the nation. In modern African states, the singers, as well as the writers, expose what is happening. The role played by Fela Kuti is particularly important, as the subject matter of his songs shows how he combines the three roles in his quest for change. He has been called many names—the Black President, Abami Eda and the King of Afrobeat—and has been compared to Bob Marley and even James Brown. Fela, who was a cousin of Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka, studied music at Trinity College of Music in London and, as a musician per excellence, he came to the limelight in the 1970s with his own version of hypnotic and intoxicating Afrobeat.

What interests me about Fela (the son of an Anglican priest and a mother renowned for her fierce feminism) was the way he assumed African mysticism in his performances: he called himself *Abami eda*—‘the strange one’. He would paint his face like a ‘native doctor’ and call his performances the ‘underground spiritual game’. His early songs, such as ‘Jeun Koku’ and ‘Na Poi’, were naughty and cheeky. He spoke about greed and about the sex act in very crude tones, but gradually he became one of the greatest critics of the military government. Fela was able to communicate with the people on the streets, relate to home truths and still meet ‘demands of sophistication in his musicality’.¹⁴⁶ The Black Power movement in America, as well as pan-African heroes like Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, are thought to have influenced Fela in the 1980s. He became a champion of the people and led a protest with his music against the government in true ‘pirate’ fashion on behalf of the masses, which made him one of the most admired personalities in the country.

¹⁴⁶ Nicholas Shaxson, *The Dirty Politics of African Oil* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2007), p. 18.

When the oil revenues collapsed in the 1980s and IMF tightened its hold on the country, many voices of protest in song, poetry and drama were unleashed. Fela was prophetic in the way he condemned the ills of the society, without fear for his life or personal welfare. Although he had an unconventional lifestyle, he became a man caught up in a mission where he was ready to give his very life and who lost his mother to this struggle. In a way, he would qualify to be called a pirate in the conduct of his life—a true rebel and champion of the masses. He was almost a Robin Hood figure in Lagos.¹⁴⁷

Fela Kuti was an acclaimed and an accomplished musician, his success and popularity being due not only in part to his hedonistic, carefree lifestyle but, more importantly, to his use of Pidgin English—a language of general appeal, the language of the street, a Nigerian hybrid English that the educated and the peasantry comprehend. There is a brief comparison to be made between Fela’s popularity and success and the early work of the Guyanese poet Martin Carter, who was ‘imprisoned by British colonial authorities in the 1950s for his part in the ‘subversive activities’ of the first democratically elected’ government of Guyana.¹⁴⁸ Carter was ‘bombastic and declamatory’ in poems like ‘I Clench My Fist’ written in response to the British troops’ invasion of Guyana in 1953.¹⁴⁹

Although you come in thousands from the sea
Although you walk like locusts in the streets
Although you point your gun straight at my heart
I clench my fist above my head and sing my song of FREEDOM.¹⁵⁰

Carter’s poetry became adopted and ‘chanted by striking workers on sugar estates and at demonstrations and political rallies’ in the fifties, just as Fela’s songs became iconic in Nigeria in the eighties because of their unambiguous subject matter, intentions and language. It was poetry or lyrics that some critics may call ‘plain bad

¹⁴⁷ Appendix two is a tribute to Fela Anikulapo Kuti, a poem composed by me from his Album titles. Album Titles are in italics. His songs reflect his struggle against state injustice.

¹⁴⁸ Brown, p. 56.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 57.

¹⁵⁰ Martin Carter, ‘I Clench My Fist’ in *University of Hunger: Collected Poems and Selected Prose*, ed. by Gemma Robinson (Tarsset: Bloodaxe Books, 2006), p. 100.

verse' but which 'allowed the poem to move off the page and into the much broader arena of orality'.¹⁵¹

Fela was an activist on many levels—a prophet/poet, propagator of African culture and a pirate in the wildest sense of the word. He began as the son of an Anglican priest but he died as a juju priest delving into many rituals associated with African wizardry and witchcraft. The use of *Witch or Wizard* may not apply to Fela in the strictest terms because, generally, they refer to someone who uses supernatural power or magic to achieve socially harmful goals. Fela's sorcery was with his music and his lyrics. The only harm he brought was to himself and the military regimes he fought so bitterly. Since his death, there has been no one in Nigeria of such stature to capture the nation's imagination.

Of Witches and Wizards

Let me conclude by examining briefly the endeavours of the ordinary people as reflected in my narrative. Clearly, the Nigerian context provides precious inspiration for the writer. As the politics of oil are raging, the ordinary people are involved in different forms of witchcraft and wizardry. In the prologue to my narrative, the old woman in the bus refers to African leaders as witches and wizards who continue to use their enchantments to enslave and oppress people or why else would they continue to perpetuate themselves in office in the face of their apparent failures? The use of witchcraft has become an ordinary day-to-day affair for the man in the street that is struggling to survive.

While the purpose and gains of joining a coven of witches or cult of wizards may not be fully known, the general consensus is that it offers protection and a means to become wealthy. These are reflected in my narrative. Sikira is willing to sacrifice her only son Fatai to help the family get ahead. She does this by giving out a personal item belonging to him. This act destroys her family, turns her remaining daughter Falila into a reluctant witch and leads her husband to abandon the home.

We are introduced into a world where politicians use *juju* to win elections and, having spent four years in office, they buy personal jets and build mansions. On the

¹⁵¹ Stewart Brown, p. 58.

other hand, young mothers join witchcraft fraternities and donate their children or kidnap other children to satisfy a vampire urge for blood. Human sacrifice is believed to be a dark, devilish way to get rich quickly, with the consequence of a damned conscience. The references to the 'devilish juju money' is from the fear, especially during election campaigns, that kidnappers could touch a man and make his manhood disappear, or touch a woman and make her breasts disappear, in order to make money. Election times are periods when people know that politicians spend money to bribe their constituents for a vote, and this adds to the tension and fear in the already worried, superstitious and downtrodden masses.

The role that Lydia and Prophet Obadiah play in the narrative is of those in touch with the perceived higher powers that can suspend and disrupt the dark powers of witchcraft and wizardry. The Christian practising the faith is perceived as able to deal with the forces of darkness. Within wizardry and witchcraft there is also a struggle for power and a system of ranking. This implies that a wizard or witch of a higher ranking can overpower or disarm one lower in rank. This is played out when Segida marries Falila; he is able to set her free from the witchcraft her mother gave to her because he is a higher wizard in the spirit realm.

The spirit world becomes a permanent reference point, a place to seek and demand justice, a place of fear, and an alternative government for many people who cannot cope any more with the current reality—a reality where some live in excess wealth and profligate waste while others wallow in abject poverty and neglect. The myths of the mammy water or ghost girls still abound to caution the promiscuous young man from sowing wild oats; for the promiscuous young girl, it is the fear of getting a 'spirit' husband who may hinder her from getting married or having a child. These, and many other beliefs, affect many people. In the continuous struggle for sanity, issues of witchcraft and wizardry have become part of ordinary life as a means to get ahead in the rat race, to obtain political power or to gain influence.

One endemic problem in Nigeria at the moment is insecurity of life. For example, a few weeks ago, a dear friend of mine lost his mother. He and his wife are both medical doctors, but they could not go back home to bury their parent for fear of being kidnapped for ransom. Thuggery has become the only means of livelihood for many intelligent but jobless young graduates, who are fed up with the government

and with life. Armed robbery and carjacking have become the means by which the desperate poor find leverage in a society where affiliation or relationship to the corridors of power is the key to getting ahead in life. The result is a mad rush to get into political office at any level, and the bid to win an election has become one fraught with political assassinations, death threats, and bribery at the most despicable level. This continues to provide a rich context for new creative endeavours.

Moreover, since the death of Ken Saro Wiwa and the Ogoni eight, there has been an upsurge of violence and continued unrest in the Niger Delta. The politics of Nigerian oil has not abated. My creative contribution is to keep in the public view this ongoing humanitarian disaster. Over the years, Nigeria and the world have changed: the Internet and international publishing have continued to put tremendous pressure on African writers. Clearly, the position of the Nigerian writer is becoming more daunting and complex. The direction of future writing is unpredictable and the imaginative approach to creativity and creative writing will continue to change. I hope this commentary sufficiently indicates what has inspired the crafting of my narrative. I also hope it has contributed an original dimension to the present body of Nigerian writing in particular and of African writing in general.

APPENDIX ONE

The Biblical Prophet

The twin idea that prophets are poets and poets are prophets is as old as the origins of literature, if literature is acknowledged in the simplest sense as the written and spoken culture of a people and their collective consciousness or thoughts on a particular subject. This notion has inspired many writers before me and has contributed to the creation of my narrative poem.

The roots of oral tradition can be found deeply planted in the fertile soils of the imagination and the myths of a society. The intricate plots and larger-than-life scenarios that predominate in the narratives within a society reflect the recurrent themes in that community. This often leads to the creation of a cult of charismatic characters who become ideological and cultural archetypal heroes through the poetry, the fiction and the drama that evolve and are passed on from one generation to another.

In many cultures, the images and figures of these archetypes and their biographies give, to the artist or poet, the licence which, according to the needs of time and place, enables him/her to reinvent and to ascribe to them the office of a prophet, or even a saviour. This has created in some cultures an ingrained tradition whereby stories are shaped and reshaped so that the poet or artist is empowered to draw oratorical authority from the proven examples in the history of his people and from his personal experience. Thus empowered, historical biographies of cultural archetypes end up with images that portray them as an incarnation of divinity, as fecundity symbols, or as the saint or the mystical prophet.

The historical model that depicts prophets as poets and poets as prophets is recognised in both Hebrew and classical Greek literary tradition, as well as by the Romans—as intimated earlier—who, although closely modelled on their Greek predecessors, have notable differences. Hebrew poetry differs from the Hellenic in that, while it emphasises moral integrity and man's obligation in a moral universe, the Hellenic pursues the pleasure in the beauty and logic of an idea. For the Biblical prophet/poet, the pursuit of intellectual pleasure was a foreign concept; poetry was

merely a by-product of their message and they were often overwhelmed by the significance of such divine messages for which they were carriers.

Biblical prophetic literature is often set significantly in scenes of unreserved moral values, expressing the paradox of man's helplessness in the presence of an almighty God. This is why the biblical prophet was never depicted as interested in receiving accolades for the lyricism of his poetry: he was on a mission of moral transformation of the society and he was always aware of 'Yahweh', Israel's God, the source of the message, whose demands for obedience leaves no room for the celebration of verbal ingenuity. James Kugel notes that:

Although rabbinic exegesis pursued the expounding of Scripture to its minutest details and textual scholarship per se of the Hebrew Bible early on reached a level of exactitude quite unsurpassed in the transmission and study of other contemporary texts, the Rabbis themselves showed remarkably little interest in the poetic structure or rhetoric of Scripture as such. While their Hellenistic contemporaries explored in detail the prosodic and rhetorical features of their texts and while, soon enough, Greek- and Latin-speaking Christians were to import these same concerns and methods to their study of the Bible, rabbinic exegesis remained largely oblivious to this "human" side of biblical expression.¹⁵²

Kugel goes further to establish that prophets were never seen as poets in the eyes of early Judaism. In his examination of classical rabbinical writings on the Bible stretching from the second century C.E. to the sixth and beyond, he concludes that although the Rabbis held what might be called the phenomenon of song and singing in high esteem, any association of the Divine Word with mere song was generally offensive to them.¹⁵³ Consequently any comparison of words revealed to prophets to those created by mere poets was bound to meet with rabbinical disapproval. Hebrew verse is perceived, in his estimation, to subjugate artistic form to subject matter.

The Hebrew prophet

Now return the man's wife, for he is a prophet, and he will pray for you and you will live. But if you do not return her, you may be sure that you and all yours will die. Genesis 20:7.

¹⁵² *Poetry and Prophecy: The Beginning of a Literary Tradition*, ed. by James L. Kugel (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press 1990), p. 11-12.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, p.10.

The first reference to a prophet in the Bible is Abraham. The founder of the three great monotheistic religions is referred to in the passage above not as a king or priest but a ‘prophet’—a prophet with an intercessory role similar to that of a priest (although, as demonstrated later, strictly speaking, in the Jewish mind, a prophet is simply the bearer of a message from God).

However, the image of a prophet has gradually become one that is used by new voices that adopt it, to impart vigour and rhetorical authority to the message they intend to convey to their audience. This was a consequence of the influence of the influx of Greek ideas into the Semitic world, when the conquest of Alexander the Great brought Judaism and Hellenism together around 332 B.C.E. Before that time, and especially in pre-exilic Israel, the prophet (as earlier stated) was simply a man with a message from God, a messenger who had been physically transported on high to receive divine counsel or decree.

The traditional poetic and rhetoric conventions that characterise the prophetic mode include giving a speech to a defined group and using metaphorical language. Typically, this person is charismatic, with a forceful style and language that often ends with a vision of the future, which is either messianic or apocalyptic as he urges the group to become morally, socially or politically responsible. This naturally rhetorical style has enabled subsequent poets to engage with this model of expression without compromising their originality.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the impact of the prophetic tradition on Hebrew society has continued to influence the Western choice of the image of the prophet as the instrument who brings the desired change of values and hence the association of the ‘prophet’ with the romantic, the modernist and revolutionary writers of European literature who saw in the prophets of Hebrew culture, an archetypal example for culture in general: the hero, the prophet, and the artist.

The word ‘prophet’ derives from the Greek noun *prophetes*, which means, primarily, ‘to foresee.’¹⁵⁴ While this idea of an ability to predict the future is part of the prophetic function, Israel’s prophets ‘were not essentially in the business of

¹⁵⁴ David L. Petersen, *The Prophetic Literature: An Introduction* (Westminster: John Knox Press, 2002), p .5.

providing horoscopes for those in Judah and Israel.¹⁵⁵ Virtually all the prophetic books and sequences of prophetic sayings in the Hebrew Scriptures are introduced by a formula attesting that the word of the Lord is coming to the prophet, who in turn delivers God's message to the people. This indicates that the prophet's words and experience can never be personal if it is to remain a revelation from God.

There are four basic ways the title 'prophet' is used in the Hebrew Bible: *hōzeh* (seer), *rō'eh* (diviner), *'iš hā'ēlōhîm* (man of God), and *nābî'* (*prophet*). While the use of these four terms shows a range of linguistic convention in different times and places, the most frequent term for prophet is *nābî'* or inspired man. This became the general term by which prophets were known. The Hebrew prophets were not just writers and/or orators—they were basically intermediaries between Man and God through divine revelation received in various ways, including audible sound and visions. They represented humans to God (Amos 7:2) and God to humans (Amos 5:4). They acted with the power of God (e.g. Elisha). They saw into the celestial realms (Amos 7:4, Zechariah 1:7-17); they contributed to divine council (Isaiah 6; 1 Kings 22) and probed the intrigues of the human mind (Micah 3).

Some prophets were in many instances also priests, who functioned in intercessory roles, confirming the multiplicity of the function of the prophet. While most Israelite prophecy portrays prophets as nomadic wilderness mystics, many of the prophets actually lived in urban settings and were often located in the corridors of power, like Nathan in the courts of David. This proximity to the royal courts symbolises that prophets often had close connection to political power in Israel's history.

The Hebrew Bible is divided into three sections—Torah (*torah*), Prophets (*nebi'im*), and Writings (*ketubim*)—but many of the books classified under the 'Prophets'—such as Joshua, Judges, 1–2 Samuel, 1–2 Kings—are more narrative historical literature than 'prophetic'. These historical books are classified under the 'prophets' because, they indicate the critical importance of prophets in the history of Israel and document how prophets admonished, indicted and judged Israel before

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 5.

kingship began. The prophetic can therefore be simply described as what the prophet said or wrote.

The Bible present prophets as custodians of history, for example, 1 Chronicles 29: 29 states, ‘Now the rest of the acts of Manasseh, all that he did, and the sin that he committed, are they not written in the records of the seer Samuel, and in the records of the prophet Nathan, and in the records of the seer Gad.’ Prophetic literature is deemed to have originated from two main sources: prophets who were acclaimed to have heard God’s words and had many of their utterances begin with the phrase, ‘Thus says the Lord’, to attest to inspiration from ‘Yahweh’, Israel’s God; and from their disciples who recorded their words or wrote commentaries based on their prophecies.

Most prophetic literature includes accounts of the life of the prophet, which demonstrates that they have roots in an oral storytelling tradition. An example found in 2 Kings 8:4–5 states: ‘Now the king was talking with Gehazi the servant of the man of God, saying, ‘Tell me all the great things that Elisha has done.’ He told the king how Elisha had restored a dead person to life. These biographical accounts of the prophets, from Isaiah through to Jeremiah, clearly support the notion that someone other than the prophet wrote part of the prophetic literature.

David Petersen defines Prophetic literature as, ‘... literature that attests to or grows out of (i.e., generated by) the activity of Israel’s prophets.’¹⁵⁶ He is quick to point out that prophetic literature consisting of prose accounts and poetic speeches can be seen from a variety of views, originating either from prophets, from other individuals not designated as ‘prophets’ but who are contemporary with or disciples of the prophet, or from the prophetic tradition.

Petersen identifies six influential positions of the definition of a ‘prophet’. The first, called the ‘ecstatic’ view, places emphasis on outward phenomena and sees the prophet as someone who has had a special sort of religious experience and/or a special sort of relationship with deity. Early writers who propagated this view include Herman Gunkel and Gustav Hölscher, who now represent two lines of development of this view. Hölscher was influential in proposing ecstasy and visionary experiences

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., p .4.

as an occurrence not exclusive to Israelite prophets: ‘he systematically considered various psychological and behavioural characteristics of ecstasies and then demonstrated the existence of these characteristics among the Israelite prophets’.¹⁵⁷

Other scholars at that time denied that the writing prophets were ecstasies and some even argued that ‘true prophets’ in Israel were not ecstasies, but the ‘false prophets’ were.¹⁵⁸ Gunkel suggested that the prophets delivered their oracles after a state of ecstasy and not during one. This position seems more acceptable to scholars who argue that the oracles were products of a sober mind. Johannes Lindblom and Robert Wilson are two recent scholars who take this view. Lindblom in *Prophecy in Ancient Israel*, defines a prophet as:

A person who, because he is conscious of having been specially chosen and called, feels forced to perform actions and proclaim ideas which, in a mental state of intense inspiration or real ecstasy, have been indicated to him in the form of religious revelations.¹⁵⁹

To Lindblom, a prophet is therefore a ‘proclaimer of divine revelation’ and when ‘inspiration strongly intensifies, it turns to ecstasy’.¹⁶⁰ Wilson’s approach was cross disciplinary as he examined sociological and anthropological data on prophetic phenomena; he then used the data gathered by anthropologists to provide a setting through which biblical evidence for inspiration and /or ecstasy could be refined. He used observable and studied behaviour as a means of understanding the social role of the prophets as opposed to the inner or secret experiences advocated by Gunkel. Wilson maintains that this anthropological analysis helps to identify the different forms of mediation and ultimately the identity of the prophet.

The second view puts emphasis on poetic expression, and Johann Gottfried Herder and Herman Gunkel—who both saw prophets as creators of literature— influenced this school of thought. Gunkel maintained that the prophets composed their prophecies after their ecstatic state and were essentially speakers, not writers

¹⁵⁷ Robert R. Wilson, *Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1984), p. 5.

¹⁵⁸ J.P Hyatt, *Prophetic Religion* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1947), 17; J. Skinner, *Prophecy and Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922), pp. 3-6.

¹⁵⁹ Johannes Lindblom, *Prophecy in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Blackwell 1962), p. 4.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

who made short speeches. Gunkel therefore investigated the evolution of prophetic literature—how it moved from short speeches to short collections and then to prophetic books. Gunkel also observed that prophets spoke according to particular forms that depended on the social context. He identified such forms as depending on the social context of the temple, law court, school and family institutions. Gunkel's literary observations led to the acceptance of the prophet as both a speaker and a writer. The developments in the study of oral literature and the process of its composition have helped to shed some light on how the prophets fared in their dual role of speaker and/or writer.

The third view sees prophets more as cultic officials who were active as priests in the temple, and it advocated a social positioning of the prophet. Sigmund Mowinckel argued that there were prophetic schools in Jerusalem, that cultic prophecy can be found throughout Israel's history and that even the writing prophets had cultic functions. Aubrey R. Johnson, who gathered evidence on the various prophetic figures and tried to match their characteristic behaviours to their social functions, further developed this theme.¹⁶¹

Alfred Haldar analysed the cultic functionaries in Mesopotamia, especially the *bārû* (the diviner, whom Haldar calls a 'seer' or 'oracle giver' and the *mahhû* (the ecstatic).¹⁶² Haldar then attempted to match the functions of these cultist to Israeli prophets and discovered that the function of *bārû* was performed in Israel by seers (*rō'eh*, *hōzeh*) while the *mahhû* were like the (*nābi*). He concluded that both seers and prophets were members of an organized cult. Frank Cross suggests that prophets were active within the royal institution and that some prophetic behaviour was substantively dictated by political modes of behaviour in the ancient Near East. This approach positioned prophets within a different model, a political rather than the cultic one, which limits prophetic activity to the ritual sphere.¹⁶³

¹⁶¹ A. R. Johnson, *The Cultic Prophet in Ancient Israel* (Cardiff: University of Wales, 1944; 2nd ed., 1962).

¹⁶² A. Haldar, *Associations of Cult Prophets among the Ancient Semites* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1945).

¹⁶³ Frank Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973), pp. 223-9.

Max Weber articulated the fourth view—that a prophet is a person who possesses distinctive personal qualities. He defines a prophet as ‘a purely individual bearer of charisma, who by virtue of his mission proclaims a religious doctrine or divine commandment’ and whose claim is based ‘on personal revelation and charisma.’¹⁶⁴ Weber’s view was taken purely from a sociological angle and it saw prophetic authority as personal leadership characteristics of a type that make a leader attract a following. Weber concluded that any cultic gathering around a religious personality was ample evidence of this type of charisma.

Although some evidence supports Weber’s assertion of a kind of discipleship or followership of prophets, especially the occurrence of the school of prophets during the time of Samuel the kingmaker and the case of Elisha and ‘the sons of the prophet’ (2 Kings 4:38), there are, however, no conclusive narratives that imply that charismatic authority was exercised through the creation of a followership.

The fifth school sees the prophet as an intermediary between the divine and human worlds. This role is articulated from a number of perspectives; Robert Wilson looks at the prophets as a class of people in various societies who may be viewed as standing between the deity and human beings. He argues that the source of prophetic authority was the deity and the divine council from which the prophets were sent as messengers. This notion of a prophet as one who conveys the deity’s message to the world has remained significant till today in the discussion of the work of the prophet.

¹⁶⁴ Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, Trans. by various hands, ed. by Günther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), pp. 439-440.

APPENDIX TWO

Tribute to Fela Anikulapo Kuti

A study of the lyrics of Fela Anikulapo Kuti epitomises the spirit of rebellion that prevailed against the political figures in Nigeria in the 70s and 80s. A short composition using his music album titles summarises his entire lifelong protest in the language of the uneducated and illiterate proletariat against state injustice.

*Black president at Kalakuta show,
in Underground spiritual game,
Ask Why Blackman dey Suffer?
Why Shuffling and Smiling?
Why all the Original Suffer Head?
Teacher, don't teach me nonsense,
I go shout Plenty, I no be gentleman,
Noise dey for Vendor Mouth.
Government of Opposite people says,
No bread? Everything is Upside down,
Confusion. Confusion break Bones,
Everything scatter, Just like that,
No Agreement in Tribal Stalemate?
ITT- dey chop, poor man na Perambulator
till Overtake don Overtake Overtake.
Before I jump like Monkey Give me Banana,
I Fear not for man. Ruler's alias Jeun Koku
Are busy in Authority Stealing.
Under Army Arrangement, na Roforofo Fight;
Beasts of no nation with Unknown soldiers
inflict Sorrow Tears and Blood.
Excuse O, Observation is no crime,
Alagbon Close Na Shakara, I no be JJD
Johnny Just Drop, Na Open and Close case,
you see, Oga President He Miss road,
he love Yellow Fever, he die inside Na Poi,
so dem buy New Coffin for Head Of state,
What Expensive shit. When Demon Crazy fail,
Zombie days go come again.*

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