

# A battle cry against depravity: Lamenting generational dispossession in Tanure Ojaide's *Labyrinths of the Delta and the endless song*\*

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## ABSTRACT

Themes of despoliation of fauna and the ecosystem of the oil rich Niger-Delta in Nigeria are often embodied in the works of Tanure Ojaide. Notably, the economic pillage of the region constitutes a major focus of his poetry which draws inferences from his Urhobo oral history and tradition in order to articulate the disturbing effect of this devastation. Nevertheless, Ojaide in *Labyrinths of the Delta* (1986) and *the endless Song* (1989) devoutly criticises the deprivation and dispossession of the common men and women of the pre-colonial Niger Delta by the *Ogiso* and *Orodje* – the dreadful Bini and Urhobo traditional rulers who were eventually defeated by the masses. The paper's overarching focus lies in its engagement with the poetic narrative of abuse of power constructed against the background of deprivation and within the context of a juxtaposition of the pre-colonial dispossession of the Niger Delta by her vicious traditional rulers against the postcolonial siphoning of her oil resources by the country's successive political leaders. The paper adopts New Historicism as a theoretical framework to illustrate three discursive planks: to establish that tyranny is associated with the wielding of political power in pre-colonial Africa – and specifically in the Niger Delta; an effort to establish that the current economic dispossession in the Niger Delta is grounded in the faulty colonial administrative system and further reinforced by the neo-colonial forces of multinational companies. Finally, the paper succinctly states that resistance culture is inherently rooted in the African psychology, and that the transformation of post-colonial society resides in the resolve of the masses to effect a political change during a given period.

## Keywords:

battle cry, lamenting, deprivation, generational dispossession, *Labyrinths of the Delta and The endless song*, Tanure Ojaide

## Introduction

The poet, like the historian, serves as a ubiquitous observer of universal occurrences, irrespective of his geographical location at any given time. Most often, his observations are perspicaciously grounded in representations of the cultural, political, social and economic

well-being of the past – and how this relates to the present experiences of the people in his immediate social milieu. By articulating the inextricable link between a society and its past in literature, the role of the literary artist in relation to that of the historian is unambiguously explicated by Nkosi (1991: 11) when he asserts that a literary artist's preoccupation is 'to make the past present, to bring the distant near'(1981: 30). In the same vein, Theodora Akachi Ezeigbo also asserts the existence of a mutual relationship between the literary artist and the historian in the course of literary production:

[while] the duty of the historian is to record and interpret as objectively as humanly possible the events of the past. But the literary artist cannot be so restricted, for he is at liberty to interpret history to suit his purpose; he could dramatise and reconstruct moments in history which he considers important to the shaping of his people's destiny. Above all his interpretation of history is creative and does not have to comply strictly with historical reality. He could manipulate dates or the chronology of events without impairing the credibility of his historical and artistic vision. A historical literary work therefore, is not a textbook of history, but an imaginative reconstruction of history."

Ezeigbo's assertion is, no doubt, fittingly corroborated in Tanure Ojaide's *Labyrinths of the Delta* (1986) and *the endless song's* (1989) ambitious rendering of the brutality, abuse of power, and dispossession of their people imposed by African traditional rulers. These atrocities were ostensibly perpetrated in pre-colonial Africa, but they correspond with the propensity of contemporary Nigeria's leadership for theft of the nation's wealth. In locating the Niger Delta's generational degradation in pre-colonial and postcolonial Nigeria, Ojaide strives to prove that there are corresponding trajectories of dispossession in the region; and that there are seldom clear-cut breaks between them. Relating the past to the present in the anthologies, clearly establishes Ojaide as a communal raconteur who is abreast of the social and political happenings of his society.

In depicting the political subjugation and economic dispossession in the anthologies, Ojaide deploys the oppression and victimhood tropes common to the traditional African societies of Nigeria's Niger Delta. He does so in order to bring to the foreground the issues of oppression and resistance and thereby establishes a background of dehumanisation and economic dispossession of the masses. This subjugation is seen to take place against the backdrop of contestation of power between the ruler and the ruled in contemporary Nigeria. The contesting of power in the Niger Delta has necessitated the establishment of a discourse platform in *The Labyrinths of the Delta* and *the endless song*, for the articulation of:

...the space between power and authority created by the coercive absolutism of power as the site of confrontation between power and the word-or the wielder of the word, the poet. Through millennia of human history, power has always been portrayed as oppressive, unjust, unfair and egotistical... The history of empires is one long tale of human savagery, misanthropy and the abuse of power, as the power-wielding classes practiced iniquitous barbarity on their less-privileged compatriots and commoners"(Anyokwu 2009: 4).

In assessing the past abuse of power in the pre-colonial Niger Delta, Ojaide relays the enormity of the distillation of gratuitous cruelty by the *Ogiso* and *Orodje* and concomi-

tantly exposes the abuse of power by Nigeria's contemporary political leaders. He illustrates the latter using their immense and almost immeasurable theft of the Niger Delta's economic resources.

In the context of the postcolonial Niger Delta's resistance against despoliation, the language of marginality continues to revolve around the metaphors of degradation and, by extension, rapacious exploitation. The poetic parallelism in the depiction of the despoliation of the Niger Delta in the anthologies is clearly intended to provide the essential push for social change – and indeed to mobilise it. Beneath this parallelism, Ojaide's narrative thrust in depicting the Niger Delta's depredation in the pre-colonial era is largely mythological and is rendered in the Urhobo oral tradition. However, the depiction of the depredation of the Niger Delta in the postcolonial period is encapsulated in a more direct, poetic expression grounded in metaphors of despoilation. The comparison of the Niger Delta's degradation in the pre-colonial era with what happened in postcolonial Nigeria is reinforced by the inclusion of recognisably real figures and immediately relevant political contexts in the anthologies – better to articulate the signification of dispossession in Nigeria's Niger Delta discourse. By invoking the discursive paradigm of subjugation in the two anthologies, Ojaide brings to the foreground an interplay of the imagery of vigour and metaphors of exuberance and resistance in order to condemn the dispossession of the masses' collective heritage by the corrupt and repressive rulers represented in the images of the *Orodje* and *Ogiso*.

Appropriating the inherent dialogic of dispossession in the anthologies enables him to construct for the reader the reprehensible economic exploitation and its attendant consequences on the people and the environment in the Niger Delta. In articulating the signification of dispossession in the anthologies, Ojaide has, nonetheless, put forward an incisive comment on the intertwining pre-colonial and postcolonial economic devastation of the region which has led to its marginality in the past decades.

The paper will endeavour to illustrate how Ojaide's criticism of the deprivation and dispossession of the Nigerian masses by the political élite is sustained through his deployment of nature, animal and aquatic metaphors and images in *Labyrinths of the Delta* and *the endless song*. The paper is primarily premised on three discursive planks: an attempt to establish that tyranny is associated with the wielding of political power in pre-colonial Africa, and specifically in Nigeria's Niger Delta; an effort to establish that the current economic dispossession in the Niger Delta was originally grounded in the faulty colonial administrative system. This point of view is further reinforced by the neo-colonial forces of multinational companies. Finally, the paper endeavours to state succinctly that resistance culture is inherently rooted in the African psychology, and that the transformation of post-colonial society resides in the resolve of the masses to effect a political change in a given period

Furthermore in recognising the necessity to account succinctly for the import of both pre-colonial and postcolonial dispossession of the Niger Delta, the paper will demonstrate how Ojaide – in conformity with the tenets of New Historicism – has employed the three

Foucaultian discursive strategies of: discourse; the construction of power and knowledge; and the question of the human subject. These discursive strategies have, in essence, been harnessed to assess the problematic of generational dispossession in the pre-colonial Niger Delta in particular, and in contemporary Nigeria in general.

## Interrogating dispossession through new historicism

In relating the trajectory of the depredation of the past to the present situation in Nigeria's Niger Delta, New Historicism has been chosen as the theoretical framework for this paper. This is due to its status as a critical mode which emphasises 'the relationship between a text and the society' that produces it. It is a theory which interrogates the assumptions and attitudes governing how events are seen differently by the author and by individual readers of a literary text. It relates a text to other texts produced at the same period in a given society; thus, literary and political connections can be drawn between the aesthetic elements embedded in the text, and the cultural realities of such a society (Tyson 1999:288). In the process of problematising the inextricable link between literary discourse and other related narratives, new historicism has made the relationship between text and society its significant focus. By relating a particular text to the cultural realities which produced it, the autonomous aesthetic issues embedded in such text have now been subjected to a re-interpretation within the context of Foucauldian discourses, hegemonic institutional practices and individual subjectivities. Within the ambit of New Historicism, the subject matter and thematic concerns of the texts under focus will be analysed with a view to drawing out these connections and discussing their significance within the analytical concerns of the paper. New Historicism is preoccupied with the examination of literary texts from the perspective of their being embedded within the social and economic circumstances in which they are produced and consumed. For new historicists, these circumstances are not stable in themselves and are susceptible to being rewritten and transformed; from this perspective, literary texts are part of a larger circulation of social energies, both products of and influences on a particular culture or ideology.

By situating the dispossession of the Nigeria's Niger Delta within the context of economic development, New Historicism proffers an eclectic approach to the discursive paradigm of marginality in the paper. As a literary theory, New Historicism incorporates many aspects of other critical viewpoints, even if it does not agree with them in totality. For example, it obtains from New Criticism the approach of seeking the interconnectedness that underlies any work of art (Selden 1989:192). It shares with Reader-Response theory the view that a work of literature can impart different meanings to different readers (Booker 1996: 137). From Postmodernism, New Historicism appropriates the critical doctrines of discontinuity, eclecticism, heterogeneity and decentred authority in narratives. Although it rejects Derrida's notions of the interface of language and text, it puts forward its own concept of the interconnection between culture and society. Like psychoanalysis, the theory explores the notion of power struggles and similarly advocates that power produces individual subjects. New Historicism shares with Marxism the notion that literature tells

the story of the past. However, while Marxism advocates the complete liberation of the oppressed as a critical objective, New Historicism returns to the stories in the texts to find out how they affect society. These extensive borrowings from other theories have given it a flexibility that enables it to adapt the analytical tools and perspectives of other theories to suit its own purposes.

As is typical of New Historicism, *Labyrinths of the Delta* and *The Endless Song*'s interpenetration of Nigerian political history is patently relative and generates a negotiation of meanings between competing groups rather than its imposition by a dominant group. Ojaide, in conformity with New Historicism, recognises in his poetry that history is the history of the present which is always in the making, and radically open to transformation and rewriting, rather than being monumental and closed. Just as the New Historicists would, the paper will argue that any "knowledge" of the past is necessarily mediated by texts of different kinds. Hence, there can be no knowledge of the past without interpretation of the 'facts' of history which need to be read just like any other text. Essentially, the paper will probe into the interconnection between the literary aesthetic, culture and political shenanigans in Nigeria's pre-colonial and postcolonial Niger Delta, and in so doing will expose the hidden hegemonic discourses embedded in the *Labyrinths of the Delta* and *the endless song* within the new historicist's literary proclivity.

## Decrying abuse of power in pre-colonial Africa

In conformity with the fulfilment of his role as an artist who needs to render the historical past and present of his community – for a possible reviewing of the pitfalls in its developmental trajectory – Ojaide, in *Labyrinths of the Delta* and *the endless song*, significantly employs 'Discourse' (a significant concept of New Historicism) to articulate the ignoble wielding of power by *Ogiso* to oppress and traumatise his people. *Ogiso* was a famous Benin king, whose despotic reign in the quintessential Benin Empire recorded many killings and its own eventual disintegration. *Ogiso*'s sadistic reign is succinctly underlined in the words of Tayo Olafioye, 'In the mythology of the Urhobo of the Delta and the Bini/Edo of the Edo State in contemporary Nigeria, the *Ogiso* is the dynasty of the sun. Yet a wicked godhead, the watershed from which the varied and minor ethnic groups originate and later disperse. The *Ogiso* was the concentric pull and yet of disconsolate, painful dispersal. The *Ogiso* "choked" and "castrated" his people' (2000, 10). *Ogiso*'s atrocious reign, which is comparable with the dastardly reigns of other empire builders such as the Ming dynasties of ancient China, the Egyptian Pharaohs and Emperor Chaka of the *Amazulu*, is rendered in Ojaide's *Labyrinths of the Delta* and *the endless song*, as haunting and destructive:

Ogiso choked flaming faggots into men's throats

Castrated the manly among us, and

Fell on anybody he loved or scorned.

We wept at night

Since we could not deny our blood in him;  
 We wept for the awfulness of our lives. (*Labyrinths*, p.20)

However, when the oppression became unbearable, the Urhobo, the Esan and other interrelated and interconnected ethnic groups decided to move out of the original ancestral homeland of Benin, to their present settlements in the Urhobo and Esan lands in the Niger Delta region:

We took off without thought of where we were going...  
 And paths opened for our anxious feet  
 It was not for fun men and women split from bed...  
 We rushed into the vast night  
 Living not in our homes  
 But caravanned in hope. (*Labyrinths*, p.23)

Rather than discussing in detail the historical travails of the Niger Delta communities' experiences of torture, economic exploitation and political subjugation during the *Ogiso* and *Orodjes*' reigns of terror, 'the poet only uses selected significant detail which he makes to represent the historical realities he alludes to. Rarely are these selected events spelt out in any detail except when the poet describes or narrates. Allusions to historical events come encapsulated in imagery and metaphor that embody not only the events referred to, but also the poet's feelings and attitudes towards them. Even when the poet narrates or describes events from history he avoids being too explicit and direct, so as to avoid the risk of being prosaic and banal' (Bamikunle 1991: 75–76). In exploring allusions to historical events in the anthologies, Ojaide relies on the appropriation of oral tradition and memory to navigate the turbulent historicity of the socioeconomic emasculation of the region. Nevertheless, the gusto with which Ojaide, in his poetry, explicates the regime of terror unleashed by the *Ogiso* and *Orodje* is defined by his personal interpretation of the abuse of power which led to the ruination of the pre-colonial Niger Delta and which demands his personal protestation. In delineating the historical construct of tyranny in the pre-colonial Niger Delta, Tayo Olafioye has explained that 'Ojaide's poems often tell stories of cultured history as if each line is a folklore' (p.17). Although his descriptions are bizarre and haunting, Ojaide cites the sado-masochism of the pre-colonial rulers of the Niger Delta. He does this by tracing the multiple structures of oppression visited on the masses in the power-relation discursive context, which tasks the reader's accurate interpretation of their import and resonance in layers: the *Orodje* imprisons his people in 'closets of metals'. To better imprint his sadistic torturer-stamp, the *Orodje* asks his people to hold back a falling, hefty palm tree, an attitude that implies an authoritarian dementia. At the other end of creative insanity, the *Ogiso* also impales his people with sharp-edged swords. The people of the Niger Delta, though, have deathly reprisals in waiting for the oppressive rulers when they entice them with sweet, hemic praise-songs and lure them



into ambushes of excision: 'we know what distance to go in silence/before unleashing thunder, /we know how to lead our persecutors away/in the night of their power.' (*the endless song*, p.6). Ojaide employs snatches of the Urhobo's oral tradition and history to construct an exposé of the abuse of power in the Niger Delta. He not only vehemently condemns the *Ogiso*'s tyrannical exegesis but also takes a swipe at the wicked Urhobo king, *Orodje* who was alleged to have imprisoned and killed his people at will. In constructing a haunted site of bestiality, Ojaide's seamless poetic lucidity runs through exposure of the subjugation orchestrated by the *Ogiso* and *Orodje* in *The Endless Song* in order to solicit an interpretation of violence beyond pre-colonial Niger Delta – as illustrated in the submission of Richard K. Priebe:

We need a rhetoric of motives, and perhaps a grammar of motives, for representations of violence in African literature. The increasing intensity of violence in recent fiction highlights this need. While social context may point to original motives, it is of little use in helping us understand the success or failure of the violence as literary trope. Regardless of time, place, or culture, there is a limited range of basic images to signify transformation, and among these images, those of death and violence are the most powerful. Within the larger context of social transformation these images may suggest community being destroyed, remade or controlled. The basic possibilities of violence involving human agency are simple: individual against individual or group (community), group (community) against group or individual..." (2005, 48-64).

The expression of atrocities of violence committed by both the *Ogiso* and *Orodje* are rendered with extraordinary force and subsumed within the New Historicist's 'context' (meaning here its setting or background) in which beating, killing and dehumanisation are remarkably circumscribed within the discourse of violence in *the endless song*:

When *Orodje* ordered us to hold back a falling palm-tree,  
he drove us into our closet of metal;  
when *Ogiso* wielded his sword against his own subjects,  
he fired the guns loaded in our guts;  
when the tortoise grew fat as others thinned out,  
he stepped into our death-charges—  
each praise-song brought them closer to the ambush,  
we knew what they loved most and what would ruin them. (*the endless song*, 5)

Clearly in retelling and recovering the past, Ojaide's poetic narrative identified with the oppressed generally and did not limit itself to the repressive and brutal subjugation of the Urhobo ethnic group by the *Orodje* alone. The poem further articulates a condemnation

of the abuse of power in the pre-colonial Niger Delta by drawing from the tyranny visited on the neighbouring Ijo and Itsekiri ethnic groups by the successive *Orodjes*, who Ojaide criticised for the constant raids and devastation of their villages during the internecine wars. The historical recollection in the poem of the pillaging of the economic resources of the Delta by both *Ogiso* and *Orodje* reflects the postcolonial economic brigandage orchestrated by the multi-national oil firms in collaboration with the Nigerian government. This juxtaposition affords Ojaide the opportunity of registering the signification of power relations in the passage of time in the Niger Delta.

‘Power’ and ‘hegemony’, as major concepts of New Historicism, reiterate that power is not merely a physical force but an ever-present human dynamic that influences how a person relates to others. Thus, power concerns human relationships and the perception of such relationships by the persons or institutions involved in them. Power in this sense is synonymous with influence and control, especially the type achieved through manipulation. Consequently, in reviewing the strained power relations between the contemporary Nigerian ruling elite and the dispossessed masses of the Niger Delta, Ojaide contends that the present exploitation of the Niger Delta is inextricably linked with its past dispossession by its *Ogisos* and *Orodjes*. This recollection of the past for the benefit of the present has been explained by Emmanuel Obiechina; ‘the past is never remote from the present but is frequently a back extension as well as a reinforcement of the present, a manner of elucidating contemporaneous experience as well as a validation of such experience. There is a deep and abiding interest in history, not as a dead substance of remote antiquity, but as an accumulation of human achievement, a testimony of human ingenuity and will reaching down to ancestral roots’ (1975, 133). Hence by depicting the historical abuse of power by the precolonial rulers of both the Niger Delta and of the wider Africa, Ojaide sues for a positive development of Africa by her postcolonial leaders, whom he describes as ‘future gods’:

*Ogidigbo*, rise  
 and with your steel  
 go on fresh exploits--  
 no longer among the Ijo, fellow sufferers--  
 to disable the incubuses on our backs.  
 Let the hands that shook the mahogany tree  
 break human shackles.

*Ogiso*, rise  
 from the moat of slavers’ sweat  
 and wipe out the dust-breathing beast.



Let who conjured a stream to flow in his backyard  
water our crops in persistent drought  
to stave off annihilation.

*Essi*, rise  
and leave your Itsekiri neighbours alone—  
we need each other's love in the world;  
raise your army against witches weakening us.  
Let the man bullets tore his clothes and left unhurt  
go any length to regain our strength.

And Shaka, rise  
not to devour your own clansmen—  
we have had enough of cannibals, emperors and generals—  
but to eliminate usurpers of our birthrights.  
Let who strangled lions in their dens  
wrest from our destiny our hidden blessing.

You were all warriors, and never did you  
come back from wars without spoils.  
Now fight your way back  
to help us in these desperate days.  
Shame on gods who looks on, bemused  
as lightning strikes their devotees  
In their own groves. (*The Endless Song*, 52)

This denunciation of abuse of power in the poem has a touch of Yambo Ouologuem's *Le Devoir de Violence* (1968) in which Ouologuem scrupulously exposed the shenanigans in pre-colonial Mali, of the ruling Moslem Nakem Empire dynasty's brutality in its employment of violence and cruelty to subjugate the common man (otherwise referred to in the book as 'niggertrash' and 'pauper'). In the same vein, Ojaide's *Labyrinths of the Delta* and *the endless song* catalogue the dastardly manipulation and abuse of feudal powers by

the *Ogiso* and *Orodje*, to essentially decimate the hapless men and women in the Bini and Urhobo kingdoms. Ojaide's significant delving into historicity in the anthologies draws its eloquence from the sensitive moments of the Niger Delta's history in particular, and of Africa's pre-colonial dark past in general, to articulate the debilitating effect of feudalism and tribal warfare. This is a period associated with internecine rivalries among the warring ethnic groupings of the Niger Delta: the Bini, the Urhobo, the Ijo and the Itsekiri. Despite the fact that these groups are immediate neighbours, they have all fought bitter wars with one another. A scathing indictment of Emperor Shaka of the Zulu is made in the poem in respect of his penchant for conducting gratuitous war campaigns which knew no bounds.

Ojaide contends that the greatness of *Shaka*, *Ogiso*, *Ogidigbo* and *Essi* would have been both monumental and celebrated if their individual prowess had been channelled towards the protection and provision of the basic needs of their people. However, since these rulers chose to champion the wanton killings and dehumanisation of their people, their collective greatness has been diminished and they no longer command any enviable respect in the annals of African history. This conundrum of the abuse of power by African rulers has been argued by Christopher Anyokwu: 'Africa's seemingly endless false starts and her eternal infancy are due largely to her top-heavy burden of bad rulers, both in pre-colonial, colonial and, *more recently* (emphasis mine), postcolonial times. And it is this malignant virus of unpopular regimes of government with which Africa and the developing world have been afflicted, that oral raconteurs, griots, minstrels, storytellers, and poets in traditional societies, on the one hand, and modern literary artists, writers and poets, on the other, have been pillorying to varying degrees of success' (p. 4). Both *Ogiso* a Bini king and *Orodje* an Urhobo king constitute models of a repressive African political ruling class – one that is preoccupied with excessive displays of power, despite the lack and want that underpin the socio-economic backgrounds of most African countries.

The poem is an indictment of the past Bini, Urhobo and other African traditional rulers who senselessly decimated and depopulated many African towns and villages in their megalomaniac military expeditions. The portrayal of the orgies of violence perpetrated by the duo of *Ogiso* and *Orodje* on their people significantly amplifies the capability of literature to mirror society. Although Ojaide historicises in *Labyrinths of the Delta* and *The Endless Song* the brutality associated with African rulers in pre-colonial Africa, the brutality is effectively subverted by the collective will of the people not to break down before the oppressors:

There's metal in our will, it shows  
 When we meet hardships—  
 We do not break down before torturers,  
 We do not surrender our hope to robbers,  
 We do not groan despite the daily stabs of hunger,  
 We do not give in to those who live on the blood  
 Of the poor or the sweat of the strong. (*the endless song*, 5)

Ojaide's appropriation of the stiff resistance against the *Ogiso* and *Onodje*'s reign of terror by the masses, as poignantly grounded in the Urhobo oral tradition, reverberates in imagery of: their collective resolve 'metal in our will'; in the collective courage which does not allow them, to 'break down before torturers'; and the stoicism that will not allow them to 'groan despite the daily stabs of hunger'. The resolve of the masses to fight back and do away with these vicious rulers has been illustrated further:

The matchet is our fan,  
 the rifle our swagger-stick in the dark;  
 we know what distance to go in silence  
 before unleashing thunder,  
 we know how to lead our persecutors away  
 in the night of their power.  
 Our will has become our god, and  
 from the iroko tree aloft our hearts  
 we keep strict watch over them. (*the endless song*, 6)

The poem acknowledges as an anecdote the violent revolt that was staged. The tale is prefaced with a brief depiction of the physical mobilisation of the masses and the systematic attack unleashed on their traditional rulers/oppressors when they least expected it. It turned out to be a popular revolt which ushered in cataclysmic social change. The poem resonates with the imagery of courage and determination which Ojaide has used to construct the notion that the culture of resistance to a perceived oppression ultimately lies with the masses in African society.

## Denouncing institutionalised dispossession in the Niger Delta

Unarguably, most African countries experienced the tragedy of being colonised by Western colonial powers – powers that revelled in the monumental stealing of their natural resources: timber, gold, diamonds, palm oil, cocoa, rubber and historical artefacts. This administrative culture of theft has been maintained and sustained with apparent impunity by the successive African political elite in post-colonial Africa. Although Nigeria is endowed with an abundance of oil wealth, this wealth has never benefited its teeming population. Rather, it has been repeatedly embezzled by her past and present political leaders, thereby leaving the masses comatose in a cesspool of poverty. Ojaide's lamentation of the pauperisation of the Niger Delta exemplifies an anguished cry of deliberate deprivation, one which depicts the decay in social infrastructures of the Delta communities. This monumental dearth of social amenities in the Niger Delta vibrantly constitutes the locus of the poem and serves as an indictment on the damaging effects of oil theft by the Nigerian political classes. This is graphically depicted in 'Ughelli':

To see her dry-skinned when oil rejuvenates hags  
 To leave her in darkness when her fuel lights the universe  
 To starve her despite all her produce  
 To let her dehydrate before the wells bored into her heart  
 To have her naked despite her industry  
 To keep her without roads when her sweat tars the outside  
 World. (*Labyrinths*, 74)

By aestheticising the deprivation of the Niger Delta in Ughelli, as it does, the poem draws from a metaphor of dispossession of the masses by the political elite in contemporary Nigeria. Thus, images of: ‘dry-skinned’, ‘darkness’, ‘starve’, ‘dehydrate’, ‘naked’, and ‘sweat’ forlornly underscore a reverberation of the institutionalised economic stagnation and deliberate starvation of social infrastructures by the Nigerian political elite. The abandonment of Ughelli in the poem is likened to the abandonment of the proverbial ‘goose that lays the golden eggs’. In spite of its status as an oil-producing community in the Niger Delta, Ughelli, like most oil producing communities in Nigeria, suffers from run-down infrastructure, roads that are strewn with craters and people who are neglected in the throes of humiliating poverty and misery. Therefore, in its contextualising of deprivation within the discourse of oil wealth in postcolonial Nigeria, the poem paints a picture of the masses in the Niger Delta degenerating into poverty and dispossession. Agonising over the debilitating effects of poverty in the Delta, Ojaide marks and quickly establishes a juxtaposition of dialogic intertextuality between the deprivation in the postcolonial Niger Delta and the blissful Niger Delta of the pre-colonial era. This is illustrated in ‘In the beginning’:

In the beginning  
 the land bloomed with bounties, so much  
 to make a contended heritage:  
 rivers to swim in a drought-prone world,  
 a landmass of comfort to our number,  
 forests to provide our daily needs.  
 We had the luck of the sow in fertility,  
 the immunity of the chameleon in our lives;  
 our men possessed the energy of the bull  
 and our women the sleek beauty of the antelope;  
 we were like the iroko tree, tall and erect.  
 Later the rivers washed away our charm,

the land of our birth wounded us with its size,  
 the forests haunted our lives with demons;  
 we trampled upon each other in assemblies,  
 and our height blinded us to the earth  
 we ought to libate with sweat... (*the endless song*, 14)

Introspectively, Ojaide juxtaposes in the poem the blissful and fruitful agrarian past in the Niger Delta with the harrowing and devastating effect of the oil exploration of the present. The poem is filled with condemnatory images and innuendoes of environmental degradation and depredation of the oil producing communities being perpetrated by the multinational oil companies and with the tacit connivance of the Nigerian government. The culpability of government is inferred – from its inability to craft legislation that would adequately protect the oil-producing communities against environmental degradations. Hence, the poem gleefully takes a swipe at the government's hypocritical stance on the dispossession of the wealth of the Niger Delta communities by the oil-prospecting multinationals.

Undoubtedly, the thematic of the Niger Delta's dispossession remains an abiding motif in Ojaide's poetry and it has been obsessively harnessed to interrogate the interconnection between literature and ecological consciousness. This assertion has been significantly corroborated in the words of Roselyne M. Jua '... Taking up the clarion call through his poetry to explore the devastation of the land and the untold suffering of a now dispossessed people, Ojaide illumines not only his literary commitment...but reasserts the interconnectivity between literature and the environment...' (167). Hence, Ojaide's eco-artistic criticism of the Niger Delta's environmental degradation is ostensibly rendered in a lachrymose tone of dispossession in the poem, 'the land of our birth wounded us with its size/the forests haunted our lives with demons/we trampled upon each other in assemblies/and our height blinded us to the earth/we ought to libate with sweat'. The words 'wounded', 'haunted', 'trampled' and 'blinded' are undoubtedly metaphors of defeatism, and they strikingly reflect the apocalyptic images of monumental mortification of the Niger Delta communities. Ojaide's protestation against the abject poverty and untold hardship experienced by the people of the Niger Delta is symptomatic of the observation raised in J.O.J. Nwachukwu-Agbada's article entitled, "Post-War Nigeria and the Poetry of Anger":

The anger of the post-war Nigerian poet stems not only from the failure of the elite culture but also from the negative correlates of the civil war, the oil wealth euphoria, the ideology of capitalistic economic formations, unambiguously adumbrated in the nation's constitution as 'mixed economy', and the culture of successive militaristic totalitarian dictatorships. These are issues which the pre-war poet may have perceived poorly or in themselves were yet

to 'percolate' for intimate consideration or possibly still were regarded  
as too commonplace to require his attention: tyranny and oppression... (p.3)

Suffice it to say that anger is significantly etched in the rhythm of the poem, as it raises an apprehension about the imminent disappearance of the forests, the avalanche of flooding and the pollution of the waters in the Niger Delta. Another haunting and frightening picture of the degradation of the Niger Delta is gruesomely painted by Ojaide in 'We are Many'. This is done through the employment of the speaking voice, which further gives impetus to the horrors of economic dispossession in the region:

From birth, I have been in the custody  
of three overlords...  
They extract oil from my wet soil  
prospect for iron in my bones,  
and level my forests for timber,  
Then they heap barrels on my back  
strap billets on my shoulders, and  
tie hardwood to my sides, (*Labyrinths*, 72)

The overarching economic dispossession thematic of the Niger Delta is delineated into three significant sub-themes in the poem: the aggressive extraction of crude oil; the deforestation of mangrove swamps as well as the mindless withering of its lush vegetation through lumbering, and the indiscriminate erection of oil rigs on the arable lands in the region. The poet adopts, in the poem, an authorial voice 'I', to decry the generational exploitation of the Niger Delta, an exploitation kick-started by the British colonial apparatuses, which callously engaged in the lumbering of its trees – such as the mahogany and teak that were hurriedly ferried to the United Kingdom to make life comfortable for Britons. The economic dispossession of the region continued unabated in post-colonial Nigeria through collaborative arrangements between the Nigerian government and multinational oil firms such as Anglo-Dutch Shell, Agip, Total and Mobil, whose explorative activities have left in their wake massive degradation of the environment which, in turn, has led to loss of livelihood for fishermen who depend on the water for their daily existence. The oil rigs erected across the region have caused a remarkable increase in the vulnerability of the region to landslides and incessant flooding. Hence, words like 'overlords', 'extract', 'prospect', 'heap' and 'strap' fervently bring to the foreground the images of exploitation and dispossession in the poem. The dispossession thematic is further pursued by Ojaide, in 'A kind of blessing':

Locusts have ruined our crops and brought hunger;  
still, in their nomadic life they are freer than many.  
Termites continue to bring hardship, they only eat

what belongs to others. God has not struck them  
with lightning; they don't grow despite what they consume.

Our parents have embarrassed us with their negligence,  
we betray them in renouncing their traditions—  
who will swallow the other now that everybody  
denies age a place in his life?

I am in league with the two rivals, I hate none.  
Tormentors live, feeling impregnable in their hearts;  
they live with the same blood they poison  
let them persist in their mission to try their victims—  
they work up lame spirits into wings of fire.

A new and better edifice rises out of an old shell.

The spectre of the goat metamorphosed into a weaverbird  
singing at the Hyena's funeral parades the world;

God does not strike thieves and traitors with lightning—  
the make room for a clean sweep of the land. (*the endless song*, 53)

In the context of the degradation of the Niger Delta, the language of neglect continues to revolve around the images of oil exploitation and, by extension, economic dispossession. The Niger Delta's dispossession is hopelessly complicated by the looting of its resources by the multinational oil firms and successive Nigerian governments. While the multinational firms have free rein in their explorative activities, the government provides adequate protection for them and keeps youth restiveness in the region concerned at bay. These exploiters are described intermittently in the poem as locusts and termites so as to bring to the foreground the large-scale theft of the huge deposits of the region's oil resources. The poem provides a compelling portrait of a society struggling against calamitous dispossession orchestrated and supervised by the state. The poem is awash with melancholic images of devastation: 'locust', 'termite', 'hunger', 'tormentor', 'thieves', 'traitor' and a disturbing symbol of persistent ruination. Despite the temporary subjugation of the Niger Delta through militarisation, the poet is optimistic that the Niger Delta's masses shall triumph, and 'a new and better edifice will rise out of an old shell'. While Ojaide never frets about the magnitude of losses that have befallen the Niger Delta due to persistent exploitation, he invests in the poem sniggering remarks of the helplessness of the masses under the current political dispensation. However, the poem closes with the suggestion, somewhat reassuring, that the economic dispossession will soon trigger a counter-reaction of the masses, to 'make room for a clean sweep of the land'.



## Envisioning triumph of the dispossessed in postcolonial Nigeria

Nigeria's inglorious past of the civil war and military rule, in tandem with its tortured present that is dogged by the insecurity and continuous threats of the disintegration of its component parts, has constantly elicited a trajectory of fear and pessimism for its future in the works of Nigerian writers of note – such as in Wole Soyinka's *A Shuttle in the Crypt* (1972), Chinua Achebe's *There Was a Country* (2012), Femi Osofisan's *No More The Wasted Breed* (1982) and Niyi Osundare's *The Eye of the Earth* (1986). However, Ojaide most often maintains an unwavering and stoical conviction in his poetry that Nigeria will not go under, but that it has the capability to regenerate and re-write its history positively. His belief in Nigeria's renaissance is grounded in 'Vision':

The leopard that haunts us will die  
 maybe in our lifetime, maybe not;  
 time plies the ambush with an invisible hand.  
 Let's not dance because we won the mock-battle;  
 the imagined foe doesn't stretch us far enough.  
 when has the hearth that roasted the lion's liver  
 become the dump for bones combed from outside?  
 we have to incur debts to buy new weapons  
 or mend our broken ones,  
 then go to the bush to prove our mettle—  
 what wanderer complains that the road to his love  
 is not wide enough for his restless feet,  
 what giant says the earth is not hard enough  
 for his soles to support him,  
 yes, what head is too small for desires?... (*the endless song*, 3)

Grounded in the poem's lyricism is the inevitability of Nigeria's revolutionary transformation, accentuated in its rhetorical questions which graphologically enhance its tonal resource: 'what wanderer complains that the road to his love is not wide enough for his restless feet/what giant says the earth is not hard enough for his soles to support him/yes, what head is too small for desires?' Ojaide's proficiency in the Urhobo language is significantly reflected in his deployment of symbolism: 'the leopard that haunts us will die'. The leopard obviously refers to the repressive and corrupt Nigerian political class. This proficiency is further established in his use of the Urhobo proverbials: 'time plies the ambush with an invisible hand/we have to incur debts to buy new weapons or mend

our broken ones'. The use of proverbials in the poem underscores the need for preparation, reorientation and re-conscientisation of the patriots towards a revolutionary change in Nigeria.

Ojaide's belief in Nigeria's restoration is not a product of wishful optimism and blind patriotism. Rather, it is a belief imbued with the historical antecedents of the defeat of *Ogiso* and *Orodje* whose reigns in the Niger Delta were comparatively more horrendous than the horrible experiences associated with the individual political regimes in postcolonial Nigeria. The poem is built on the optimism that the popular revolt of the masses which defeated *Ogiso* and *Orodje* in pre-colonial Nigeria could be repeated at the right time in post-colonial Nigeria, to decisively sweep away the corrupt leaders:

Our will is the iroko tree rooted in our hearts,  
 It survives whatever storm ravages us;  
 we can hold to ourselves  
 and laugh cynically at our tormentors;  
 we know more than the beasts terrorizing us  
 that they will fall into a deep hole  
 as they cavort in our streets. (*the endless song*, 5)

Not surprisingly, the tension between oppression and its reprisal is premised in the poem's emphasis on brutal subjugation by the elite and the resilience of the masses to fight after they have been attacked. This is underscored by the striking employment of 'Iroko tree' imagery in the poem, to register a stoical determination of the younger generation Nigerians to face their adversaries with equanimity. However, the corrupt leaders are metaphorically depicted as beasts in the poem.

In spite of the noticeable divisive polarities which have been orchestrated by the years of debilitating ethnic chauvinism, social disparity, poverty, religious bigotry and institutionalised corruption in contemporary Nigeria, Ojaide believes that a radical social change in Nigeria could be kick-started through a dialogue across adversarial socio-political and ethnic divides. This is exemplified in 'Debate on Nation Building':

So I will talk to trees  
 Discuss with the birds  
 Parley with human-faced brutes  
 The dialogue for salvation has to be kept going. (*The Labyrinths of the Delta*, 64)

However, Ojaide hinges the occurrence of a radical social change on the Fanonian dialectics of power relations between the oppressor and the oppressed. This dialectic is further appropriated to stoke his optimism for the inauguration of masses-driven revolution in the post-colonial Nigeria. This optimism is reiterated in 'I sing of Love':

I sing of the hidden spirit in our midst  
 I sing of the redeemer in the womb of time

I sing of the revolution incubating in the heart

I sing of the pain before delivery... (*Labyrinths of the Delta*, 79)

Like Fanon, Ojaide believes that liberation has an important bearing on the overall growth indices of a post-colonial society such as Nigeria. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon affirms that national liberation, “far from keeping aloof from other nations, therefore, it is national liberation which leads the nation to play on the stage of history. It is at the heart of national consciousness that international consciousness lives and grows” (Fanon 1968:247--48). Subsequently, Ojaide suggests in the *Labyrinths of the Delta* and *The Endless Song*, the importance of national liberation, which entails an examination of series of factors – such as the historical, political, social and economic – in the reconstruction of postcolonial Nigeria. Although, unlike Niyi Osundare, Femi Osofisan, Odia Ofeimun and Femi Fatoba, Ojaide neither canvasses a Marxist-oriented revolution in his poetry nor calls for the deployment of armed struggle in effecting social and political change in postcolonial Nigeria. His conviction regarding the imminent revolutionary change in Nigeria, though, is rooted in the ‘firm belief in the power of man to tear down oppression and change history’ (Bamikunle 1991: 81). Through the use of the proverbial in the poem, Ojaide has acted invariably as determined against all odds, to effect a radical change in his society.

## Conclusion

The paper has utilised New Historicism as a theoretical framework to essentially articulate how Ojaide has deployed the significance of history in the *Labyrinths of the Delta* and *the endless song* in order to bring to the foreground the antecedent of the abuse of power in the pre-colonial Niger Delta communities of Bini and Urhobo, kingdoms whose tyrannical kings *Ogiso* and *Orodjo* dehumanised and dispossessed of their social, economic and political privileges. However, when the brazen tyranny of the duo reached its crescendo, the masses revolted and liberated themselves from the shackles of economic oppression and political subjugation. The paper has affirmed that history is not a fixed, unalterable, unflinching mass, simply because it occurred in a past which cannot be revisited. On the contrary, the past can and should be revisited because its narration is simply too important to be left to a privileged segment of society which has its own interests to secure and protect. Flowing from this is the fact that notions of objectivity are not as rigid as traditional ideas of history have made them out to be. As anthologies in which real historical personages and events are re-interpreted, *Labyrinths of the Delta* and *the endless song* provide a succinct platform where the dialectic of dispossession/resistance gambit is vibrantly constructed by Ojaide as a model to address the issue of power relations in postcolonial Nigeria. The paper has equally emphasised the three Foucaultian strategies of discourse; the construction of power and knowledge; and the question of the human subject in its interrogation of the poetics of dispossession in *Labyrinths of the Delta* and *the endless song*. The paper has further established that economic dispossession is a corollary of the abuse of power, which was exemplified in pre-colonial Nigeria’s Niger

Delta, where the feudal lords ruled with apparent impunity and enmeshed the country in economic brigandage. This abuse of power has been ingeniously replicated by the political elite in post-colonial Nigeria. In conclusion, the paper has essentially demonstrated how Ojaide wove an intricate web of metaphor, imagery and the proverbial into the two anthologies so as to arouse the zealotry of Nigerians of the younger generation and thus to combat the economic dispossession that is continually perpetrated by the political elite. However, despite the prevailing ethnic, social and religious polarities in contemporary Nigeria, Ojaide is nonetheless of the conviction that, just as *Ogiso* and *Orodje* were consumed by revolt of the masses, Nigeria will soon witness a revolution by the masses that will radically transform the country in every way.

## About the author

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