

Refiguring Blackness and Decolonisation in Femi Abodunrin's *It Would Take Time: Conversation with Living Ancestors* and Other Poems

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Abstract

This article focuses on Femi Abodunrin's poetry in order to reflect on the ideological conditions from which his articulation of Blackness and decolonisation emanates. Although Abodunrin's creative oeuvre transcends a single poetry anthology, the study nevertheless restricts itself to one poetry anthology, *It Would Take Time: Conversation with Living Ancestors*, and excerpts from three other poems, "Whatever I Hang," "The Pursuit of Happiness" and "Going to Meet the Man," published in *Splinters of a Mirage Dawn: An Anthology of Migrant Poetry from South Africa*. Arguably, Abodunrin's poetry is a quintessential postulation on Blackness and decolonisation in a postcolonial context. Hence, his work represents a coherent response, a reappropriation and refiguring of the syncretic experiences of Black Africans within the circumstantial whole of a postcolonial social reality. The phenomenology of decolonisation, depersonalisation and an inhabitation of an alienating and somewhat fragmented reality are some of Abodunrin's thematic interests. His tactic to subvert a Eurocentric approach to the politics of African identity, literature and culture, Africans' displacement and the psycho-affective dimension of this tussle confirms that despite the struggles, Africans can assert their presence and agency in the conception and articulation of their culture and identity. *It Would Take Time* and Abodunrin's other three poems are reflective of the uphill efforts channelled towards recentralising African agency, refiguring Blackness and also emphasising the triumph of a unique ideological outlook on decoloniality without ambiguities of reference.

Keywords: Blackness; culture; identity; postcolonial; agency; poetry

Introduction

The density of Femi Abodunrin's book-length epic poem, *It Would Take Time: Conversation with Living Ancestors* (2002; henceforth, *It Would Take Time*) encapsulates questions about and postulations on African identity, culture and decoloniality. One question in consonance with Abodunrin's theorisations of "Blackness" is raised by Kevin Quashie in *Black Aliveness, or Poetics of Being* (2021, 1): "What would it mean to consider black aliveness, especially given how readily—and literally—blackness is indexed to death?" An attempt at providing meaningful responses to this question necessitates, as a start, an investigation and analysis of the concept of "Blackness," its meaning and impact on theories of race and racism (Hrabovsky 2013). Such investigations and analyses will be incomplete if they ignore the interface of "Blackness, Colorism, and epidermalization of inferiority" (Mirmasoomi and Roshnavand 2014, 65). Explorations of this interface will reveal that perceptions of "Blackness" are multidimensional, where "Blackness" is thematised as a fourfold burden: "problematic stereotypes and social constructions, the paradox of in/visibility, burden of racial 'two-ness,' and burden of minimization" (Mapedzahama and Kwansah-Aidoo 2017, 1). Aware of this multidimensionality of the burden of Blackness and the decolonisation process, Abodunrin is not so naïve as to present his epic as a monolithic prescription for what the discourse on Blackness and decolonisation should encompass. Instead, his epic depicts a perceptive visionary whose central concern is to have us square ourselves to face both the positive and negative aspects of our identity and culture as Africans. *It Would Take Time*, for instance, represents a creative consummation of the vision contained in *Blackness: Culture, Ideology and Discourse* (Raji 2000). Abodunrin (2008, xviii) affirms "*Blackness* is issued against the backdrop of these universal verities of the conditions of 'Blackness' in our world today!" The verities include "racial essentialism and the seemingly immutable and always antagonistic Western discourses" (Abodunrin 2008, xviii). In *Blackness: Culture, Ideology and Discourse*, Abodunrin (2008, xix) foregrounds "the historicity of the 'Black' condition" by focusing "on the theoretical and polemical premises of 'Blackness' in a post-Negritudian, post-colonial, post-feminist and post-modern contexts—to name but just a few of the 'Posts-' that have informed contemporary critical theory in our world today" (Abodunrin 2008, xix).

Abodunrin published *It Would Take Time* (2002) and *The Dancing Masquerade* (2003) in order "to return to the context of migration and emigration of writers and critics alike from the continent" (Abodunrin 2008, xx). Consequently, Abodunrin contributed three poems, "Whatever I Hang," "The Pursuit of Happiness" and "Going to Meet the Man" to an anthology of migrant poetry from South Africa, *Splinters of a Mirage Dawn* (Mitra and Nkealah 2013, 67–68). In this anthology, migration and emigration were central themes. On these two themes, Abodunrin has something to say simply because,

I have travelled the world!
 I shall not rest, I told this half-child,
 until I have seen the discursive bottom of this matter
 (Abodunrin 2002, 25)

In “Whatever I Hang,” Abodunrin not only reminisces about “travelling the world” where he and Grace Nichols, a Guyanese poet, talked about a variety of issues, including “love of Calypsos through theorizing about the Middle-Passage,” but also states that, in the process of embarking and disembarking, the duo sought to establish a firm foundation upon which they could properly theorise “about the colonial baggage” (Abodunrin in Mitra and Nkealah 2013, 67). In these journeys, both theoretical and practical, questions pervading the postcolonial context never cease to be asked, requiring the poet (Abodunrin) to go to the “labour room—the abattoir where all mothers are corroded” (Abodunrin 2002, 25) and still ask: “Is the post- in post-colonial the post- in post-racialism?” (Abodunrin in Mitra and Nkealah 2013, 67). *It Would Take Time* depicts “a parade of the pantheon of Abodunrin’s favourite avatars” (Raji 2000, 107). The favourite avatars include the “mobilization and conscientization” and the exposure of the “painful moments of unnecessary cultural frictions within Africans who have been to Europe, and frictions between them and those who may not have been to Europe” (Akinola 2020, 1–2). *It Would Take Time* and Abodunrin’s other three poems are selected for analysis not only for their ideological persuasions and clear-sightedness on the ambivalence and cultural schizophrenia pervading postcolonial Africa (Abodunrin 2018), but also for their essence and relevance in the postmodernist discourses on Blackness and decoloniality. As will be noted, Abodunrin is quite aware that the climate will not always be receptive to his ideological contributions because in the “epic poem,” he envisages the antagonism and trivialisation that will meet his discourse. The antagonists are likely to make the “conversation with living ancestors” appear as if it is a dance to a discordant tune, “a macabre dance” (Mitra and Nkealah 2013, 67; Abodunrin 2002, 24).

This article further argues that Abodunrin’s epic serves as a catalyst for Africans’ self-discovery precisely because the epic is mainly positioned against the sterile worship of Eurocentricity. Perhaps it might be ideologically appropriate to speak of Abodunrin’s epic as a metaphorisation of Afrocentric aspirations. Akinola (2020, 3) concurs: “Largely, Abodunrin employs metaphor to represent actual historical and current realities of the Nigerian postcolonial scenarios, alluding to the de-familiarisation of Africans by white colonists.” Abodunrin, at times, puts his themes in capsules of affective sense, as seen in the poem “Whatever I Hang” (Abodunrin in Mitra and Nkealah 2013, 67), probably because he is aware that his postulations tend to lend themselves to a “diverse ideological orientation” (Harawa 2015, 37). For polemical purposes, this study foregrounds the following questions: (a) What could be considered the role(s) that Femi Abodunrin’s poetry plays in the (re)figuration of African identity, decoloniality and culture? (b) How does Femi Abodunrin’s poetry feature in the postcolonial/socio-political context of Africa? (c) In what way(s) does Abodunrin’s

work, as a cultural and ideological exegesis, contribute to the creation or sustenance of general African sensibilities? Tied to the responses is a literary appreciation of the aesthetic value, expressive role and lyrical ingenuity of word choice in Abodunrin's art.

Postulations on Why It Would Take Time

The title of the book appears to be an immediate concession that attaining self-comprehension or arriving at a preferred place would not be as easy as it might have seemed initially. On one level, it appears as if the point of reference is a discussion once held, which the author intends to remind his readers about. On another level, the author may be alluding to his delay in providing a formal and theoretical response to a somewhat ongoing discourse. The title may also be an index to the belated release of a theory of discourse on the dynamics of decolonisation. The foregoing views are not to be taken as absolute assertions on the total meaning or content of the book because one may still argue, including the author, that the title refers to the length of the work itself and the time it took to compose: it is a book-length "poem" after all. Taken that way, the author may be saying that it took time to compose the text, as evidenced in the first stanza:

It would take time
to conceive an epic that would explain
in simple terms what time has done
to make us—you and I, child of my mother
the thinkers that we are—that we think we are
It took time, don't tell me for I know
to conceive this epic of our postimperialist debasement
It would take time! Oh, it would take time
to conceive a story that would encapsulate
this debasement of the self—this yearning to aggregate...
(Abodunrin 2002, 20, 22, 23)

The persona explicitly states that it would take time to "conceive an epic." Conception, in its common or natural sense, entails the insemination of sperm into the womb, which leads to what is commonly known as reproduction. The offspring then becomes the manifestation of the deposited sperm. While the manifestation of the offspring may appear instant to a casual observer, there is, however, nothing casual or coincidental about the intricate details related to the formation of the manifested sperm. An intricate, albeit mysterious and complicated process called gestation (also a period/time), occurred and led to a birthing. In the human womb, the sperm is incubated to maturation for roughly nine months and thereafter a birthing occurs. *It takes time*. It took time for the "seed" of the epic we now read to germinate within the mind of the author. Linked to the appearance of this "conceived" seed, this epic, is an explanation of what "time has done." "Conception" and "explanation" are interlocked to produce a discourse on the "makings" of time. Time is personified as a "maker," our maker. "Time" has done

something to not only shape the way we think, but also to sustain the dialogic processes that are reflective of how we even think about ourselves.

The dimension of time then has a role to play in the conception, construction and articulation of the author's thoughts. It took "time" to frame a response, a discourse, on how time functions as the potter and we, as the clay in its hands. Time not only makes, "but time also spoke to Ladugbolu—ancient one in a language he understood" (Abodunrin 2002, 23). Ladugbolu is one of the converts to the new religion, to a feudal ogre (Harawa 2015). Even the oracles of time are not under the sway of humans. Time speaks, "but did we understand the voice of time?" (Abodunrin 2002, 23). We have not paid attention to the autonomy and authority of time. Will we pay attention to what is released to us now as an epic mirroring "reiterating our delusion," still within the framework of time? Again, for the polemical premises of this study, the title of Abodunrin's book-length poem is taken to mean: (a) it would take longer than expected for the formerly colonised Africans in Africa and elsewhere to attain self-comprehension and decoloniality, and (b) it would take longer than expected for Abodunrin to produce an anthropological or ethnological theorisation of discourse on the verities of "Blackness" within the ambivalent dynamics, cultural, linguistic, political and otherwise, of a postcolonial context.

Notably, the title does not include personal pronouns, such as "She" or "He," but an impersonal pronoun, "It." The title does not read: "S/He/They/We/You Would Take Time." The replacement of the personal pronoun(s) with an impersonal one could be a deliberate effort to shift focus from "persons" to essentially "a process." This lack of specificity, a critical key in the use of impersonal pronouns, denotes at best the depersonalisation and dehumanisation of whatever object or subject the author alludes to in the title. The assumption is that by "It," the author refers to the decolonisation process in Africa. The process does not in any way negate the role human beings play, but nevertheless denotes that human beings are not entirely in charge of how fast or how slow the process unfolds.

Decoloniality takes time because it entails "coming to terms" with ourselves after a gruesome colonial experience. Subsequently, a formidable redefinition of our place would take longer than we imagined. In other words, we would not just wake up and instantly reconfigure our identity, culture and ideology like nothing happened to "us" in the past. The "past" as a dimension of time would require asking questions concerning the African past and present, which for "any casual observer of the contemporary African scene ... are legion" (Abodunrin 2002, 9). One pertinent issue "that any serious student of the 'cross-current of the African/Diaspora relationship' must of necessity be plagued with and need to resolve, concerns the manner in which non-conformists or so-called Black radicals are often violently cut down in their prime" (Abodunrin 2008, 15). Implicated here is the immediate annihilation of anyone who appears to cajole people towards a refiguration of varied issues related to self-definition. Non-conformists or "Black radicals" do not last long!

The legion of questions asked may also include: “What is Africa? What is African? Who qualifies as the African? How can an African be characterized?” (Kanu 2013, 34). After asking, we may realise: “There are no simple or straightforward answers to these questions” (Abodunrin 2002, 9). It will take time to look for, find and build a congenial home because the process is lengthy and laborious. Decoloniality necessitates deconstructing colonial structures whose indelible marks are not only traceable in linguistic, cultural or political structures, but also in the psyche of the formerly colonised people; it takes time to decolonise the mind (Ngũgĩ 1986). Rooted in the colonised mind is “the condescending western image of primitive Africa” (Abodunrin 2002, 13), and so, it takes time to deconstruct the image and construct another, a congenial one. A congenial home is difficult to build in a context where “cultural schizophrenia pervades our world” (Abodunrin 2018, 64). The process involves the revaluation of African identity, culture and ideology. A receptive climate has to be collectively established, which at the superficial, or even theoretical levels, may appear doable with ease and convenience. Abodunrin argues that it would neither be easy nor convenient. The emergent quarrels, resultant from “cultural schizophrenia,” among other causes, contribute to the delay of decoloniality and so, it takes

time
to sort out and unravel
the numerous catastrophes our liberation
has encountered—at home and abroad
(Abodunrin 2002, 20)

There are still “irreconcilable boundaries and borders between disparate cultures” (Abodunrin 2018, 64) in Africa and elsewhere. To “sort out and unravel” the knotty issues that emerge from or contribute to the quarrels takes time and the inability to resolve them adds to the “numerous catastrophes” that further widen the “unbridgeable gap” (Abodunrin 2018, 64). Decoloniality comes with numerous catastrophes, which transcend local borders and impact the diasporic zones. Thus, there is still an uphill work for the seemingly liberated Africans in Africa and beyond the borders of Africa because there are still unresolved “issues”:

The other time you tasted my raw anger
over what you termed my hypersensitivity
towards matters like snowflakes
burning my soul—but which to
your creative mind are simply ephemeral
(Abodunrin 2002, 20)

Perhaps the “other time” when the persona’s “raw anger” was “tasted” was when his reconstructionist contributions on the verities of “Blackness” were met with disdain. The epic had to take time to be conceived probably because of the previous trivialisation and blatant dismissals of the persona’s vocalisation of the realities of “Blackness” and decoloniality. The persona prefaces the current response with a flashback, not only to

relieve the antagonism he encountered, but also to foreground the suspicion that it might happen again in the present context. Previously, the persona's disposition was "termed" his "hypersensitivity / towards matters like snowflakes." This evidently infuriated him. The dismissive response was accompanied by a disdain for the matters, the convictions, that are "burning" his "soul." Worst of all, the disdain came dressed in a "creative" garb. The antagonistic "creative minds" were so intellectually loose that they not only classified his work as "ephemeral" but also disregarded the time it took to conceive such a work. Not only did the antagonists refuse to dignify the persona's intellectual insertion into the discourse of "Blackness," but they also did not ascribe any sense of permanence to the tonality of the thematic concerns raised.

It could be that, "in the face of matters philosophical and mundane," the audience, in their "arrogance," were dismissive of what the persona terms his "foolishness," the kind that continues to pile "on the heads of those of our lineage yet unborn" (Abodunrin 2002, 23). Not even the citation of Nietzsche, as a fortification of the argument, could convince the listener(s) that thinking must not be done in the "prison-house of language," proving that "we cannot reach further than the doubt which asks whether the limit we see is really a limit" (Abodunrin 2002, 21). Such reactions to Nietzsche warranted the persona's concession: "I promise never to speak of the dead German again—never!" (Abodunrin 2002, 21). The only tentative response that the persona's audience could blurt was: "which language, whose prison, in whose house?" No wonder on this aspect of language use, particularly as prescribed by Eurocentric exponents, Abodunrin "offers an articulate apprehension" (Okunoye n.d., 1). The apprehension is notable in his "transgression of boundaries colonized by these conglomerations of genres of high literature" (Abodunrin 2008, 8), hence the "blurred boundaries" (Raji 2000, 104) in his epic. Abodunrin blurs the boundaries that distinguish literary genres to propose an antithetical approach to the Eurocentric prescriptions of what literature is. Also noteworthy is the fact that the boundaries may be blurred but his vision and intent are not:

... I composed the epic that took time
To appease and to cajole!
(Abodunrin in Mitra and Nkealah 2013, 68)

Had the respondents, even in their familiar "proverbial obstinacy," still realised that encapsulated in the epic was not a mere "appeasement" but also a "cajoling," perhaps their response would have been different, especially if they considered that "they are conjoined, Siamese twins, once incubated by the same womb" (Abodunrin 2002, 20). This familial connection should have anchored the necessary discussion of issues such as "the oil-rigs of our souls dictate" and is "allied to our much prostituted destiny" (Abodunrin 2002, 20). Bigger than the differences of ideological persuasions is the fact that an objective engagement on the "monumental woes" compels a migration to the "Delta of our neo-colonial debasement" (Abodunrin 2002, 20). The people of Niger Delta are a case in point because "oil exploration has negatively affected their

environment and worsened their socio-economic situation” (Kanu 2013, 40). It is at the Delta of “our” neo-colonial debasement where we will square ourselves and admit, first of all, that African governments cannot protect their people from the rapaciousness of the forces of globalisation.

Secondly, we will realise that “Africa as the dispersal point for both the remaining Africans in the homeland and those in the Diaspora has also continued to engender varied reactions. These reactions have at best, over centuries, produced ambivalent results” (Abodunrin 2008, 6). At the Delta, we will acknowledge that the past experience of the slave trade and colonialism were “the provenance of such an enquiry, as Africa’s encounter with the West beclouded her identity” (Kanu 2013, 34). We will also consider the reality that “the new threat to Africa’s identity is the movement of globalization” characterised by “neo-colonialism” (Kanu 2013, 34). We will defiantly, differently, re-ask that legion of questions to which there are no simple and straightforward answers:

Who needs the epic that would take time to do this?
I say why not the Nation-language so that
the hurricane could rumble? or why not depoliticise
this speech so that the harmattan can testify eloquently
to the rape of our confluence landscape?
(Abodunrin 2002, 23)

Questions bordering on African identity will arise and certainly, “at face value,” will seem “obvious,” but we will also realise that “the answer becomes less obvious once other qualifiers are added to the question” (Kanu 2013, 34). When adding qualifiers, we may have to prepare ourselves to come face-to-face with the “kalashnikovs” that are procured to protect the integrity “—geopolitical and cultural—of our confluence-oriented landscape” (Abodunrin 2002, 20–21). It will not be easy; it will take time, because the “kalashnikovs,” as we speak, have found their way, “their expression on the heads of our joint owners of the same landscape” (Abodunrin 2002, 21). The rhetorical question will then have to be re-asked: “Have you not heard?” (Abodunrin 2002, 21). But then again, how will it be heard when at the slight awareness of knowing “where I was headed ... you called me names?” (Abodunrin 2002, 20). Even if there was some willingness to disclose a plan “too grand, too precise to be enumerated here” (Abodunrin 2002, 21), the presentation would be met with antagonistic interrogatives: “So why conceive an epic that would take time? Why not the sonnet that summarises? Or the iambic that you and I never invented?” (Abodunrin 2002, 21). To which the truncated answer would be: “I produced the epic that would take time to *appease and cajole*” (Abodunrin in Mitra and Nkealah 2013, 68; italics added). But why even bother to provide a response to an audience whose energy is only channelled towards (re)asking misplaced questions? As a consequence, instead of strategising on the design of our own weaponry, we are preoccupied with majoring on minor issues, i.e., literary forms instead of content, and thus engage the rampant issues and mammoth task(s) before us off tangent. The legion of unanswered questions also entails:

Was it not you, benighted priest—
 elder brother—child of my mother, who claimed that
 you have not been listened to, or must I reiterate
 the venom—the splenetic spoonerism with which
 you spoke about my monologic imagination?
 (Abodunrin 2002, 24)

The mammoth task(s) before us require(s) a diligent dissection of all the issues, both from the past and in the present, that necessitates a “conversation with the living ancestors.” As a necessary intervention, “let’s have the epic to be dialogic / we can jettison the iambic to confound the enemies of our race / Let the sonnet receive our overwhelming contempt / if they must know that we understand its limitations” (Abodunrin 2002, 24). Since the accusation is that the persona’s intellectual insertion is a “monologic imagination,” a proposal should be that the conversation be dialogic. In this dialogic conversation, a lucid description on the “emergence of the quest for an African identity” (Kanu 2013, 35) can be brought into critical focus. Dialogically, an honest analysis of the “macabre dance,” which was initiated by the persona’s antagonists whose effusive claim is that they neither partook in the enemy’s orgy of violence nor consented to be knighted by them, can be derived. In that analysis, “the enemy of our race” will be identified and the cause(s) of the “cultural clash” that seems “routine” and the “neo-colonial angst” in our territory will be exposed. The antagonists are the “Iscariots of our race” (Abodunrin 2002, 24), and part of the delays of decoloniality is caused by some among us who are still knighted by the coloniser. In such a climate, it is not conducive to conceive and “deliver the unborn of our race.” What makes it harder, and even adds to the delay, is that “the unborn is asking complicated questions while still in my womb” and attempts are being made to “mummify this ranter,” but to no avail; hence we are yet to see “the discursive bottom of this matter” (Abodunrin 2002, 24–25). Reaching the discursive bottom of the matter requires understanding

that i have not conceived an epic that would take time
 out of sheer indulgence, or jettisoned the sonnet out of envy.
 i began as a geopolitician situating myself geocentrically
 out of love—sheer love for the human race.
 But i soon learnt that others are focused on the race
 and have never bothered with the human!
 (Abodunrin 2002, 26)

The diagnosis reveals that three paramount factors gave rise to the emergence of the quest for an African identity, namely, ideological race classification, slave trade and the dehumanisation of Africa, and colonialism and the exploitation of Africa (Kanu 2013; Mirmasoomi and Roshnavand 2014). Refiguring *Blackness: Culture, Ideology and Discourse* (Abodunrin 2008) compels a revisit to the intellectual archives of the likes of James Baldwin (1965). The poem “Going to Meet the Man” (Abodunrin in Mitra and Nkealah 2013, 68–69) is a tribute to James Baldwin. While it is unclear whether “the

Man” to be met is Baldwin or God, or both, the meeting is still a necessity because there, “we” will learn how “we” can reaffirm “our” heritage even in this climate that is still overshadowed by Western bias and erroneous ideological significations. In the revisit, we may realise how this “very complex and highly philosophical Negro writer [James Baldwin] ... insists that different historical paradigms have produced the Negroes and their native African counterparts” (Abodunrin 2008, 13; author’s insertion). Since “the Man has always thrilled and thrilled” and nothing else, the poet had to compose “the epic that took time to appease and to cajole!” (Abodunrin in Mitra and Nkealah 2013, 68) in an effort to advocate a revisit to past attempts at figuring “Blackness”—a (re)visit that may expose the strengths and weaknesses of “our” forebears’ expositions on the subject. Meeting “the Man” might help revisits to revaluations of the impact of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, an experience that cannot be overlooked in the discourse on Blackness and decoloniality. Revisiting such “monumental woes” may take time, but this period of carnage still has to be considered within the intellectual horizons characterising the postcolonial context. The revisit may reveal why the Black race was/is classified as backward, inhuman, primitive, emotional and capricious, and in no way equal to the white race (Mapedzahama and Kwansah-Aidoo 2017) in the first place. Some responses might be, “there are so many people in the African continent who are not Africans, as there are many people from Africa in Diaspora who do not accept that they are Africans” (Kanu 2013, 37), thus dismissing Africa’s geo-numerical based identity as improbable. Or, another response might be: “Africans should stop brooding over slavery and colonialism as a reason for their backwardness. If we really want to show that we spearheaded ancient civilization, let the so-called civilization be repeated in our age” (Kanu 2013, 38). The latter response has problems, as evinced in the poem “The Pursuit of Happiness” (Abodunrin in Mitra and Nkealah 2013, 68). In the poem, Abodunrin sublimely challenges the misconception that immigrants’ quest for happiness is satisfied by the mere attainment of “cornmeal,” “sumptuous meat” or a “search for greener pastures” (Abodunrin in Mitra and Nkealah 2013, 68). The desire and subsequent attainment of “happiness” goes far beyond the immigrant’s ability to supplement a meagre family income in their new “home”; there must be, to begin with, equity and equality in dignity and treatment between the indigenes and the immigrants. However, for the immigrant, equity and equality remain a distant dream because the immigrant is still otherised and despised just upon arrival at “ORT,” a reference to Oliver Tambo International Airport (Abodunrin in Mitra and Nkealah 2013, 67). So, “Going to Meet the Man,” however necessary the trip might be, entails knowing how to navigate the conveniences and inconveniences of modernisation and globalisation, including those of a modern airport where ethnic discrimination has a firm hold. This time, even though the trip to meet the Man might not be similar to that of the slave trade, it will still ring familiar in that it is characterised by xenophobic pejoratives experienced at the “post-apartheid Customs and Excise!” (Abodunrin in Mitra and Nkealah 2013, 67). By the time the Man is met, enough wounds would have been inflicted on Africans by Africans on the journey(s) in search of a congenial home. So, in “Whatever I Hang,” “Going to Meet the Man” and “The Pursuit of Happiness,” Abodunrin metaphorically and philosophically represents a three-phased journey necessary to undertake on the

way to decolonisation. That is to say, there has to be a lucid theorisation about the Middle Passage (the past), an honest reflection on “the ruins of a great house” (the effects of colonialism), “the Oilgerian game of death” (Abodunrin in Mitra and Nkealah 2013, 67), implausible receptions of one another at ORT and all the disdainful and dehumanising remarks that South African brothers and sisters heap on other Africans out of sheer suspicion of the other (the postcolonial condition)! This reflection, however, might not be elaborate, because the station at which decolonial voices should converse on the condition of “Blackness” and the antics of post-coloniality is an airport where people are either embarking to *somewhere* or disembarking from *somewhere*. Therefore, there is not enough time to even theorise “about the colonial baggage” and to talk about the effects of the “decades of postcolonial angst” (Abodunrin in Mitra and Nkealah 2013, 67). It is on the strength of fully appreciating whatever each one of us “hangs” that we will establish a sense of camaraderie in our “pursuit of happiness,” that each one of us will ultimately have something to say or ask when we meet the Man. But, this will take time because we currently do not have time to even theorise about the things that landed us here in the first place. Although we might ask, “Why are you here?” (Abodunrin 2018), it seems we are never patient enough to wait for an answer, or better yet, to look for an answer.

The injunction that *It Would Take Time* becomes essential here because it compels us to ask questions about decolonisation: How can we do it? When will we do it? Who should do it? What are the tools we can use to restore the former glory of the Black race in the present age? If revisiting the past is not an option and the present is overwhelmed by a sense of cultural schizophrenia, ambivalence, disorientation and confusion, how then do we negotiate a way forward? I propose, as a start, a revival of appraisals and refigurations of “Blackness” such as we see in Leopold Senghor’s (1967) poem “Black Woman” in our varied discourses. In Senghor’s poem, black symbolises life and beauty and these symbolical images of defiance of the West’s formulation of the “African image” (Mphahlele 1974) can aid the refiguration of “our” “Blackness.” Although most Africans have been designated the colour black and this identity has been a source of ridicule from the West, resulting in everything black at one point regarded as inferior and devilish (Kanu 2013; Moten 2008; Quashie 2021; Ngũgĩ 2012), we still need to have positive and beautiful figurations of our own “colour,” which cannot continue to be used, not even by us, to demean us (Motseki 2019).

It Would Take Time also warns that the discourse should not evade “the prison-house of language.” This is why language, code-switching and abrogation feature quite significantly in *It Would Take Time*, thus making it a hallmark of creative work that does not submit itself to a monolithic interpretation. The socio-anthropological and even ethnological lynchpins make the epic “fit for the kingdom of Arts!” (Abodunrin 2003, ix), irrespective of the blurred genre boundaries. *It Would Take Time* “projects two categories of pantheons with the first comprising of gods and their manifestations and the second of noteworthy thinkers, scholars, activists and revolutionaries from the black

world” (Raji 2000, 107). This cyclostyled interaction between literary genres, the “gods” and the “scholars,” merged into “living ancestors,” lands us:

At Lokoja where our destiny joined, haven't
you heard that some are theorising over the swollen stream
as if that history belonged to yesterday—their yesterday?
Amalgamation is beginning to look like a monstrous evil
(Abodunrin 2002, 21)

Understanding Africans’ corporate “destiny” necessitates a peep into whatever designation the cartographer allocated to Lokoja. Lokoja, a town and river port, capital of Kogi State, south-central Nigeria, was established by the British merchants as a trading post in the late 1850s (*Encyclopedia Britannica* 2020). A further description of Lokoja in the article published by the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (2020) resonates with Ulli Beier’s description of Nigeria’s sociocultural landscape (cited in the preface to *It Would Take Time*) in 1950. When Beier came to Nigeria in 1950, he found that the “Yoruba towns were industrious” (Abodunrin 2002, 13). In Osogbo, where Beier lived opposite a blacksmith’s workshop, all day long half a dozen craftsmen were busy producing hoes, cutlasses and other farm tools. They were even forging the pellets for short guns by hand!

The modern town [of Lokoja] is a collecting point for cotton, leather, and palm oil and kernels, which are shipped to the Niger delta ports of Burutu and Warri for export. The town is also a trade centre for the yams, cassava (manioc), corn (maize), sorghum, beans, fish, palm produce, shea nuts, and cotton produced by the local Igbira people. (*Encyclopedia Britannica* 2020)

“Encapsulating such a world, and all that has happened to it (or simply, *these happening things*), in creative terms, raises the larger question of ‘language and abrogation’” (Abodunrin 2002, 15; original italics). The metaphorical convergence of destiny at Lokoja, where “some are theorising over the swollen stream” (Abodunrin 2002, 21), is of particular interest here. Lokoja should be known for the above economic activities, which should be for the benefit of its people, but “Lokoja is where the union of states was declared. It is a place where African (Nigerian) land was dispossessed. Not only did the new administration bring new administrative hierarchy but also new cultural and linguistic dimension[s]” (Harawa 2015, 39).

The “some” who are theorising “as if history belonged to yesterday” (Abodunrin 2002, 21) necessarily have to divulge who nominated them to theorise on behalf of “all.” We may for now act like we are not discomfited by our apparent ignorance that we have not even “heard” that there is a “theorisation” already happening. But we must ask: Could it be that encapsulated in their “logical” (certainly juvenile) conclusion, yesterday’s happenings have no place in today’s realities? Could it also be that the reason we have not even heard what is happening “over the swollen stream,” to begin with, has to do with our indifference towards yesterday’s happenings? Are the theorists not

legitimised then, to hold a discussion about us, for us, without us? *It Would Take Time* reminds us, irrespective of “our” apparent ignorance, that “amalgamation is beginning to look like a monstrous evil” (Abodunrin 2002, 21). Closely linked to this amalgamation are the “centrifugal forces of globalisation” leading us to “a form of historical catalepsy” (Abodunrin 2018, 65). The epic offers us a panoramic view of what will happen when the “amalgamators” speak of history as a distant aspect of yesterday. Furthermore, the amalgamators do not “give a toss whether you and I were brown or white or whether we worshipped tree gods or the trinity” (Abodunrin 2002, 21). For Abodunrin, there has been an ideological migration on the part of the amalgamators, where the conversation is no longer undergirded by racial ideological classifications, religious or tribal peculiarities, but about “our territory.” This territory, “God-given, devil-oriented, sango-stricken” (Abodunrin 2002, 21), as it may be, is an object/subject of interest for the amalgamators. And here, we step into a terrain that needs us to tread carefully because for a novice or uninformed ethnographer, part of the Yorùbá worldview has just been brought to the fore:

Directly the Yoruba world-view has it that there originally existed a single god-head called Orisa who lived at the foot of a cliff attended by his slave, Atunda. The slave ministered to his master day-in and day-out, a routine which by nature he detests. One evening, Atunda rolled a huge boulder on Orisa, his master, thus causing the god-head to shatter into innumerable pieces scattered in different directions of the universe. Esu’s status as a rebel derives partly from a version of Yoruba creation myth which identifies him with his slave who caused the disintegration of his master. It is because of this that Abodunrin moves away from the myths of Sango, Ogun and Obatala who hitherto had received focused attention from writers, theorists and critics. (Raji 2000, 105)

Sango is dismissed as a tyrannical ruler of Oyo who was forced to abdicate the throne by his subjects, thus causing him to kill himself (Raji 2000). The miscegenation facing the world of the gods appears to be congruent with the one facing the world of humans. The transgressive tendencies noted in the relations of beings in the realms of the gods are being manifested in the world of humans, notably cultural, political, economic and linguistic miscegenation. The confluence that was beheld at Lokoja, where acts of construction and progress were remarkable, where vociferous chants such as “it is good, Oh! it’s good to build three tents” (Abodunrin 2002, 21). From here, the mythology of a tribal tripod, “one for you, one for me the other for our benighted neighbour” (Abodunrin 2002, 22) were dismantled.

The Impetus of Hybridity in Femi Abodunrin’s Epic

Abodunrin’s argument underscores the strength of hybridity (Harawa 2015). Hybridity, according to Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (1989, 97), is “the creation of new transcultural forms within the contact zone produced by colonization.” Abodunrin employs linguistic plurality in his epic as a reflection of the ambivalence that characterises African people’s culture in the postcolonial context. Hybridity manifests itself in various guises, “notably linguistic, cultural or political dimensions” (Harawa

2015, 44). For Abodunrin, however, the dialogism of language in his epic appears to be his key arsenal in the decoloniality process. Linked to this process is the transgression of the Eurocentric monopoly of literary production, which for Abodunrin entails breaking free from the conventions and/or constraints of writing a short story, a play or a poem. Abodunrin blurs these boundaries in the first place specifically because he “proves himself to be a close reader, and a great synthesiser and analyst of texts” (Raji 2000, 107). In the epic, Abodunrin calls for the coexistence of languages as a significant strategy in the depoliticisation of language and literature in Africa. This is why in the epic, we see a mix of languages:

The scene of our *depossession du monde*, my renaissance brother
 We are merely victims of the *weltanschauung*
 sacrilegious nincompoop—are you still shouting dementedly,
 “*Orisa lo 'oba, Orisa lo 'ba—Igba keji Orisa*”?
Alaage're O!
Àgéré!
Ara e ba mi ka lo
Agere
Ko tun wa do ni padepade pade!
Agere!
Pade owo, pade omo
Agere!
PA—PA—PA!
AGEREEEE!
 (Abodunrin 2002, 22, 25; original italics)

Abodunrin vacillates between Yorùbá and other languages such as German, French and English “without actually breaking the flow of the poetic pieces. All these aspects constitute a unique form of hybridity” (Harawa 2015, 23). For Abodunrin, the central question is: Why is the foreign language nationalised/universalised while African languages are marginalised in Africa? *It Would Take Time* presents itself as a deliberate effort towards the decoloniality, not only of language, but also of Eurocentric theorisations of literature in Africa. The mixture of languages reveals that languages can co-exist and that no language should be glorified to the detriment of the other. By mixing genres and languages, Abodunrin liberates himself from the conventions or constraints of writing. This, to him, reveals a need for “a new understanding / a new language to describe you and me / misfits of a prodigal age” (Abodunrin 2002, 23). This serves a beneficial purpose in a postcolonial context that is characterised by a linguistically heterogeneous society. In the text, Abodunrin uses, among other languages, Yorùbá, and does not provide translations. Harawa (2015, 42) reveals that Abodunrin was reluctant, as expected, to give the English translation of the Yorùbá excerpt cited above. Understandably, giving the English translation would have been a self-defeating effort in his resistance of the use of the colonial language. Harawa (2015) acknowledges that not providing the English translation is, for Abodunrin, a political act. Abodunrin’s text

does not belong to any literary genre, and this, as Harawa (2015, 29) argues, makes the text a hybrid of cultures.

At one level, the mix of languages is Abodunrin's recognition that language can be a tool for textually constructing, deconstructing or reconstructing the world. He does this while proving that the English language is not a yardstick for defining one's intelligence or identity. The Yorùbá language, for example, can be viewed and used on par or interchangeably with the English language and any other language and still yield the intended purposes. In the introductory essay of the book, Abodunrin (2002) justifies the significance of the text with its mix of languages (Harawa 2015). Steven Brown, in the book's blurb, posits that the introductory essay sets the scene for reading Abodunrin's poem. When one reads the introductory essay, there is a realisation that Abodunrin wants to ground his work on the foundation of intertextuality, that is, an interdependence of literary texts. Intertextuality is employed in the text as a decolonising strategy. For Abodunrin, this includes "blurred boundaries" (Raji 2000, 104). Raji (2000) notes that this transgression is evident even in the subtitle as the author conflates the "living" with the "ancestors." While at the surface level this may appear to be a contradiction, Raji indicates that the contradiction is resolved by the word "time" in the title. Raji (2000, 104) asserts that time "stands as the essence of concern in this work." Abodunrin is concerned with how time past impacts upon time present and how both impinge on the future.

Conclusion

If we are to refigure "Blackness," where better to start than centralising the complexities and dynamics that characterise our culturally ambivalent society? Abodunrin's epic offers us ideological premises upon which a dialogic conversation can be held without fussing about the styles that artists employ to propose their ideological outlooks. Abodunrin's epic ignores "form," boundaries that should not matter as long as the message is clear and "substantial." The composition of literary texts and their forms cannot be the central obsession of theorists when theorising on decoloniality; the essence lies in the constructive articulation of the issue at hand. Independence must be given to the theorists, critics and artists to freely produce their art in the way they deem appropriate. This not only enhances the philosophical framework from which we can refigure "Blackness" and decoloniality, but also enables African theorists to move from the Eurocentric shadow of artistic compositions to organic, Afrocentric productions. This ideological outlook is evident in the persona of Abodunrin's epic who refuses to be a Jonah or an Iscariot, choosing instead to provide a bulwark in negotiating a path towards talking honestly about our discredited past and ambivalent, schizophrenic present.

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