

Corruption in Contemporary Nigerian Poetry: A New Historicist Perspective

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Summary

Discussions on corruption in Nigeria are dominated by economists and social scientists with their scholastic discourse on the subject growing by the day that one wonders whether Nigerian creative writers, especially contemporary poets are not perturbed by the rising wave of corruption in the country. This article attempts to investigate the contributions of some Nigerian poets like Niyi Osundare, Odia Ofeimun, Idris Amali, Joe Ushie, Amanze Akpuda, Musa Idris Okpanachi, Darlington Ogbonnaya and Eddie Onuzuruike in the fight against corruption in Nigeria. Hence a new historicist approach was adopted to discuss their imaginative portrayal of corruption and its impact on the war against graft. Their artistic perspectives of corruption were identified in order to better understand the various forms of corruption as well as the historical dimensions and their suggestive mitigating effects. From the findings, it is evident that Nigerian poets have raised strong voices against corruptive tendencies by exposing the various categories of corruption in Nigeria and their destructive and debilitating effects.

Opsomming

Gesprekke oor korrupsie in Nigerië word oorheers deur ekonome en sosiaal-wetenskaplikes, en hulle skolastiese diskoers oor die onderwerp neem daaglik toe. 'n Mens moet wonder of kreatiewe skrywers in Nigerië, veral kontemporêre digters, ook ontstig word deur die groeiende vlag van korrupsie in die land. Hierdie studie stel ondersoek in na die bydraes van Nigeriese digters soos Niyi Osundare, Odia Ofeimun, Idris Amali, Joe Ushie, Amanze Akpuda, Musa Idris Okpanachi, Darlington Ogbonnaya en Eddie Onuzuruike tot die stryd teen korrupsie. Hulle artistieke perspektiewe is geïdentifiseer om die verskillende vorme van korrupsie, die historiese dimensies daarvan en versagtende effekte te verstaan. Die bevindinge toon dat Nigeriese digters beslis hulle stem verhef teen korrupte neigings deur verskillende kategorieë van korrupsie, asook die vernietigende en verlamme uitwerking wat korrupsie in Nigerië het, aan die kaak te stel.

Introduction

Nigeria could have been one of the richest countries in sub-Saharan Africa because of its rich oil and gas deposits which fetches it billions of dollars yearly but the country faces immense challenges of extreme poverty, weak economy, dilapidated infrastructure, terrorism, organised crime because of corruption which has been depriving it of judicious use of its staggering resources (Kreck 2019: 2). As Ebekozien (2020: 2) notes, “several studies ... have shown that corruption is the root cause of the socio-political and economic woes of Nigeria”. Though various measures have been taken at one point or another to check the spiralling effects of corruption, the results have been quite dismal. While acts and facets of corruption seem to be assuming frightening dimensions, political instability, economic chicaneries and social machinations like tribalism seem to be dangerously fanning its ever inflaming embers. Corruption scandals are not new in Nigeria as they have been the major reasons given by the military for their interventions in politics since the 1960s. In a speech to announce the bloody but botched coup of January 15, 1966, Major Chukwuma Nzeogwu mentioned corruption as one of the major factors that ignited the coup:

Our enemies are the political profiteers, the swindlers, the men in high and low places that seek bribes and demand 10 percent; those that seek to keep the country divided permanently so that they can remain in office as ministers or VIPs at least, the tribalists, the nepotists, those that make the country look big for nothing before international circles, those that have corrupted our society and put the Nigerian political calendar back by their words and deeds.

<http://www.vanguard.com/2010/09/radio-broadcast-by-major-chukwuma-kaduna-nzeogwu>

In spite of the cataclysmic scenarios created by the coup and the subsequent pogroms against the Igbos which caused a thirty-month fratricidal insurrection, corruption continued unabated after the war, and has almost defied all institutional and legislative frameworks either erected or formulated to fight it. Evidently perceived as a major factor hindering Nigeria’s march towards the achievement of her developmental goals, corruption is generally seen as the root cause of numerous social and political upheavals which have rocked the nation since independence.

This article is premised on the fact that poets unlike social scientists make metaphoric, symbolic and satiric use of language. Armed with such a linguistic prerogative, they say what ordinarily could not have been said by the social scientists. Through the application of well couched poetic expressions, they make punchy remarks and lampoon those in positions of authority without directly breaking any legal statute. Also as masters in the art of language use, poets use the instrument of language to provoke and instigate people to deeply contemplate and analyse issues. Unlike social scientists

whose interest is to present factual and statistical records, the poets under study help to bridge the gap created by such straight-jacketed empirical analyses by capturing and exploring in colourful language, the multi-faceted vagaries of corruption as well as showcasing it as a deleterious socio-human act. This article is significant as it involves the application of New Historicism to comparatively place side by side, the views of economist/political scientists and poets on corruption in Nigeria. The poets whose works are studied in this article are Niyi Osundare, Odia Ofeimun, Idris Amali, Joe Ushie, Amanze Akpuda, Musa Idris Okpanachi, Darlington Ogbonnaya, and Eddie Onuzuruike. They cut across various generations of new Nigerian poetry as corruption has been a generational menace in Nigeria.

The following objectives are pursued in this article: A brief explanation on the meaning and scope of corruption as a global phenomenon. Then the identification of the conceptual theoretical framework adopted in the study and the examination of evidences of how contemporary Nigerian poets have creatively utilised the instrument of poetry to paint and recreate concrete and imagistic vistas of corruption. There are highlights of the nature, characteristics, dimensions and scope of corruption as portrayed in contemporary Nigerian poetry. Next is the identification of the implications, consequences and effects of corruption on the Nigeria's socio-economic and political lives as periscope by these poets; it will examine how these contemporary Nigerian poets that are mentioned above, have utilised poetry to aid in the fight against corruption.

Corruption as a Global Phenomenon

Corruption has been in existence with humanity. It is “a global issue and not a new problematic phenomenon” (Ebekozi 2020: 1), hence it is difficult to define as there is no consensus among economists and political scientists on the precise or definite meaning of corruption (Aidit 2003: 637). However, Nye (1967: 3) sees it as “any act that diverges from the accepted norms of the society often with the motives of status benefits or monetary gains”. A definition by the World Bank sees it as “the abuse of power for private gain [It] involves behaviour on the part of officials in the public and private sectors in which they improperly and unlawfully enrich themselves and /or those close to them, or induce others to do so, by misusing the position in which they are placed” (World Bank 1997). Hawthorne and Magu (2018: 2) view it as “a misuse of public office for private gain”, while O'Brien (2020: 251) insists that it is “the misuse of resources for personal gain or enrichment, with the character of the social and political order determining what is possible in each case”.

Similarly, Chen (2018: 1) defines corruption as “dishonest behaviour by those in position of power, such as managers or government officials’ as well

as giving or accepting bribes or inappropriate gifts, double dealing, under-the-table transactions, manipulating elections, diverting funds, laundering money and defrauding investors”. As a concept, corruption has an aura of ruination hovering around it. This means that corruption involves illegal and unethical conduct exhibited by someone who may or may not be in a position of authority; a practice that potentially derails the wheels of mutual association and progress in a given society. The overarching idea is that corruption denotes abuse or misuse of one’s office or position for individual enrichment at the expense of the people. Corruption has been the bane of most African countries, even from the colonial era. It is prevalent in Nigeria and has negatively affected the image and economy of the country. Therefore, the cankerworm of corruption remains a major devastating issue facing Nigeria since the colonial period; it has eaten deep into the fabrics of our system. Ogbeide (2012: 19) asserts that “it is difficult to think of any social ill in the country [Nigeria] that is not traceable to the embezzlement and misappropriation of public funds perhaps as a direct consequence of the corruption perpetrated by the callous political leadership class since independence”. Nigeria’s political history is evenly punctuated with the reign of military dictators who apart from being extremely high handed, corroded most of her vibrant socio-economic and political institutions and heavily looted her treasury.

Of all the efforts made by successive governments in Nigeria to fight corruption, none has been as popular, active, strategic and successful as the establishments of first, the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC) in the year 2000 with the late incorruptible Justice Mustapha Akanbi as founding Chairman and then in 2003; the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) with Mallam Nuhu Ribadu as the founding Chairman too. In one of Akanbi’s statements on why successive governments had consistently battled with eradicating corruption in Nigeria, he states:

Corruption is endemic, pandemic and systemic and several efforts made in the past to check its onslaught had defied solution The many adhoc measures to combat it, put in place by various military regimes failed to yield results or change the attitude and minds of purveyors of corruption who see it as a way of life. (Ige & Lawal 2005: 1)

Also, in one of his position statements Ribadu states:

People should see this war [war against corruption] as necessary for all of us and for our country. It is not a government thing. Every Nigerian should be proud to earn a decent living. There is more dignity in honesty and labour than in filthy wealth. We should not destroy our children, our tomorrow and our integrity because of our mad rush for riches. (Adebanwi 2010: xvii)

Buoyed by this kind of posture, Nuhu Ribadu brought the war against corruption to the front burner. He successfully prosecuted those who hitherto were considered “untouchables” and made government officials to be on their toes. His travails and untimely removal in December 2007 were symptomatic of Nigeria’s labyrinthine political intrigues, though before then he had said that “when you fight corruption, it fights back” (Nigerian-village-square.com1.). Since he left the anti-graft agency, the heat and fire against corrupt individuals have waned considerably. On May 29, 2015, Muhammadu Buhari was sworn in as President of Nigeria and chief among the programmes in his agenda was the fight against corruption. During the campaign that brought him to power, his key mantra was: “If we do not kill corruption in the country, corruption will kill Nigerians” (*The Nation*, March 13, 2015: 4). Efforts by Buhari’s government to fight corruption in Nigeria have produced little of no positive results as reported by The Centre for Democratic Development (CDD), “With the 2023 election season already ramping up, and Buhari’s hands-off governing style largely unchanged, his government’s anti-corruption track record is set to go down in history as one characterised by missed opportunities and, in some respects, outright hypocrisy. His 2016 promise to ‘demonstrate zero tolerance for corrupt practices’ remains largely unmet.” (*Premium Times* June 13, 2021: 1)

Theoretical Perspectives

This critical engagement is guided by New Historicism, a theory that emerged in the late 1970s as a reaction against the formalistic tenets of New Criticism. Coined by Stephen Greenblatt, it arose as one of the reactions against the view that literature can be studied in isolation from its social and political contexts (Childs & Fowler 2006). Thus “in place of dealing with a text in isolation from its historical context, new historicists attend primarily to the historical and cultural conditions of its production, its meaning, its effects and also its later critical interpretations and evaluations” (Abrams & Harpham 2009: 218). As Collette (2012: 3) puts it, “new historicism is a modern theory that concentrates on how events, places and culture within a society affect a written work”. Succinctly put, “new historical theories maintain that it is not the text itself, but the social and historical contexts in which the work is created that determines the importance and meaning of the literary work” (Pietruszynski 2006: 20). Echoing the same thought, Lyu (2021: 1075) remarks that “not dealing with a text in isolation from its historical context, new historicists pay more attention to the historical and cultural context of the literary text”. Thus, in this study, attempts are made to explicate the numerous manifestations of corruption in Nigeria by revealing the efforts made by some Nigerian poets since after the Nigerian civil war to artistically sensitise people on the issue of corruption.

Contemporary Nigerian Poetry

The civil war that ended in 1970 remains a remarkable political and poetic watershed in Nigeria's history. Though incidences of corruption were rampant before the civil war, they greatly escalated after it and have been on the increase ever since. Similarly, though Nigerian poets were vocal and daunting before the war (Okigbo, Soyinka, Clark, Wonodi, Echeruo), the gory and calamitous scenarios unleashed by the war experience created a new breed of Nigerian poets who have become quite iconoclastic and combative in their style, preoccupation, tone and mood. Commenting on the new poets, Udentia (1996: 92) observes that:

... while they sometimes handle the themes already explored by the older poets, they do so from the perspective of new knowledge, new consciousness and a better dialectics of social change. They are more socially minded, politically committed, optimistic, deeply concerned about social amelioration and willing to set clear solutions to the dominant social contradictions of the current epoch.

He equally adds that they show great bitterness living in a society "mutilated" by the near collapse of social values. This group of poets, vibrant and equally recalcitrant, strongly and directly condemn prevailing social ills. Owing to their novel trend of thoughts and affable disposition, they are labelled avant-gardes; and one thing unites them: their bold aversion to socio-political and economic irresponsibility. Funso Aiyejina (1988) calls them poets of the "Alter-Native Tradition" meaning that like rebels, they fancy delving into some ricocheting socio-political issues while not strictly following the dictates of the entrenched poetic tradition. Also referred to as "new" poets, the language of their poetry is not slavish to classical poetic diction and ideals but is more home-grown and easily accessible. Emphasising this aspect of their poetry, Jeyifo (1983: ix) reasons that "the most dramatic manifestation of this situation is the relationship of the 'new' poets to language For while the older poets generally deployed a diction of metaphoric, highly allusive universe calculated to include but a small coterie of specialists, the new poets have taken the language of poetry, the diction of figurative expression, to the marketplace" Bringing their language and diction to the marketplace means simplifying their poetry by deploying easier to understand poetic repertoires which communicate clearly but are not necessarily banal or bland. As conscious and honest citizens of Nigeria, contemporary Nigerian poets see themselves not only as gatekeepers of the society's conscience but also as champions of its cause.

Aspects of Corruption in Contemporary Nigerian Poetry

By aspects we mean typologies of corruption especially in the public sector. According to Abu and Staniewski (2019: 3059), “a major factor that has been blamed for the poor standard of living in Nigeria is the massive corruption in the public sector”. Among Nigerian poets of the new order, Niyi Osundare is one of the earliest to give serious attention to corruption in the civil and public service. Writing in his pioneer poetry collection *Song of the Marketplace* published in 1983, he brings to limelight the high indices of corruption in Nigeria’s civil service in a poem entitled “Excursion”:

I have been through
the secretariat
where civil servants
are all but civil
here files are
lost and found
by mysterious messengers’ magic. (Song ... 12)

The aspect of corruption Osundare exposes and condemns here is the situation where public servants expect to be given monetary inducement for them to carry out official responsibilities for which they are monthly remunerated. It is not unusual that in most offices in Nigeria, corrupt messengers withdraw official sensitive files from circulation and hide them inside their drawers. They only release these files when their palms are greased by the beneficiary of the information contained in the file or in some extreme situations, such files are permanently destroyed. This is rampant in Nigeria for as Eke (2016: 289) asserts, “the lack of efficiency and effectiveness in the civil service is built on corruption”. Also, Olusegun Obasanjo, former President of Nigeria, once lamented that “our public offices have shown cases of the combined evils of ineffectiveness and inefficiency and corruption, whilst being impediments to effective implementation of government policies” (*The Servicom Book* 2006: 1). Corruption is undoubtedly a systemic problem in Nigeria’s civil service for even in recent times, the Nigeria Bureau of Statics (NBS) report of 2019 records that “of all Nigerian citizens who had at least one contact with a public official in the 12 month prior to the 2019 survey, 30.2 per cent paid a bribe to, or were asked to pay a bribe by a public official ...” (“NBS Publishes 2019 Corruption in Nigeria Survey Report”) Addressing the prevalence of such corruption, Osundare (1983: 34) in a poem with the caption “Ignorance” writes:

Madaru steals public funds
and blocks the road
with a sleek Mercedes
custommade from Germany

they sing his praises
and envy his luck.

As observed by Tanzi (1998: 9) “in several cases of corruption, the abuse of public power is not necessarily for one’s private benefit but can be for the benefit of one’s party, class, tribe, friends, family” This reflects a pervading trend where those who loot the country’s treasury to live ostentatious lives are not condemned but are lionised and given chieftaincy titles by the same people whom they have indirectly impoverished. Madaru in the poem, instead of receiving virulent reprobation for “stealing public funds” is praised and made a hero whom other people struggle to be like. Going by the title, Osundare insinuates that those who fete and hero-worship corrupt individuals are block-headed ignoramuses, for were they to be wise, they would not laud those who are indirectly enslaving and impoverishing them through dishonest acts.

Similarly, Nigeria’s fight against corruption seems to be circuitous and ineffective for as Ogbeide (2012: 16) observes, “if corruption in the 1990s were endemic, corruption since the return of democracy in 1999 has been legendary”. Another contemporary Nigerian poet, Idris Amali (2012: 100) depicts this circuitous nature of corruption and Nigeria’s democratic experiments in a title poem entitled “Back Again at the Foothills of Greed”. In the poem, he wonders what leads Nigeria to obviously re-cycle the same fractured political route that is replete with corruption: “We are back again/ At the gate of greed//In our blind eyes/... We are back again/At the fortress of our nation’s faith ... /We are back again at another full moon of ‘chop and chop’/When the chased eagles and vultures/Have perched on low shrubs/But with their surgical talons poised/To further empty our bowels.” According to Adebani (2010: 106), “governance and public office in Africa, from Nigeria to Kenya” ... are transformed into an “eatery” in which people either take their turn to eat or are invited to “come and eat”. Amali points to this when he writes that Nigeria is back again at another full moon of “chop and chop”. In the same poem, he wonders why Nigerians celebrate dishonesty. Ogundiya (2009: 291) corroborates this when he notes that “... anti corruption policies in Nigeria are mere political facade designed to buy political support and loyalty from the citizenry”. Sadly, most Nigerians clap for those who siphon the national treasury even when they are to bear the brunt of such action. Such behaviour is symptomatic of some obnoxious colonial mentalities, for in the pre-colonial era there was so much intimacy and familiarity such that most Nigerians lived in closely-knitted communities where it was difficult for people to flagrantly indulge in corrupt practices. With the inception of administrative governance and large-scale commerce during the colonial period, other levels of responsibilities emerged as Mbembe (1992: 4) rightly observes: “... the post-colony is made up not of one single ‘public space’ but of several, each having its own separate logic yet nonetheless liable to be

entangled with other logics when operating in certain specific contexts: hence the post colonial ‘subject’ has to learn to bargain in this conceptual market place”. The meaning therefore is that in the post-colonial times, every Nigerian is not only a member of his closely-bonded community but a citizen of the Nigerian state with duties and responsibilities assigned to him in either private enterprise or public service. This post-colonial Nigerian is therefore expected to carry out some roles and render some services for the good of the state. However, one sad thing with colonialism is that it twisted the thinking and orientation of most Nigerians and also marooned their minds off the values of diligent work and moral precincts.

As Ekeh (1975: 102) puts it, colonialism foisted dual realms on Africans, thus making post-colonial Africans to be members of two publics namely, the “primordial” and “civic” publics. The resultant effect is that while the post-colonial African feels morally bound to his/her primordial public, he/she becomes extremely amoral when relating with the civic public. That is why a Nigerian for instance can be severely punished or ostracised if he misappropriates community or native-association’s fund while the same man is valorised and applauded by members of the primordial public if he embezzles government (civic) funds. He identifies two forms of corruption orchestrated by such disposition: “The first is what is regarded as embezzlement of funds from the civic public, from the government The second is the solicitation and acceptance of bribes from individuals seeking services provided by the civic public by those who administer these services” (Ekeh 1975: 110). It is this tendency to condemn corruption at the communal level but encourage and promote it at the governmental or state level that has made Nigeria to be encircling the foothill of greed and also with no significant progress towards reducing the level of corrupt practices.

Also, Amali’s disposition to corruption heightens in a more recent collection, *Effega: The War of Ants* (2014). Most of the poems in the text are devoted to the war against corruption through sensitisation of the populace. For instance, in the “Dedication”, he laments, “As this land/Prides and strives on great fertile filth/... Below the huge mountains of filth/Punctuating the nook and cranny of our land/... As the rule of theft and misrule/Have become the rule of law/The powerful have turned into legion of looters/ Complete in the progressive looting race/Umpired by the Chief thief of the State ...” (*Effega: The War ...* 2014: 5). Amali’s choice of words in the expression “Chief thief of the State” is ingenious as some Nigerian civilian Presidents have been discovered to have been aiding graft. With such scenarios, who then would implement the laws against mindless acquisition of wealth and senseless quest for mundane things at the expense of others? With corruption at every nook and cranny, Amali (2014: 33) feels that Nigerians are the ones killing themselves with their attitude to avaricious acquisition of wealth:

God no longer kills, but we are our own killers
As there is no honest eye
Bestowed on us to see our naked problems.

In another poem with the title “The Hyenas are Here” he represents corrupt politicians with symbols like “hyenas”, “leopard”, “jackals”, “wolves” and warns that “Until these plutocrats are cleared by:/Hunger-stricken snares/ And ravenous hunters at arms/Our barns of grains and groundnuts/Stand on steads/Cordoned by ravenous rodents” (Amali 2014: 36).

Similarly, the theme of seeing corruption as a form of carnivorousness of the Nigerian state is also explored by Musa Idris Okpanachi (2005: 327) who in a poem “The Eaters of the Living” chants:

Ours is a nation of the eaters
We eat everything and everyone
We eat like the termites
We eat like the cancer cells
We eat like acids.

Because of rampant and hydra-headed corruption in the country, people’s dreams, goals, aspirations hopes and visions are constantly squelched and gobbled up while corruption-induced hunger and diseases decimate the population daily. By carefully selecting and using the highly metaphoric word “eat” in the excerpt above, the poet exposes how corruption gravely affects the poor by depleting nationalistic zeal and dampening patriotic attitudes.

A major tenet of new historicism views literary texts as “cultural products that are rooted in their time and place, not individual genius that transcend them (Parvini 2018: 239)”. Most contemporary Nigerian poets reflect the endemic nature of corruption in their poetry especially in government institutions like the prisons sector as illustrated below:

The market economy of the Nigerian prison industry
is such that abducted bags of beans and garri
get auctioned at markets whose target clients
barter their souls to get at the crumbs.

Analysing the corrupt machinations of both the staff and inmates of Nigeria prisons in the above poem entitled “The Prison Industry”, Amanze Akpuda (2000: 28) reveals a lot of black-market racketeering especially in situations where foodstuff like beans and garri meant for prisoners are siphoned and taken to the open market where they are sold, leaving prisoners to languish in hunger. The poet’s style here is quite striking as he creatively employs economic terms and indices to bring to the fore corrupt exploitation and malfeasance in Nigerian prisons. If a correctional facility like the prison is a

rotten business centre, as illustrated above, one wonders what the state is of other government agencies.

Poetic Renderings of Corruption's Effects

Apart from exposing instances of corruption in Nigeria, new Nigerian poets have also uncovered its devastating effects and terrible consequences on the Nigerian nation. As Okwuagbala (2020: 10) points out "corruption in Nigeria hurts a lot of people as the money that would have been used to reduce poverty in the country is being channelled into the pocket of a select few". In his collection, *Song of the Marketplace*, Niyi Osundare (1983: 9), reveals that corruption has thrown up a situation where there is extreme poverty in a land that is supposed to be rich. In the poem "Excursions", the poet speaker takes a tour of a Nigerian street and shockingly discovers a spate of ravaging poverty: "We see village boys' kwashiorkor bellies/ Hairless heads impaled on pin necks/and ribs baring the benevolence of the body". Relating this to corruption he sings: "These sightless sockets/Burn indictory gazes into/Heavy pockets/and vaults of hoarded loot/These swinging stumps/Are pointers to/The skull behind our corpulent grins" (*Songs of the ...* 11). This passage indicts Nigeria's mismanagement of a large volume of the nation's resources; its assets are misappropriated and whisked away to foreign banks. It is as if Nweke (2019: 2) has this in mind when he asserts that, "corruption enables few privileged individuals to convert what belongs to the general public to their personal properties which at the long run results to widespread poverty and poor state of infrastructure amongst other societal problems".

Another sad imprint of corruption identified by Osundare in his poetry is military intervention in Nigeria's politics and against popular resistance to governmental corruption and malfeasance. Capturing the invasion of Nigeria's democratic sensibilities by gun-toting soldiers, Osundare (1983: 14) puts it thus: "In the cities/People whisper/About fortified kings/Ruling by boot and butt,/Sirens knifing through/The turbid/Squalor/of slums like the butchers saw/Dancing through the abdomen/Of a coughing cow/They put a price on wit/Stocking dissident throats/With bullets from foreign lands." However, in the name of blotting civilian rot, the Nigerian military is painted to have spilled more ills. The corrupt activities of politicians and the citizenry usually cause soldiers to abandon their constitutional role of securing the territorial integrity of a nation to rather meddle in the governance of a state. This act is a mark of corruption as it breeds nepotism and subversion of rules. Dramatising such brutalisation and pauperisation of the masses by the military during the heydays of military rule, Esiaba Irobi (2009: 84) in his play *Cemetery Road* labels the military as a fruitless non-productive sector: "Of all the professions in the world, and of all the classes of human beings, the one that produces nothing, absolutely nothing is the military class In what

century, through the ages, have soldiers contributed to human progress and civilization except through destruction?" To him, the kind of corruption perpetuated by the Nigerian military, during their reign, made it look as if Nigeria were being ferried in a hearse down the cemetery road. Amali in his collection, *Generals without War* (2000: 17) portrays this when he reels out the following as the negative effects of military rule in the poem "The Generals":

School teachers and civil servants
sing dirges of unpaid wages
as University dons survive on their failed shadows
from the decisions of our home-made generals
Who swagger across Europe with our money
For cure of stomach pains
Where millions of our money are coded.

Apart from owing salaries and wasting Nigeria's hard earned resources on frivolous medical tourism, military meddlesomeness negates the professionalism of soldiers. Politics creeps into the Nigeria's military, thus bequeathing the land with "civilianized-soldiers" whom Amali tags as "Generals Without War". Describing such soldiers in a poem of same title, Amali (2000: 14) argues that dabbling into politics makes them formless without fitness as well as half-baked money-mongers. "See now my brothers what greed has done ... / These generals shapeless as the baobab/ In glittering faces fail the obstacle test." In a poem entitled "Contractor Generals and Field-Marsahls", he berates this pedigree of soldiers whose stock in trade is to humiliate, intimidate and brutalise the masses:

Our men-at arms
have turned our guns on us
obsolete they may be
but I say
guns are what they still are
as barrels of gun not simply
to be cocked at one who knows no intrigue of guns.
Yet we see our barrels and bayonets pointed
daily at us.
(*Generals Without* 23)

According to Ogundiya (2009: 291), "of all forms of corruption, political corruption has remained a major obstacle to national progress in Nigeria". Corruption produces politicians who make empty promises that deny the people the opportunity of reaping democratic dividends. Such fantastical promises have left Nigeria with an impotent democracy as Odia Ofemun (1980: 4) remarks in his poem "A Footnote I" which is contained in his popular collection, *The Poet Lied*:

In our model democracy
the magic promises of yesterday
lie cold like mounds of dead castle
along caravans that lead to nowhere.

Ofeimun's diction in the above lines is quite strategic and ironical. There is a sharp contrast between the imagery of an exemplary democracy and the "magic promises" it projects, and these "abracadabra" promises are hefty but worthless "mounds of dead castle": they are dormant and make no positive contribution to the people's future. It reveals the inherent dangers in a political environment dominated by sweet-mouthed politicians. The underlying fact here is that it is from the corrupt, uninformed and gullible electorate that sweet-mouthed sycophants emerge. Such people are ready to take little stipends as inducement to become part of a rented crowd whose stock-in-trade is to march in support of leaders who brutalise them.

Profligacy which leads to mismanagement and misapplication of government funds is another significant effect of corruption. This is the crux of Joe Ushie's poem entitled "Musa's Legacy". In the poem Ushie portrays wasteful spending as an arch-example of corruption. Revealing that Africa has been saddled with a long history of squander-mania, he presents the historical (mis)deeds of a past African Emperor, Mansa Kanka Musa, by recounting the utterly extravagant historic pilgrimage he is touted to have made from Africa to Mecca with tons of gold and ivory. Mansa Kanka Musa is said to have shared and distributed bars of gold and ivory to people while making the pilgrimage, only to borrow resources on his way back from the same people he splashed his gold and ivory largesse on. At the beginning of the poem Ushie (1998: 14) fetes him with laudatory epithets. "Ebullient son of our ebony race/Ever-roaring lion of the savannah/Evergreen iroko of a forlorn homestead/Ever-glittering star of our land ... /Seven hundred seasons going to roost/And you remain visible/Like the ongoing scar of slave trade" (p. 14). Then he remembers the pilgrimage. "How can we forget 1235 a.d. and/Your long-reigning pilgrimage to Mecca?"

How can we forget the blinding glitter
Of your resplendent procession?
Or your caravan of 60,000 men
Your personal retinue of 12,000 slaves
Shocked with a princely outfit
How can we forget your baggage train
Of 80 camels each bearing slave-dug gold? (*Eclipse in Rwanda* 15)

Recalling that Mansa Musa freely distributed all these treasures during the onerous trip, he sadly comments that he returned broke: "And, broke, you borrowed from same soil/Where your gold had sunk/At sky-high profit rates." (*Eclipse in* 15) Going by his calculation and the fact that most of Mansa

Musa's generational descendants which he enumerated in this poem – “Babangida, Abacha,/... /Bokassa ... /Ahmadu Ahidjo ... /Mobutu Sese Sekou” (*Eclipse in* 15) are said to have massively enriched themselves with state treasury and decorated and splattered corruption everywhere in their country, Emperor Mansa Kanka Musa could by Ushie's standard, be boldly referred to as the grandfather of corruption in Africa!

Ushie is not alone in tracing the historical evolution of corruption in Africa; Chinua Achebe highlights this in his novel *Things Fall Apart* wherein he captures Africa at the point of the advent of colonialism as he presents the first manifestation of unwholesome act of corruption during the arrest and detention of six Umuofia elders (including Okonkwo) by the white District Commissioner. Court messengers, whose identities are revealed to be Africans, inflated the fines imposed on the elders: “On the morning after the village crier's appeal, the men of Umuofia met in the market place and decided to collect without delay two hundred and fifty bags of cowries to appease the white man. They did not know that fifty bags, would go to the court messengers who had increased the fine for their purpose” (Achebe 1958: 139). Such an act of graft reveals the process through which corruption infiltrated the rank and file of the early governmental systems in Africa. However, the issue of the outright endorsement of one's act of graft by his primordial constituency is a subject matter in Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* where instead of condemning Obi Okonkwo for collecting bribe and being subsequently convicted of the crime, his kinsmen lament his inexperience and the fact that he collected a mere pittance:

The President [of Umuofia Progressive Union] said that it was a thing of shame for a man in the senior service to go to prison for twenty pounds. He repeated twenty pounds, spitting it out, “I am against people reaping where they have not sown. But we have a saying that if you want to eat a toad you should look for a fat and juicy one”.

“It is all lack of experience” said another man. “He should not have accepted the money himself. What others do is tell you to go and hand it to their houseboy”. (*No Longer at Ease* 5)

Instead of cautioning and condemning Obi Okonkwo for his nefarious act; instead of being deeply troubled that one of their finest educated *nouveau riche*, who is supposed to be one of the upright and leading administrative icons of the emergent nation, has soiled himself by taking monetary and sexual bribes, the kinsmen rather rationalise the issue.

Apart from drawing people's attention to the various dimensions and effects of corruption, some new Nigerian poets have in strong terms condemned acts of corruption in the political space. In a poem “With Which Conscience” which is part of a collection entitled ... *and Pigs Shall Become House Cleaners*, Darlington Ogbonnaya (2009: 23), questions the rationale some

politician would apply in governing the people and also fight corruption after bribing and rigging their ways into power:

With which conscience
Shall you govern the state
When you are sitting
On a hijacked seat?
With which voice
Shall you sing anti-graft choruses
With which bills
Shall you transform our lives
When your senses are polluted
By bags of notes?

Having most times gotten to power through dubious means, the poet-personae is of the view that most Nigerian politicians lack the moral audacity and fibre to chastise those around them who abuse their offices for personal gains knowing that they too cut ethical corners to ascend to their own political positions.

In a similar poem with the title “If Only They Will Count the Votes”, another poet, Eddie Onuzurike (2005: 348) through his poet persona sternly warns politicians to steer clear of him with their ill-gotten wealth:

Keep your money
That is bereft of truth
I'll rather keep my vote
Until you acquire some honour
Keep your rice/
Which is full of political weevils
Evils of deceit, enslavement
And possible death of conscience.

The situation is even worse in recent times for according to “a survey data collected in May/June 2019, 31 per cent of adult population of Nigeria reported that they were personally offered money or a favour in exchange for their vote in the last [2019] national or state election” (*Corruption in Nigeria: Patterns and Trends* 2019: 61). As if he has such scenario in mind Eddie Onuzurike (2005: 348) further sings: “Now that I have my voice/I will avoid your money/Scorn your rice and dread your drinks/If only they will count the votes.” The poet-personae would prefer to spurn all entreaties to be bribed to mortgage his vote but he is afraid about whether the electoral system would allow his vote to count.

Conclusion

According to Mambrol (2020: 2) “one aim of New Historicism is to figure the relationship between texts and the cultural systems in which they were produced”. Bearing this in mind, this article has examined how corruption is creatively recreated in some works of poetry by some new Nigerian poets. In doing so, the poems are discussed *pari-pasu* in relation to specific political and historical events as well as in relation to significant commentary about these events and the problems of corruption. From the foregoing, the study discovered that contemporary Nigerian poets have portrayed various aspects of corruption in Nigeria through their artful use of language. They have also made staunch poetic representations of the glaring but sordid effect of corruption in the Nigerian society as well as its historical undertones. Through their artful deployment of poetry, these poets have largely indexed and historicised the various manifestations of corruption in Nigeria and its effects on the populace.

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