

Ethnic; or National: Contemporary Yoruba Poets and the Imagination of the Nation in *Wa Gbo ...*

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Summary

Arguments and debates about the appropriate linguistic medium for the expression of African literature continue to be recurrent. One such argument against the literature is the assumption that even at its very best, it can only serve a provincial purpose, as it is ethnic-based. Against this backdrop, the article seeks to tackle the reductionist conception of African literature written in African languages by arguing that in spite of the limits imposed on it by the fact of linguistic provinciality, this category of literature does more than articulating exclusively ethnic sentiments and modes of nationalism as a counterforce to the literature written in European languages. To do this, the article examines *Wa Gbo ...*, an anthology of contemporary Yoruba poems. I argue that beyond a body of poetry that seeks the consolidation of Yoruba nationalism, the value of this anthology lies substantially in the way most poets centralise the discourse of postcolonial Nigeria by engaging national issues around questions of development. The article concludes that perhaps another way in which the relevance of African literature written in African languages may be assessed is not so much by way of the linguistic medium of expression as the national concerns it articulates.

Opsomming

Dieselfde argumente en debatte oor die geskikte taalmedium waarin Afrika-literatuur uitgedruk moet word, kom steeds voortdurend voor. Een van die argumente teen Afrikaliteratuur berus op die veronderstelling dat dit, selfs op sy allerbeste, slegs 'n provinsiale doel kan dien omdat dit etnies gegrond is. Teen hierdie agtergrond het hierdie artikel ten doel om die reduksionistiese opvatting oor Afrikaliteratuur wat in Afrikatale geskryf is, aan te spreek deur aan te voer dat hierdie kategorie literatuur – ten spyte van die beperkings waaraan dit deur taalkundige provinsialiteit onderwerp word – meer doen as om uitsluitlik etniese sentimente en vorme van nasionalisme as 'n teenmag van die literatuur wat in Europese tale geskryf is, te verwoord. Om dit te doen, kyk ek na *Wa Gbo ...*, 'n bundel kontemporêre Joroeba-gedigte. Ek voer aan dat buiten gedigtemateriaal wat daarop gemik is om Joroeba-nasionalisme te konsolideer, die waarde van hierdie digbundel grotendeels lê in die manier waarop die meeste digters die diskoers van postkoloniale Nigerië sentraliseer deur nasionale kwessies rondom ontwikkelingsvrae te bekyk. Ek kom tot die gevolgtrekking dat 'n

ander moontlike manier om die relevansie van Afrikaliteratuur wat in Afrikatale geskryf is te beoordeel, nie soseer te doen het met die taal waarin dit geskryf is nie, maar met die nasionale besorgdhede wat dit uitdruk.

Introduction

In what appeared then to be a prophecy of doom, Obi Wali had sometime in 1963 warned that should African literature continue to be written in Western/colonial languages, the practice would not only be deplorable, but would ultimately lead to a dead end. The responses his essay generated from African writers and critics of various hues and regions were unprecedented. Beyond its pan-African texture, Wali's thesis also had writers debating what should constitute national literatures. Implicit in the foregoing is the binary permutation that the critical articulation forced between the category of African literature written in indigenous languages and the other group written in colonial languages. Serious as the issue raised by Wali was, it was interpreted to be a matter of opinion. Expectedly, African writers, critics and other stakeholders found themselves taking sides. Indeed, the development was fashioned in the mode of ordering of difference which brought about, if we could choose, a mutual suspicion between African-language literature and African literature of colonial-language expression. The suspicion has since been partly responsible for why from time to time the debates about what should constitute national literature is based, among other things, on the criterion of the linguistic medium of expression.

But also implicit in Wali's thesis is the suggestion that African-language literatures constituted an endangered species on account of the neglect they suffered and what appeared to be the imbalance in the patronage of the literature written in African languages and that written in European languages. Therefore, the cul de sac of African literature on account of the patronage of European languages is two-pronged: if we continue to write African literature in European languages, we will lose out on the development potentials of our continent; it also means that we will deny our African languages the opportunity to serve the purpose of literary expression and ultimately find their way into the list of world-language literatures. Those who toe this second line of argument can even fortify this position by drawing illustration from the evolution of some European languages like English and French. They were once relegated to the background and denigrated as mere vernaculars which paled behind a colonial language like Latin. Their development today as world languages was also partly due to the audacity of those French and English writers who in the face of Roman imperialism ignored negative criticisms to externalise and inscribe their literary urge in the then "vernaculars".

Though not immediately, Wali's intervention or interruption – depending on which side of the divide we find ourselves – has continued to produce

converts in various circles. On the one hand, a category of writers sticks to writing in African languages, strongly persuaded that the non-utilisation of African languages for literary expression is an indication of an intentional effort to spurn the wealth of African resources and fritter them away. The understanding is so generic as to include what results when Africans are trained exclusively in Western languages and the sense of loss that their parents and the community suffer in the end. Ishola's (1992: 17) popular illustration of the expression of this sense of loss will be apt: "We spend all our money sending them to school, but when they become capable they stop talking to us. Isn't that a big loss?" Ishola himself is a prominent writer whose chosen language of expression is Yoruba. On the other hand, there is another category which can be limned as constituting a school of "prodigals" in the sense that after writing in European languages for decades, they have decided to return to writing in African languages. Ngugi readily comes to mind in the assessment of this category of African writers. It is often argued that perhaps the significance of his linguistic switch from writing in English to Kikuyu is best measured by the level of social and political consciousness it produced among his Kikuyu people of Kenya, especially as mediated through the Kamiriithu Cultural Centre between 1976 and 1977 (Currey 2008: 114). It was the level of insecurity and quandary it created in the psyche of the autocratic government of Arap Moi that resulted in his imprisonment and subsequent exile. What this suggests is that the form of social and political consciousness – to say nothing of the cultural – that Ngugi's literary intervention produced would not have been as consequential if he had continued to write exclusively in English. Yet, Ngugi still, as a matter of necessity, does a self-translation of his work from Kikuyu into English.

But there is no linearity to the tropes of the school of "prodigals" as there are various strands to how their return is orchestrated. Kofi Anyidoho, the Ghanaian poet of note, for instance, has adopted a convenient approach of straddling two linguistic media, in which case he now writes originally in both English and Ewe (see Anyidoho 2003: 3-20). This is unlike in the past when he wrote exclusively in English. In his own explanation in the essay "The Back without Which There Is No Front" (2003), this is the logic of necessarily looking backward in order to move forward. This, however, must be construed as meaning more than the mere invocation of pre-colonial African memory for the framing of a postcolonial present, as writing in Ewe is taken to be as serious as writing in English. To Anyidoho, therefore, the immediacy of functionality that comes with writing in African languages requires that the mass media be exploited as a simulation of the old/primordial African village square in order to reach out to a large number of

people at the same time (2003, p. 12).¹ The result is a momentum of a performative tradition that is gaining popularity by the day not only in Ghana, but in a number of other African countries where, by enlisting the new media technology, writers today “mike what they like”, to echo the South African poet, Magogodi (2005: 1). Importantly, for Anyidoho, it is in striking a balance between the utilisation of available indigenous and foreign languages for literary expression that African nations would be able to credibly take on their developmental challenges.

In other regions of Africa, the above line of argument as concerning what should be designated national literature can take an entirely different dimension altogether. In Ethiopia, for instance, where there is a vibrant and long-established culture of patronising indigenous languages, especially Amharic which occupies a better place of pride when compared to, say, English or French, the question is not whether African literature written in African languages can be designated national literature, but whether any literature written in a foreign language can ever be estimated as constituting national literature (Kurtz 2007: 187). In most African countries where colonialism ran its full imperial course, the struggle between African languages and Western languages for literary expression is not only ongoing, but more often than not, the literature written in African languages tends to be reckoned in poor relations to the literature written in the colonial/Europhone languages. To that extent, what constitutes national literature in the estimation of most nations is what is written in the colonial languages. The argument often put forward for this is the linguistic multiplicities of African nations which makes it difficult, if not impossible, to accord a language a national status, so much so that the literature produced in this language can be linguistically accessible to all.² As a debate that has spanned over four decades, and which has come to be situated in a periodisation schema, similar to the way African literature of European linguistic expression is also periodised (Barber 1995: 3), the real challenge that African-language literature faces in its marginalisation is, among other things, the way what it expresses is glossed over.

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1. For Anyidoho (2002: 15-16), it is no longer possible to compose poetry and have it committed exclusively to print; it should at least be simultaneously aural. This has informed the production of his poetry in both print and in the “recorded living voice”. The appropriation of his Ewe mother tongue in his new creative resolve serves to foreground his radical persuasion about the need for his poetry to speak first to his people in his African language while it speaks to a larger world audience.
 2. Even when Swahili appears to enjoy this status in most parts of the East African region, it cannot be said to have earned the full status of the medium for national literary expression in most of these countries.

The said discounting of what is expressed in African-language literature manifests in the reduction of such literature to the category of an art, serving ethnic interests, or at best predisposed towards the consolidation of provincial nationalism (Adejunmobi 1999: 581). The Babel-of-tongues explanation is mostly given for why according to the status of national literature to an African-language literature would be difficult. As this is the case in most African countries, one begins to admit that the case of Amharic in Ethiopia, and to some extent Kiswahili in East Africa, are isolated instances of the privileging of African-language literature as national literature. Coupled with the foregoing is the politics of critical reception of African texts as necessarily amenable to the responses of Western critical standards, in which case what makes it to the list of canonical texts in Africa is a function of directions in Western critical reception. On this score, the scramble for Canonising African texts is not only done using Western critical models, but is also based almost solely on the accessibility of the texts in European languages.³ This high premium placed on African literature written in European languages accounts for the second-fiddle role to which African-language literature has been abandoned. It may also explain partly why *Things Fall Apart* has received little attention in the area of translation into African languages. For, while the text has garnered a phenomenal global critical acclaim, also substantially because of the privilege it is accorded in Western critical paradigm (Okunoye 2010: 42), and may have been translated into as many as 50 languages, it is not certain whether 10% of these languages are African languages. The epiphany on the statistics of translation speaks more to the low esteem of African-language literature than to the reception of the text on the African continent. Viewed from this angle, the earlier hint at the endangered status of African-language literature must then be construed as all-encompassing, as even the most critically acclaimed of African texts is no less endangered once we reckon that African literature of any medium should be geared towards an evolutionary process of development. Or of what value would a text like *Things Fall Apart* be if it were translated into many languages other than African and were on account of this better appreciated by people in foreign lands than by people on the continent for whom Achebe's imagination of an "imagined community" makes immediate sense? The irony is made more disconcerting, knowing that an American canonical text like Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* has been translated into 80 African languages (Hofmeyr 2001: 322). In the end, the dead end that Wali forecast could be seen as directed in all its ambiguities towards a generic texture of African literature written in both European and African languages. But while the resolution of

3. This is not unconnected with why Ngugi, as a matter of compulsion still has to translate his work from Kikuyu into English in order for every work to muster adequate critical acclaim.

the linguistic stalemate engendered by this circumstance of double linguistic tragedy is still being awaited, it has become impossible to gloss over the estimation of African literature written in indigenous languages as serving no national purpose on account of the limitation of ethnic space and accessibility. To be sure, I want to argue that going by the content of some of the texts written in African languages, it will serve the critical circle well to review its assessment of literature in this category and measure its values more by paying attention to the issues and concerns it raises within its apprehension of discourses in the national domain than by the linguistic medium for the expression of this literature. It is against this backdrop that I examine the coalescence of national concerns and the imagination of the Nigerian nation in the work of contemporary Yoruba poets in *Wa Gbo*

Admittedly, the anthology is structured to reflect the primacy of Yoruba nationalism. This is clear from what is perceived as the conscious selection of the opening and closing poems. Interestingly, Bisi Ogunsina's opening poem which is titled "Yoruba" (Adeleke 2001: 1-2),⁴ reels off the panegyrics of the Yoruba, merging primordial feats with those of modernity while concluding with a call for greater unity among Yoruba people for the sustenance of a distinguished and formidable tradition that is as local as it is global. A similar sentiment runs through the last poem, Aderemi Balogun's "Ajosepo" [Cooperation] (*Gbo* 192-194), which deplores disunity and separatism among the different stocks of the Yoruba ethnic group and calls for a transnational banding together. While ethnic consciousness is obvious in these two poems and to that extent speaks to the ascendancy of subnationalism in postcolonial Africa, as events at the national level continue to indicate a high level of marginalisation of ethnic and regional interests,⁵ the fact remains that the most ethnocentric agenda within a national space is alive to the supremacy of the nation. This then must be seen as accounting for the location of the national consciousness and concerns in the poetic expression of most of the contemporary poets featured in *Wa Gbo* ...

Articulations of National Concerns in Yoruba Poetry

The designation of Nigeria as a "mere geographic expression" may have stemmed from the flawed colonial lumping together of primordially disparate ethnicities, kingdoms and empires.⁶ The administrative convenience it

4. Subsequent references to *Wa Gbo* ... (Adeleke 2001) are indicated by *Gbo* followed by the page number(s).

5. See Olaoluwa (2009: 176).

6. The quote is popularly arrogated to the Yoruba nationalist Obafemi Awolowo.

provided for the performance of colonial power left the nation with a geographical and political legacy that continues to pose a challenge to self-governance in the wake of colonialism. Going down memory lane, Oyerinde in “Oke Isoro Naijiria” [The Mountainous Problem of Nigeria] recalls various critical stages in Nigeria’s political history chiding all parties concerned and identifying disunity as the nation’s albatross:

Oke isoro taani nile yii,
 Okan soso poro lo je.
 Aamu to n da wa loride-edede yii,
 Won o pe meji.
 Ainisokan lagba oran
 Taa da ni Naijiria.

[The problem that bedevils us in this land,
 Is only one huge problem.
 The sorrow that we face in this nation,
 Is only one,
 Disunity is the chief crime
 That we have committed in Nigeria.]

(*Gbo* 25)

Already the poet’s excoriation of all for the lopsided nature of things in the nation contests the notion that African-language literature operates essentially within the domain of the ethnic. It is in this wise clear that the space of the national is paramount in the imagination of Nigeria as an “imagined community”, even if the initial configuration was done without regard for the distinctiveness of ethnic histories. To that extent, his identification of disunity goes to show the imagination and desire of the ideal in the making of a truly great nation, where ethnicity is expected to be history.

What is more, the imagination of Oyerinde must be appropriately situated within the domain of memory, and as that which gives cogency to the processes of the imagination of collective memory. As Nora explicates, memory and history are constitutive ingredients in the production of national and collective consciousness (Nora in Moudileno 2009: 200). Oyerinde’s production of the Nigerian memory and history takes into account the travails of the nation which began with the scuttling of the first republic and the civil war it engendered. Taking seriously the fantasy of ritual and sacrifice, he conceptualises the death of Nigeria’s civil and military figures in her politics as constituting part of the sacrifice made in the hope of forging a lasting national unity. Some of these names include Tafawa Balewa, Okotiebo, Belo, Akintola, Irosin, Ifeajuna, Nzeogwu, Banjo, etc. Knowing how much the nation has lost in the course of sustaining its unity, he decries all comments and stereotypical expressions that foreground ethnic parochialism rather than foster national unity:

Latonilo, Naijiria mo ki yin ni lo.
 Gbogbo eni to b ape Ngozi ni Yanmirin,
 Ota orile-ede yi lo je
 Gbogbo eeyan to ba pe Chukwudi lajokuta-mamumi
 Awon lagba odale.
 Eni pe Adeolu be *beerebe bansa*,
 Oun lolori awon abaluje.
 Gbogbo eni to b ape Ibrahim ni Ganbari
 Agba olote lo ya
 Ki Yoruba ma wo Igbo bi orogun
 Ki Nupe o mo Efiki lebi won
 KA wusa pelu Fulani o ye
 Foju oniwayo wo Urobo.
 Ka fera wa denu.
 Ka yee foju eru wo rawa.
 Ani KA wuas o pe Igbo ni "Dan uwana" Ki Yoruba o pe Mumuye ni
 "omo iya mi"
 Ki Igbo o pe Kanuri ni "Kkoke Nwanem"
 Imeya o pe.
 E je a mu un kuro loro wa.
 Imeya o pe, ara mi,
 E je ka fife lo po

[All ye Nigerians, take my warning.
 Whoever calls Ngozi Yanmirin,
 Is an enemy of this nation
 All those who call Chukwudi the-one-who-absorbs-stones-without-the-aid-
 of-water
 Are arch-betrayers,
 Whoever calls Adeolu a despicable barbarian
 Is the head of slanderers.
 Whoever calls Ibrahim Gamabari
 Is a ringleader of rebellion
 Yoruba should not see Igbo as a rival
 The Nupe group should also see the Efik as belonging
 The Hausa and the Fulani
 Should no longer see Urhobo people as frauds.
 Love for one another should be sincerely from the heart
 No one should label the other a slave.
 Let Hausa call Igbo my brother
 Let Yoruba call Mumuye "my mother's child"
 Ethnic essentialism is no virtue.
 Let Igbo call Kanuri "my own brother"
 Let us do away with it.
 My people, ethnic essentialism does not pay,
 Let us live together in love]

(Gbo 28)

The stereotypical labelling of one another as a quotidian experience by various ethnic groups has unfortunately found its way into the discourse of the popular. But it is even more disturbing to know that there is a sense in which the binary exclusion it suggests in an “Us-Them” manner has over the decades sanctioned the direction and texture of the performance of power. Put differently, if the literature of hegemony is clear in stating how the ruling class seeks endorsement through the patronage of popular culture (Chirambo 2009: 43), it has become necessary to interrogate the singularity and unidirectional affirmation of this process of hegemonic formation. This is necessary because hegemony, I want to argue in view of this poem, is not always a construction of the ruling class, but a legacy that is invented within the domain of popular culture and pushed over to the political class for endorsement and utilisation in the business of governance. A contention of this nature also challenges the view that the ruling elite class belongs to high culture and hands down or imposes its taste on the masses, who on account of their limited privileges with relation to power, accept the tastes of high culture even if affording it is elusive (Brown 1997:14). The alternative culture of the popular that the masses create in response is thus considered to be inferior and as such falls into the category of low culture. Nevertheless, reviewing this position especially in the African context is necessary because the ruling elite, in spite of its apparent exclusive configuration, is still a product of “low culture”. The process of socialisation in the formative years of every member of the ruling class must be seen as inclusive of the orientation of popular culture. Therefore, in the poet’s call for the elimination of ethnicity and the favouritism and exclusionism that it breeds, the call is ultimately directed at the Nigerian leadership, as once it is able to demonstrate a commitment toward the execution of developmental goals without recourse to ethnicity, there is a sense in which this will rub off positively on the popular and quotidian experience of inter-ethnic interaction. On this score, the conception of political power and hegemony must be seen as reciprocal: emanating from the ruling elite as it does also from the masses.

In “Naira N Ra” [Naira Rots/Crawling Naira] the national concern of Oyerinde is further foregrounded by the consciousness that the naira, the Nigerian currency, has suffered an unprecedented depreciation. His show of concern is best appreciated when attention is paid to his deployment of the antinomies of the past and the present, where the invocation of memory stimulates a celebration of the high value of the nation’s currency, but the evaluation of its present value inspires a lamentation analogous to tragedy and loss. In this invocation of memory, the strength of the poem lies in its comparative approach which, relying on indices of past national development and the high value of the naira among other national currencies, especially the convertibles, initiates a kind of epic in which the past heroism of the naira stands out:

Iwo lo de Faranse
 Too se furoonu mole,
 Too doju towo won ...
 O ko won ni pijo
 O ko won ni rinooti pada bo
 O dAmerika o da won ka.
 O da won ka
 O la Dola mole o la peregede.
 Dola doabale.
 Won da o lola,
 O di dola nigbekun wa le.
 O ko won lapo,
 O ko won lorun
 Kaye le maa teriba fun wa.
 O deru jeje loju pon-un.
 O o se Limosin-in-in-in kan ku sibe.
 Ija Iwo pelu pon-un loju oba Geesi ni.
 O n mi pokanpokan
 O yi I somi
 O daa geerege woodoo Temusi.
 Titi pon-un n saponle re
 To doable, to kan saara ...
 Bo o rinhooho woja Jepaanu
 Dansinni, Toyota, Misibusi oun Idaya Oloye
 Ni won fi n ro o pe o kale nibe ...

[You got to France
 And drowned their money,
 Indeed, you shamed their currency ...
 You made a spoil also of their Renault cars
 In America, you single-handedly outwrestled them.
 You bought their Peugeot cars
 You subdued the land
 You threw the dollar triumphantly.
 Before you, the dollar lay supine.
 On account of your victory you were decorated with medals,
 You bound up the dollar and brought it home in captivity.
 In the exchange duel you emptied Americans' pockets,
 You made away with many thousands of dollars
 So they could hold us in high esteem.
 You bought out all the available limousines.
 You also had a duel with the pound sterling in the presence of the Queen.
 Becoming the *enfant terrible* before the pound.
 Making the pound gasp for breath
 You ultimately drowned the pound
 In the famed River Thames.
 Until the pound began to sing your praise
 Prostrating and giving you thumbs up ...
 In your travel to Japan

Automobiles like Dansani, Toyota, Mitsubishi and Daihatsu
Were used in paying homage to you ...]

(Gbo 30-31)

While the epic enactment of the naira is breathtaking, as it wrestles, battles and “throws” hard currencies from France to America, to Britain and to Japan, it also at the same time throws up issues around the foregrounding of ambiguity in this epic enactment. Put differently, heroic as the naira battle with other world currencies was in the 70s, a period of unprecedented economic boom for Nigeria, the trope of ambiguity is compelling in the way the poem simultaneously critiques Nigerians’ unbridled knack for consumerism. Worse still, this culture of consumerism could not and has not invented a credible counterforce of productivity . Whereas in a country like, say, Britain, where the naira was said to have wrestled with the pound sterling till it drowned the latter in the River Thames, Price argues that the invention and sustenance of consumer culture and consumerism had evolved from its earliest stage in the late 17th century as a direct consequence of industrial productivity, a social imaginary against which Jane Austin’s *Pride and Prejudice* unfolds (Wang 2007: 70).

Besides, the initial purchasing power reputation of the naira in post-colonial Nigeria, especially in the international market, also failed to take cognisance of the nationalism of Western consumerism which was from the beginning coalesced with capitalism. In this case, consumerism also presupposes a competitive internationalism in which only those countries with a balanced credential of consumption and industrialisation can make a success of their consumption spree. This much is clear in the contention of Bao (2008: 557), whose reflection on recent developments in China’s consumerism is unambiguous about the country’s maintenance of balance between consumption and production. The naira’s one-sided wrestle further highlights an irony that is best construed from the angle of Nigerians’ acclaimed religiosity. For ordinarily, a consumer society with an insatiable desire for exotic automobiles from Toyota to Mitsubishi, to Renault and American limousine should have come under the label of an agnostic orientation driven by unbridled hedonism. But here is a Nigeria that is perceived to be thoroughly religious, and as such should be conscious of the incompatibility between consumerism and religion, especially Christianity and Islam. But as Varul (2008: 238) explains, against the backdrop of the overwhelming force of consumerism in contemporary times, this irony continues to recede or be given little or no attention, as it is becoming increasingly imperative that even religion, at its most extremist, can no longer do without courting consumerism. Yet when done without taking into account the necessity of the schema of balance, as in Nigeria’s case, the result is the devaluation of a nation’s economy and currency.

In a similar vein, Raji’s “Nepa” takes on the question of institutional dysfunctionality, which often comes up in the discourse of governance. The

institution in the spotlight here is Nigeria's National Electric Power Authority (NEPA).⁷ Like in the criticism of the dwindling fortune of the naira by Oyerinde, Raji begins by foregrounding the place of this power institution in the development agenda of Nigeria. This ranges from the health sector to media, to sports and to industry. And as if to foreground the integral place of power supply to development in the nation, the persona assumes first the role of a critical court poet who must begin by reeling off a head-swelling panegyric to his king before launching his salvo of attacks. This criticism is always couched in cryptic innuendoes, as within this tradition, it is perhaps the only way by which the poet, from his marginal space, is able to "speak truth to power", to echo Said. It is in light of the foregoing that the significance of the opening lines of "Nepa" is crystallised:

Nepa pele
 Oko-mona se yeri
 Ota ayeraye okunkun
 Iyekan oorun
 Ibatan Osupa
 Alabase awon irawo
 Abibinu bii Sango⁸
 Abijawara bi Olukoso
 Ofi-onde-sakaba de bi o wu u
 Otawu wereke fun won nimoole

[I salute you Nepa
 The super source of lightening
 The everlasting arch-foe of darkness
 The sun's kinsman
 The moon's relation
 A collaborator with the stars
 The one whose fury is comparable to Sango's
 The swift one like Olukoso
 The one who with the belt can reach any height
 The one who with swiftness supplies power]

(Gbo 52)

The generous deployment of tropes of comparison serves to highlight what is ordinarily considered ideal about the institution charged with power sup-

7. The name has recently been changed to the Power Holding Company of Nigeria (PHCN); in spite of this, it has continued to betray traits that are even worse than those known prior to the change in designation.

8. The first national headquarters of NEPA in Lagos had in front of it an imposing statue of Sango, the Yoruba God of Thunder. It also explains why more often than not electric power is likened to Sango.

ply. Whether in the comparison to lightning or the sun or the moon or the stars, there is the constancy of an incandescent invocation that presents NEPA as an institution in a positive light. Against the positive representation and comparison of the ideal, which provokes a critical evaluation of nature and technology, the poet/persona thereafter presents us with a sordid picture of systemic dysfunctionality in the institution and how this dysfunctionality impacts on other areas of life in Nigeria. The indictment that results throws up the question about the success of the modernisation project in Africa in the sense that the kind of industrial triumphalism that the Industrial Revolution engendered in the West is yet to be replicated in most parts of Africa. Assured power supply, which is ideally the brief of NEPA, has been neglected, resulting in all manner of crises and emergencies in other sectors charged with the implementation of the modernisation project for the improvement of standards of living. This then explains why the persona navigates from the domain of praise to that of criticism of NEPA:

Igi araba ti i ba jalafeyinti fagbe leyin ilaagun
 Ilese NEPA to ye ki teru tomo
 Fowo soya fun anfaani ti o labuye
 Oun lo wa n fojoojumo daku daji
 To n rinrin ajo aiwitele
 To n tibi ka lo fee
 Gbemi oke aimoye
 To n se suta foro aje ilu ...

[The tree under which the farmer should repose after sweaty hours of labour
 The institution of NEPA for which all and sundry
 Should vouch on account of limitless opportunities
 Is the one that goes on and off on a quotidian scale
 Going on an unannounced journey
 Switching off unexpectedly
 Taking the lives of uncountable people
 And standing in the way of our economy ...]

(Gbo 53)

Therefore, the failure of NEPA is symptomatic of the failure of public institutions in Nigeria. Institutions like NEPA cannot be relied upon, especially not during moments of desired “repose” under the “araba” tree.

Recent theorising on resource curse tends to *orthodoxify* the established view that nations with abundant and exportable natural resources are on account of the resources plagued with economic, social and political problems, resulting in an aggravation rather than enhancement of living conditions. Critics of the radical hue are quick in interrogating the view, arguing that the developmental problems that rear their heads in resource-endowed nations can be arrogated more, for instance, to inveterate primordial rela-

tionship patterns that antedate colonialism (Kurtz 2009: 479), or that the problems of development can equally be ascribed to resources other than the exportable within the purview of the analysis of certain nations (Brass 2008: 523). Much as the radical view may hold water, the line of argument pursued in Yemi Adeyinka's "Epo" [Oil] does more to validate the position of orthodox resource curse. Beginning with the flawed, if not doomed attitude towards the valuation of the previously prized export/cash crops, the exploration and export of crude oil in commercial quantity results in the neglect of other sources of revenue in the nation:

Ojo tomo Aadamo mo nibere irorun
 Epo wolu, robi gbaye ise de
 Tewe tagba n n paye daa de
 Tomode tagba n dagiiri wale
 Ko seni fe sagbe
 Epo de, owo de
 Gbogbo koko, roba, kofi atepa datepa
 Igi koko digi idana
 Aye n wowo epo
 A kose aaro sile bomoge lo
 Epo n pawo wole
 A o reyin oro
 Olori n fowo faya
 Aranmada ile n fidi mule lairo

[Human virtue came to an end the day ease strolled into the land
 Oil strolled in, crude oil took over and the land is overwhelmed by jobs
 All exclaimed that ease had transformed the land
 Both the old and the young have returned home
 From their farmland, no more interested in farming
 Crude oil strolled in, wealth followed suit
 Cocoa, coffee and groundnuts were trampled upon
 Cocoa tree was turned into firewood
 All were hungry for the oil wealth
 We abandoned our morning vocation to engage in a romp with the ravishing
 belle
 The crude became the money spinner
 We had no thought for the consequences of easy wealth
 Leaders spent the money, taking new wives
 Skyscrapers took over the land]

(*Gbo* 127-128)

The impact of curse as seen in the above poem consists in the response to the discovery and production of crude oil in commercial quantities in Nigeria. It is a combination of complacency, destructivity and unbridled consumerism. Put differently, the curse is demonstrated in the folly that sanctions the abandonment of cocoa, rubber, and groundnuts to pursue a

national culture of lethargy and easy life defined by the commodification of wives and consumerism of magnificent mansions. To that extent, while the production of crude oil is a forward step, the progress it records is far outweighed by the backward steps of suspended productivity in other areas as in the case of the abandonment of farming. The symbolic significance of the abandon goes to the level of asserting that it is a vicarious commentary on how the Nigerian nation has ceased to make progress in other areas of its economy since it was suddenly admitted to the league of oil-producing nations. The economic monotony today impacts on the political and social life of the nation, causing continual unrest and disaffection in all parts of the country, as the fantasy of stupendous wealth of oil revenue has been found to be inadequate in catering for the nation.

Acts of socio-political and economic venality are perpetrated in resource-rich nations; these acts are also known to engender ethno-regional marginalisation, resulting in some instances in double paradox for those regions and ethnic groups that are said to constitute host communities of the resources. As political governance is in most cases pursued in a number of African countries without any regard for the sanctity of realising the common good, it is not uncommon for political actors in governance to exclude host communities from the resources. The response this usually provokes among the marginalised is an articulation of subnationalism both in thought and practice – which may be perceived by the state as an act of subversion and rebellion. It is against this backdrop that one begins to see the effect of the resource curse on the pacification measures that government adopts in countering the agitation for recognition by regions and ethnic nationalities that see themselves as victims of marginalisation, especially with respect to the distribution of resource wealth. At the core of the marginalisation culture of leadership is the pandering of leadership to ethnic sentiments:

The *leadership* in many *African* countries, with their ethnic diversities, is characterised by ethnic bias and favouritism, and citizens are thus treated unequally in many respects, particularly when it comes to national resource allocation and political representation. This breeds resentment and creates conditions for an ultimate rejection of the state by the frustrated and politically conscious masses. It is also tantamount to *corruption*, weakening the ability of the state to function efficiently, and is therefore anti-developmental.

(Richard 2009: 695; italics original)

The corrupt nature of African leadership together with the marginalisation it produces finds expression in Faleti's "Ikuu Saro-Wiwa" [The Death of Saro-Wiwa]. The poem engages the death of a writer and environmentalist of the Ogoni people. Saro-Wiwa's execution alongside eight others by the General Abacha government 1998 continues to inspire creativity not only in English but also in other African languages across Nigeria. In the case of

Faleti, the passion for an elegy on Saro-Wiwa is also in order because Faleti is one of the contemporary Yoruba poets whose influence goes beyond ethnic confinement. Moreover, Saro-Wiwa was a well-known member and also former president of the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA). Faleti's mourning of Saro-Wiwa was mourning a fellow writer; after all, "Nijo ti Saro-Wiwa ku/ Gbogbo akewi ló sofo" [On the day Saro-Wiwa died/ All poets/writers were thrown into mourning]. But rather than merely lamenting the execution of a writer and environmental activist whose agitation was for the improvement of the oil-producing area of his Ogoni people, Faleti problematises the death by giving cogency to the contention that the significance of Saro-Wiwa's death is witnessed in different ways by the Nigerian state, the Ogoni community in general, and his immediate family in particular (Campbell 2002: 39). But first, we come face to face with the grim reality of the double paradox of the resource curse of the Ogoni when Faleti paints the picture of what Ojaide (1999: 244) calls the paradox of sitting on oil and still remaining poor:

Iya ti n jOgoni
 Oun l'oro ti n ba Saro Wiwa lokan je
 Saro wi, e so o d'ogun!
 E wa wo akanpo iya
 Nibi t'elede gbe n pafo ninu akuro
 Ti oloko ko gbodo wi
 Omi riru ba'nu oko je
 Olowo elede n jedo eran, o n sanra
 Epoo Robi ko je keja o wa lodo
 Agbe ko r'omi t'o tutu t'o du mu,
 Omi ru, oko parun!
 Ona t'oloko n rin, e ti b'ona je
 Ajeji f'eyin ti nile
 Won n je gbadun ina oba,
 Atupa ti n seefin l'omo onile n tan
 E n jeun Ogoni
 Ogoni n f'owoo re ko 'kun ebi –
 Saro wi, e so o dogun.
 E n jeun Ogoni faa!
 Ogoni ko ri ninu dukia 'e gbojule

[The suffering of the Ogoni
 Was what constituted Saro Wiwa's sorrow
 When Saro agitated, you turned it into war!
 Come and behold cumulative suffering
 Where the swine waddle in mud
 Yet the owner of the land dare not protest
 The farmland is flooded
 The swine owner feeds fat
 Crude oil exploration has reduced the aquatic population

Farmers have no drinkable water at their disposal,
 Oil spills destroy the farms
 Farmers' tracks are destroyed
 Outsiders relax in their homesteads
 Enjoying electric power supply
 Oil producers can only make do with hurricane lamps
 You feed fat on Ogoni wealth
 But Ogoni people are in pains of hunger –
 When Saro agitated, you turned it into war
 You feed fat on Ogoni's wealth
 And Ogoni cannot boast of any access to its own wealth]

(*Gbo* 160-161)

The dominant metaphor of expropriation, whether in terms of the audacious swine in the mud or the fat-feeding of the swine owner at the expense of the landowner, speaks to the flawed arrangement in the granting of concessions for resource exploitation in Nigeria. In this arrangement, the host communities have little or no say in the conditions of exploitation. The questionable arrangement comes under the spotlight in Uwafiokun Idemudia's explanation:

The oil industry in Nigeria has been dominated by two of its three key stakeholders: the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN) and foreign oil companies. The consideration of the host communities as a stakeholder in the Nigerian oil industry is a new phenomenon; however, the host communities are still relegated to the background in decision-making processes within the oil industry. This is partly because the FGN, by virtue of decrees and laws, such as the Land Use Act of 1978 and the Petroleum Act of 1969, remains the only authority that can legitimately enter into negotiation and grant concessions for oil exploration to international and local firms, since ownership of crude oil has been vested in the Nigerian state.

(Idemudia 2009: 5)

The above explains the proverbial poverty of the Niger Delta region which, paradoxically, constitutes the main host community of oil prospecting in Nigeria. More specifically, it explains why Saro-Wiwa anchored his environmental activism on the deplorable condition of his Ogoni people who gained little or nothing from the prospecting of Shell Petroleum in Ogoniland. While the Federal Government of Nigeria and Shell Petroleum were making huge profits from the prospecting in Ogoniland, the Ogoni people themselves could only live in abject poverty precisely because all land was and is still considered to belong to the Nigerian state. The non-inclusion or marginalisation of the host communities should also explain why suffering in the oil-producing areas has been so disturbing, as they are not considered by law to have any legitimate stake in deciding the conditions of prospecting.

As said earlier on, similarly, on account of the political economy of the cause of Saro-Wiwa's death, there can never be only one dominant narrative in the rendition of his death. In other words, different people ascribe his death to different things. In Faleti's view, much as Shell and the Federal Government of Nigeria are culpable, the blame is heavier on the Ogoni elite or "elders" whose acts of betrayal resulted in Saro-Wiwa's execution:

Agba Ogoni gbagbe ibi
 Won b'otaa mule, won dite omore won ...
 Saro wi, e so o dogun ...
 Agba to gbowo ibonu
 T'otaari omo re fekun paje –
 Oju won a ribi nigba nigba
 Ibanuje nii gbeyin oro
 Fun baba t'o tori owo
 Ko yin si omo bibi inu re
 T'o gbagbode ote
 Saro-Wiwa fun 'pe tan
 Ara yin 'o bale mo

[Ogoni elders forgot the familial bond
 And went into conspiracy with the enemy ...
 When Saro agitated over this, you turned it into war ...
 The elder who took a bride
 And gave his child to the leopard –
 Would also witness evil from time to time
 Sorrow comes in place of wealth
 For the father who on account of money
 Betrayed his own child
 That went into collusion with the enemy
 Saro-Wiwa raised the alarm
 And you could no longer be at ease]

(*Gbo* 161-162)

It is alarming how the greed of a negligible few among the Ogoni contributed to the marginalisation of the people in matters that concerned their depleted environment and compromised their standard of living. It is even more alarming to know that when Saro-Wiwa attempted to expose the venality that was at the core of the complicity of the Ogoni elite, the result was the betrayal and set-up of a man who once led about half the population of the entire ethnic group to stage a protest that drew the world's attention to the desperate and sorry condition of Ogoniland (Pegg 2000: 701).

Conclusion

Overall, the merit of a literary piece should not be exclusively measured by the language of its expression, but also by its values exhibited in the aggregation of concerns and artistic texture. What is more, for critics and theorists of African literature generally, it is high time we began to admit that other languages so designated as international are first and foremost ethnic languages of other peoples. In this regard, what is ultimately limned as national or international is primarily ethnic, which presupposes that in spite of the limits of African-language literature, its thematic and literary merits are too obvious to be ignored in the apprehension of African postcolonial imaginaries. In the end, we are compelled to re-evaluate the reductionist comments about African-language literature as serving ethnic interests only, going by the predominantly national concerns articulated by different poets in *Wa Gbo* While it is a tragedy in the first place to relegate this literature to the background, it is also becoming increasingly clear that it is imperative to look back to African-language literature with a view to coming to terms with its concerns as national, if not pan-African in texture.

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