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Sule Emmanuel Egya



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POETRY AS DIALOGUE: A READING OF RECENT ANGLOPHONE NIGERIAN POETRY

SULE EMMANUEL EGYA

UNIVERSITY OF ABUJA

Abstract: Recent Nigerian poetry in English seems to concern itself with the most pressing socio-political condition in Nigeria, especially the prolonged military despotism in the past decades whose consequences are still felt in the society. One of the strategies the poets use to dramatise and historicise the situation is the dialogic approach. Their poetry reveals a dialogue between the poet and the people, and between the poet and the despot. The poem that emerges from this act of dialoguing, it will be seen, is conditioned by how the poet perceives the personae with whom he dialogues, *i.e.* the dialogue between the poet and the people and the dialogue between the poet and the despot differ. The poem is also polyphonic, able to depict to a greater degree the social contradiction in an oppressed society. Using selected poems of younger Nigerian poets, I intend to show the process – and the possible effects – of this dialogisation in recent Nigerian poetry.

Keywords: dialogic, intersubjectivity, Nigerian poetry, social commitment, despotism.

INTRODUCTION

Nigerian poetry in English which emerged during the socio-political turmoil of the 1980s and 1990s, this article argues, is dialogic. Of utmost significance to the identification and mapping of this poetry as a dialogic, intersubjective, and intertextual discourse is the context in which it is produced. To foreground the context is not merely to privilege the primal interconnectedness between this poetry and the recent historical events in Nigeria from which it takes its life, but, more importantly, to account for the method, the *how*, of realising poetry as a pragmatic medium for inventing a nationalist discourse. The recent Nigerian poetry, then, as I intend to argue, oversteps the limits of poetry-as/for-art (in the sense Euro-American modernism conceives it, and as received in Nigerian literary tradition), and institutes itself as an agency of subversive addressivity. The choice of “addressivity” here is to draw attention to what one might see as the intention of the poet to orient her poem towards an addressee; the desire to speak to other subjects. The

capacity of this poetry to be an *utterance*, to speak and to listen, to embody voices in dialogue, necessitates the appropriation of Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of dialogism to pursue its historicism, given its spatiotemporal location in the past of Nigeria. But Bakhtin's conception of dialogism, as I hope to argue, is something that is a given in African traditional poetics. Oral poets in Africa have always seen themselves as artists in dialogue, and the modern poets writing in English take after the oral artists in their dialogic aesthetics. With a number of selected poems I am interested in demonstrating the addressivity, the locus of intersubjective utterance, possible in what is considered primarily a monologic art. The Nigerian poets I am concerned with here take versifying as a mode of speaking to subjects and institutions with which they choose to dialogue. The intersubjective verse, we will see, comes through as a compelled utterance that must respond, and ought to be responded to.

BEYOND BAKHTIN: POETRY AS DIALOGUE

In her engaging study of popular culture using Bakhtin's theory of dialogism, *Intersubjectivities and Popular Culture: Bakhtin and beyond* (2008), Esther Peeren takes her time to explain the preposition "beyond" in her title. She contends that it does not in any way mark a theoretical space or time *after* Bakhtin's work. She announces from the outset that "[her] aim in invoking a beyond to Bakhtin is less to declare his work obsolete than to enable it to live on, to make it speak to us anew" (2008: 1). This clarification, or rationalisation, is vital, and is often made by scholars (see, for instance, Wesling, 2003: 30-42) who appropriate Bakhtin's theory to, as in my case, the study of genres of literature and culture that are seen to be marginalised in Bakhtin's theoretical exposition. In Bakhtin's work, poetry, whether epic or lyric, is seemingly dismissed as linguistically inadequate to cater for the phenomenon of heteroglossia or polyphony. Sneering at what he considers the excessive conventionality or formality of poetry, Bakhtin opines that "[in] its style, tone and manner of expression, epic discourse is infinitely far removed from discourse of a contemporary about a contemporary addressed to contemporaries" (1981: 13-14). Bakhtin's point is that epic poetry – and here he is referring to European epics – is often a celebration of the past where the poet in her elevated language is less concerned about addressivity. That is, the epic lacks the multi-voices integral to genres such as the novel which Bakhtin perceives to be more contemporary. For him, poetry is still locked in the past, rigid about its nature and features, narrowly confined to a single authorial, by which he implies authoritative, *voice*. This authority is the "impersonal and sacrosanct tradition" (*ibidem*: 16) that disconnects poetry from society, realities, and speech dynamism. It is easy to see a connection between this tradition and Russian Formalism, a

theory contemporaneous with, but oppositional to, Bakhtin's theory of language. Donald Wesling is therefore right when he writes:

Russian poetics generally, up to and including Formalism in the twenties...had drawn a sharp line between poetic language in its controlled and formal cosmos, and prose language in its aleatory or chaotic abandon.... Bakhtin did more than just reverse a prejudice, though...his bravado performance contained some dazzling condemnatory phrases against poetry's asocial qualities, and against a poetics and linguistics that justified earlier claims for the kingship of poetry. (2003: 21)

But Bakhtin in his nuanced, rather pervasive, valorisation of the novel, and his disregard for poetry, formulates a theoretical treatise that, after all, seems to embrace all kinds of literary text. Perhaps this is because he is not just concerned with the form of the novel, its self-contained ontology, but with the novel as an agent of dialogism, as a vehicle of polyphony, as an exemplary embodiment of what he calls "other-languagedness" (1981: 66). Bakhtin believes that "[the] language of the novel is a *system* of languages that mutually and ideologically interanimate each other. It is impossible to describe and analyze it as a single unitary language" (*ibidem*: 47).

Bakhtin's theory, as many scholars who study Bakhtin specify, is a theory of language and/or communication (Holquist, 1990; Wesling, 2003). As Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist point out, Bakhtin's dialogism

emphasizes not so much the gaping dichotomies at the centre of human existence as the strategies by which they might be bridged. This emphasis finds expression in Bakhtin's term for the condition of the world as it presents itself to consciousness, 'addressivity,' which implies that our relation to the world is essentially communicative. (1984: 83-84).

Bakhtin therefore reduces every literary expression to an utterance, one that is aimed as a response to an earlier utterance(s) or anticipates response(s). An author, by writing, is participating in a dynamic system of utterances and she is fully aware that other actors are implicated in it. In a novel, for instance, every character's utterance is a manifestation of a distinct language, what sociolinguists call *idiolect*. In that context, languages as many as the characters emerge, and they interact with one another dialogically. The author interacts with the characters as well as interacts with her audiences. It is important to quote Bakhtin at length here:

The novel orchestrates all its themes, the totality of the world of objects and ideas depicted and expressed in it, by means of the social diversity of speech types...and by the differing individual voices that flourish under such conditions. Authorial speech, the speeches of the narrators, inserted genres, the speech of characters are merely those fundamental compositional unities with whose help heteroglossia...can enter a novel; each of them permits a multiplicity of social voices and a wide variety of their links and interrelationships (always more or less dialogized). These distinctive links and interrelationships between utterances and languages, this movement of the theme through different languages and speech types, its dispersion into the rivulets and droplets of social heteroglossia, its dialogisation – this is the basic distinguishing feature of the stylistics of the novel. (1981: 263)

This is the main thrust of Bakhtin's concept of dialogism, a theory of communication which he expounds using the novel genre. In my view, the novel as a genre, in spite of Bakhtin's romanticisation of it, is simply a ground, a literary model, for demonstrating how dialogism works. Every literary text, including poetry of all types, can also contain polyphony and other-languagedness. Bakhtin himself is aware of this, and that is why he formulates what he calls novelisation, the idea that other literary genres, even if monologic on the surface, can encapsulate more than one voice, can permit heteroglossia, at least in the form of what he calls "internal dialogism" (*ibidem*: 282). If the core of Bakhtin's dialogism is, in his words, that "[the] word lives, as it were, on the boundary between its own context and another, alien, context" (*ibidem*: 284), then every word, every utterance, indeed every act of communication, is dialogic. Bakhtin's broad exclusion of poetry in his theory of dialogism is his refusal, or inability, to see poetry as an act of communication, just as the dominant formalist literary discourse of his time refuses or is unable to see. In a sense, then, although Bakhtin rails against the pervasive influences of formalism, he is, in his classification of poetry, influenced by the formalist idea of poetry.

Some scholars, after and/or following Bakhtin, have attempted to pursue what they see as Bakhtin's inadequacy by demonstrating that poetry, as against Bakhtin's assertions, is dialogic. To be precise, these scholars cash in on Bakhtin's admission that a poem can be novelised, limitedly dialogic, and can open up the possibilities of dialogisation in poetry. They transcode Bakhtin's central terms to demonstrate the capacity of poetry, just as that of the novel, to embrace voices other than the poet's. Some of the recent sustained studies that aim to establish poetry's capacity for dialogism are Donald Wesling's *Bakhtin and the Social Moorings of Poetry* (2003); Kimani Njogu's *Reading Poetry as Dialogue: An East African literary tradition* (2004); and Jacob Blevins's

Dialogism and Lyric Self-Fashioning: Bakhtin and the voices of a genre (2008). Of interest to my work is Blevin's book, which collects essays on lyric poetry to make evident "the true paradox of lyric poetry [which is that] it is at once personal and interpersonal, simultaneously private and public" (Blevins, 2008: 11). Of greater interest is Njogu's book, seminal in a way, which identifies and maps the phenomenon of dialogism in African literary tradition. While Njogu concentrates mainly on the oral, dialect, poetry of East Africa, this work centres on the lyric poetry in English written in Nigeria in the last few decades.

DIALOGISM IN AFRICAN POETICS

Bakhtin, in his theorisation, pins language to specific speech situation, as against general linguistic abstraction; he is not concerned with language universal, or what the structuralists call *langue*. In explaining Bakhtin's philosophy of language Michael Holquist, in his introduction to *The Dialogic Imagination*, writes: "Language, when it *means*, is somebody talking to somebody else, even when that someone else is one's inner addressee" (1990: xxi). This seems to me the underlying tenet of dialogism. In this premise, dialogism emphasises interpersonal, intersubjective, relation; necessarily based on the relation between word-contexts, utterances, and texts. It is at the textual level that Julia Kristeva, influenced by Bakhtin (see Kristeva, 1989), inaugurates the concept of intertextuality, understood as the dialogic conflation of varied texts in a (new) text. The awareness a word, an utterance, or a text, has that it does not stand alone but in relation to another, that it can only mean when it enters into a relation with the other, enables the kind of interaction that is intrinsic to any *living* language. A language, in this sense, realises that it is in the midst of other languages and its meaningfulness depends on its interaction with them. In the same vein, people who use words, or make utterances, do so with the awareness that they are making linguistic choices out of a repertoire, and these choices can only mean when they are dialogically connected with the meanings that existed before or with the meanings that are anticipated within a given linguistic, social and cultural milieu.

The communal view, as it were, of language(s) as a means of intersubjective addressivity, a vital attribute of Bakhtin's dialogism, is one that already exists in African philosophy of literature. Seminal studies in African oral literature such as Ruth Finnegan's *Oral Literature in Africa* (1976), and the essays collected in *The Oral Performance in Africa* (Okpewho, 1990) foreground the performativity, contextuality and intersubjectivity of African orality. The African oral artist performs not for herself but for others, speaks not for herself but for others, and she considers her performance complete only after having responses from her audiences. It is a communal phenomenon in which issues of

aesthetics are not only contextualised but also intersubjectivised, *i. e.* determined by the relation between the artist and the audience, or among the artist, the audience, and the gods/goddesses of art and performance. The dialogic interconnectedness of the subjects, such as the performer and the audience, in African orature is realised and understood within the cultural, social, even epistemic world view of the people as a collective. This is what Isidore Okpewho calls the “emotional-intellectual harmony between the artist and his audience” (1990: 141). This harmony collectivises various individual outlooks of their society, results in a cultural and ideological superstructure in which is contained what Bakhtin calls “socially significant verbal performance” (1981: 290), which directly or indirectly exerts control on the dialogic relations existing in all strata of human existence. It can be argued that all oral arts in Africa are impelled by this relation in which case they emerge as utterances between the oral artist and her audience. It is important here to point out that a performance of African orature, either by a group or by a single person, is polyphonic; the metacommunicative devices available to the artist, for instance the skills of the folktale narrator before her audience, make it so. The oral performer does not claim the exclusivity of authorship; she understands that she happens to be the next performer in a continuum of performances; she often acknowledges, and encapsulates, the diverse voices that are visible in this continuum. The oral artist in Africa does not suffer from what Harold Bloom terms the anxiety of influence. Kimany Njogu expresses this in a different way when he writes, “[any] given performance is a re-telling of previous performances. It is also a response to possible performances. Performances encapsulate relationships that exist between the performer, the [polyphonic] text, and the audience” (2004: 96).

The modern African poet in European languages, however, occupies an artistic terrain different from the African oral performer such as the oral poet.¹ Unlike the oral poet, the modern poet writes in the exclusivity of his privacy; she acquires the appellation and (though questionable) authority of authorship. While there is a considerable difference between the domain of the oral poet and that of the modern written poet, there is a visible interface between oral poetics and written poetics in a way peculiar to African literary development. In spite of the heavy influence of Euro-American modernism on the emergent literature in European languages written in Africa there has been, right from the outset, what Ezenwa-Ohaeto calls “a co-existence and mingling” (1998: 11) of the domestic oral poetics and the foreign written poetics in African literary expression up till today. In fact, modern African poets since Gabriel Okara, Kofi Awoonor, Okot P’Bitek, and Mazisi Kunene, among others, have continued to appropriate African oral poetics in their

¹ For an in-depth discourse on the disparity between the African oral poet and modern written poet, the comparison of the written poetry and the oral poetry, and the influence of the oral on the written, see in particular S. Okechukwu Mezu (1978).

poetic endeavours, and to see themselves, in the manner the oral performers see themselves, as humans speaking through poetry to humans about burning issues in their society. Recent studies such as Ezenwa-Ohaeto's *Contemporary Nigerian Poetry and the Poetics of Orality* (1998), and Charles Bodunde's *Oral Traditions and Aesthetic Transfer: Creativity and social vision in contemporary black poetry* (2001) continue to reveal the inevitable connection between oral poetry and written poetry in modern Africa from the viewpoint, basically, of the modern poets to, like the oral poets, address their audiences in the very manner that appeals to the audiences. Tanure Ojaide in his *Poetic Imagination in Black Africa* (1996) consistently draws attention to the contemporary African poets' inclination to, as it were, return to their cultural roots to fashion an orality-dependent idiom with which they can more effectively communicate with their audiences because the poets have centred their artistic energies on crucial socio-political issues that are common to them (the poets and the audiences). From the beginning of his book, Ojaide announces that "African literature is traditionally didactic" (1996: 2), and goes on to assert that "[the] writer in modern-day Africa has assumed the role of the conscience of the society, reminding readers and society of the high cultural ethos that must be upheld" (*ibidem*). The emphasis here is on communication, addressivity; the desire of the writer to orient her work towards a target audience. This has, from the oral to the written, underscored the poetics of African literatures. It is the core of Chidi Amuta's exposition of African poetics in his *A Theory of African Literature* (1989). Amuta harps on the burden on contemporary African written literature, given its anti-colonialist beginning and its anti-imperialist, anti-dictatorial presence, to either serve as a medium for social (inter)action, or be an alternative to the discourse of establishment. Emmanuel Ngarra also considers effective communication, an exchange between the writer/artist and the audience or the society, central to African poetics. It is this he attempts to demonstrate in his *Ideology and Form in African Poetry* (1990), in which, at the beginning, he opines that "[the] impact poets make depends on the significance of what they say about social reality and on how effectively they communicate their vision to their readers" (xi). What this implies, which is significant to my contention, is that the poet by versifying is simply engaging in a dialogue, one that is expected to be functional to the society.

RECENT NIGERIAN POETRY AS DIALOGUE

Most of what new Nigerian poets, like their precursors, write is lyric poetry in which the poets express their thoughts on mostly public issues.² Some of them, such as Chiedu

² Those I consider new Nigerian poets or poets of the military era in Nigeria are Emman Usman Shehu, Chiedu Ezeanah, Uche Nduka, Olu Oguibe, Remi Raji, Toyin Adewale, Maria Ajima, Afam Akeh, Ismaila Abdullahi, Abubakar Othman, Lola Shoneyin, Unoma Azuah, Maik Nwosu, Angela Agali, among others.

Ezeanah and Remi Raji, refer to their poems, following Niyi Osundare and others, as songs. For instance in Ezeanah's collection *The Twilight Trilogy* (2005), the poems are broadly classified into "endsong", "song of songs", and "song of a forgotten war". In their poetry, then, the speaking subject, with an individually assertive "I" or collectively assertive "we", is often (mis)construed as the poet herself speaking. Any overindulgence with the "I" form will presumably (as Bakhtin may have thought) result in monologism. But it has also been contested (see in particular Blevins, 2008; Njogu, 2004), using no theory other than Bakhtin's, that a lyric poem, in spite of its imposing individually assertive "I", can be in fact many-voiced and heteroglossic, just as the novel. In other words, the lyric poem is not, according to Jacob Blevins, "simply the romantic valorization of the individual" (2008: 12). A complex network of voices, if closely examined, can be discerned in a lyric poem. Or, to quote Blevins again, [the] lyric subject [in a lyric poem] only becomes a true subject by situating his or her voice amid other, different voices" (*ibidem*: 13). This is an instance of what Bakhtin calls internal dialogism, which Kimani Njogu further explains:

[...] it will be noted that the speaker can be both a subject and an object of a discourse in so far as he or she is capable of distancing the inner self from the outer self. The inner self in that case becomes an other. What we witness in such situations is an objectification of the self in order to establish a dialogic relation with the self. This tendency would explain why the soliloquy may be dialogic although on the surface it gives the impression of being monologic. (2004: 10)

What Kimani Njogu explains here can be discerned in contemporary Nigerian poetry in English, but beyond that, the Nigerian poets, since the beginning of modern poetry in Nigeria, following the practice of the oral poet, consider themselves as producers of *functional* utterances in an interpersonal dialogue.

It must be pointed out here that poetry in English in Nigeria, perhaps more than any genre, has undergone what one may call radical theorisation and praxis. It emerged in Nigeria as a quasi-modernist practice in the hands of, among others, Gabriel Okara, Christopher Okigbo, Wole Soyinka, J. P. Clark-Bedekeremo. Its quasi-modernist status was drastically deflected by the practices of poets who emerged after the Nigerian civil war such as Odia Ofeimun, Niyi Osundare, Tanure Ojaide, and Okinba Launko. In his study of the literature about the civil war, *Nigerian Writers on the Nigerian Civil War*, Olu

Mostly born during/after the Nigerian civil war (1967-1970), they were teenagers during the oil boom of the 1970s in Nigeria, university students in the 1980s when military dictatorships had set in. They were also victims of the terrible military oppression of the 1990s. Their early poetry mostly dramatises what they witnessed.

Obafemi (1992) maps the shift in Nigerian poetry from the quasi-modernist practice (characterised by turgidity of imagery and an obsession with mytho-poetics) to one that is people-centred and, inevitably, more dialogic. The post-war poetic practice, and this is what makes it even more dialogic, is predicated on the poets' resolve to become engaged as artists and to concern themselves directly with the immediate socio-political problems of their society.³ Other scholars such as Alu (2001), Amuta (1988) and Maduakor (1986), have identified the Nigerian civil war as that critical juncture in which Nigerian poetry in English does not only flourish but re-focuses its artistic energies on issues that affect the wellbeing of Nigeria. What is of more significance is that the poets, getting quite political, set what one may call an artistic agenda for themselves; this is what Alu sees as "[the] poet's [...] honest desire to detach himself and his speechless brothers [sic] from the viperous hands of [Nigerian] dictators and the tightening grip of neo-colonialism" (2001: 198). The poet who engages in socio-political issues is thus in an enterprise in which she positions herself between the ordinary people and the oppressive establishment. She speaks to the ordinary people whose plight she claims to narrativise; she also speaks, often aggressively, to the oppressive establishment on behalf of the less privileged in the society.

It is this conception of lyric poetry, its utilisation as a medium for political discourse, that is handed down to the new poets I am concerned with here. The verb phrase "handed down" is to emphasise the *organic* link between the earlier poets (Osundare, Ofeimun, Ojaide) with the poets of the military era. Some of the earlier poets taught the new poets at universities in the 1980s, and one of the consequences of this was that some of the new poets became heavily influenced by the older poets.⁴ But a discernible difference between the older poets and the new poets is that while the older poets, perhaps having witnessed the wanton killing of the innocent people during the civil war, came to the literary scene with Marxist exuberance and the rhetoric of Africanist poetics, the new poets, perhaps emerging during the nadir of national despair, choose to lament for their nation. Most of the new poets are visibly pessimistic in spite of the force of their diatribes against the ruling regimes. In what follows, I intend to show, with some poems, first the poet in dialogue with the oppressor-figure and then the poet in dialogue with the victim-figure.

³ This resolve is, most critics believe, first expressed in Odi Ofeimun's volume of poems *The Poet Lied* (1989). The title loudly echoes the chasm between the earlier quasi-modernist poets and the poets that emerged after. See in particular Aiyejina (1998).

⁴ Niyi Osundare, Tanure Ojaide, Okinba Launko (a pen-name for Femi Osofisan), Funso Aiyejina, among others, taught English studies in Nigerian Universities in the decades between the 1980s and 1990s. The case of teacher-student influence among Nigerian poets is the influence of Osundare on Remi Raji (see Egya, 2007; and Raji-Oyelade, 2003).

It is vital to reiterate that the poet considered herself a victim during the oppressive military regimes of the last few decades in Nigeria. The regimes of Generals Muhammadu Buhari, Ibrahim Babangida, and the late Sani Abacha were three successive military dictatorships that considerably plunged Nigeria into a depth of despair and agony. At the climax of it, in the maximum rule of Sani Abacha, Nigeria had become, to quote the British journalist Karl Maier, “a battered [...] elephant staggering toward abyss with the ground crumbling under its feet” (2000: xx). In the state of anomie that set in, Nigerian writers, artists, intellectuals, and journalists suffered diverse forms of brutalisation; the condition was so terrible that writers could hardly create (see Rotimi, 1997). The poets of the military era did not escape the oppression; some of them even suffered incarceration.⁵ Writing poetry, like demonstrating on the street, was, to them, an act of confronting the military oppressor. Characterised by tortured emotions, some of the poems they wrote were aggrieved utterances directed at the oppressor.

For these poets, addressing the oppressor-figure implies the deployment of figural language to confront the establishment, sometimes with a less metaphoric form of diatribe. The sarcasm in Remi Ayorinde’s poem, articulated right from the title, “The Generalissimo”, culminates in a plain-word diatribe such as “One whose name is a curse / Among men of flesh” (6-7), or “Diabolic generalissimo” (12), or “What you lack in physique / You made up in malignant cunning” (23-24). This manner of imagining the oppressor-figure demonstrates the gap between the poet and the oppressor, characterised by extreme hatred, ideological conflict, and self-righteousness both on the side of the poet and the oppressor, each with a capacity to *politick* with words. We are given the reasons that prompt the poet to address, to confront the oppressor:

The blood of men you drank
 Gave you a place among mortals
 Such that the lamentation of a hundred million
 is like music in your ears

[...]

Riches that can feed the world
 You cruelly acquired
 While your subjects
 Struggle to death for viands. (*ibidem*: 15-27)

⁵ Olu Oguibe, Ogaga Ifowodo and Akin Adesokan were known to have been imprisoned by the dictatorship in the 1990s before leaving Nigeria. They are now settled in the U.S.A.

In these lines, plain enough for the oppressor to decipher, the poet-persona depicts a ruthless personality that fits into the characterisation of the military oppressor of the recent past in Nigeria as perceived by the public. The use of the pronoun “you”, and its singular antecedent, portray the all too glaring existence of a powerful figure the poet challenges. But the poet-persona also pauses from the stream of invectives to address those he considers his audiences, apart from the oppressor-figure. In one of the stanzas, for instance, the poet-persona says:

If death has a face
And affliction a vista
Search it out on the general
The self-acclaimed King. (*ibidem*: 51-54)

This of course is not addressed to the “you”, although it is about the “you” – the oppressor that the poet-persona has been directly addressing or confronting in the other parts of the poem. The reader is addressed here, urged to see the oppressor-figure in the way the poet-persona has been seeing her. In this polyphonic poem, then, three voices can be primarily discerned: the conspicuous voice of the poet-persona, the voice of the oppressor-figure, not heard, perhaps not allowed to be heard, and the voice of the audience, also not heard. The poem thus anticipates responses from both the oppressor-figure and the audience.

In Musa Idris Okpanachi’s “We Give You this Country” (Okpanachi, 2007), the oppressor-figure is also addressed as a “you”, loaded with all those heinous aliases that represent a military despot in Nigeria’s recent past. Here too the underlying trope is sarcasm, although there are less of invectives compared to Ayorinde’s poem. The voice of the poet-persona here is pained, wounded, engagingly pitying; the poet-persona’s powerful feeling is of course towards the ordinary people collectivised as a country, a country blatantly brutalised by this very powerful oppressor-figure to which, as the entire tone of the poem suggests, all humanity has to succumb. In the rhythmic flow of the poem, accentuated by the repetition of “We give you this country”, the poet-persona, through images familiar to Nigerians, states, but implicitly challenges, the phenomenon of self-perpetuation, what is today known publicly as the sit-tight syndrome, common to African despots. The dialogue here is between “we”, representing the oppressed people of the country, and “you” representing the despot and her cohorts. Like most poems of this cast, this poem concentrates on the disturbing chasm between the leader and the led, always with the poet persona taking side with the led. This is one claim that Okpanachi’s

poem pursues, carefully deploying words that arouse sympathy for the country in the reader. The poem concludes this way:

We give you this country
It is your birthright
Inhabited by subhuman
The land is your throne
The flag your kerchief
And the anthem
Your pagan song
Of apostasy

We give you this country
Because your heart desires it
Because it is where you
Spread yourself
To defile the land
To rape the maid
To change the constitution
Even from your grave. (*ibidem*: 25-40)

Some of the lines resonate with irony. The poet-persona of course means the opposite of it when he says “It is your birthright.” He also means the opposite of it when he says “Inhabited by subhuman.” For these are aimed, just like the entire poem, to confront the sickened psyche of the oppressor who thinks to rule is his birth right, or thinks the people whom he rules are sub-humans. A poem in a period of peril, especially one as this, is to prove to the despot that his subjects are not sub-humans, but are, in fact, capable of getting into a dialogue with her over the limitation of power.

The dialogue between poem and power, the clash between the poet and the oppressor, is also the thematic thrust of Abdullahi Denja’s poem with the highly suggestive title “The Warrior and the Poet”. Unlike the previous poems, this poem allows us to listen to the voice of the oppressor, haughty and bloodthirsty as it is. Denja structures the poem into the dramatic mode with the exchange of words between the warrior, the oppressor-figure, and the poet who regards himself as a troubadour (not in the medieval sense of the word). The dialectic begins with the warrior claiming that the “limpid song” of the poet is useless in serious matters such as political decisions or issues that concern people’s lives. The poet counters by pointing out that songs are so important that even the warrior

needs a “battle cry” (10), that is to say, a kind of propaganda song, before going to the war front. The warrior’s next point is that songs, *i.e.* poems, do not have the capacity to *act*. To act here means to be able to “stab” (14). The poet ends the debate by saying:

The warrior may worship the sharp edge of his sword
But let him remember a sharper blade
Lurking in the mouth of the wandering poet
For which men bleed first before the other bleeding. (*ibidem*: 16-20)

Because Denja is a poet, and he is obviously addressing the oppressor-figure in this poem, the argument seems to end in favour of the poet. The poet is simply claiming here that a poem is sharper than a sword; that words are more effective than any form of war instruments. But beyond this the poet is asserting his artistic prowess, especially in the presence of oppression – the fact that the poet has that traditional potential to challenge the powerful ones in the society, as the poets I have discussed here have done.

In Maik Nwosu’s “Ballad of the Peace-Keeper” (Nwosu, 1998), the poet-persona addresses not the oppressor-figure but the victim-figure, that is, some one oppressed in the society, someone with limited chances of surviving in a society that does not take her voice into consideration. Interestingly the victim-figure here is a military man, but a private in the military, sent off to a war zone to keep peace. The main interest of this poem, it seems, is to stress the gap, always in the form of the privileged trampling over the underprivileged, between the military general, or the generalissimo as Ayorinde’s poem above characterise her, and the rank and file in the army. In a tone sympathetic but also inciting, the poet-persona addresses Private Umoru Shantali (a footnote in the poem says Private Shantali is a “Nigerian private who, while on a U.N. peace-keeping mission in Somalia, ‘saved time’ in a Mogadishu dungeon”). Private Shantali is presented in the poem as a victim – he of course has no say in the decision that flings him to the war zone (as traditional with the military); he realises that there is in fact no peace to be kept other than watching the horrible drama of brothers killing brothers; he also gets to know the other side of the war, its politicisation and trading of interests; and while he watches all these in Mogadishu, wondering how his country, as bad as Somalia but in another form, can send peace-keepers to Somalia, his beloved wife/lover dies in Nigeria out of, as implied in the poem, poverty, diseases and negligence. The poet-persona, at the beginning of the poem asks Private Shantali a vital question:

shantali, the seasons of man
revolve like the hinges of forever
sometimes recoil and thrust
like the heavens of the mamba
and even when the tablets of omens
have midwived clouds of calm
and the guns lie smoking but stilled
where is the peace? (*ibidem*: 1-11)

Although this question aims to provoke Shantali to think critically about his situation as a soldier serving the warring appetite of some superpowers that have to keep their U.N. busy, or to seem busy, it does seem that Shantali himself has had his own perception of the war now as an insider, a supposed U.N. peace-keeper. Thus when Shantali's voice comes in response in the second part of the poem, this is what he says:

they took us away
from the parade-ground
they took us away
from its serene familiarities
pronounced the sentence of the blue helmets
and despatched us to our fate
soldiers of the new agenda for peace
i awoke anew
in the killing fields of mogadishu
brother against brother
clan against clan
squabbles dimmed in ancestral blood
and fled was the patriarch of the apocalypse
fled from the slime and blood
of his convolutions
fled into the furtive refuge
of his brother hunchback
where is the peace we have come to keep? (*ibidem*: 31-48)

This then is the alarming paradox of peace-keeping, that the peace-keeper comes to know the "blue helmets" does not bring peace to any society. As the rest of the poem unfolds we see the woes that not only befall those ordinary people who cannot flee "into

furtive refuge”, but also the woes that befall the so-called peace-keepers like Private Shantali. In the least, the poem problematises the concept of U.N. peace-keeping, draws attention to other zones of humanitarian crises in the 1990s such as Sarajevo, Johannesburg, Gaza, Monrovia, and Kigali. It satirises the purported desire of the superpowers, owners of the U.N., to bring peace to such zones, and it explores the private anguish of the soldiers sent on such missions. All these are skilfully embedded in the dialogic structure of the poem – the polyphonic nature of the poem is better understood if we discern the voices of the poet-persona, of Private Shantali, of the brutalised people of Mogadishu and other war zones, and even of the U.N. peace keeping mission, which is anticipated in the poem.

We see a different kind of elegy in Angela Nwosu’s short poem entitled “Waiting for the Lift” (Nwosu, 2002) written for Ken Saro-Wiwa, the slain Nigerian environmental activist. As characteristic of most poems written for Saro-Wiwa, the poet-persona addresses the perceived victim-figure metaphorically representing Saro-Wiwa who many believed was unjustly hanged by the dictatorship of Sani Abacha.⁶ The poet-persona sees herself as the next victim of the terrible police state in which one is not allowed to air her views (but the poet resolves to speak!); a state in which death lurks at every corner of the society, in which to live is to be in perpetual curfew. Nwosu’s metaphor here is striking: “Living chokes like the hangman’s rope” (7). Saro-Wiwa was killed by rope; the poet-persona foresees not only herself but the entire society facing the rope-death. And for the condition of living to be tightening on the people like the hangman’s rope is a self-explanatory metaphor that aptly captures the terror-stricken society. The dialogue here is primarily between the poet-persona and the slain activist, with the poet-persona ending it with this possible extrapolation: “But then my day, like yours, may yet come” (14). This line, last in the poem, heavily underscores the helplessness of the people, of the poet, in the society.

CONCLUSION

The lyric imagination, for the Nigerian poets, especially the ones who versify during what was seen as the intense militarisation of the Nigerian state, offers itself as medium of interpersonal exchange, a feature that makes the lyric poems they write fundamentally dialogic. As I have attempted to show, each lyric poem encompasses more than one voice – at least, the voice of the (poet-)persona, of the despot, and of the victim or the audience. The poet designs these voices as a way of situating her art within the aspirations of her

⁶ Quite a lot of poets of this era have written poems about, and in dedication to, the late Ken Saro-Wiwa who was convicted by a military tribunal and hanged in 1996. See the book *Ogoni’s Agonies: Ken Saro-Wiwa and the crisis in Nigeria* (1998) edited by Abdul-Rasheed Na’Allah.

society. In this premise, the poet stands as a public performer with a profound sense of duty. Her duty is to the society, to the victim of the oppressor; it is a duty that positions her against the oppressor. Dialogism offers itself as the most viable mode of communication for this poet. Although, as I have pointed out earlier, African poetics, oral or written, is dialogic, and these poets' precursors wrote poems that could also be considered dialogic, the successive dictatorships in Nigeria in the decades between the 1980s and 1990s, and the resultant severity of hardship and uncertainty of life impelled these poets to grow more dialogic in their imagination with the assumption that their poetry had the primary duty of intervention. My claim then is that a poetry that is stretched by a public demand orients itself towards dialogism. Its chief strategy is to bring together voices that may either agree or disagree, but voices that will certainly vocalise the pressing contradictions of the society. This, it does seem, is what the poetry written during the military era in Nigeria accomplishes. A proper understanding of this poetry therefore demands a critical method that takes into consideration the claim that a poem, not only a novel or a drama, can be polyphonic. Another of my claims is that the dialogisation of issues goes beyond polyphony. Since most of the issues raised by the poet are public issues, the poet feels obliged to let in voices that might differ, or contest, her own voice. At the level of language, different registers and languages of specialisations find themselves in a dialogue that requires the poet's social semiotic sensibility. Going through the poems discussed above, it is clear that the language of the poets revolves around military registers, especially in relation to how they brutalise the civil section of the society. We hear the voices of the military officers and of their victims, the voice of the poet in each poem taking side with the victims'. From this perspective, these emerging Nigerian poets present poetry as a kind of social performance – in the purely African sense – where the performer projects less of herself, and concentrates on the condition or wellbeing of her society. Social or communal goals precede all other (personal) interests. This is also the perspective from which the theorist Bakhtin conceives of dialogism: it recognises the primacy of society, or community, where all have voices to speak, and the artist, at best, projects these voices, instead of allowing her voice to dominate and suppress other voices. These poets do not certainly suppress other voices; neither do they project their own voices. When we hear their voices, it is to contest the voices of the enemies of society, what to them is an important duty they must perform on behalf of their society. From what we have seen in their poetry, it is quite limiting to think, as Bakhtin makes us to assume, that poetry cannot exemplify the phenomenon of dialogism. The most seemingly personal of poetry types, the lyric, is in fact polyphonic, especially if it concerns itself with extra-personal issues. The dialogic nature of this poetry, one might suggest, makes it

possible for this poetry to participate in the cultural struggle that eventually unseated the military regime in Nigeria in the late 1990s.

SULE EMMANUEL EGYA

Sule E. Egya teaches African poetry and contemporary literary theory in Department of English & Literary Studies, University of Abuja, Abuja, Nigeria. Until recently, he was an Alexander von Humboldt Fellow and resident scholar at the Institute of Asian and African Studies, Humboldt University, Berlin. He has published widely in journals. He is also a poet.

Contact: ejahsule@gmail.com

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