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History and Politics in 21st Century Nigeria Poetry: A Study of Odia Ofeimun's A Boiling Carcas and Rome Aboh's A Torrent of Terror

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Abstract

This paper argues that history and politics drive the thematic and stylistic peculiarities of 21st century Nigerian poetry. Only a handful of studies have been done in this regard. Furthermore, few notable studies have been done on Odia Ofeimun's A Boiling Carcas and Rome Aboh's A Torrent of Terror. This paper, therefore, brings the "new" poetry of Odia Ofeimun and Rome Aboh to critical lenses with the view to authenticating the place of history and politics in 21st century Nigerian poetry. Thematic parallels of 21st century Nigerian history and politics are shown in the collections of poems. The influence of 21st century Nigerian history and politics on the stylistic features of the poems are also underscored. Findings show that 21st century Nigerian poetry, like its 20th century antecedent, is a product of contemporary history and politics. 21st century Nigerian poets are very much concerned with their society, as well as global affairs, and through the thematisation of history and politics in their poetry, they continue in the traditions of the poet as historian and social activist.

Keywords: History, Politics, 21st Century, Nigeria, Poetry

Introduction

History and politics are common themes in Nigerian poetry. From the pioneer writings of the nationalist poets, to the first, second, and third generations of Nigerian poets, history and politics have manifested as salient Denies. Only a few notable studies have been done on 21st century Nigerian poetry, especially with regard to the themes of history and politics. This study, therefore engages history and politics in 21st century Nigerian poetry with a view to authenticating Nigerian new poetry, as a continuum of 20th century poetry traditions. This work employs Odia Ofeimun's *A Boiling Caracas* and Rome Aboh's *A Torrent of Terror*, published in 2008 and 2015 respectively, as representative works of 21st century Nigerian poetry.

Odia Ofeimun was born in Iruekpen-Ekpoma, Edo State, Nigeria. He studied Political Science at the University of Ibadan, where he started writing poetry. His earliest works were published in *Poems of Black Africa* (1975). He worked in the Federal Civil Service and later ventured into journalism. Some of his published collections of poetry include *The Poet Lied* (1980), *A Handle for the Flutist* (1986), *Under African Skies* (1990), *Salute to the Master Builder* (1990). *Siye Goll - A Feast of Return* (1992), *Dreams*

at Work (2000), *London Letter and Other Poems* (2000), *Go Tell the Generals* (2008), *I Will Ask Questions with Stones If They Take My Voice* (2008), *Boiling Caracas* (2008), *Lagos of the Poets* (2010), *Nigeria the Beautiful* (2011).

Romanus Agianpuye Aboh was born in Ohong, Obudu, Cross-River State, Nigeria. He goes by the pen name, Rome Aboh. He obtained a B.A. (Hons) in English at the University of Calabar in 2002. He later got his M.A. and PhD in Literary Discourse Analysis at the University of Ibadan in 2009 and 2013 respectively. He is currently a Senior Lecturer at the University of Uyo, Nigeria. He has published two literary works — *A Torrent of Terror*, a poetry collection published in 2014, and *Above the Rubble*, a novel published in 2015.

21st Century Nigerian Poetry

Nigerian poetry has a very unique history. Joseph Ushie traces the earliest beginnings of the Nigerian poetic tradition to "oral renditions" in various Nigerian cultures (11). This position is confirmed by Mathias Orhero (28) who asserts that "Nigerian poetry owes its origins to the oral literary traditions which are predominant in Nigeria". From its oral origins, Nigerian poetry has taken roots in the

written tradition due to the advent of colonialism and literacy. Harry Garuba attempts a canonisation of Nigerian poetry and he employs "generations of poets" as a marker to delineate the various canons of modern Nigerian poetry (51). Garuba's study identifies three distinct generations of Nigerian poetry.

The idea of "generations" in Nigerian poetry is well rooted. Scholars such as Ushie (11-23) Sule Egya (53), Friday Okon (94), Romanus Aboh (2-3), and Christopher Ogunyemi (53), among others, have employed the concept in the identification of various canons of modern Nigerian poetry. It has been established that there are three generations of modern Nigerian poets that wrote in the 20th century. The 20th century poets have received ample critical attention and the peculiarities of their themes and techniques have informed many literary exegeses.

21st century poetry' is considered as the poetry written between 2000 till the present. Patrick Oloko (n.pag) considers the poetry of this period as "'contemporary" poetry. He asserts that "more poetry has been written in Nigeria between the turn of the century and now than in the past", foregrounding the blossoming of poetry in this period. He lists

some of the poetry collections published in this period thus:

Farthing Presidents and Other Povms (2001) by Tope Omoniyi; *Evening of My Doubt* (2001) by Rotimi Fasan; Iremqje: *Ritual Poetry for Ken Saro Wiwa*, (2000) by Akeem Lasisi; *Tongues of Triumph*, (2002) by Anaele Charles Ihuoma, *Heartbreak in the Mangrove and other Poems*, (2001), by Fabiawari Irene Briggs; *When a Dream Lingers too Long*, (2002) by Toni Kan; *Waking Dreams*, (2002) by Angela Nwosu; *The Lament of the Town Crier*, (2003) by F.B.O Akporobaro; *Scarlet Laughters*, (2004) by Peter Anny - Nzekwe; *Rhythms of The Last Testament*, (2002); *This Story Must Not Be Told*. (2003), and *The Governor's Lodge and Other Poems*, (2004), all written by Hope Eghagha.

Aboh engages the poetry of the 21st century poetry, which he refers to as "new Nigerian poets", and posits that they are regarded as "lamentation poets" whose poetry thematise:

the seemingly irresolvable Niger delta oil crisis, political betrayal, the widening gap between the extremely rich and the extremely poor, religious bigotry and political assassinations. Above all. these poets have continued to forge the link between the

poets and their society: making their poems an outlet for the people's socio-political expression. In a corollary, these poems are shaped by tension between the mass majority and those who clung to power against popular will (1-2).

Taking off from Aboh's idea of lamentation, Macaulay Mowarin submits that the 21st century Nigerian poets decry "the betrayal of political leaders and the dilapidated state of the Nigerian nation" (125), Gloria Emezue (126) focuses on the dominating voice of threnody in the poetry of 21st century and asserts that:

these poets lament the betrayal of the people's genuine aspirations for a better life, poverty, unemployment and the dilapidated state of the nation's economy. Their anger over the vicious cycle of brutality that diminishes the [nation] is unmistakable. It is this form of threnody ushered by these young men that has come to be known as the new generation of poetry.

Further substantiating Emezue's position, Garuba expatiates on the idea of threnody in new Nigerian poetry and states that:

Though collectivized by a threnoclic thrust, the new poetic voices are diverse, disparate, deliberately

individualized, a deviation from the gregariousness, the fraternal spirit, and the theoretical meeting point, of the poets of-the Alter-Native tradition. The poets recognize the miscarriage of good governance and its attendant woes as the greatest crisis in Nigeria, consider it their duty to confront the crisis, and take different thematic and stylistic routes to do so. They write as insiders implicated in the intense persecution and the struggle for self-liberation, their tones leaning towards pessimism (54).

Differing from other scholars, Senator Ihenyen describes the 21st century Nigerian poets as "children of globalisation" who have access to the World Wide Web. To him, these poets live in a globalised world and their poetry reflects the changing tides of the society.

The socio-political nature of new Nigerian poetry is also foregrounded in Ushie's study and he proceeds to list some of the poets such as "Femi Oyebode. Afam Akeh, Onookome Okome, Uche Nduka, Chin Ce, Usman Shehu. Remi Raji, Joe Ushie. Nnimmo Bassey and Maik Nwuso" (22).

It is important to note that some of the 21st century poets are not new in the Nigerian poetic scene. Poets such as Tanure Ojaide,

Odia Ofeimun. Niyi Osundare, among others, are regarded as being among the second generation of modern Nigerian poets. However, they continue to write poetry and their new poetry collections respond to the changes in the sociopolitical configurations of the 21st century realities. This informs why some of them may be included in listings of 21st century poets.

The preceding has attempted to examine some scholarly works on 21st century Nigerian poetry. It is obvious that only few notable critical engagements on new Nigerian poetry have been done. Furthermore, nothing much has been done on Odia Ofeimun's *A Boiling Caracas* and Rome Aboh's *A To/rein of Terror*. This lacuna in scholarship justifies the need for this study.

History and Politics in Odia Ofeimun's *A Boiling Caracas* and Rome Aboh's *A Torrent of Terror*

History and politics manifest in various thematic and stylistic shades in 21st century Nigerian poetry. This paper employs Ofeimun and Aboh's poetry as representative texts. Ofeimun's poetry has been purposively selected in order to engage an older poet's new poetry with that of a new poet.

21st century Nigerian poets incorporate Nigerian history and politics in their poetry. Ofeimun's "Death Abiding" employs the mode of allusion to foreground two major Nigerian crises. In the first part of the poem, the poet alludes to "Kano:" as he creates the image of death in the following lines: in Kano [...] "We lapped up death in the death of strangers friends we knew too lau whose hands would shake ours but for the axe-blades powered by muezzins, pulpits, and infallible rostrum" (35).

The lines are used to depict the victims of the Kano religious riots in 2004 that claimed tens to thousands of lives. Kano is not new to religious strife in Nigeria. Since 1953 when the first documented riot broke out, there has been series of riots in the ancient city, mainly by the Muslims who attack and maim Christians in the city over religious differences and other minor issues. The image of "axe-blade" that the poet evokes shows the domesticity of the violence. Guns, bombs, and other sophisticated weapons were not employed. Rather, homemade and home-used weapons and items like axes and knives were used to commit the massacre. The image of "muezzins"¹ and "pulpits" represent the two belligerents in the religious war: Muslims and Christians respectively.

In the second section of the poem. Ofeimun alludes to the Umuleri and Aguleri conflicts that started around 1933, reaching its peak in 1999 and has manifested in various waves and forms till the present. The poet alludes to this conflict together with other similar conflicts in the lines

See? *Hutu* and *Tui.si. kaaa* and
pulo, 'umuleri half dozen,
'aguleri count six [...]

A daemon [...] with a maichel
bullet-spraying from dashing kit-
cars and bullish hordes on
licensed rampage awakening
neighbourhoods and alleys (37).

The above lines show the nexus between the Umuleri-Aguleri conflict and other similar conflicts, notably the Hutu-Tutsi' conflict (the Rwandan civil war), and it proceeds to depict a scene from the conflict. The use of "matcher and "bullet-spraying" show that the conflict employed both local and standard weaponry. The poet's allusion to this is used to

Aboh's "moment of despair" and "evidences from okija" employ allusions to, as well as images and themes of Nigerian history and politics. In "moment of despair", Aboh depicts the refugee crises that has engulfed parts of the Nigeria. The central theme of

homelessness is introduced in the opening lines: "Their umbilical cords uprooted and / dumped at The Hague" (24). The uproot of "umbilical cords" symbolise the displacement from motherland, while "The Hague" serves as a metaphor for the International Criminal Court (ICC) at The Hague, Neiherland, The ICC is regarded as the apex court where displaced people can go for justice. Aboh proceeds to thematise the Bakassi Peninsula crisis of 2006 in the lines:

Now Bakassians go as would
refugees without their gods,
without a home with annihilated
yesterdays; with beleaguered
tomorrows.

Kpash! They go without the
libation of their fishing feet

Their loving brows no more
caressed by the morning dew.

And their ghosts like Hamlet's
wander still on that Peninsula (24).

The preceding lines paint a vivid imagery of the refugee situation of the Bakassi people. When Nigeria signed off the oil rich Bakassi Peninsula to Cameroun. after the ICC judgement, the people were left without homes. Many of the inhabitants of the Peninsula are Nigerians who settled there ages ago. mainly for fishing and trade. Upon the occupation of the Peninsula by the Cameroonian government, the displaced persons were moved to another location in

Cross River State, Nigeria, and were thus, severed from what they have considered as their homeland (Nowa Omogui n.pag). Aboh's poem, therefore, presents some of the agonies of the displaced Bakassi people who are left without a "home" and their "fishing feet". The allusion to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is used by the poet to convey the idea of hopelessness and exile. It is also used as a metaphor of the mental agony and anguish of the dispossessed people. Furthermore, the poet alludes to the Odi massacre by Federal forces in Bayelsa State, Nigeria (2010) and the Zaki Biam massacre by the Nigerian military in Benue State, Nigeria (2001). These two massacres were committed against hapless citizens of rural communities that dared to face to government in demand of their rights. The poet persona comments on their homelessness, which was an after effect of the military' pogrom, in the lines:

O you peace-loving terrorist
Of Udi, Zaki Biam
have rendered many
homeless;
your generation shall also be
homeless
in the land of the living (24).

The paradox of "peace-loving terrorist" is used as a humoured satire of the Nigerian military that have rendered the hapless people of Odi and Zaki Biam homeless. The

poet persona proceeds to unleash invectives on the culpable persons in the massacre.

In "evidences from okija", aboh directs his object of satire at Nigerian leaders. In thematising tyranny, the poet alludes to various aspects of Nigerian history and politics beginning with the titular "Okija" and ^Soka". Okija refers to Okija shrine at Anambra State, Nigeria, where over 70 dead human bodies, purportedly for human ritual purposes, were found in 2004. Soka refers to the Jbadan forest of horror where hundreds of human skulls, over twenty decomposed bodies and over twenty living but emaciated people, also for human ritual purposes and human organ trade, were recovered in 2014 (Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia). The poet employs these historical allusions to foreground the inhumanity of Nigerian leaders as he says:

Having sold our souls to
tenders of Okija and (hen
Soka, they swore with
maniacal pomposity; "it's a
do-or-die." They swore with
zealotry: "we will reign for
sixty years to come." (30)

It is obvious from the preceding lines that the poet persona alludes to Okija shrine and Soka forest to form parallels of the evil committed therein. However, he obviates the direct object of his satire through the quoted

statement that asserts reign for sixty years. The statement was made by the previous ruling party of Nigeria.

Aboh also alludes TO the current Boko Haram terrorism in Nigeria (2009-present) that has taken lives and ravaged the entire "North East of "Nigeria, especially Bornu State, where is it is headquartered. The poet attempts to ridicule the inability of the government to address the menace since its inception and he expresses this in the lines; "BH offers them amnesty, / leads them into Sambisa; / and pain-packed laughter knocks us naughty" (30). "BH" is an abbreviation of Boko Haram while "Sambisa" is their official base. The act of "BH" offering "amnesty"-to the-government only for "pain-packed laughter" to knock the government "naughty" is used as an irony and to assert the terrorists' control of the situation. The poet's tone of pessimism is largely due to the insincerity of the government in the fight against the terrorists, as well as the many underground politics involved in the Boko Haram saga.

Apart from Nigerian politics and history, International politics also features in the poetry of 21st century Nigerian poets. Through the agency of globalisation via the World Wide Web, as well as the self-exile or travels of Nigerian new poets, global issues

have taken place in their poetry. The new poets are familiar with international history and politics and they allude to these in their poetry. In Odia Ofeimun's "Death Abiding", the poet alludes to various aspects of international history and politics; The poem starts on a note of pessimism as the poet persona philosophises on the nature of death. However, through the use of allusion, the poet incorporates international history and politics into his poetry. In the first section of the poem, the poet persona says

We died, hurried towards our deaths- in every murder served, condoned, a peep away from the lowered car windows a hoop inside air-conditioned folly a head-shake for roadside corpses guarding the retching honour of fear strutting in Kigali as in other mayhems in Kano, Zaki Biam and Monrovia where we die *a* different death each day (35).

The above lines have allusions to the Rwandan genocide and the Liberian civil war. Although both events took roots in the 20th century, with one extending to the early 21st century, the poet has been able to incorporate them in his poetry to show the idea of death and the nonchalant nature of humans towards the crises alluded to.

In the second section-of the poem, the images are more concrete. This section begins with the poet alluding to the 2002 Nyaragongo volcano eruption in Congo with the lines: "Only blood was news in the valley / of the Nyaragongo river / where plagues shamed proportions / that the Holy Ones foretold at Kibeho" (36). The allusion to "Nyaragongo river" in Congo is used by the poet to further show the idea of massive and avoidable deaths in the world. The nonchalance of the world towards deaths is further highlighted in the poem through the allusion to the France's passivity in the Rwandan genocide (1994), Bosnian war (1992-1995), and the Kosovo war (1998-1999), as seen in the following, lines:

Death was a happy
gang on French leave
with do-goods who
loved Rwanda as they
never loved the fiends'
rampage in Bosnia-
govina and Kosovo
hauling us to camps run
by murder Mafiosi who
defied justice and to
whom time kowtowed
in snares of the
stomach happy for
beans, blankets and
bandages (36).

The preceding lines clearly allude to the highlighted international conflicts. Furthermore, the poet also alludes to Darfur

crisis in Sudan which began in 2003 as the persona says "between *the janjaweed* and the *interhamwe* / every fiend on horseback with a gun" (37). "Janjaweed", which the poet alludes to, is one of the belligerents of the Darfur crisis in Sudan and, like the "interhamwe" of Rwanda, committed one of the greatest genocides ever known to man.

Aboh's "a torrent of terror", the titular poem in the collection, employs allusions to international history and politics in order to empathies with victims of crises, as well as to lampoon tyranny and evil in humans. The poet uses the apostrophe form to address an unknown character, representative of human tyranny, as the poem opens "Yours is the brewing anarchy / at Tehran. Pyongyang" (23). The allusion to "Tehran" and "Pyongyang" are used to foreground the idea of dictatorship. Tehran is the capita! city of Iran while Pyongyang is the capital city of North Korea. Iran and North Korea, especially the latter, are known worldwide for human rights abuses and dictatorships. The Islamic Republic of Iran is mostly known for restrictions on fundamental human rights, extra-judicial killings, restriction of media, gender inequality, religious intolerance, among other human rights issues (Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia), The Democratic

People's Republic of Korea, popularly referred to as North Korea, has one of the world's highest cases of human rights abuses. In North Korea, there is no free speech, freedom of religion, freedom of expression, freedom of the press, minority rights and rights to food, as well as other forms of human rights abuses such as forced prostitution, forced labour and forced abortion (Wikipedia. the Free Encyclopedia). Aboh's allusion to the capital cities is his way of expressing the tyranny and terror in the preceding countries,

Aboh's poem also alludes to the "steaming jihad / in Darfur, Bamako". Darfur is a city in Sudan while Bamako is the capital city of Mali. The allusion here is used to underscore the religious dimension of terrorism and tyranny-. The Battle of Aleppo (2012-2016) in Syria is also alluded to as the poet persona says "Yours is the state-managed pogrom / in Aleppo, in you is the personification / of tyranny" (23). The lines allude to the military confrontation of the Syrian Rebels at Aleppo where thousands of civilian were killed. Furthermore, the poet alludes to the torrent: "of inmates in Guantanamo Bay; extricating men from women women from children and children wandering like stray dogs into open arms of militias" (23).

The allusion to the United States' Guantanamo Bay detention camp at Cuba is evident in the first line of the extract above. Guantanamo Bay is one of the prisons with reports of human rights abuses in the world. It was established specially for terrorists by the US President Bush's administration in 2002 (Global Security n.pag). Human Rights Watch reports that the prison housed minors under the age of 18 and women, together with high value criminals (n.pag). Some of the reported abuses at this prison are torture, unlawful detention and the Inability to access a court, among others (Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia).

The complicity of Russia in the Syrian crisis and its military invasion of Ukraine (2014-Present) are alluded to in Aboh's "a torrent of terror" as the poet persona reveals "Yours, the *Putin* rush / of weapons to Syria, now Ukraine / finding solace in other' death" (23). The allusion to Vladimir Putin, the President of Russia, in the preceding lines is employed to represent Russia. Clear allusions to the Syrian crisis and to Ukraine are also shown in the lines and these are used to show Russia's role in the protracted crises in the region. Again, Aboh employs these allusions international history and politics to thematise tyranny and terrorism in the 21st century.

The theme of political corruption is a major aspect of history and politics that manifest in the selected texts. Corruption is not a new concept in the Nigerian context. The Corruption Perception Index (CPI) and Transparency International rank Nigeria high in terms of corrupt practices. Bribe-Nigeria asserts that corruption is endemic in Nigeria. These show that corruption is not new in the Nigeria socio-political stratosphere. However, in the 21st century, the endemic corruption in Nigeria has only worsened, in response to the malaise evident in the society, Odia Ofeimun and Rome Aboh use their poetry to satirise the leaders who engage in political corruption.

Ofeimun's "Angels Of The Lootyard" directs its biting satire at the corrupt Nigerian leader. The poem starts by referring to Nigeria's democracy as "democracy of baboons". Baboons are employed here as symbols of oppression and violence against the masses by the leaders, Ofeimun laments the "backward" movement to "tyranny" in 21st century Nigeria. This is against the Nigeria of the 20th century in a bid to show the retrogressive nature of political corruption in Nigeria. The political leaders usually start out by "a campaign of ants / whose megaphones goad silence" (12). These lines foreground

the idea of subservience of the masses when the inept political elites come campaigning for another shot at power. To buttress the idea of political corruption, the poet persona says that the corrupt leaders:

banned the parliament of
hearts and locked
courthouses against justice to
settle briefs in street marches
and demos they paid
marchers to vacate
shopfloors factory yards and
oil rigs. And, mere hawkers
on the streets they paid the
mountain not to move to
stand and to await another
millennium (12)

The poet repeats "paid"¹ to foreground bribery, a vice that goes together with corruption. The political leaders show their tyranny by shutting the other arms of government, as well as mass hysteria through bribery'. The idea of "stipends" to the masses in return for passivity towards corruption is ingrained in the political philosophy of "share the money" by some Nigerian political parties.

In Aboh's "a letter to the mp", the poet employs an epistolary form to thematise political corruption. The poet persona begins by alluding to elections as he says "Dear MP, / When you cajoled us to vote for you, / was the last time we saw you" (25). These lines

confirm the view that political corruption begins at the point of election. The use of "cajoled" foregrounds the idea of forced voting or cash inducement of voters, which are common indices of political corruption in Nigeria. The poet attempts to appeal to the conscience of the political leaders by painting the imagery of the abysmal state of the masses that have been promised better conditions. The following lines show this:

Come and see our
matchbox houses
cramming us in on
bedbugs-infested mats.
Come and see our eczema-
coated skin, our only linen.
Come and see our children
kwashiorkored bellies and
mumps-fattened jaws.
Come and see rodents and
reptiles besieging our
hospitals.
And bats ambushing our
dilapidated classrooms (25).

The visual images in the lines above are created by the poet to draw attention to some of the effects of political corruption on the masses. These masses are the same ones that voted in the leaders after being promised better living conditions. Further lamenting the plight of the masses, the poet persona says "We will leave this place for you. You will inherit our corpses". The ideas of human mortality and eternal judgement are evoked

by the poet to create a sense of sober reflection for the corrupt political class.

Conclusion

Nigerian poetry is functional. From its earliest inception in the written tradition, it has always had history and politics as its driving force. Critics must ask salient questions on whether the new and current Nigerian poetry have anything in common with the 20th century traditions of poetry. This work has attempted to answer this question using Ofeimun's *A Boiling Caracas* and Abolys *A Torrent of Terror*. It has been revealed that 21st century Nigerian poets write against the background of 21st century history and politics. They, therefore, continue in the socio-political tradition of 20th century Nigerian poetry. However, the new poets have been able to leave the confines of the nation to thematise the history and politics of other countries, therefore subscribing to the idea of globalisation. The new poets do not also subscribe to ideology as obvious in some 20th century Nigerian poems. In terms of style, new Nigerian poets employ highly allusive language in order to capture the wide range of historical and political influences on their poetry. The poems also attempt to

thematise multiple issues at the same time, thereby creating a connected web of themes. However, this study limits itself to just two collections of poems and therefore leaves much to be done on 21st century Nigerian poetry, especially with regard to the 'twin themes of history and politics.

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