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Recent Nigerian bards and minstrels: Forms of counter narratives

Abstract:

Most African cultural productions, especially literature and music, have remained political even in the post-Colonial era because of the dismal socio-political and economic conditions of the African people. Thus, African literature and music are not only very indicting, they have become media for artists to express their discontent over the failure of independence and Africa's permanent state of transition. The subject of my discourse borders on how Nigerian artists engage their society in a dialogue on issues of pressing postcolonial concerns, especially the relationship between the ruled and the rulers. This study interrogates counter-narratives of music and poetry that have emerged to challenge the nationalized versions of Nigerian culture and histories that are widespread in Nigeria's official discourses or dominant ideologies. Recent Nigerian popular music and poetry from the 1980s are appraised as calibrating tools to measure the growth process of the nation popularly regarded as the giant of Africa. The genre of music I deal with in this paper goes beyond offering mere entertainment to many depressed Nigerians; it has become a counter-narrative, which offers the Nigerian people another version of the dominant bureaucratic narrative celebrated by government agencies.

Key words: Guerrilla hip-hop, counter narratives, popular music, poetry.

Introduction

The burden of memory and the disenchantment of the people with Africa's independences have no doubt established a chameleonic relationship between the African artist and the continent. Over the four decades that have passed since most African nations attained self rule, the continent remains in a fixity, engendered by the inability of African rulers to translate the bountiful treasures of independence to socio-economic bliss. Chimalum Nwankwo argues that in Africa the only "thing fixed is its desert of pain and despair" (11). The despair and bureaucratic failure of African government have created a permanent mood of depression for the African people. Although African artists continue to resonate with the triumph of the people over their adversaries (rulers), and the need to cement their hope in the belief of a better tomorrow in their arts, the current global economic meltdown has become a Sisyphean task, especially as African rulers lack ideas on how to unbound the tangle. Western

nations are organizing various packages to stimulate their economies; Africa, no doubt, has nothing to stimulate, because their economies are publicly driven, that is if there is any.

Africa's biggest burden remains corruption. Although the phenomenon is both endemic and global, its effects on the world vary in degree and form. The problem is "trans-systemic; that is, it inheres in all social systems – feudalism, capitalism, communism and socialism" (Alatas 11). In sub-Saharan Africa, the phenomenon has become the tripod on which public power/office is negotiated and sustained. The pandemic has reached a cancerous stage and become an issue of global concern, because it is the brick wall that has left the continent stunted since the advent of self rule.

Scholars and critics have continued to insist over the years that Africa inherited corruption from the bureaucratic ordering of colonial powers, dangerously moored on capitalist exploitation. Mumea Mulinge and Gwen Leseted argue that the "internal context is rooted in Africa's colonial past and its associated legacy while the external context focuses on internal actors" (53). Uzochukwu Njoku, equally locates the emergence of corruption in Africa on the colonial legacy of "the British institution of the Warrant Chieftaincy" (104). Although the question of corruption in Africa has deep historical roots, African rulers, can not be exonerated from the disaster of state failures in the continent which William Easterland Ross Levine describes as Africa's "growth tragedy" (1203). An empirical study of corruption will no doubt explain why African democracies are rooted in the politics of allegiance. By this, I mean public/political offices, positions and appointments are shared, distributed or allocated through the degree or magnitude of involvement in fraudulent acts during the electioneering process to ensure the victory of one's party. The acts range from carting away ballot boxes, orchestrating violence, manipulating electoral results, truncating justice during electoral cum legal protestations, to holistic destruction of electoral materials in order to stall electoral results.

The subject of my paper is not corruption as it were, but it provides a methodological approach and a theoretic channel which enhances a conceptualization of the conflictual relationship between African leaderships and artists, especially musicians and poets. This approach will equally answer a barrage of puzzles which are indexical to the explication of the relationship between them. The questions include the following: Why are African leaders unable to deliver the dividends of self-rule? Why do bad policy, corruption, and venality seem so endemic? Why are African states so ineffective? And Chin Ce's all important question about the significance of art to the well being of the society: "But how further has the literature gone towards the education of society or the political reengineering of the continent?"(4). The thrust of this paper is therefore, geared towards interrogating how artistic expressions expand discursive space and dialogue on national issues and gives us alternative constructs and possibilities about Nigerian realities, cultures, and identities. Josaphat Kubayanda has argued,

Literary production and criticism actually is an integral part of the process of state formation, for at the heart of the polemic is the search for new political orders for a continent that is viewed by intellectuals as desperately in need of social change. The writer articulates the ideas, words and images that relate to or undercut real power in order to construct a powerful literature alternative utopia or a new sense of nationality (8).

Because of the lack of political will of the rulers, African artists now assume the status of the pulse of the continent, indicating routes and leeway from the gross failure of fiscal institutions engendered by lack of commitment and focus by government. The recent trend of musical and poetic expressions in Africa emanate from the dismal economic dilemma of most African countries, which has brought to the fore the unbridgeable hiatus between the rich and poor. In order that the African predicament does not remain an unalterable decimal as a calibrating tool to appraise the continent and the African people, artistic expressions must be socially functional rather than perform the utilitarian value of entertainment. Tanure Ojaide suggests,

Literature has to draw attention to the increasing gap between the haves and have-nots. Literature has become a weapon against the denial of basic human rights. In the 1960s and 1970s the focus was on political corruption, which was destroying the very fabric of good governance. In the 1980s and now socio-economic concerns have become dominant. Housing, food, health, and other basic needs which were taken for granted in the 1950s and early 1960s have become the focus of attention. It is understandable why the artist is utilitarian (125).

The insistence of the African artist not only to foreground the pedagogical province of art, but to capture the realities of everyday existence in the post-colony, refusing to be subjected to the status of ‘passive morons’ like the masses, no doubt pits the artist against the government. For the African artist, defiance has become a stock in trade as they continue to make the unreasonable cruelty of government lucid. Forging oeuvres contoured with defiant resistance bequeath the artist with the portrait of an insurgent. Simon Gikandi opines that the “failure of politicians to live up to the mandate of decolonization had forced writers into political activism” (2). The artist in Africa, has continued to make bold his position as a self-appointed guardian of the public good, not only on the grounds of reflecting the realities of everyday existence in their art, but also seeks to achieve coherence in the dissemination of their artistic evangelism in order to create an ordered world. The artist strives to make mankind better by helping to address his problems and helping them to find meaning in the world characterized by existential angst, man’s cruelty to himself and the world, thereby making the world void.

This study therefore interrogates how counter-narratives of music and poetry have emerged to challenge the nationalized versions of Nigerian culture and histories that are widespread in Nigeria’s official discourses or dominant ideologies. My sense of counter-narrative differs from the Ashcroft, et al., definition of the term; I define the concept as stories, expressions, or languages of critique, demystification, and agency capable of contesting dominant oppressive practices and ideologies. This definition will help the study focus on the extent to which creative artistic expressions articulate an alternative narrative of Nigerian culture, as is the potential to mobilize the people to resist a single government

definition of national culture. The importance of turning to the artist for alternative discourses, especially as they now function as memory which help society to provoke consciousness, is aptly articulated in Roy Heath's mythical rhetoric where he argues that, "it is our creative artists, our writers, painters, sculptors, and musicians that we must look to rebuild a shattered tradition..." (91). Thus the artists cannot pretend to be unaware of what transpires in their societies. Ngugi, in "Writers in Politics," articulates the notion of every writer taking sides, the political and non neutrality of works of art. Every work of art thus confirms or contests the status quo. Artists have responsibilities to their societies. Poetry and music do not grow or flourish in a vacuum: it is given impetus, shape, direction and locus by social, political, and economic forces in a particular society (Ngugi: XV). It is against this backdrop that this study attempts to appraise recent Nigerian music and poetry as united by their humanistic vision and concern, bringing to bear Chinweizu et al reaffirmation of the necessity of the African writer to prioritize issues bordering on the public sphere:

The function of the artist in Africa, in keeping with our traditions and needs, demands that the writer, as a public voice, assume the responsibility to reflect public concerns in his writings, and not preoccupy himself with his puny ego (19).

Imaginative compositions, especially recent popular music in Nigeria have become vibrant site for the contestation of government's official discourse on politics and governance. They are counter-narratives which continue to uncompromisingly challenge the established territorial orderings of democratic Nigeria.

Recent Nigerian Pop-music and the Nation

Nigerians have recently witnessed new and vibrant forms of musical, civic and political activities. These new forms of politics include deferent genres of music ranging from hip-hop, reggae, afro-jazz, and afro-pop amongst others. Of all these forms, afro-hip-pop seems to be the most popular, as it not only provides entertainment for its teeming enthusiastic publics, it is equally becoming a very formidable vehicle for political education and mobilization. These new artists, initially isolated from the public sphere, have sung

themselves into prominence, providing political balm to millions of disenfranchised Nigerians, and sometimes, government equally employs their services to help in messaging their agenda. Afro-hip-pop is currently enjoying an unprecedented artistic outburst and has invaded the Nigerian airwaves. Despite the popularity this art form enjoys, some adult Nigerians regard it, especially the singers, as a Babel of voices with no message good enough for the people. This may be attributed to the language they employ in singing their messages –the Nigerian pidgin and the rhythm of the beat which is usually very enchanting.

Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, is no doubt the precursor of the present face of Nigerian music. A music that is public oriented especially at the level of language. The Nigerian Pidgin is the medium of expression, a language whose syntax is wholly African, while most of its vocabulary is premised on lexical borrowing from English and indigenous languages.

Throughout Nigeria, music is now considered a legitimate and potent medium to pass messages, that is, a counter-narrative to the official cultural politics. The numbers of artists who continue to engage themselves publicly in order to defend their rights, and also address concerns with socio-political stakes has soared with the passage of time. Monga C. establishes the incisive power of music and its potentials to articulate social change in any society:

If political scientists and sociologists wish to understand the way African societies function, they need to go beyond statistics and macro-economics in order to decipher the sounds and the music of Africa. The rates of inflation and unemployment may allow for calculation of a fictive gross domestic product, but only music can help us measure the per capita anxiety rate and gross domestic happiness – fundamental underpinnings of culture (105).

Recent Nigerian popular music is now viewed as subversive because of its anti-pathetic tone against the activities of government. The most fascinating feature of this music is its radical correspondence with popular issues plaguing the society. It is in touch with the problems of daily life, in tune with the present democratic chaos of victory, annulment, and re-run/run-off, the atmosphere of disorder, the music is often syncretic, but nevertheless

contributes positively to the development of a new social order. Though the Nigerian adult population does not seem to be fascinated by this musical revolution, bringing to bear the fact that “people no longer understand or experience what music means, or how and what music contributes to human essence. That is, the world is no longer appreciating why music is an essential or beatific living and not an accessory mechanized?” (Nzewi et al 90). This genre of music is often repetitive and sometimes it seems neurotic or lost, this form of music continues to make functional the essential role of popular art; it records the frenzied chronicle of the collective meanderings, ambitions, pains, joys and dreams of the masses. Tejumola Olaniyan aptly captures the components of recent Nigerian popular music, depicting alternative truths against the official monolithic version when he remarks,

Tyrannical leadership, political instability, flagrant disregard for rules and entrenched nepotism as currency of official transactions, economic malformation, epochal inequalities between the few and the many, impossible cities, recurrent devastating interethnic wars, anti-state rebellions, and attendant heart-breaking dispersal of populations... (77).

The most socially conscious musician among the pack is African China. The protestation of his music is direct; his music attacks government openly. This direct confrontation with government has endeared his music to the majority of the people. He is a musico-historian; he documents and recreates national issues through music, thereby performing the function of memory. China’s commitment to bringing his mind to bear on the political and sociological aspects of life in Nigeria adds an other dimension to his music. He has demonstrated unique human, social, and community commitment through his music. Since his debut album, *Crisis*, became an instant hit in Nigeria, he has been the eyes, ears, and mouth of Nigeria’s oppressed and disenfranchised people, lifting his voice and exposing the people to the antics and deception of Nigeria’s emergent political class and their insistence on the nascence of the Nigerian democracy as an excuse for their overwhelming and monumental failure. China is heavily obsessed with the plight of the *lowdowns* of his society, his music rages at the blatant inequities in postcolonial Nigeria, especially in the

distribution of resources. As a musico-historian, there is a pervading sense of the burden of memory which brings to the fore Nigeria's tortured trajectory. In *Crisis*, his first album, China gives a run down of the dangers in living in Nigeria as an underprivileged or oppressed person:

Your worst enemy go be your best friend
 Every night and day
 We day think of our daily bread
 You never can tell
 Who go be your best friend
 You never can tell
 When the world e go end
 She make we yarn
 about the one June 12
 wen be say dem kill people before the 12th
 ...
 Something happen for inside mile 12
 wen e go make we all Nigerians come interfere
 nursery student wen e day go learn
 omo na im dem kill o, make we no yarn.

Your worst enemy could be your best friend
Every night and day
We think of our daily bread
You never can tell
who your best friend will be
you never can tell
when the world will end
should we talk
about June 12
when people were killed before the 12th
 ...
Something happened in Mile 12
which attracted everybody's attention
A kindergarten pupil who went to school
Was killed, yet they don't want us to talk

The song aptly captures the reasons that the Nigerian federation still remains dangling nearly fifty years after independence, bringing to the fore why Chinua Achebe has continued to lament that there “is nothing basically wrong with the Nigerian land or climate or water or air or anything else. Nigeria's biggest problem remains the unwillingness or inability of the leaders to rise to their responsibility, to the challenge of personal example which are the hallmark of true leadership” (1). Besides the questions of economic mismanagement and the brutal efficiency with which the political class sustains itself in office, China also explores the dangers of negotiating one's existence as an individual within this dangerously nauseating existential void called Nigeria, when kindergarten pupils are not spared the turbulence of survival, invariably making them victims. Although Sharia law is no longer as popular as during the Obsanjo administration, China equally captures the crisis it engendered when some Northern governors introduced it in their states to demonstrate the dangers in living in the Northern part of Nigeria and how the debilitated masses distract and bother themselves over inconsequential issues – a strategy the rulers employ to distract Nigerians from their

failure to perform their constitutional functions of providing basic services to the masses. The song is an indictment of Lugard's Union of convenience, because different laws are simultaneously operational in different parts of the country at the same time. Invariably, the idea of Nigeria as a federation becomes questionable.

In China's "Our Government Bad", the same rage at the bureaucratic inefficiency of government is highlighted. The inability of government to redeem their promises made during electioneering campaigns occupies a cardinal position in the song. The Nigerian government is characterized by politicians who over promise and under perform:

Our government bad oh!	Our government is bad
Dem no wan give ghetto man job oh	they deprive the common man of job
My God oh	Oh! My God
Cos if ghetto man no get work	How can the common man survive
My brother na how ego take survive oh.	Without a job

Besides the song detailing the hopelessness of attempting survival in Nigeria, it equally reveals the fact that squalor and poverty lay bare the Nation's oily façade, because the amoral political system on which Nigeria's democratic institutions rest lacks fiscal propriety. The Nigerian democracy or political system seems to operate without ideology; it is no doubt money-oriented. Since politics is regarded as money-making venture, ideology has thus been delegitimized and what becomes operational is the politics of money and personality. Corruption continues to thrive because public office holders see the nation's wealth as a boneless elephant: whatever part the machete cuts is fleshy, and thus, government becomes the short cut to affluence/success.

African China is a sensitive musician whose obsession for music that is people oriented has made him continue to search for different expressive media to orient the people to the dangers of the Nigerian brand of democracy. In "Sweet Mama" China bequeaths Africa with the female gender, a popular style in negritude poetry, to demonstrate the dangers of bearing children that would eventually destroy the mother. This aptly parallels the poetic

personae of James Tsaaior *Moments and Monuments* who laments the frustration and agony of attempting to take a nationalistic and patriotic stance for a nation responsible for the contraction of his identity. “But how can I respond with filial fidelity/When the mo(fa)therland reduces me to cinders”(16). However, China demonstrates that his talents span beyond singing his message, in “How Long”, he manipulates the resources of the camera to define Africa’s stark backwardness and the permanence of her postcoloniality:

How long will Africans realize
Tell me I no know
How long will Nigerians realize
Say we no know
Where we dey go.

How long will Africans realize
Tell me, I don’t know
How long will Nigerians realize
I say we don’t know
Where we are heading

Like Niyi Osundare, who deploys graphological experimentation to make his poetry lucid, China manipulates the camera to concretize the visual shape of the subject matter of his songs in the video. This makes the song attract audience attention. The song borders on Africa’s backwardness, even in the midst of numerous resources that should assure the continent’s development and growth, detailing how the continent is not just stunted, but retrogresses. Everything in the video runs backward at an alarming pace. The song is a filmic representation of the shape of the subject of discourse. The song appropriates Africa’s backwardness in virtually all spheres of human endeavour.

China’s most controversial album is *Mr. President*, which attracted the anger of then President of Nigeria, Chief Obasanjo; it has equally provoked three albums from different artists, who have either condemned the song or celebrated it, or used it as a kind of musical treatise. *Crisis*, which was China’s debut album, focuses on the way his music converses with the problems of Nigeria, especially those with socio-political and economic stakes. Since the release of the first album, China has stayed the course and has continued this conversation with his nation. Perhaps it is the singer’s constant return and articulation of the woes of democracy and the failure of self-rule that best defines the new album as quintessential China. In *Mr. President*, the fact that “independence is a return to *Status quo ante*, not a

political transfiguration but a mere metamorphosis of human varieties” (Okuyade 129) is vibrantly articulated. Independence for most African states suggests a transition from capitalistic cum autocratic colonial government to an indigenous democratic authoritarianism, denuded of parliamentary democratic etiquette:

Food e no dey	There is no food
Brother eh water no dey	and there is no water
And our country no good oh!	And our country is bad
Everyday for the thief	Everyday for the thief
One day for owner oh	one day for the owner
Poor man wey thief magi	A poor man who steals magi cube
Omo na him dem go show him face for crime fighter	Is usually tried and jailed
Rich man wey thief money	A rich man who steals money
Omo we no dey see dem face for crime fighter	goes unquestioned
...	...
Mr. President	Mr President
Lead us well	lead us well
If you be governor	If you are governor
Govern us well	Govern the people well
If you be senator	if you are a Senator
Senate am well	Do your job properly
If you be police	if you are a police officer
Police well well	Do you job very well
no dey take bribe.	Do not take bribes

African China adopts a technique of rendition which is characteristically his. He contracts historical events which have become postcolonial indices with which to determine the growth of the individual as against that of the nation. His music enables an interface between the personal and the nation. In the perpetually evolving dialectics of human affairs there are numerous ways through which the experiences of the people dialogue with national experiences. The song above captures the inequity in the rule of law in the Nigerian nation. Kofi Agawu aptly captures this function of the musician when he remarks, “for an African composer it seems that the most important thing is ... to strive by every available means to capture in his music that cultural; or spiritual essence which pervades the African continent” (72). China’s musical discourse and style has not only created an identity for him, but for his genre of music. Akin Euba accentuates this position when he argues, “in order to make an impact in Africa, composers need first to develop a voice that speaks to Africans, and this

leads to the question of identity” (119). *Mr. President* remains a subtle but direct attack on the excesses of the leadership which had developed a penchant for easy money and nepotism. China is the voice of the voiceless and the message of his music is vibrant, urgent and militant, synonymous with the political nature of Fela’s songs against virtually all the oppressive regimes Nigeria has ever had. His music pendulates between liberation and socio-economic empowerment of the Nigerian people. However, his music fails to appreciate the fact that no freedom is acquired from a platter, especially as the people do not make concerted efforts to liberate themselves from the clutches of the government. China still maintains his place in the annals of Nigerian music industry. His music carries the true Nigerian reality and defines the engagements of his generation.

China is not the only recent Nigerian musician voicing his concern and discontent about the deteriorating state of affairs in Nigeria. Another prominent musician is Edris Abdul Karim, who also fights alongside the people through the social commentary he makes in his music. Some of Edris’ songs focus on the social and economic issues that govern people’s daily lives, and, with an infectious sense of humour and optimism that prevails through all his music, his appeal extends to young and old alike. His song “Nigeria Jagajaga” has equally elicited a harsh response from the immediate past president of Nigeria. Edris remains the only Nigeria musician who has refused to identify with any ethnic group in the country. He describes himself as a Nigerian with no ethno/primordial attachments. Since his emergence into the Nigerian music scene he has maintained a nationalistic posture. He enumerates the problem with Nigeria by revealing that nothing works. It is an indictment of a political class characterized by its inability to make the society function like an ideal one, where things are done orderly:

Nigeria Jagaja
Everything scatter scatter
Poor man dey suffer suffer

Nigeria is scattered
Everything is scattered
The poor man always surfers

gbosa gbosa
gun shot in the air

gbosa gbosa
gun shot in the air

The song has very firm political overtones. Although he sounded apologetic on hearing the president's response to the song, Edris still insists that the song only attempts to capture the realities of the Nigerian situation, thus "it is important to reiterate the essence of music to the African, its dynamism in conformity with societal change and the implications of these changes on his total life pattern in contemporary context" (Idolor:1).

Timaya is a new voice in the Nigerian music scene. His music has an ethnic cum regional temper; the music exposes the asymmetries in the distribution of resources in Nigeria – telling the Niger-Delta predicament to other Nigerians who have refused to constructively examine the plight of the micro minorities today regarded as the Niger-Delta. His music has become a vehicle which elaborates the pains and anguish of a people deprived of access to their natural endowment, which develops the majority ethnic groups that continue to sustain their parasitic union with the Niger-Delta people. Besides capturing the existential angst and anguish of being trapped in this haunted space described as the Niger-Delta, he questions the issue of notation and naming. Because of the insistence of the minority people to resist the government over the gross devastation of their environment and humanhood, they are now branded as militants and hostage-takers. Timaya's music reverses the branding. The Nigerian government invariably becomes the hostage-takers and militants. Presently, the Niger-Delta are now vassal states, and the government of President Yar'adua has eventually conquered the people; the area is now heavily militarized. People walk with their hands up, a signification of their submission to the ludicrous insensitivity of the government. Timaya's music engages in "the act of mutual zombification *of the Nigerian military* (Mbembe 4: Emphasis mine). The Nigerian government therefore takes the identity of hostage-takers because the environment and the people are under hostage and bombarded constantly for oil. Considering the atrocities of the Joint Task Force -the label of the military

operation in the area and their designation Operation Restore Hope which strikes a travesty with their mission, the activities of the government in the area no doubt articulate the strictest etiological sense of the idea of militancy. Timaya's songs emphasize the fact that the Nigerian government only won the oil battle, the war has been won by the Niger-Delta people because they now see what is responsible for their abject misery and demotic state, and their contention and resistance remain a question mark to the legitimacy of the present democratic government. Timaya addresses global issues from the local because arts speak "for all of humanity but it uses a platform, a springboard, from the particular to the general" (Eghagha 159). Timaya's music is close to Tanure Ojaide's poetry because the imaginative arts have become the locus for identity politics. As artists, they owe a duty to their people, to bring to light the burden of being a minority person. Timaya's songs are threnodic. In "Dem Mama", he revisits president Obasanjo's executive pogrom in Odi, a Town in Bayelsa State, one of the oil producing states in the Niger-Delta:

I say dem don come
 Iyo, Iyo Iyo Iyo Iyo
 nothing we de dem yo yo yo yo
 yo yo yo yo yo yo
 Nigeria na my country
 Bayelsa na my State oh!
 Dis na reality
 We im bin happen for Bayelsa o
 1999 I swear I no go forget am o
 Wen dem kill the people o
 And make dem children orphans o
 Anytime wen I think am o
 Water dey pour for my eyes o
 Somebody say make I leave am o
 But I say me I must talk am o

Chorus: I say dem don killi
 Dem mama yekeleee
 I say dem do killi
 Dem papa eh
 I say dem don killi
 Dem mama, dem mama, dem papa...
 ...
 Na so dem march e dey go yoo
 Ten thousand soldiers for road o
 Ask dem where dem dey go

**I say they have come
 Iyo Iyo Iyo Iyo Iyo
 We have done nothing to them**

**Nigeria is my country
 Bayelsa is my state
 this is reality
 it happened in Bayelsa
 It was in 1999, I can't forget
 we the people were killed
 and children became orphans
 Whenever I remember the incident
 Tears drip down my eyes
 Somebody asks me to forget about it
 But I insist, I must talk about it**

**They have killed
 their mothers
 they have killed
 their fathers
 I say they have killed
 their fathers and mothers**

...
**Onward they marched
 Ten thousand soldiers
 when asked of their destination**

Dem say dem dey go Bayelsa o	Bayelsa! They responded
Which place for Bayelsa o	Where in Bayelsa?
One village when dem call Odi iyo	A village called Odi
Wen dem enter our village	when they landed the village
Dem rape our young girls	they raped our young girls
and make dem homeless o	and made them homeless
Dem kill our mama Iyo	They killed our mothers
Dem kill our papa Iyo	they killed our fathers
Dem kill our brothers and kill our sisters	they killed our brothers and sisters
and make dem homeless oh!	And made them homeless
Wetin we go do Iyo	what are we to do?
Everybody dey cry Iyo	Everybody is crying
I say the government dem bad oh!	government is indeed bad

I quote the song profusely in order to accentuate my argument on the issue of naming and notation. The song does not only reveal the outlandish criminality of the Nigerian government, it equally demonstrates how the micro-minority people of the Niger-Delta are displaced from their primordial base making them suffer the burden of permanent migrancy because the Delta habitat has become inhabitable for them as their natural endowment has become an anathema to their sense of survival and the bane of their progress. The song does not just capture the violence in the area, it conceptualizes it. The youth resistance in the area is gradually waning because it has metamorphosed into an economic enterprise and they have equally been outgunned by the might of the Nigerian military, Timaya's music resonates with uncompromising resistance, thereby reiterating the fact that the Nigerian government only won the battle, they lost the war. Timaya's music narrates the true story of the situation and functions as "the preservation of memory on home soil is momentous, for it appropriately bridges the gap between past and present, old and new" (Alexander 18). The Niger-Delta agitations only represent just a fragment of the pervading atmosphere of social unrest engendered by ethno-national politics in the Nigerian federation.

Another very socially conscious musical group is the *Junglist*, though not very popular. After their first album, they experienced a crisis which they are yet to resolve. The crisis is responsible for the split of the group. One of the members of the group still sings. Their first album, *Money na Time* is very political, especially the song "Eyes Don Clear". The

song explores the issues of the political notoriety of dictatorship and the endemic corruption that characterize the Nigerian nation. The song has tactically ruptured the popular portrait of the people as “Passive morons” (Outa: 349). The song carries the tone of relief, because the mood provokes an awakening. The people are not only conscious of their plight, they are now aware of the establishment that continues to resist change:

If you wake up for one morning
 Try to look through your window
 Wetin you go hear
 Na the sirin we dey blow
 And you go dey wonder
 Why some of dem dey play game
 Na world bank dem dey carry our money go so oh!
 Tell dem say
 Our eye don clear
 Tell dem say
 Our eyes don open oh!

**If you wake up in the morning
 just look through your window
 You hear
 siren blearing
 and you wonder
 where they are going
 They are heading for the world bank
 Tell them
 our eyes are now clear
 Tell them
 Our eyes can now see**

Election never start
 We don dey see different poster
 See the face when him dey inside
 Na those strong politicians
 When don fool us before
 Dem don go reinforce again
 This time their plan no go work

**Before elections begin
 you see numerous posters and billboards
 the faces you see
 are those of politicians
 who have fooled us before
 they have gone to reinforce
 This time their scheming won't work**

This song no doubt discouraged a one time military president who intended to run for the 2007 elections. The musical video clip captures his portrait as one of the strong politicians “when don fool us before”. The politician eventually declined running for the office of the commander in chief, giving flimsy reasons as the cause of his withdrawal. “Our eyes don clear” is indeed a formidable factor for his withdrawal from the race.

Although the group is now split, Oritsefemi, the only member of the group who still sings, produced a sequel to their debut recently. He titled it *Elewon*. After the celebration of the awakening in the first album, he insists on the *massificatoin* of the struggle of liberation. The track “Flog Politicians” carries an uncompromising temper of revolt and the importance of a revolution, because the oppressed are now aware that the injuries inflicted on them are from within. The song is equally a direct attack on the excesses of the leadership of the nation

who had developed a penchant for easy money and nepotism:

Baba Fela tell them before
Oritsefemi tell them again oh!

**Fela once told them
Oritsefemi tell them again**

We go flog politicians koboko oh!
Dem too dey do us Ojoro oh

**We will flog politicians
because of their antics and deceit**

...

...

All their magic and tricks
Na him we don soji
When dem wan commot for sit
Them go bring their padi
When dat padi padi come
Dem dey spoil the country
Oya for Niger
Pastor wan be president
for Niger
419 wan be president
For Niger
Area boy wan be president
For Niger
Lawyer wan be president.

**we now understand
all their tricks and antics
when their tenure lapses
they will bring there friends
to succeed them
that is how they run the country
In Nigeria
Pastors want to president
In Nigeria
fraudsters want to be president
In Nigeria
Street hooligans want to be president
In Nigeria
Lawyers want to be president**

Oritsefemi reiterates that the Nigerian democracy lacks ideological force, hence it is devoid of focus, direction, and individuals run for office for what they can steal from the common wealth. And since the enterprise is deficient in will, anybody is qualified to run.

One other fascinating feature of this recent Nigerian music, the genre of Guerrilla Hip-hop, is the dance that accompanies the song. The dance is a dance of the margins – the dance of imbecility. It demonstrates the extent to which the people have been reduced. (Galala, Alanta, and Suo become dance which characteristically defines the socio-economic burden of the low-downs of the Nigerian society). Godini Darah argues that the “message that dance articulates may serve to promote or critique existing values or order” (152). Galala, Alanta and Suo are, therefore, dances the ruled use to articulate and express their deplorable conditions, as dance is an instrument for socio-cultural mobilization. This dance embodies the lived experiences and behaviours that are the result of the unequal distribution of power along socio-political lines. This dance is important because it is the site where desires are mobilized through non-verbal expressions by which identities are made and unmade. It also represents the terrain where alliances can be constructed among diverse

groups who demonstrate in a single frame to express their burdens.

From the analysis of these songs with associated dance, they become part of the dynamics of an emerging political reality. Music functions as a vehicle to articulate protest and consolidate community on deeper levels. The political temper and socio-economic conditions of Nigeria become the accelerators of this new genre of music in Nigeria, the *Guerrilla hip hop*. These musicians have refused to be passive observer of events in their society, through their songs; they do not only counter the dominant official discourse but like Richard Chijioke Okafor argues:

The Nigerian popular musician has always borne witness to the times he lives in. He praises, he admonishes, he records events and he involves himself, through his music, in the social and concrete problems of his land. In addition, he yearns for ideal human relationships between peoples of various lands. He is ahead of his time. His music is therefore a social document (9).

Music as a socio-cultural practice “promises that we might yet attain the status of free creative subjects acting within a larger community” (Nesbitt: 182), thus, a group isolated since independence, -the youths, have garnered inspiration and energy from hip-hop culture to forge a platform relevant to the needs of millions of disenfranchised people of Nigeria. The Nigerian Guerrilla hip-hop carries the temperament of transformative resistance and equally give these musicians a distinct identity because according to Homi Bhabha, “What remains to be thought is the repetitious desire to recognize ourselves doubly, as, at once, decentered in the solidary processes of the political group and yet, ourselves as a consciously committed, even individuated, agent of change – the bearer of belief ” (65).

This new musical genre is very inclusive; old and young people are enthralled by its message and the manner of rendition. In providing for the listeners the opportunity to join in the performance by dancing and singing along or participating in other ways, the gulf between the performer and the audience is bridged. The idea of bridging the hiatus between the performer and the artists will be one of the issues I shall pursue in attempting to articulate how Nigerian poets from the 1980s have employed performance as a means of reaching their

audience, thereby giving poetry back its soul which has been wrung in the poetry of Okigbo/Soyinka/Clark generation because of the eccentric and private currents of the poetry.

Rage, Anger, and Indictment in Recent Nigerian Poetry

Without any anticipatory doubt, the disturbances that attended the early years of the newly independent countries, the civil wars, the military coups, the prevalence of political, economic corruption, and the culture of impunity became the cataclysmic developments that dealt a severe blow to the negritude ideology, which had been the touchstone of inspiration for Africa's early writings. It became glaringly clear that one of the ways out of the political chaos of the immediate Postcolonial era was to forge poetic expressions with combative force.

However, self-rule tactically destroyed the relevance of anti-colonial agitations as a literary theme in the artistic vision of the new poets. New poets looked beyond the colonial devastation of Africa to discover new themes and new approaches to help check the growing internal crisis in the continent. For example, instead of romantically glorifying an abstract concept of negritude, the poets explored and analysed the actual predicament of ordinary people in the new African society. Thus, one of the vibrant voices of this era, Funso Aiyejina dubs the poetry of the era as "poetry of an Alter – Native tradition" (112).

Since Nigerian poets have been able to identify fault-lines in the political systems of their nation, the language of their poetry changed from the private interest it assumed during the late 1950s and early 1960s to a vehicle for mass activism and orientation. The battle line is drawn and the masses must know that their whiter than white brothers are responsible for their deplorable plight. Biodun Jeyifo captures the transmogrification at the level of language when he remarks that:

For while the older poets generally deployed a diction and a Metaphoric, highly allusive universe but a small coterie of specialists, the new poets have taken the language of poetry, diction of figurative expression, to the market place... (315).

This innovation finds voice in Niyi Osundare's first poetry collection which Dan Izevbaye describes as "programmatically" (321) in organization. It begins with a manifesto and ends with a note of the birth of an African renaissance:

Poetry is
 Not the esoteric whisper
 Of an excluding tongue
 Not a claptrap

For a wondering audience
 Not a learned quiz
 Entombed in GrecoRoman lore
 ...
 poetry is
 no oracle's kernel
 for a sole philosopher's stone
 poetry
 is
 man
 meaning
 to man (3)

This poem innovatively redefines the poetic possibilities of African poetry at the level of language and message. If the Nigerian masses are to be galvanized into action the medium for dispersal of information should be situated within the scope of their linguistic capacity. Osundare's position here articulates the importance of mutual intelligibility during communication. If the dialogue between a reader and a text fails to establish a field of shared experience, the conduit of communication between both therefore breaks down and the entire exercise becomes baseless. Poetry should not just serve the purpose of entertainment, it should address burning issues in the society, and the reader should be able to make the lines of the poetry not only utilitarian but motivational and arouse questions bordering on existence. As stated earlier, the new trend of poetic expression emanates from the dismal economic dilemma of most African countries, which lay bare the hiatus between the rich and poor. In order that the African predicament does not linger, poetry must be functional hence it is used as a political instrument for propaganda. If the utilitarian function of African poetry has to be efficacious, like Ojaide suggests, the language has to be public

oriented. From this perspective, one can recall the charming rhapsodic evocative lines of Odia Ofeimun's poetry. In the "prologue," one notices a voice addressing his audience directly with clarity of vision and mission:

I have come down
to feel for ears and hearts and hands
to rise with me
when I say the words
of my mouth

(Poet Lied: 1)

The idea of coming down is very important for the poets of the present generation, because the poetry of the preceding generation alienated the people and equally created space for their isolation, as their employment of language spanned beyond the language capacity of their readers. Ofeimun's personae resonates the voice of not just a story teller, or a *griot*, but one willing to tell his tales by the fireside. *Fireside* here is iconic of the popular location and province of the marginalized people of Africa who are usually found around the abject corners and basement of the society.

This demystification of language, re-orientation and re-conscientization of the masses is geared towards exposing the burdens of Africa enveloped in the history of the time. Osundare in "Udoji" recounts the yearnings and aspirations of the people against the provisions of government:

We ask for food and water
to keep our toiling frames
on the hoe
but they inundate us with udoji
now pockets burst with arrears
but market stalls are empty
gari is dearer than eyes
a naira cannot buy a yam.
...
Tell the givers of this bribe
That what we need
Is more than money can buy (36).

The poem is a mockery of a government that is insensitive to the plight of the people. They know what the people desire, but because of greed, they will rather make them have what they think they should have. This way, they may keep something for themselves at the

expense of the voiceless majority.

The masses doubt government's intentions even when they are sometimes sincere. The doubt is a demonstration of the people's sense of anguish over the monumental failures of the rulers. Although they are responsible for the emergence of some of these rulers through democratic processes which are usually hijacked by the vocal minority, the people see themselves as exiles at home because they are never allowed access to the commonwealth. This exposition of the dismal plight of the masses and their abysmal loss of hope is captured in Osundare's "Excursions 1" in *Songs of the Market Place*:

We see the farmer shaving earth's head
with a tiny hoe, his back a creaking
bow of disintegrating disc
from dawn's dew to dusk's dust
offering futile sacrifices
to a creamless soil (8)

Nnimmo Bassey's "We thought it was Oil but it was Blood" becomes a travesty of the expectations of the masses. Sometimes the poets in their exploration of the plight of the masses, adopt post-structuralist binarism in their approach to address the dismal conditions of the people. This technique gives the reader an opportunity to easily distinguish the rulers from the ruled and make glaring the consequences of the insincerity of government to the people. In Osundare's "*Moonsongs* xxii", the tone is not only propagandistic, but a testimony of the social dialectics that characterizes the relationship between the *high ups* and the *low downs*:

Ikoyi

The moon here
is a laundered lawn
its grass the softness of infant fluff
silence grazes like a joyous lamb,
doers romp on lazy hinges
the ceiling is a sky
weighted down by chandeliers
of pampered stars.

Ajejunle

here the moon
is a jungle
sad like a forgotten beard
with tensioned climbers

and under growths of cancerous fury:
cobras of anger spit in every brook
and nights are one long prowl
of swindled leopards
The moon is a mask dancing . . . (42).

The poem addresses post-independent Nigerian crises and appraises the social realities and problems previously ignored. The continued betrayal of the African masses by the rulers begins to calcify the poetic lines of these poets, yet, they are not drowned in their rage.

Onookome Okome a recent poetic voice also remarks about the insensitivity of government in 'Family of Stone':

Lips hang high and cloudy, and you, the
Dreaded Olorogun, sting the air
With your words of blood.
You have cast me out of
The territory of my nation and
I grow in sacrifice and distance (Mammi wata: 46)

Living under government characterized by self-centeredness has become so frustrating that the people flee their primordial base and source of livelihood to seek alternatives outside the continent. The poem carries the tone of unquestionable and inextinguishable defiance and a mood of dejection because the personae has been forced into exile – a condition created by absence of even basic amenities which should make life relishing, engendered by the insensitivity of government.

Tanure Ojaide in "*The Fate of Vultures*" frowns on the progressive plundering and degradation of Africa's wealth by insatiate rulers and begs his memory god, Aridon to come to the rescue:

O Aridon, bring back my wealth
from rogue – vaults;
legendary witness to comings and goings,
memory god, my mentor,
blaze an ash-trial to the hands
that buried mountains in their bowels
lifted crates of cash into their closets. (11).

This poem is written to mock government. The occasion is the funeral ceremony of an ex-governor of Benue state. While the masses mock the occasion and see the funeral ceremony

as laughable, because the governor while alive was very egocentric and forgot his duty to the people and he never considered the pains and mortality of mankind, the political class celebrates him as an equally self-centred member of the exploitative class. The poem equally cautions these leaders that their fate will no doubt be like that of their dead comrade if they do not adjust their perception of governance. Ojaide employs predatory imagery and an avian metaphor, the *vulture*, to make the message lucid.

These poets do not merely chant their songs with a raging temper; they are also visionaries in the suffocating walls of their country. African poetry from the 1970s to date has become a package of rage and hope. These poets recount the history of Nigeria faintly, but with an urgent need for the truncation of the exploitative tendencies of the rulers.

Nigerians no longer engage in the unending search for the origins of their deplorable conditions. Robert Young suggests: “Poverty and starvation, then, are often not the mark of an absolute lack of resources, but arise from a failure to distribute them” (135). These poets call for a new Pan Africanism which brooks neither external dependence nor internal despotism and social deprivation. The poetry of the moment expresses a renaissance that could metaphorically refer to a ‘second independence’ which has found voice in recent Nigerian poetry. Bassey in “We thought it was oil but it was blood” carries a resilient tone, but points to regeneration after the incessant battery and plundering of the poor and their commonwealth respectively:

They may kill all
But the blood will speak
They may gain all
But the soil will rise
We may die
And Yet stay alive. (*We Thought it was Oil*: 15)

The idea is radiantly articulated in Osundare’s “I sing of change”:

I sing
of the beauty of Athens
without its slaves
of a world free

of kings and queens
 and other remnants
 of an arbitrary past

 of earth
 with no
 sharp North
 or deep South
 without blind curtains
 or iron walls

 of deserts treeing
 and fruiting
 after the quickening rains

 of the sun
 radiating ignorance
 and stars informing
 nights of unknowing
I sing of a world reshaped. (90)

Glimmers of utopia and necessity of its translation into actionable programmes cannot be contested. Nigeria returned to democratic rule in 1999 and recently experienced for the first time in the geo-political history of the nation a transition from one democratic regime to another. Could that occasion be the touch-stone for Africa's 'second independence'? Ezenwa Ohaeto in the *Chants of a Minstrel* asks a question whose answer is a question mark on the African renaissance:

Just one request Mr. President
 Now that we are democratic
 Now that we have equal opportunities
 Can I have your seat for one day only? (Chants: 9)

The excerpt above carries an uncompromising tone of doubt. The incessant failures, governmental misrule and bureaucratic inefficiency displayed by African rulers are what have created room for this doubt. The poem, which vibrantly resonates with and accentuates the voice of the people, articulates their frustrations over their inability to have access to government; on most occasions, they boycott elections because they regard elections as exercise in futility and mass intimidation, and the political class distributes offices amongst themselves and appropriates resources as they desire,.

Nigerian poets have continued to resist any form of dictatorial government, thereby indicating through their arts the need to evolve a people oriented government. The writer is

the product of a specific place and time, which have their cultural, social, economic and political manifestations. Invariably, the writer is primordially attached to the destiny of the place and time which continue to nurture and inspire him. The problems of the writer's place and his environment naturally become his too. Little wonder that Okome's "Poetry" in *Pendants* hopes poetry in Africa assumes a very pragmatic stance:

I have often slept empty.
I have walked marooned streets and arcades
with this slim thought:
When shall I witness the violence
of the poetry of my generation: this gift
That the times place upon our brows?
A living expectations of a generation's poetry:
An expectation that poems would one day
Walk into streets
Shy and spiritless as the streets may be and
Slap some faces into true knowledge
of man and things;
finish the sentences begun,
open the faith ways of unbelievers,
rework this wonderful pathos to forget,
To steal the present that is us,
To steal the future in its foetal cradle
and make poetry make things happen.
O my epoch is a silent saddle. Idiots ride (Pendants: 50).

Recent Nigerian poetry treats themes of Africa's political history, themes not in themselves new, yet now so presented as to give the poetry a new significance and dimensions, revealing springs of action showing the important bearings of Africa's political currents, and some features that are but briefly explored in previous poetic engagements. As seen from the manifestation of contemporary Nigerian poetry, memory helps in the evocation of emotions because poetry points man to a better world. African poetry continues to be poignantly political because of the changing pulse of the continent's socio-political history. African poetry captures the historical experience to which the continent has been subjected. Above every other thing, the poets do not just witness the historical burdens of Africa in their arts, they equally interrogate them. Contrary to George Nyamndi's contention that "Africa goes where its literature takes it" (566), this essay insists that African literature, poetry in particular gravitates where history directs it, considering the fact that artistic expressions are

braided into historical phenomena. African literature remains the pulse of the continent because it has continued to function as a pie chart where the cultural and socio-political life of the people are aptly captured and appraised. Tanure Ojaide establishes this position when he asserts that “the direction of a national literature depends not only on the writers, but also on sociological factors, the condition of the people and time, and economic, political and other realities” (84). Ultimately, historical happenings determine the direction of African poetry.

Conclusion

The counter-narratives appraised in this paper are eloquent testament to the dramas of everyday existence in Nigeria. They equally negate the dominant prescriptions of a national culture that the government offers. Presently, the Nigerian government continues to assert its position on the issue of national regeneration through the president’s Seven-Point Agenda and the politics of Re-branding popularly celebrated by the Minister of Information and National Orientation. A critical appraisal of these two politics will only accentuate the fact that they are mere assertions of private will devoid of any pragmatic political ideology or will. Nigerian music and poetry offer an alternative to these politics and government agenda through overt messages and direct indictment articulated in allegories, images, metaphors, innuendos which are coded allusions geared towards exposing what Timaya designates as “True Story”.

These counter-narratives are utilitarian and functional because they enhance the knowledge of the politics of civil society which the dominant ideology struggles to shield from public glare. This function of the artist, as Apple puts it, becomes “a conscious collective attempt to *name the world differently* to positively refuse to accept dominant meanings and to positively assert the possibility that the world could be different and seen with different lenses”. Thus, a new politics of identity and belonging, one which reflects

postcolonial Nigeria boldly has become a signpost for articulating the idea of political representation. It also addresses the issue of naming and defining what it takes to be Nigerian in both postcolonial and global context and what self-rule holds for the postcolony.

These artistic expressions are therefore not just counter-narratives, but artistic responses occasioned by the inefficiency of Nigeria's fiscal institutions and the bureaucratic deficiencies of the country's political systems stirred by the politically barren rulers. Much rage and anger in the arts are discussed in this paper, and the theme of accusation inundates them. One other important feature of these arts is the obsession with message and the medium of delivery. This is strictly because the rulers are on assizes in these arts for their ignoble attitude. However, the perspectives from which these artists create is populist, which axiomatically advocates egalitarianism and a just, equitable distribution of resources. Nigerian creative art therefore, remains poignantly political because of the socio-political temper of the time and the dismal economic conditions of the people.

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