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## THE POET AS TOWN-CRIER\* IN A NATION IN CONFLICT: OKIGBO'S AND OJAIDE'S POETRY

### Abstract

The postmodern/contemporary society is besieged by issues of difference in ideology, personality, sexuality, ethnicity, economy, socialisation, identity, culture, religion and many more. These issues often result into intolerance, terrorism and conflicts. The roots of these issues of difference are in resistance to cultural/ethnic superiority, political domination, and economic control as well as religious purity. These issues of conflict are fluid, spreading like 'bushfire' from one area to another, sometimes resisting interventions through round-table negotiation, thus requiring other forms of reconciliation that must move beyond political analyses. This paper examines how poetry is used as an art of caution in imminent conflict and an act of reconciliation through appropriation of words. To this end, some selected poems of Christopher Okigbo and Tanure Ojaide are assessed to provide insights. Adopting a thematic approach within the apparatus of Postcontact argument of Françoise Lionnet, this study examines how Okigbo's hybridization of Christian religious expression and Ojaide's African traditional mythology raise awareness about looming crises and respond to issues of cultural/social conflicts. However, their poems move beyond culture to man's conscious and unconscious relationship with God and environment. In other words, the intention is to show how the poet as a mediator plays the role of a traditional watchdog or alarmist ("town-crier") and reconciles man to God and his environment.

### Key words

*Town-crier; conflict; reconciliation; resolution; prodigality; environment; Christopher Okigbo; Tanure Ojaide*

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Conflict is generally defined as contestation or disharmony in human existence. It is a disconnection in the harmonious cords of human management of economic,

social, religious and cultural identities. Man is always in conflict with the self, others and with and within his environment. Conflicts are thus inevitable in any human society where material and social resources are unequally distributed and inequity is resonant in the cultural and political relationship among people. This is the case in societies where hyper-technological advancement sometimes leads to inequity and only advances the interest of a dominant group, and at other times becomes the trope for global understanding. Every nation of the world documents stories of conflict, which sometimes become plots in literary imagination. Man and society have always been in conflict from creation stories to civilization and Enlightenment era: imperialist invasion and domination. In fact, one major factor responsible for conflict is the fear of domination that draws out the notions of contestation and resistance. The post-independent Africa, particularly Nigeria, is an example. The country, Nigeria, is currently plagued by multidimensional issues generated by intra and inter-states conflicts: an unstable socio-political structure, religious intolerance (for instance, the current Boko Haram<sup>1</sup> insurgency in the north-east of Nigeria that has held in captive almost three hundred schools girls under the aegis of resistance to western education and civilization for girls and has killed and maimed thousands of Nigerians) and inter-fractional conflicts among the three major ethnic groups that often detonate the “thunder” or dynamite of political violence, and inequitable distribution of resources, particularly in the south-south region, known as the Niger Delta. These various conflicts often result in violence: loss of lives and properties and stagnation in human and natural/societal development policy. Yet, Nigerian peoples are always careful in handling different dimensions of dissent to ensure the survival of the society. This care is indicated in the strategies of conflict management and resolution.

These issues of conflict have also become plots for literary expressions in post-colonial Nigeria. African writers, particularly Nigerian writers/poets are always in the forefront as avant-gardes of change using literary arts to challenge post-colonial national and cultural issues, such as oppression and internal and external conflicts. National and ethnic issues of conflict are deployed pragmatically and artistically as consciousness-raising narratives for the purpose of harmony and peace through resolution. Literature, therefore, didactically acts as an arbiter of justice through non-violent resistance and resolution using poetry as means for the purpose of peace, harmony and co-existence. The poet employs his artistic talent and consciousness to create awareness either to avert conflict or reconcile people enmeshed in conflicts. The poet’s creativity is seen as the vehicle through which layers of differences, distrust, oppression and fear are shredded and the boundaries of limitation reconstructed.

This paper focuses on the use of words in poetic form for healing, moralizing, resistance and reconciliation guided by post-contact argument of Martin Japtok (1998: ix). Post-colonialism as a theory and period marker has been engaged in critical assessment of literary texts produced in countries and cultures that have come into contact with the Western imperialist mission. However, its interrogation based on existing colonial structure is questioned in the face of post-

independence challenges. Post-colonialism, in Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978: 83), focuses on correcting the colonizer's invented false images, myths and other (mis)representations of the Third World in stereotypical images to conveniently justify Western exploitation and domination of Eastern and Middle Eastern cultures and people. Homi Bhabha (1994: 50) also shows how certain cultures (mis) represent other cultures, thereby extending their political and social domination in the modern world order. Post-colonial theory recognizes the cultural identity in colonized societies and deals with the danger of developing a national identity after colonial rule; the ways in which writers articulate and celebrate their colonialism via images of the colonized as a perpetually inferior people, society and cultures. Nonetheless, many critics have expressed concerns about the authenticity of this theory in addressing the binary opposition structures of superiority versus inferiority of cultures and peoples. Critics like Kwame Anthony Appiah (1997: 420), have further questioned the term post-colonialism and argued that it is frequently misunderstood as a temporal concept about the time after colonialism or following the politically-determined Independence Day when a country breaks away from its governance by another state. To Appiah, it is an engagement and contestation with the colonialist's discourses, power structures and social hierarchies. It is, thus, the colonized reply to the colonizer's legacy by *writing back to the centre*, when the indigenous peoples write their own histories and legacies using the colonizer's language. The theory, however, addresses matters of identity, gender, race, and ethnicity and the challenges of developing a post-colonial identity.

Martin Japtok (1998: x) in the "Introduction" to his collection of essays builds upon the argument about the meaning of post-colonialism and its authenticity by re-examining its advantages in the present war-torn independent African nations that are weighted by historical and cultural differences and conflicts, despite the imaginary sense of geographical unity. Japtok questions the significance of independence or post-colonialism: is it a new, possibly invidious form of perpetuating Western hegemony through relating all "peripheries" to a "centre" like the spokes of a wheel, thus, constricting the ability to interact with one another as long as change is focused on the West? These issues may be paramount in Okigbo's and Tanure's poems, which represent anti-imperialist attitudes in the face of national conflicts, internecine ethnic war, terrorism, negotiation and transformation that trailed post-colonial Africa, especially Nigeria, where attention is focused on the West for resolution. In his attempt to answer back the questions of post-independence and post-colonial tag and the implications, Japtok adopts Françoise Lionnet's (1995) alternative proposal to postcolonialism which is "postcontact". Lionnet's interrogation infers that the "post" in postcolonialism implies more than the static periodization after colonialism:

In fact, I find it useful to think of "postcoloniality" in terms of "postcontact": that is as a condition that exists within, and thus contests and resists the colonial moment, itself with its ideology of domination. (1995: 4)

Since to many, postcoloniality defies specific answers, it has become a theoretical adoption to understanding the contest between the colonizers and the colonized as well as the continued imperialist domination by the West and by African leaders. It is an interrogative approach to the spin-offs of colonialism and post-independence African leadership system in order to analyse the “truth” and the meaning of independence. In this essay, the “postcontact” submission of Martin Japtok to postcoloniality as before and after postcontact as an inter-changed for postcoloniality will be constantly referred to in the critical examination of the post-independence disconnection in Nigerian and the place of poetry in conflict resolution.

In order to depict the significance of poetry to reconciliation, two Nigerian poets of different post-independent historical experiences are examined: Christopher Okigbo and Tanure Ojaide. These poets are committed “town-criers” who harness the relationship between art, ideology and social consciousness to articulate the prevalent conflicts in post-contact Nigeria. My task is to examine how these poets act both as town-criers and mediators who diagnose the past and the present and effects there from a prognosis of the future through conflict resolution or conflict management.

According to Campbell S. Momoh (2005: 1), conflict management is, ontologically, a law of nature while conflict resolution is existentially subject to the law of living. The law of nature is general, stronger and superior to the law of living which is specific. But the existential law is in itself derived from ontological law. Life derives its essence from nature. This implies that man depends on Nature and yet is always in conflict with Nature and for there to be conflict resolution there must conflict management.

“Conflict” thus has both dictionary and ‘intellectual’ definitions. The Merriam Webster Online dictionary defines it as a hostile encounter, antagonism, fight, battle, a clash or sharp disagreement as between ideas, interests, or purposes. Nelson-Jones (2005: 1) identifies the following emphasis in the dictionary meaning of conflict: “fight” “struggle”, “antagonism”, and “sharp disagreement”. It is often noted that defining conflict as concept is a tedious undertaking in academic scholarship. However, Gerald L. Wilson and Michael S. Hanna in the book *Group in Conflict: Leadership and Participation in Small Groups* braved a definition as “a struggle involving opposing ideas, values and or limited resources” (1). But this definition has been queried by critics. Campbell Momoh offers an alternative and more elastic approach/view to conflict:

A situation where an individual quarrels with himself because there is no visible, physical external factor to hold responsible for the agony of internal conflict. (3)

Conflict is internal/external, physical/spiritual or private/public. It characterizes the dynamics of human interaction. The notion of the individual is elastically stretched to include communities, race, ethnic groups or even a country. Mo-

moh's definition is derived from the fact that conflict is not passive but produces responses that may be violent, either verbal or physical, and sometimes effects positive dimensions to societal development.

Indeed and oftentimes, the reaction to conflict leaves a chain of responses that become unmanageable or uncontrollable. It starts as a "sharp disagreement" to an oppressive motive and ends up in a violent struggle or a fight if not immediately managed or resolved. It is for this reason that several intellectuals and groups/activists like Ada Aharoni and the "Peace Culture through Poetry" of IFLAC 2004 in Beijing seek conflict management or resolution through peace poems. Poetry as a vehicle of reconciliation is diagnostic, in that it creates platforms for management and resolution of sharp disagreement, dissent, contestation or struggle. The term "conflict management" in this sense implies that oppression/opposition, dissent/struggle is a reality, which man must strive to identify, manage and contain. It is in some ways a move towards conflict resolution. However, both concepts – conflict management and conflict resolution – are factors of contestation and dependent on each other.

The nature and functions of poetry are such that it is a means of historical documentation, poetic truths, socio-cultural consciousness, or an expression of religious experience, a healing balm and/or a mediation or a medium of reconciliation during opposition/struggle, fight or disharmony. However, it is noted that the function of poetry is determined by the circumstances of conflict in a particular society. This notion is anchored on the Aristotelian position that society itself is political since it involves the organisation and the government of men. Emmanuel Obiechina (1988: 8) asserts therefore that "all African writing is at once a literary piece, a social protest and a medium of political re-assertion". The assertion tends to explain why Frank Mowah (2005: 99) sees Modern African poetry as "a product of conflict, political schisms and experiences which have characterized the African world since the coming of the Europeans in the sixteenth century". As a product of various unpalatable socio-political, religious and economic experiences in the continent, (African) poetry becomes a responsorial subject of oppressive mechanism: its thematic commitment is laced with resistance, negotiation and resolution tendencies.

Resistance is the major focus of African poetry and the result of oppression and the attendant "struggle" or "disharmony" caused by communal, ethnic, political or religious disaffection or discrimination. Oppression and resistance are two inseparable dialectic phenomena, which presuppose forms of subjugation expressed in form of abuse, calamity, cruelty, hardship, suffering, violence and tyranny unleashed on human person/society as against ideal social, economic and political conditions. Osami Dumbi (2003: 35) views oppression as a form of social subjugation of man to an undesirable condition. He adds that "since man has innate desire for happiness, resistance remains a constant dialectic to conflict/oppression".

Resistance and negotiation become inevitable with the manifestations of oppression, demanding various forms of management and resolution – ideological,

psychological or reconciliatory. However, the proportion of conflict tends to determine the level of or approach to resistance and resolution. Often the degree of resistance may take on or incite violence that requires negotiation. In recent times, resolution by negotiation has become the strategy in the conflict project as the case of the Niger Delta crises in Nigeria: a resistance to the age-long ethnic and economic oppression. The resolution of the crisis has entailed cash negotiation, kidnapping, militant offensive, round-table and public dialogue, such as the Niger-Delta Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 2008. Unfortunately, the terror unleashed by this crisis is beyond the palliative efforts that include a ministry of Niger-Delta to replace Niger-Delta Development Commission (NDDC). Niger-Delta conflict is one of the numerous issues in the country, which result from economic impoverishment, political imbalances, environmental degradation and ethnic/religious intolerance. The issues in Nigeria since independence and the Niger-Delta have indeed preoccupied writers, particularly poets (town-criers) like late Ken Saro-Wiwa, who was murdered for speaking and writing against the oppressive treatment of the oil-rich south-south Niger-Delta people in 1996. These activist poets use their poems as vehicles of awareness, negotiation, resolution and reconciliation between communities and individuals. Describing the Niger-Delta conflict, David Dafinone (2007: 4) explains that:

The Niger-Delta people vehemently oppose being colonized by few Nigerians who have captured the instrument of power for their interests. As long as the government continues to alienate the people from their land and usurp their right without due process, the government cannot be seen to be democratic as it does not take into consideration the principles of corporate governances, which involves freedom of choice, rule of law, transparency, accountability, probity, equity and justice. Our stand on this issue is not in the context of breaking from the Nigerian federation or excluding other non-oil producing areas from benefiting from the proceeds from oil export and production. Rather, we dose in recognition of the natural endowments, namely, minerals, forest, and water of the other states of the federation and insist on the ownership and rights of the individuals, families, communities and the state over natural resourced for the greater well-being of the people, the government and society.

This candid assessment of the post-colonial Nigerian people indicates that Nigerians do not struggle merely for ideological reasons but for peace, material benefits and a better management of resources and power control for social development.

In as much as conflict as a result of oppression is political, the resistance or violent response in Nigerian society is the same. Each process is a result of oppression – conflict and resistance. As observed by Ngugi Wa Thiong’O (1972), “imperialism is a total phenomenon – an economic, a political and cultural phenomenon – so its impact on the people tends to be all embracing”. He adds that “we can say that the struggle against imperialism is also total, it is political and

it is also cultural” (367–9). Ngugi emphasizes the need to see writing in this context. This statement indeed finds relevance in the struggle for political and economic emancipation that is taking place all over Africa as a result of bad and corrupt governance. Typical examples are the current political crises in Zimbabwe, Sudan, Rwanda and several countries in North Africa that have left untold hardship on the citizenry. It would not be wrong on this basis to concur that African literary culture has always been combative, capturing the political, cultural and economic conflicts of the modern day Africa. Indeed, it is a protest literary culture that attempts to resolve conflicts by literary resistance, reconciliation negotiation.

The thesis is that Nigerian poetry is resistant in nature; a literary piece for bridging the gap between the rich and the poor, a social protest and/or a medium of resolution and peace; that the poets are “town-criers” or mediators, playing messianic roles by articulating hope and aspiration: a prognosis for future development.

### **Conflicts and Resistance Culture in Modern Nigerian Poetry**

According to Aristotle, in his *Poetics* (2013: 23), poetry is a representation of men in action, an imitation of life and reality captured in mimetic and pragmatic contexts. The pragmatic nature, however, becomes the focal interest of Plato in his rules of poetry in *The Republic* (in M. H. Abrams’ *Orientation of Critical Theories* 1984: 4–23) – matter, manner and appeal to imagination. In contemporary literature, the mimetic and expressive nature of poetry is not as predominant as the pragmatic implications of the genre, considering the various issues it addresses in a particular society. Its expressive or mimetic nature often results in pragmatism. It is on these bases that poetry is viewed as a product of conflict, political schisms and experiences that enables self-expression, self-fulfilment and maximum self-realisation under poetic licence. Resistance is thus woven around resolution in modern Nigerian poetry. The poet sees his art as a medium of sustaining a community and its institutions, and this he does by drawing upon oral tradition for castigating social vices.

Modern Nigerian poetry is a literary trend that is defined by interest in national conflicts as they affect individuals and communities. Post-contact poetry is used as an art of resistance or a weapon to challenge “hydra-headed” hyper-technologically driven conflicts of the modern times. Their responsibility moves beyond returning a nation to her past glory of Négritude ideology, but also steering the post-independent society in a post-deconstructionist manner on a right course in the mirage of challenges and creating platforms for development. Part of such challenges include corruption, ostentatious life style, issues of development like borders and boundaries (an instance is the secession of Bakassi to Cameroon in August, 2008), ethnic conflicts (a prevalent issue in Nigeria between the three major ethnic groups) and class/economic domination (expressed in the Niger-Delta militancy over land degradation and oil exploitation) and sectarian/

religious conflict that enable internecine war (like the terrorist violence of Boko-haram, a contemporary challenge in the Northern region of Nigeria that seem to have defiled resolution since 2009). But the major challenge confronting Nigeria and stagnating international investment is the Niger-Delta oil crisis (the acts of militancy and kidnapping), the conundrum among political parties, and more recently, the “Bokoharam” terrorism.

However, through obscurity, fragmentation and allusiveness of style, the modern poets, such as J. P. Clark, Kofi Awoonor, Lenrie Peters, Dennis Brutus, Wole Soyinka, Christopher Okigbo, Tanure Ojaide, Odia Ofeimum, Akeem Lasisi, Segun Adekoya and many others have become the indigenous “town criers”, who continually resolve oppression, struggle/violence through their thematic commitment to national development. Their poems are sometimes lamentations of the loss of cultural and moral values and identity. Poetry is thus an institutionalized vehicle for conflict resolution, bordering on resistance, although non-violent in the spirit of Martin Luther King Jr.’s non-violent political ideology, sometimes inciting and at other time negotiating or reconciling by foregrounding language to capture mood, atmosphere and attitude.

### **The Prodigal Town-crier: Christopher Okigbo’s Poetry of Mediation by Negotiation**

Christopher Okigbo (1930–1967) is an African foremost transnational modernist poet of post-independent Nigeria. His poems are diagnostic, traditional, archetypal, religious and political, yet self-expressive and pragmatic. His poetry is mediating, reconciling and promoting positive/cultural consciousness through language that ensures development and peaceful co-existence. Okigbo’s claim to poetic greatness rests on five main factors, namely: his all-inclusive multicultural sensibility: his mythopoeic imagination: his fusion of ritual seriousness into the praxis of his poetry: his mastery fusion of a wide diversity of poetic modes from traditions across the world and his all-encompassing vision of reality – the phenomenal and the imaginative – in the fortunes of his poet-hero, the prodigal. Through the prodigal, the poet constructs a complex fable of man’s perennial quest for fulfilment in cycles of poems which, though written and published separately, are organically related.

Running through, and unifying, all these dimensions, of his poetry is his over-riding concern with the ideals of the open society, decolonization of the mind, cultural freedom, human rights and civil liberties, security of life and property. These are clearly manifest in his consistent references to events of the day and further culminate directly in his involvement in the Biafra War, which costs his life in August, 1967.

According to Romanus Egudu (1977: 4), Okigbo as an individual is a man of two worship systems – the Roman Catholic and indigenous worship of Idols, the river god in Ojooto, his birth place. The personal experience in his religious ex-

posture is captured in his poems which address issues of cultural identity in post-independent Nigeria. It will be interesting to note that many Nigerians and in fact African creative writers often interpret socio-cultural and political conflicts from a religious perspective: whether orthodox or indigenous.

This is a sterling quality in Christopher Okigbo's poetry, which approaches socio-cultural conflicts of post-independence in two orders: Christian worship and indigenous system of worship; Afrocentricism versus Eurocentricism, that is, interpreting and promoting cultural nativity by using the Western modes. His thematic focus is the challenges of transition to post-colonial system and the attendant conflict of being an independent nation, yet his issues border on resistance, sometimes prophetic, but negotiating socio-cultural and political reawakening based on his poetic posture and techniques. He is often regarded as a prodigal poet, who laments the dearth in the worship of indigenous faith. His poems are structured into three major themes: religious, social and political interests (Egudu 1977: 5). Each interest is a mediation and negotiation for personal and societal resolutions. However, his religious poems are unconscious/conscious use of style and techniques to attain personal therapy. He calls upon the mythic elements – rituals, nature and oral tradition as well as creates archetypes in order to resolve personal and societal conflicts.

In his collection, *Labyrinth, with Path of Thunder* (1971) published after his death which occurred as a result of his involvement in the Biafran war of 1967, connotes crossroads and thunder. His other collections of poems include *Heavensgate* (1962), and *Limits* (1962). Each poetic collection is a prodigal diagnosis of causes of political, cultural and socio-religious conflicts and resolutions.

Okigbo's poetry epitomizes the age-long wisdom that literature is a powerful, socially transformative force. His poetry not only mirrors the socio-cultural and historical realities of his time but a complex of prophetic visions rooted in these realities. As a prophetic town-crier, he draws upon the prodigal concept of the Christian synoptic parable of the gospel of St. Luke. This parable deals with the repentance of a recalcitrant son and it finds relevance in his literary creativity. The prodigal concept is one of his multiplex subtexts that view the socio-political and religious developments in Nigeria at a time of rapid global consciousness. Considering Okigbo's background exposure to Western culture and religion, his poems openly yearn for a rediscovery of values and ideals, which have been sadly obscured by colonialism and post-independence entrenchment of militarism, one-party dictatorships, sham democracies without democrats. His vision of realities reflects the contemporary neglect of the rule of law, contempt for human rights, endemic political crises and senseless and wasteful wars; ethnic cleansing and other recurrent cycles of tragic loss of human life.

Prodigality as a concept is a biblical anecdote of a son's economic indiscretion against the frugal culture of the Jews, the tribal reference of the narrative, the repentance of the son and the forgiveness of the father. The parable of the prodigal son has been subjected to literary and theoretic interpretations, moving it beyond religion to morality and interrelation between God and man. According to

Martin-Lloyd Jones (2005) in his sermon on “The Parable of The Prodigal Son”, prodigality is the most popular of Christ’s tales which has inspired and been subjected to multitudinous interpretations.

The synoptic parable embodies a universal moral that gives it instant, unre-served endorsement across cultures as a pedagogical instrument. Although deeply rooted in Jewish ethos, it reveals the forgiving and reconciling nature of God. The story focuses on an economic frugality but then, it goes beyond that to establish the contrast between God and man in the management of resources and conflicts. It deposits the characteristic nature of man on economic management and personal conflict resolution.

Okigbo as a town-crier demonstrates this nature in negotiating for reconciliation in his poetry of personal and societal therapy. The prodigality in his religious poems effect more universal meaning to include the characteristic nature of man in his social relations: internal conflicts, political dissention and socio-cultural differences in issues that define man, and yet create internal and external conflicts in him. It deposits a poet’s conscious awareness of his environment and his commitment to effecting transformation and development. His poems are subjected to religious interpretations because of his ability to develop archetypes in the form of “idoto” (a river god worshipped in Ojoto, Eastern part of Nigeria) in order to capture archetypal experiences. However, within the religious themes are moral experiences and individual behaviour of the personage. Thus, what is called religious is mere acknowledgement of the poetry’s intensity and ability to reflect profundity in the exploration of individual’s sensibility as it evolved in a ferment compounded out of the confrontation between traditional interests and modernity. His language is ritualistic, drawn from Christian mode of worship and traditional ritual worship of Idoto. But these external resources are used to represent the personage’s journey into his inner and outer self for both personal and public resolution. As earlier stated in my introduction, it is only internal/personal therapy and resolution of conflicts that can ensure the external/environmental reconciliation. (This is illustrated in the public outcry for reparation or secession forty-one years after Biafran war in 2007, and The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of 2008 set up to reconcile victims of the Niger-Delta environmental degradation.)

Thus, in as much as his poetry has a powerful impact that connotes religiosity, his poetry is mainly an exploitation of language for secular purpose – the recognition of development of personal or societal identity, unity and peace. In Darthorne’s opinion (1982: 19) every word in Okigbo’s poetry has an almost telegraphic precision about it as well as associations that belong to the encyclopaedia of the poetic experience.

In one of his earliest poems, a part of a larger cycle, the poet demonstrates this telegraphic nature of language:

The moon has ascended between us  
Between two pines  
That bow to each other

Love with the moon has ascended  
 Has fed on our solitary stems  
 And we are now shadows  
 That cling to each other  
 But kiss the air only  
 (*Modern Poetry from Africa*, 1963)

Darthonne interprets this poem as the anguish and spiritual inspiration of two lovers. 'Between' in the poem indicates a visual reason for emphasizing the separation. However, the meaning goes beyond human separation in a ritualistic re-enactment of a folk-belief in the manner in which sky and earth become separated, yet ironically, often in conflict and harmony. The ritual re-enactment connotes tragedy in the act of separation with the word 'pines' while the 'us' in the 'between' indicate two people or phenomena. As a religious poem, it agonizes over the separation between man and God with hell impeding between the two beings as a result of differences. The separation of man is his own making creating darkness ('moon') around him due to his worship of 'false' gods that have eroded the truth from him.

Most of Okigbo's poems have religious references and spiritual quests and like T. S. Eliot, Okigbo is concerned with the wastefulness of human life and the perennial quest of man for fulfilment that preoccupy the modernist tradition. As a modern poet, he is caught between the devaluation of the indigenous religion/culture and the conformity to the western religion/culture. The efforts of the early Christian missionaries are directed at estranging the native from their indigenous system of worship and "planting" in them imported faith. Christopher Okigbo thus sees himself as a prodigal who has left home religion for the new faith and at a moment of maturity comes to the realisation of a gap created by his absence. This explains his satirical attitude to Christianity. And to express his gradual maturity, his poems reflect different phases of religious conflicts, and growing levels of experiences. He focuses on reconciling himself to his indigenous identity in a kind of therapy that at the end of his collections in *Labyrinths* he gradually transports this personal therapy into a futuristic prognosis – a public therapy and resolution. There is a foregrounding in the cycle of season within the structure of his poems while reflecting the psychic residue of his past which, he recalls in the river goddess – *Idoto* worship. In other words, his reconciliatory therapy to his indigenous identity creates intuitiveness about his environment and the political trends that are gathering thunder or moving on the "paths of thunder".

In *Heavensgate* (1962), "The passage" is a poem that ushers in flow and thoughts (direction).

Before you mother Idoto,  
 naked I stand;  
 Before your watery presence,  
 a prodigal

Leaning on an oil beam,  
Lost in your legend

Under your power went I  
on barefoot,  
Watch man for the watch word  
at Heavengate;

Out of the depths my cry:  
Give ear and hearken ...

The poem presents a poetic personage who is a prodigal, seeking reconciliation. It is a religious poem about a prodigal personae returning home to his indigenous identity, yet it moves beyond that to communal desire for restitution of identity, culture and religion. Within the poem is an effect of Christian method of worship (Catholic mass) in the posture of the personae's supplication before the river god "Idoto" whose totems of worship include oil-bean and the watery presence reinforces his nature/status. The structure of the poem indicates uncertainty – to be accepted or to be rejected – a form of staccato in the accent and descent of the lines structured long and short, giving it an incantatory quality. Florence Stratton (1994: 91) gives the poem a feminist interpretation: first as an artist's creative inspiration, which embodies the Négritude mode of a prodigal on African cultural traditions. Second, it encompasses the attitude of Mammywata, a mythological female figure that lures men to destruction, yet empowers women to be independent. "Idoto" (Mammywata) in this context emerges as a female sexuality associated with pollution, death and redemption. This implies that Africans have a form of worship or channel of redemption before the advent of Christianity or colonialism.

The incompleteness of the last line further indicates its nature as a forerunner for other poems with their various sub-themes and issues. The language is deftly a mixture of Christianity and traditional religion. "The Passage" symbolizes a rite (ritual) or cleansing process of reconciliation like in baptism, while the prodigality connects it to the Christian parable of the prodigal son and forgiving father. This image of the father and son in the Christian faith is represented in the personae and the river god, "Idoto". Okigbo accentuates this in line two – "Naked I stand" – in total submission to supernatural 'musing' or intervention, which creates drama, raises tension and ensues resolution.

The concept and posture are continued in "The Passage" part two titled "DARK WATERS of the beginning" (the use of capitalization by the poet symbolizes the significance of his prophetic vision of gloom initiated in "The Passage").

Rays, violent and short, piercing the gloom,  
foreshadow the fire that is dreamed of.

Rainbow on far side, arched like boa bent to kill,  
foreshadows the rain that is dreamed of.

Me to the orangery  
Solitude invites,  
A wagtail, to tell  
The tangled-wood-tale;  
A sunbird, to mourn  
A mother on a spray

Rain and sun in single combat;  
On one leg standing,  
In silence at the passage,  
The young bird at the passage.

The second part of the passage (“DARK WATERS of the beginning”) indicates the psycho-logical state of the celebrant/supplicant, seeking forgiveness and acceptance. This passage captures the solitude and alienation of the soul expressing hope of acceptances. The “Dark Waters” symbolizes the mud that smears the personae during his separation from his root, culture or faith as well as prophesies an impending desolation in the event of conflict. The element of opposites indicates conflict and the repetitions are frenzy warnings. Okigbo in this context moves beyond religion to socio-political situations. He becomes a prophet whose poems foreshadow “gloom” or catastrophe that gathers in the wake of the Nigerian/Biafran Civil war in 1967. It is safe to say that Okigbo explores political gloom from a religious platform in his focus on indigenous/orthodox worship, while using contraries/opposites to voice his prophesy. “Heavensgate” in this context becomes a symbolic platform for reconciliation or negotiation.

“Heavensgate” expresses the experience of reconciliation captured in a religious expression. “Heavensgate” in the view of the poet was originally conceived as an Easter sequence, which later grew into a ceremony of innocence, structured like a mass but an offering to Idoto, the village stream of which he drank and washed as a child. The celebrant like Orpheus, is about to begin a journey (a new life). The journey requires cleansing and involves total nakedness, complete submission to the water spirit that nurtures all creation like God. The poem, thus, presents the celebrant at various stations of his cross (“Introduction” in *Labyrinths*). One fact that many critics of Okigbo fail to consider is the contemporary issues embedded in the religious presentation of renewal. That is, his poems are basically and often interpreted at the religious sphere, overlooking the secular aspect of the spiritual. Apart from the religious multiplication, the poem becomes a personal therapy and transformation process after the pollution of the worldly experiences and conflicts.

In addition, considering the nature of poetry as a tool of social-political and personal resolutions of conflict, the poem becomes prognostic of future conditions. Beyond that, some of his poems actually prophesied the future based on the ‘storms’ of the present time: “Path of Thunder!”

The collection in *Path of Thunder* depicts the poet as a man of all times, drawing upon the past, the present and the future. The poet through his poems expresses diagnostic vision of the present and prognostic of the future. This visionary expression captures the political conflicts in Nigeria between 1965 and 1967. In addition, it also depicts the indigenous ritualistic belief and worship of Okigbo, especially from southern Igbo. “Path of Thunder” is a mythical expression that moves beyond the political prophesy to a religious invitation to an indigenous god, “Amadioha”, the god of justice and vengeance whose governing planet is the Sun and his symbol of worship is a white ram, to vindicate the oppressed people amidst the post-independence conflicts and imbalances. Amadioha is a manifestation of inner strength symbolised by thunderbolts and metaphysically represents the collective will of the people, of which the poet, as a “town-crier”, is the agent or a prophet.

The poem “Come Thunder” describes the state of affairs in postcontact Nigeria, precipitating the first civil war. The poem is structured as a prophecy: it interprets the present (1965) and forecasts the future (1966–67). The political conflict in Nigeria in 1965 heralded a future of bloody turbulence and destruction in the subsequent years beginning with the 1966 coup d’état. “Come Thunder” is a prophetic poem of an impending political catastrophe. This conflict is symbolically described as “thunder among the clouds” – an omen of doom – here; Amadioha is ritualistically invited by the collective will of the people expressed in the pains of injustice and political conundrum. There is also “smell of blood” afloat; “the death sentence lies in ambush along the corridors of power”; and there are “great fearful things”, “a nebula immense and immeasurable”, “an iron dream”, “a path of stone”.

The conflict in Nigeria comes under Okigbo’s poetic prediction with the poem “Elegy for Slit-Drum” (*Labyrinths with Path of Thunder*, 68–70); pre-empting a future of crisis as a result of corruption. In the poetic prophesy of the future, politicians are represented as “robbers”, parading their wealth and power. The “Elegy for Slit-Drum” informs that the “parliament is now for sale”/“The cabinet has gone to hell” and “musters are now in goal” (Okigbo 70). The poem presents a scenario of one-up-man-ship that suggest betrayal and man-eat-man situation. “Elegy for Slit-Drum” metaphorically describes post-colonial Nigeria interne-cine conflict using animal world and their struggle for power, chaos and betrayal. The poem is symbolic. It represents the old politicians who have fallen victims of the same gluttonise corruption of past leaders. But the poet issues a note of warning that the “Thunder that has struck the elephant the same thunder can make a bruise”. Symbolically, the poem is a dirge for a slit drum – the drum is a traditional instrument beaten in lamentation. The presentation of the drum as broken connotes an abomination and further disaster.

“Hurrah for Thunder” symbolically expresses premonition of destruction for the perpetrators of crises by Amadioha, the unconscious collective will of a people. In this situation, “the elephant, tetrarch of the jungle: ... has fallen –” as a result of the invocation of the “hunters”. Okigbo the “town-crier” however, warns the hunter of similar fate: “But already the hunters are talking about pumpkins:/if they share the meat let them remember thunder”.

Okigbo, the town-crier, recreates the crisis of 1966 – coup de état – and beyond that foreshadows the terrible Civil War with specific references to the political conflict in Western region of Nigeria in 1965. This indeed spurs Gerald Moore’s observation:

It should not require a poetic sensibility to see these things, but what is striking about Christopher Okigbo’s “Path of Thunder” is that he sees them in a particular historical context and as omens of a more radical crisis which nothing can now avert. (*Black Orpheus II*, 11)

Drawing from above, it must be totally presumptuous to say that poetry is only a means of reconciling conflicts, or an instrument of resistance or transformation. It is also a prophetic expression of impending conflict. Thus, what Okigbo as a town-crier prophesied in his collection *Labyrinths* becomes the irreversible conflict that demands ‘intellectual’ resolution. The symbolic elements: “elephant”, “hunter” and “thunder” also preoccupy the new generation town-crier: Tanure Ojaide in *Delta Blues and Home Songs* and *Fate of the Vultures: & Other Poems*.

### **The Town-crier’s Resistance and Mediation: Tanure Ojaide’s *Delta Blues and Home Songs* and *Fate of the Vultures & Other Poems***

The unhealthy experience in post-colonial Nigerian societies must have influenced the kind of ‘intuitive desire’ constituted by the poet Tanure Ojaide, a second generation poet of the 1990s, to mediate and fight corruption and oppression especially of the Niger-Delta. Tijan Sallah (1995: 25) explains that Ojaide finds the retarding system and nature of African leadership uncomfortable. The character of African leadership, in this sense, is marked by incoherent social vision, corruption, environmental degradation, oppression and exploitation, all for pernicious ends. He, however, describes Ojaide as a ‘new traditionalist’ poet who derives his poetic style from indigenous roots, characterized by direct statement; the language is free of idiosyncrasy and arcane imagery (21). In other words, he relies on parables and refers to traditional ritual adjusted to contemporary conditions.

Ojaide justifies his poetic style in his claim that he tries to model some of his poems in English on the poetic form of Udje<sup>3</sup>, the Urhobo traditional songs of abuse (Ojaide 2001). The Udje dance songs belong to the corpus of traditional satire that strongly attack what the traditional society regards as vices. In this context, the traditional singers assume the position of social critic and reformer with

the desire to ensure that what the society considers as positive norms are upheld. Central in the songs are the principle of correction and deterrent through the use of “wounding” words. Ojaide, from Niger-Delta continues in the tradition of late Saro-Wiwa, however, he claims that his poetic inspiration is indebted to a muse, Uhaghwa or Aridon, Urhobo god of songs. In this instance, Ojaide’s posture and choice of techniques can be deemed purposeful. His poetry is a resistance to oppression (of the Niger-Delta people) in post-independent society, patterned along traditional poetic form popular as a weapon of evil deterrent among his folks.

In examining few poems in *Delta Blues and Home Songs* (1998); Ojaide’s posture and technique ensure the instances of his thematic preoccupation. On the whole, the collection reads as a poetic diatribe against environmental degradation of the Niger-Delta and the unjust system which makes the people to be chief mourners and paupers in the midst of their oil wealth. It is also a weapon of resistance against the oppression of the people. In a nutshell, oppression and resistance find unity in his poetry.

The first poem in *Delta Blues and Home Songs* “My drum beats itself” seems like a signature tune to the entire poetic performance, while taking up Okigbo’s concern in “Elegy for the Slit-Drum”. Here, the poetic personae parades himself as a possessed town crier charged by a muse for a purposeful mobilization among his people and sustains this posture throughout the collection. The posture of the poet is understandable, considering the fact that the collection was published in 1998 under the military oppressive mechanism of General Sani Abacha (1993–1998) in Nigeria after he murdered Ken Saro-Wiwa to silent his environmental activism. It was a period when the waves of economic impoverishment and political subjugation that have become common trend in most African States peaked under military cabal in the oil-rich Niger-Delta of Nigeria. Moved by the need to mediate in the suffering of his people, the poet seeks their solidarity in resisting the cabal by adopting the leader-chorus formula typical of African oral performance under the inspiration of Uhaghwa/Aridon. This poetic technique also signifies involvement of the people in the protest that is non-violent:

Now that my drum beats itself,  
I know that my dead mother’s hands at work  
This round that I lipsing and others think mines  
Could only come from beyond this world

The little from there makes abundance in my hands  
Inside the drum hides a spirit  
That wants me to succeed beyond myself...

My drum beats itself  
And I await the carnival the drum divines.  
Sing with me

Iye iye, Iye Iye... (“my drum beats itself”, 10–11).

The long and short lines structure of the poem symbolizes the leader-chorus performance and the trepidation of the heart due to the subjugation of the people and explication of their wealth.

In “When green was the lingua franca”, the poet captures the activities of multinational corporations such as Mobil, Shell, Agip, Elf/Total etc. and foreign collaborators in the power abuse through economic oppression of the Niger-Delta people. The poet laments the destruction of the Niger-Delta green heritage, the idyllic environment in the name of white-collared jobs and wealth creation through oil exploitation. The result is ‘double-yoke’ for the Niger Delta people, who are subjected to environmental degradation and economic impoverishment. The poet employing a propagandistic tone resists the oppressors’ activities by describing them as hellish:

Then Shell broke the bond  
With quakes and a hell  
Of flares...

I see victims of arson  
Wherever my restless soles  
Take me to I hear witness.  
The Ethiope waterfront wiped out by prospectors  
So many trees beheaded  
And streams mortally poisoned  
In the name of jobs and wealth!

... The weeds have been amputated. (12–14)

In “Season”, the poet narrates the people’s ordeal and calls in the attention of the ruling class to their plight: “We selected delegates to take our prayers to Abuja/ but guns scared them from the promised land” (15). And in “Wails”, he decries the Cabal’s murder of Ken Saro-Wiwa and 9 others in 1997 by lamenting the vacuum created by a devouring nation. Using the image of a boa to symbolize a nation that devours her offspring instead of celebrating its own, the poet raises his protest beyond all impeding ‘high walls’ and invokes Aridon for intensity: “Aridon give me the voice to raise this wail/beyond high walls” (17).

In the same mood of protesting the devouring nature of the nation, “Witchcraft” becomes a metaphor for describing the socio-political and economic conditions of Niger-Delta and the Nation as a whole. Witchcraft symbolically refers to an African belief in the metaphysical power of bewitchment to suffer “Between life and death”, leaving “Fresh Casualties” due to oppressive military tyranny. “Fresh Casualties” is an inter-textual response to J. P. Clark’s “Casualties”. Ojaide’s “Fresh Casualties” is the poet’s perspective of post-independent Nigeria of the 90’s while Clark’s “Casualties” is an examination of the casualties of colonialism and the Civil War of 1967–1970. Ojaide’s “Fresh Casualties” expresses concern

about post-colonial neo-imperialism, that is, localized oppression through economic capitalisation and environmental pollution within an ‘independent’ nation against its own people:

The casualties are neither those  
 Who stayed the brunt of fire power,  
 Nor who fled from reinforcement of cover;  
 But those small things tackled in our souls  
 That shone through the bodies  
 And made us upright in a crooked world.  
 We have become mercenaries  
 Slaughtering the totem of the land  
 To lavishly outlive a killing season. (37)

Finally, Ojaide in “Remembering the town-crier” reiterates his ideological project of mediation in conflict through protest. Here, he reinstates his ideological posture as a messiah like Moses bearing the eye-for-eye law. However, he describes his position as a town-crier charged and committed to the struggle for economic equality and social justice of his people, not an anarchist. As a town-crier with messianic mission, he calls on Aridon, and draws on Udje satirical poetic form of the Urhobos of Niger-Delta to abuse, lament, curse, and deter all forms of socio-political imbalances in Nigeria. Repulsive imagery and pungent metaphors colour the poet’s use of language in his purposeful mission of a town-crier among the oppressed.

It seems the poet, Tanure Ojaide, lives Ghandi’s ideology of resistance without violence that is promoted by Martin Luther King Jnr. In fact, poetry as a genre of literature is prophetic and referential in its functional nature is realising socio-political change. Thus in his collection, *Fate of Vultures & Other Poems*, Ojaide further displays his skills as an indigenous poet, who draws upon traditional elements, powers and forms in order to address national socio-economic conditions and violence in the Niger-Delta.

In the “The music of pain” is the expression of threat or warning about his effort as a “town-crier” seeking change by revolution. The tone of the narrative is that of pain and the struggle not to give up but to continue the songs of satire that will bring about a change. And to achieve this, Aridon is again invoked in the silent revolutionary songs against oppression and environmental abuses. Obviously, the destruction of Niger-Delta – ecological degradation, exploration and exploitation of oil wealth and destruction of the sense of being human – is not only by the west but also by Nigerians who are supposed to be leaders and are expected to safe-guard our identity:

Listen. I do not cry in vain.  
 my song I sought  
 the chorus of resistant cries...

I dressed my words with steel of shafts for a long hunting season...  
 “What can songs do?” they mock me...  
 They are fine-filed machetes in the hands of the threatened! (2)

The music or song of pain represents the communal pain, cries and resistance through the voice of the ‘town-crier’.

Another of Ojaide’s poem is “The fate of vultures” that calls upon the presence of the unseen, Aridon, to “bring back my wealth from rogue-vaults; legendary witness to comings and goings, memory god, my mentor...” (11). Ojaide in this poem relives and affirms the prophetic vision of his forefathers like Christopher Okigbo of the 1960s poetic musings and concerns on the path of thunder to ecological devastation and human wastefulness that result from looming dark clouds of impending Civil War in 1967. Okigbo’s path of thunder and Ojaide’s lamentation find similarity and significance in their poetic concerns for the sanity of the human environment and dignity of human identity. In Okigbo’s “Come Thunder” that addresses prophetically “the thunder among the clouds ... the smell of blood ... the death sentence lies in ambush along the corridors of powers...” and “the homesteads abandoned in this century’s brush fire witness it...” (66). Ojaide’s *The Fate of Vultures & Other Poems* are traditional expressions of lamentations on the environmental destruction, pollution and wastefulness that characterise postcolonial Nigeria.

## Conclusion

It may be safe to say that the response of Nigerian poets through their imaginative expressions to the issues in their community is acerbic. Poetry reconciles many issues ranging from personal therapy, to emotional, political, environmental, cultural/traditional and religious struggles. Through the stringing of words like those of Christopher Okigbo to create sounds/consciousness to Tanure Ojaide’s scathing resistance, the purpose is prognostic. However, each poet designs his style of resolving his communal conflicts, either by prophesy or “thunder” or resistance through activism. It must be noted that in the present day Nigeria, Okigbo’s prophesy of fifty years ago has come to reality. And the task of ‘crying out’ as a town-crier to inner and outer essence of both man and woman is taken up by Tanure Ojaide. The message of the town-crier from across the Niger (*Delta Blues and Home Songs* and *Fate of the Vultures & Other Poems*) has become cancerous destroying the unity and prospect of development of an impoverished nation in the mist of plenty, especially in the area of environment. Poetry, as a genre of literature, is the most vibrant and powerful vehicle of ensuring reconciliation and development in any given society. The poets create awareness about an ensuing conflict; provides options of resolution; reconciles “differences” through poetic use of language; and ensures development through peaceful relations.

Christopher Okigbo and Tanure Ojaide represent two generations and currents of literary trends to Nigerian poetry (1960s and 1980s respectively) in terms of

the issues that influence their poetry and styles. However, these poets in spite of the differences in styles – Okigbo’s imitation of English poets like Ezra Pound and W.B. Yeats and Ojaide’s reliance on Nigerian oral tradition, (the use of concrete images derived from the fauna and flora, proverbs, indigenous rhythms, verbal tropes, and concepts of space and time to establish a poetic form) – are directed towards resolving postcontact cultural, political, religious and social conflicts. Stylistically, Okigbo writes without meaning in mind, rather; his poetry, like those of his generation is culturally oriented, nature-driven and addresses socio-political issues from universal perspective. Ojaide like other contemporary poets addresses national issues more aggressively from a particularised stance point. In his desire to effect changes, he uses the nation state as the starting point to resolve postcontact Nigerian internal conflicts. All in all, each poet thematically uses his art to reconcile individuals and communities and to therapeutically harness co-existence as well as engender development and satirize or resist poor governance and prophetically warn the people of an impending doom or conflict in Nigeria.

The significance of poetry as a vehicle of resistance and reconciliation cannot be overstated; rather it is an expression of a way of life that may be useful in understanding and dealing with disruption in natural and national order. The literary expressions of Okigbo and Ojaide, invariably offer personal therapy and create socio-political consciousness about situations within one’s immediate environment and facilitate tolerance. The thematic focus penetrates the deep roots of conflicts and calls for respect for the rule of law, national identity, ethnicity, and culture.

## Notes

- \* A town-crier is an African used to describe a messenger who proclaims certain messages about the community, usually from the king. In the sense of this paper, the king is the imagination or inspiration of the poet.
- 1 Bohoram is a religious insurgence that has transformed into a political terrorist movement as a result of the terror that it leaves in its trail, such as; the kidnap of two hundred and seventy school children known as Chibok girls taken as ransom for political negotiation (in 2014) and various suicide bombing of various communities in the North East of Nigeria. Bokoharam originally means movement against western culture. But it has graduated into a political terrorist movement without a clear-cut agenda except incessant bombing and creation of psychological and physical fear and insecurity.
- 2 Niger-Delta conflict is marked by militant activism and terrorism of the youth known as Niger-Delta militants, who are involved in kidnapping for ransom and vandalizing pipelines in Nigeria due to the oil wealth located in the deltas and the resultant environmental pollution and underdevelopment of the communities.
- 3 Udje is a unique type of Urhobo dance in which rival quarters or towns perform songs composed from often exaggerated materials about the other side on an appointed day. Udje songs are thus dance songs sung when udje is being performed. Since there were no prisons in traditional Urhobo, major crimes were punished either by selling the offender into servitude or by execution. Minor crimes were, however, punished by satire. Udje dance songs fall into the corpus of satire. The songs strongly attack what the traditional society regards as vices.

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