

Versifying the Environment and the 'Oil Encounter': Tanure Ojaide's *Delta Blues & Home Songs*

Philip Onoriode Aghoghovwia

Abstract

This paper focuses on Nigeria's Niger Delta using literary representations from the region to interrogate the oil encounter and an exploration of its impact on social and environmental structures. The paper situates Tanure Ojaide's *Delta Blues & Home Songs* (1998) within the discourse of environmental justice and ecocriticism, reflecting on the poet's excoriation of the oil encounter as the harbinger of environmental degradation. Of particular interest is the unique and alternative insight – a kind of insider/indigenous knowledge – this text provides in the agitations for environmental remediation and social justice. The paper argues that through the geography of lived and imagined memory of the pre-oil exploration past, the poet stretches our scientific and technological imagination in proffering solutions to the environmental and social challenges that attend the oil encounter. The poet calls for a lived kind of environmentalism as he invites the reader to inhabit the cultural world of his Niger Delta where he imaginatively recalls the past – of his childhood – of fishing and farming; when 'the old ways were still very vibrant' (Ojaide, *Poetic Imagination* 1996:121). The paper concludes that this near utopian past which the poet versifies, becomes a model for the remediation of the oil-polluted Niger Delta environment. Part of the work of this paper, then, reflects on the particular contributions that literary and cultural perspectives can offer in apprehending the twin issues of justice – environmental and social – occasioned by the oil encounter, and how these perspectives might fruitfully enter into a conversation that is largely dominated by the sciences.

Keywords: Oil Encounter, Niger Delta, Environmentalism, Social Justice, Ecocriticism

Introduction

In discussing the coastlines and littoral zones of Nigeria's Niger Delta, it is not possible to avoid reference to the 'Oil Encounter'. The term Oil Encounter can be credited to the Indian writer and critic Amitav Ghosh, who in his 2002 essay, 'Petrofiction: the oil encounter and the novel', suggests that there is little presence of oil in the cultural imaginaries of world literature. Ghosh declares that 'In fact, very few people anywhere write about the Oil Encounter ... the silence extends much further than the Arabic or English-speaking worlds' (2002:77). Crucially, Ghosh's interest is in 'epic narratives' of the oil encounter in American fiction and the high-powered politics that oil generates within the US polity and the Arab world. The history of oil in the America-Arab relation resonates with the history of several bitter wars fought in the last half century (including most recently the two Gulf Wars), and the politics of silence and conspiracy theories that oil has generated in America-Persia-Arab nexus. It is to that extent that there has been perceived silence, reluctance, and 'embarrassment verging on the unspeakable' (2002:75), which Ghosh characterises as a 'petrofiction barrenness' among writers – both in America and in the Arab world. I shall return to Ghosh later in this paper to discuss the implication of his pronouncements on Africa's cultural representation of the oil encounter, and how his critique illuminates my argument. Using Ghosh's argument as a framework, this paper will then examine representations of Nigeria's Niger Delta in a body of literature that has been stimulated by the commoditization of oil since the 1970s, and which captures the trajectories that oil has come to map out in the lives of the common people around these coastal and littoral zones. Imaginings of the oil encounter continue to underscore issues of environmental degradation exacerbated by oil exploration and commodification in the region.

Ecocriticism in its general sense has become a contested issue in African literary scholarship today. This stems from its inability to take note of the cultural specificity of the African context in addressing environmental

justice and sustainable development – perceived as the two most significant environmental issues in Africa in general and the Niger Delta in particular (see for instance Harvey 1996; Guha 1997; Comfort 2002; Evans 2002; Reed 2002; and Sze 2002). Critics have argued that the values espoused in Anglo-American ecocriticism are exclusivist and elitist in their application to ecological challenges in a terrain like the Niger Delta. Since it tends to valorise aestheticism and privilege the natural ecology over human ecology, mainstream ecocriticism divorces the natural world from the human. In its bid to promote the conservation of nature it excludes the people who live in environments considered to hold particular natural value, and tends to be oblivious of the socio-cultural ties of the people to the ecosystem¹.

The failure to put the African context in perspective perhaps explains the American ecocritic William Slaymaker's accusation that African writers and critics do not take ecocriticism seriously. He contends:

There is no lack of writing in Africa that might fall under the rubric of nature writing. Black writers take nature writing seriously ... but may have resisted or neglected the paradigms that inform much of global ecocriticism' (2001:132 - 133).

Slaymaker's assertion is partly true to the extent that the environmental 'preservation strategy' in the Global North is treated with suspicion and found to have 'disastrous consequences in the Third World' (Curtin 1999:5). Anthony Vital has insightfully argued that ecocriticism will only be treated

¹ Cf. Guha, Ramachandra 1997. *The Authoritarian Biologist and the Arrogance of Anti-Humanism: Wildlife Conservation in the Third World*. *The Ecologist* 27, 14-20. Also see Vital, Anthony 2005. *Situating Ecology in Recent South African Fiction: J.M. Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals* and Zakes Mda's *The Heart of Redness**. *Journal of Southern African Studies* 31.2: 297-313. A more recent essay of Anthony Vital in 2008: *Toward an African Ecocriticism: Postcolonialism, Ecology and *Life & Times of Michael K.** *Research in African Literatures* 39, 1:87-121, is cited and discussed in the body of this paper, where he too argues for a locally-rooted aesthetic in the discourse of ecocriticism. His position corroborates mine as I attempt to extend the debate in this piece.

with less resistance, in a terrain like the Niger Delta landscape, if it can be flexible enough to provide answers which will ‘be rooted in local (regional, national) concerns for social life and its natural environment’ (2008:88). What constitutes Nature writing – if that is what Slaymaker takes ecocriticism to mean – in the Niger Delta literary tradition is an ecological advocacy which laments cultural deracination of the people and environmental degradation fostered by the commoditization of natural resources. These concerns are not so popular with mainstream ecocriticism hence the call for an environmental justice mode of ecocriticism which considers the cultural cohesiveness between the human and the non-human world since none exists outside of the other. This has become the focus of much African scholarship on environmental criticism and this study locates itself as a critical engagement with this emerging tradition.

Environmental justice criticism combines environmentalism and social justice by drawing upon other counter discursive paradigms such as marginality theory, ethnic/minority discourses, ecofeminism, and postcolonial discourses to call attention to the ways the commoditization of natural resources such as oil, and ‘the disparate distribution of wealth and power often leads to correlative social upheaval ...’ (Adamson *et al.* 2002:5), not only in Nigeria’s Niger Delta, but other sites where natural resources are commoditised. The call for environmental justice, as championed by the environmental activist-scholar-writer Ken Saro Wiwa, has fostered a radical literary output from the region. This literature calls for an environmental justice that privileges sensitivity toward the natural habitat in tandem with the indigenous people who depend on the ecosystem for their survival. Joe Ushie rightly notes that, ‘the Niger Delta literary landscape has continued to flourish even as its physical environment is wilting’ (2006:22).

The Niger Delta, Oil and Ojaide’s Imagination

The Niger Delta is a densely populated region. It has an estimated population of 31 million people and covers about 75, 000 square kilometres, making it one of the largest wetlands in the world (Obi & Rustad 2011:3). The region is a vast coastal plain in the southernmost part of Nigeria, where West Africa’s longest river empties into the Atlantic Ocean. James Tsaaior describes the region as a ‘reservoir of priceless mineral resource’ with ‘rich,

fertile and alluvial wealth with prodigious crude oil deposit' (2005:72). This vast region of wetland was once called the Oil Rivers² because of its history of bearing two types of oil resource: palm oil and crude oil. This history dates back to the 1890s with the palm oil trade before and during colonialism in the Nigeria. At the time palm oil and palm kernel were the main exports of the Niger Delta and Britain's Royal Niger Company quickly seized on this and established a monopoly. Palm oil flowed to Britain and elsewhere in Europe, where it served to power the apparatuses that drove Europe's industrial prosperity and colonial incursion (Peel 2010).

In 1956, Royal Dutch Shell discovered crude oil in commercial quantity at Oloibiri, an Ijaw town in the Niger Delta, and began exportation in 1958. Today, there are over 606 oil fields in the Oil Rivers of the Niger Delta, and Nigeria is the largest oil producer in Africa, with an average 2.6 million barrels of oil per day. It is the second largest oil-bearing nation in Africa after Libya, with a proven crude oil reserve of 32 billion barrels³. Since 1975, oil accounts for about three-quarters of government revenue and 95 per cent of the national export earnings. Much of the natural gas extracted in oil wells in the Delta is flared and wasted into the air every day. The environmental devastation associated with the industry and the lack of equitable distribution of the oil wealth have been the source of numerous environmental movements and inter-ethnic conflicts in the region, including recent guerrilla activities by the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), the Niger Delta Volunteer Force (NDVF) and other interstitial resource-rebel groups⁴.

² Darah, Godini. 'Revolutionary Pressures in Niger Delta Literatures' *The Nigerian Guardian* June 28, 2009.

³ The Nigerian Vanguard 'Editorial' February 22, 2011.

⁴ Cf. Alao, Abiodun 2007 *Natural Resources and Conflict in Africa: The Tragedy of Endowment*. New York: University of Rochester Press. With detailed analyses of facts, figures, and concrete examples, Alao discusses the relationship between natural resources and conflicts in Africa, of which Nigeria, with its vast oil reserve, is a case in point. See also Obi, Cyril and Siri Aas Rustad 2011. *Oil and Insurgency in the Niger Delta: Managing the Complex Politics of Petro-Violence* Sweden/London: Nordic Africa Institute/Zed Books.

Tanure Ojaide⁵ was born in this oil-rich but economically impoverished area of Nigeria, in 1948, a period he designates as ‘an age of innocence in a rural home in the Delta region of Nigeria’ (1996:121). He was raised by his maternal grandmother, Amreghe, in a riverine rural environment. Every first-born male child in his Urhobo ethnic extraction is traditionally deemed a priest. Ojaide has grown to become a socio-cultural priest, an environmental and minority priest of awareness. Ojaide studied under the tutelage of several Urhobo traditional artists. Okitiakpe of Ekakpamre is largely instrumental to his studying Udje dance and songs – a traditional form of poetry – which he later translated into English and continuously deploys in his poetic oeuvres (see *The Fate of Vultures* 1990). Ojute and Omokomoko are other artists who exposed him to the breadth and depth of Urhobo poetry, philosophy of life and traditional aesthetics. He uses his Urhobo heritage to poetic advantage by exploring the *Ivwri* philosophy and using Urhobo folklore as a foreground. The *Ivwri* philosophy is a rich cultural heritage that draws upon the legends of past heroes who become models in the society for others to emulate. Thus we see Ojaide’s continual reference to mythical and legendary figures such as Mukoro Mowoe, Essi, Ogodogbo and Aghwana. His poetry is not only engaging because of its technical qualities, but also its cultural integrity. Ojaide succeeds in apprehending the environmental degradation of the Niger Delta, the devastation unleashed upon the local population, and the plight of victims (casualties) caught up in the race for oil and the politics which attend that encounter.

⁵ Ojaide is not the type of poet one remembers by only one good work; he is prolific. His poetry publications include: *Children of Iroko & Other Poems* (1973); *Labyrinths of the Delta* (1986); *The Eagle’s Vision* (1987); *The Endless Song* (1989); *The Fate of Vultures* (1990); *The Blood of Peace* (1991); *Daydreams of Ants* (1997); *Delta Blues & Home Songs* (1998); *Invoking the Warrior Spirit: New & Selected Poems* (1999); *In the Kingdom of Songs: A Trilogy* (2002); *I Want to Dance & Other Poems* (2003); *In the House of Words* (2006); *The Tales of the Harmattan* (2007); *Waiting for the Hatching of a Cockerel* (2008), and *The Beauty I Have Seen* (2010). His writings are consistently rich and deeply rooted in the Delta region.

Ojaide's poetry can be situated within what the critic Funso Aiyejina calls the 'Alter/native tradition' in Nigeria poetry. Describing Ojaide as a 'new traditionalist' (1988:124), Aiyejina argues that the writings of Ojaide's generation – the second generation of modern African literature (see Adesanmi & Dunton 2005) – marked a paradigm shift. These writers moved away from the use of far-fetched, high-sounding English images and resorted to native and traditional metaphors. Free of idiosyncratic language and arcane imagery, Ojaide's poetry relies on parables and references to traditional rituals adjusted to contemporary purposes, such as his crusade for restoration of the ecosystem in the Niger Delta and the improvement of the living condition of the people in this region.

Ojaide engages metaphors, images and legends from folklore and history to speak about the Niger Delta conditions – of environmental and social injustice. In a book of essays written in honour of Ojaide titled *Writing the homeland: the poetry and politics of Tanure Ojaide*, Onookome Okome argues that Ojaide is well aware of the social burden that a poet in a distressed society must bear; and he takes on this role with fortitude. Okome maintains that social responsibility is for Ojaide, 'the very soul of writing' (2002:158). Hence, Ojaide's poetry is essentially about the Niger Delta environment in which he first experienced life; a region that continues to capture his imagination as he attempts to apprehend the absence of environmental and social justice for the autochthonous people and their land. The fast fading world of the pre-oil exploration Niger Delta remains the site where Ojaide locates this collection.

The collection, *Delta Blues & Home Songs*, is divided into two sections. The first, *Delta Blues*, dedicated to the memory of Ken Saro-Wiwa, is concerned with the degradation of the Deltascape where he valorises his childhood, becoming the touchstone for measuring and judging the attitude towards the environment by successive governments and the multinational oil corporations. The second section, *Home Songs*, has some folkloric poems that have personal and local concerns. They are dedicated to well-meaning individuals who have influenced the poet's life during his formative years. Through the memory of lived-childhood experiences, Ojaide takes us on a voyage to this environment, where he describes the beauty of a self-sustaining agrarian culture and the subsistent abundance that was the Delta economy before oil was discovered.

In 'When green was the lingua franca' Ojaide recounts with sincerity how the Delta once was. He describes the pastoral abundance of the Delta, through rustic memories of childhood:

My childhood stretched
one unbroken park,
teeming with life.
In the forest green was
the lingua franca
with many dialects.
Everybody's favourite
water sparkled
Undergrowth kept as much
alive as overgrowth, the delta
alliance of big and small,
market of needs, arena
of compensation for all (12-13).

Here, he deploys metaphors to describe the centrality of the greenery to his childhood's bucolic existence. The Niger Delta, just like the larger Nigerian federation, is a linguistically heterogeneous society with about forty languages and over two hundred dialects. Pidgin is the lingua franca of this region. Pidgin was a contact language around the coastal areas with the earliest European merchants from Portugal, France and later, Great Britain. Over time and as a result of British colonialism, the Pidgin language now has English as its major substrate. It is this linguistic image Ojaide draws on to demonstrate the aura of cultural and ecological equilibrium. The greenery, as the lingua franca, signifies the evident agrarian abundance, vegetative richness and stable biodiversity that the Delta was once noted for. We notice a sense of nostalgic retrospection in an idyllic ambience in the way he portrays the 'forest' as evenly spread in its 'green' foliage, and the 'water sparkling', a metaphor of scenic beauty and pristine orderliness.

With this near utopian memory and geographic description of the Deltascape, Ojaide draws our attention to the subtlety of his lived-environmentalism. This subtle environmentalism makes no less a damning commentary on the degradation of the ecosystem brought about by oil

exploration and neoliberal capitalism. The following lines juxtapose the Edenic picture created above with the brutal reality of oil exploration as the poet excoriates Shell (one of the major multinational oil corporations mining oil in Nigeria's Niger Delta) for the ecological invasion and commoditization of the region. Further on in the same poem:

Then Shell broke the bond
with quakes and a hell
of flares. Stoking a hearth
under God's very behind!
I see victims of arson
wherever my restless soles
take me to bear witness.
The Ethiope waterfront
wiped out by prospectors—
so many trees beheaded
and streams mortally poisoned
in the name of jobs and wealth! (13)

In Ojaide's counter-hegemonic discursive strategy, Shell Oil Corporation – as well as other multinational oil corporations mining oil in the region – is responsible for the despoliation of the Delta environment and the incessant violence that now threatens the existence of the human population and other eco-forms. According to the poet, Shell has broken the bond between the people and the environment and committed a sacrilegious act against God by heating up the firmament with its flares. This abomination has led to frenzy in the race to exploit the region's alluvial wealth. The poet deploys idioms of violence: 'victims of arson', 'wiped out', 'beheaded', 'mortally poisoned', as well as glamorous images of neoliberal capitalism, 'jobs', 'wealth', to suggest that the oil bounty has paradoxical effects: with wealth comes death and destruction. This is because the race for oil in Nigeria is not shaped by social justice. This gives credence to Robert Young's argument that poverty and starvation suffered by the marginalised are often not the mark of an absolute lack of resources, but derive 'from failure to distribute them equitably' (quoted in Okuyade 2011:127). The once healthy landscape has become degraded, polluted and endangered by oil spillages and gas flaring,

among other environmental hazards. This has, in turn, taken its devastating toll on the flora, fauna and people of the Niger Delta.

My argument does not suggest that Ojaide disavows oil exploration, but that he privileges moral sensitivity and distributive social justice in the face of such an industrial drive. This position becomes even more pertinent when placed in the context an illustrative recent news report by Agence France Presse (AFP) on the case between Shell and the Bodo community in Nigeria. The case was heard in a London Court (not in Nigeria) and judgement was passed in favour of the Bodo community:

A spokesman for Shell's Nigerian operations, the Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC), said it would pay compensation but said the process could take *several months*. But lawyer Martin Day, representing the Bodo community, said he would be pressing for 'adequate compensation *immediately*'. 'This is one of the most devastating oil spills the world has ever seen and yet it had gone almost unnoticed until we received instructions to bring about a claim against Shell in this country,' he said⁶ (e.a.).

In this report two things stand out: firstly, it seems that justice is unavailable to the poor namely, the Bodo community, in the Nigerian justice system, hence the case was taken to a London court. Secondly, from this quotation we notice that Shell lacks the moral urgency to address the environmental hazards its operations continue to cause in Nigeria. Take for instance the dismissive response devoid of remorse and moral obligation to a community that hosts its exploration. It invariably demonstrates that environmental as well as social justice in marginalised spaces is not a right but a privilege. This privilege is at best granted by courts of law – apparently the only hope of the subaltern – and dispensed with reluctant levity by the multinational oil corporations and the Nigerian State – or at worst, it is exacted by violence as the aggrieved take to the Delta creeks and become insurgent.

If 'When green was the lingua franca' is a call for environmental

⁶ 'Shell admits 'devastating' Nigeria oil spills' *AFP News Agency*, August 3, 2011.

justice, 'Delta blues' is a dirge. The poet laments the violence, death, greed, apathy, vested interests, and what Ramachandra Guha, in an essay on the 'Arrogance of Anti-humanism' calls 'green imperialism' (1997:19). Here, I use the phrase to mean the commoditization of the Delta and the privileging of the oil mineral it bears over the existence of people who inhabit the land—in one sense it is an economic re-colonisation. In the poem Ojaide writes:

This share of paradise, the delta of my birth,
reels from an immeasurable wound.
Barrels of alchemical draughts flow
From this hurt to the unquestioning world
This home of salt and fish
stilted in mangroves, market of barter,
always welcomes others—
hosts and guests flourished
on palm oil, yams and garri.
This home of plants and birds
least expected a stampede;
there's no refuge east or west,
north or south of this paradise (21).

With a mournful cadence, Ojaide decries the despoliation of the Delta biodiversity: a landscape of peace and hospitality with its evergreen foliage now wilting under the violence of pollution and exploitation. As he recounts the plight of the marginalised people of the Niger Delta, he also conjures the picture of the vanishing abundant natural riches of the Delta landscape. The rain forest is being stripped of trees, which used to serve as protection and security for the people of the Delta; one of which is the 'Iroko' (African teak). 'The forest is levelled' for commercial reasons, and animals and other avian species migrate to areas where they can survive since they have been dislodged from the Delta forest. The fish and other aquatic organisms that lodge in the Delta Rivers cannot survive the heat from incessant oil spillages and gas flaring. This in turn marks the declining supply of fresh water and thus amounts to environmental degradation. The after effect is the sharp decline of agricultural productivity and dearth of a fishing economy which the terrain compels the people to rely on.

In graphic metaphoric lines, Ojaide mourns this treachery against the people. The symbol of their struggle is the person of Ken Saro-Wiwa, and in the poem 'Wails', he offers a dirge for a friend and fellow artist. The poem is modelled after his native Urhobo *Udje* dance songs:

Another ANA meeting will be called
and singers will gather
I will look all over
and see a space
that can take more than a hundred-
the elephant never hides...
Aridon, give me the voice
to raise this wail
beyond high walls.
In one year I have seen
my forest of friends cut down,
now dust taunts my memory (17).

Ken Saro-Wiwa's⁷ execution was no doubt a cathartic moment in Nigeria's history under the brutality of General Sani Abacha's regime; certainly it was so for Nigerian writers on whom it had a devastating emotional impact and

⁷ Kenule Beesom Saro-Wiwa was significant to many people in, and outside, Nigeria. He was a writer, scholar and environmental rights activist. In Nigeria, he is remembered as a politician, successful businessman, newspaper columnist, television script writer/producer, and a prolific writer. His detractors demonise him for his role in the Nigerian Civil War of 1967-1970. He was said to have supported the Nigerian Federal troops against the secessionist Biafrans, where he was rewarded with the post of Sole Administrator of Bonny Council in Eastern Delta. He is seen to have benefitted from the lopsided federal politics of the Nigerian federation he later campaigned against in the 1990s (see Wiwa, Ken 2000. *In The Shadow of a Saint*. Toronto: Knorf Canada; Meja-Pierce, Adewale 2005. *Remembering Ken Saro-Wiwa and Other Essays*. Lagos: The New Gong; Hunt, J. Timothy 2006. *The Politics of Bones*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart).

for the international community, whose support Saro-Wiwa had cultivated and enjoyed⁸. Ojaide in this poem confronts the tragedy of contemporary Nigeria, whose tragic hero Saro-Wiwa and his struggle becomes. He metaphorically refers to Saro-Wiwa as 'the elephant' whose absence would be conspicuous when 'Another ANA meeting will be called' (17), referring to the Association of Nigerian Authors which Saro-Wiwa once presided over. Charles Bodunde argues that 'Ojaide interprets Saro-Wiwa's death within the wider contexts of political struggle and national tragedy', so that 'Saro-Wiwa's case symbolises the aspirations and will of a community and the complexity of political struggle' (2002:201).

In a melancholic, disconsolate mood, the poet announces with tearful cadences:

I must raise the loud wail
so that each will reflect his fate.
Take care of your people,
they are your proud assets.
The boa thoughtlessly devours
Its own offsprings, Nigeria's
A boa-constrictor in the world map (17-18).

⁸ To the international community and among his admirers within Nigeria, Saro-Wiwa will forever be remembered as the champion of environmental rights and social justice, especially for minority peoples around the world. His campaigns against environmental pollution and decimation of the agricultural economy of the Ogoni People, for which the Nigerian Government and Shell Petroleum were complicit, attracted international attention; especially his success at framing the Ogoni (minority) agitations within the discourse of Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organisation (UNPO) in the Hague. In November 1995, he, together with eight other Ogoni leaders were executed under spurious accusation of inciting and conspiracy to murder four Ogoni elders who had been lynched to death by some irate mob in 1993. His death brought international opprobrium to the Sani Abacha's dictatorship in Nigeria, which led to international sanctions and expulsion of Nigeria from the Commonwealth Organisation in 1995.

Ojaide discovers in the courageous and irrepressible minority rights leader a veritable human shield against totalitarian regimes, just like the elephant shields its young ones from the predator's rampages. Ojaide's image of the elephant to describe Saro-Wiwa as a hero who looms large in the minds of the people, calls to mind the fate of the elephant, a one-time Africa's priceless possession. The elephant was once a symbol of Africa's pride, strength and abundance, but its tusks served as the basis for the illicit ivory trade by colonial imperialist and African collaborators. This trade saw the death of many elephants as Africa's fauna and flora were plundered to serve as raw materials to develop Europe.

Today, the elephant, once a symbol of Africa's economic stability, is an endangered species on the African soil. It is this image of the endangered elephant Ojaide draws on to describe the death of Saro-Wiwa, a voice of truth and a symbol of the people's struggle against oppression and exploitation. The poet concludes climactically:

Streets echo with wails.
A terrible thing has struck the land,
everyone is covered with shame or sorrow--
this death exceeds other deaths.
this news cannot be a hoax;
for the love of terror,
they have murdered a favourite son,
and eight other bearers of truth (18).

Tayo Olafioye remarks that 'Ojaide is able to transform the image of pain through satire into artistic form because he is not only an artist but the voice of his people, more accurately, the Oracle of the Delta' (quoted in Okuyade 2011:124). In the traditional setting of the Niger Delta and perhaps elsewhere, an oracle – the knower and seer of hidden things – was not only concerned with lamentations and condemnation of ills in the society. Oracles also prescribed ways of addressing these ills and providing workable alternatives to ameliorate the consequences of those challenges that plague society. Thus, Ojaide is not an oracle of doom and condemnation, but also of hope: a visionary in the restoration of the harmony that once was in the environment. He believes that since he has been a witness of the good past

which he succinctly 'versifies' in this poetry collection, he knows what is hidden or lost in that past that could serve as a model for rebuilding the crumbling structures of the present.

This poem is not all about grief and despondency; there is a glimmer of hope in the images of renewal and continuity signified by the transfer of the toga of heroism and leadership from one activist to another:

After the warrior-chief's fall,
somebody else will carry the standard-
Boro left for Saro-Wiwa to take over,
the stump will grow into another *iroko*.
The hardwood shield is broken,
the people are exposed to a storm of abuse;
the diviner's spell is broken
& everybody's left in the open.
But the diviner's words are never halted
by death—*Ominigbo* is my witness (19).

The African belief in 'life after death' (Ojaide 1996) resonates in most of the poems dedicated to Saro-Wiwa and the other eight, and this becomes a source of consolation and beams a flicker of hope and sustenance for the continued agitations and demands for social justice in the Niger Delta. This position is consistent with the earlier argument that Ojaide is an oracle of good tidings and not one of doom; an unapologetic optimist and healer of wounds.

In 'Elegy for nine warriors', for instance, the poet engages the metaphor of this continued existence of life even in the great beyond to portray the 'Ogoni Nine' as heroes, 'the nine warriors', who have become immortalised by their noble attempt to rescind the hegemonic order and liberate the Delta people:

Those I remember in my song
will outlive this ghoulish season,
dawn will outlive the long night.
I hear voices stifled by the hangman,
an old cockroach in the groins of Aso Rock.

Those I remember with these notes
walk back erect from the stake.
The hangman has made his case,
delivered nine heads through the sunpost
and sore'd his eyes from sleepless nights.
The nine start their life after death
as the street takes over their standard (25).

Ojaide's passion for exploring traditional African folklore is undeniable. Writing in a tradition of abuse poetry modelled after the Urhobo Udje cursing song, Ojaide chides and derides the notorious hangman responsible for the death of these great men, whose blood will continue to whet the appetite for the demand for social justice in the troubled region of the Niger Delta and Nigeria at large. In this poem Ojaide employs repetitive words for effectiveness and the advancement of the intensity of the message. The repeated use of 'those I remember' reinforces the persona's homage to the Ogoni Nine and his unflinching support in the cause they died for. The poem reads like a chant to herald 'the nine' into the bliss of the afterlife, so that their demise does not leave the people in a state of despair but charges them into action to actualize the demands for which they lost their lives.

Ojaide frowns upon the socio-economic imbalance which has generated political confrontation, causing the Delta people so much pain. This has alienated them from the gains and shortfalls of their God's given wealth as they live in squalor while the resources from their land build mansions elsewhere. The poem 'Abuja' laconically exemplifies this trope:

Here where all cardinal points meet in a capital
here where rocks raise homes to the sky
here where the savannah rolls over the soil
the coven where witches plot the demise of others
this is where chiefs celebrate on the sweat of slaves
this is where range chickens consume and scatter
leftovers
this is where the hyena's den is guarded by rings of packs
this is where the hyena cornered the hare

and swallowed it, leaving no scent for a trace
this is where the boa-constrictor strangles its catch
this is where robbers boast of their callous acts
& laugh at the plight of a hundred million cowards
this is where the national flag covers a cesspool
this is where a god led his worshippers to die
this is where I weep for my entire land
(41).

The metaphor of inequality and lopsidedness in the Nigerian polity is what runs through the lines of this deeply lyrical poem. The beauty of the lyricism, I think, highlights the disconnection between the government and the governed, between the origination of the wealth and where it is amassed. The image of exploitation and depravity of the people which Abuja⁹ represents is discernible in the poet's continuous repetition of 'this is where'. Thus, the poem becomes a dirge, lamenting the continued denial of the people of their rights to the wealth of their environment. The poem becomes a cry for what could have been for his homeland and what should not be the order of things in the seat of power that is Abuja. The repetition of 'here' and 'where' invokes in the reader a sense of alienation which the people experience even in their own country, and this reinforces that category of 'place', which represents the binaries of the metropolis and the provincial; the centre and the margins. This trope in much of postcolonial discourses continues to define not only literatures from Africa but also politics and governance in Africa. Tijan Sallah notes that while 'place conveys a deep sense of history' (1995:21), Abuja becomes the usurper of God's blessings of the Niger Delta

⁹ Abuja, the Capital City of Nigeria, is a post-Civil War creation of the federal military government of Murtala Mohammed in 1976. It was built from the immense wealth that the 1970s Oil Boom had brought to Nigeria. The money which should have been deployed to other vital sectors of the country's economy, and to cushion the effect of pollution the oil exploration had brought on the Niger Delta environment, was used to build a brand new city for the vain glory of Nigeria's political elites. Abuja exemplifies the postcolonial extravagance and self-serving interests which seem to define politics and leadership in Nigeria.

people. Everything she produces is carted away to develop Abuja. Thus Abuja becomes everything the Niger Delta is not.

Ojaide's ability to measure the Deltascape within the range of his poesy is borne out of his deeply rooted and sustained relation with the region. The unhappy shift as represented in the metaphor of a falling landscape into the now visible ruins can be traced to the absence of vision in governance. This according to the poet is manifest in the ways in which unthinking and heartless rulers (not leaders) have shattered the people's hopes and usurped their means of livelihood. This sad situation is grimly captured in couplets in the poem, 'Army of microbes':

To the usurper-chieftain who has set his rabid guard dogs
against streets of impoverished ones
To the uniformed caste of half-literate soldiery
who close people's mouth with trigger-ready hands
To the ruling council fat in the neck and thigh
but whose plans make wraith of workers
To those who have creased faces of farmers and fishers
with lines of hunger and pain
To the cabal of loyalty and fealty
that sold the rest for coded Swiss accounts
To the petty head in his lair of Aso Rock
who spread sorrow into every home
I say, Shame on you and your kind (43).

What is noticeable in the lines above is an aesthetics in which images are deployed to emphasise the fact that all is not well with the Nigerian polity. The poem depicts the state of affairs in Nigeria during General Sani Abacha's Junta and the stifling situation which the people found themselves in. The rulers in uniform dictated the affairs of state, not with the authority of the constitution but with the might of the gun. Each couplet reflects and philosophises the reality of living in Nigeria at the time. Ojaide employs invectives to expose the brutal reality of the living condition of the populace. The military government and their cronies are portrayed as economic saboteurs in their bid to enrich themselves by stashing away the national earnings in Swiss bank accounts.

Conclusion

Ojaide's poetic oeuvre demonstrates a lived and imaginative relationship with his homeland. It is this relationship he has with the Delta that informs his critique of the Oil Encounter. Ojaide's poetic aesthetic and practice is not grand but lyrical. Through his imaginative reconstruction of his Delta environment, the poetry campaigns against the way a neoliberal capitalism and the global race for oil have impacted people's lives. His figuration of the Oil Encounter is however not a grand narrative of epic quality of the kind that Amitav Ghosh calls for. In Ghosh's reading of Abdelrahman Munif's novels, *Cities of Salt* and *The Trench*, he dismisses both as 'an escapist fantasy' and 'a romantic hearkening back to a pristine, unspoiled past', respectively (2002:84-87). While Ghosh declares both novels as failing to address the grand narrative of the oil encounter, he appears to deny the writer the liberty of creative imagination that can be therapeutic and optimistic, even in the face of oppressive realities.

Peter Hitchcock's 2010 essay, 'Oil in an American Imaginary' picks up on Ghosh's pronouncements where he (Hitchcock) rightly affirms Ghosh's observation of a consciously muted imagination of the oil encounter in American literature. However Hitchcock makes a fascinating point which illuminates my argument. He avers:

If climate change has provoked utopian desires for a world beyond oil, a planet where oil does not and cannot centrally drive its economic activities, then that challenge must include an imaginative group of its otherwise abstruse narrative of modernity, *not in the mere content of oil's omnipresence, but in the very ways oil has fictively come to define so much of being in modernity* (2010:81, e.a.).

Hitchcock however does not refer to cultural production elsewhere—in Africa, for instance—that has attempted to address the oil encounter. This paper is an attempt at filling that gap, because African, especially Nigerian literature, hardly merits critical attention in the analysis of global petrofiction/literature. What the Nigerian example can show, is a distinctive oil encounter in the imaginative creation of a writer who uses his lived-experience to define what oil has come to mean within a specific

geographical space and socio-political context. This is even more so when that position derives from a sense of vassalage in a neo-colonial framework - as in the case of the Niger Delta people.

This is because the visible trajectories and socio-political realities that the Oil Encounter has etched on the Delta landscape need to be understood within what Harry Garuba calls ‘the complicated terrain of the unresolved ... incoherences (sic), contradictions and multiplicities’ (2005:65). The Oil Encounter and the politics that attend the production and distribution of oil resources have brought with it a multiplicity of paradoxes—of poverty and wealth existing at the same site, of a neoliberal capitalism associated with western ideals of democracy and a free market, but which do not translate into wealth, nor guarantee environmental and social justice for the autochthonous people. And paradoxically too, it is this atmosphere of anomie and of the unresolvable, exacerbated by the ‘grandiose’ Oil Encounter in the Niger Delta, that has given ebullient articulation to Ojaide’s poetry.

References

- Adamson, Joni *et al.* 2002. Introduction: The Environmental Justice Reader: Politics, Poetics & Pedagogy. In Adamson, Joni, Mei Mei Evans & Rachel Stein (eds): *The Environmental Justice Reader: Politics, Poetics & Pedagogy*. Tucson: Arizona University Press.
- Aiyejina, Funso 1988. Recent Nigerian Poetry in English: An Alter/native Tradition. *Perspectives on Nigerian Literature 1700 to the Present*. Lagos: The Guardian Books Ltd.
- Bodunde, Charles 2002. Tanure Ojaide’s Poetry and the Delta Landscape: A Study of Delta Blues and Home Songs. In Okome, Onookome (ed): *Writing the Homeland: The Poetry and Politics of Tanure Ojaide*. Bayreuth: Bayreuth African Studies 60.
- Comfort, Susan 2002. Struggle in Ogoniland: Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Cultural Politics of Environmental Justice. In Adamson, Joni, Mei Mei Evans & Rachel Stein (eds): *The Environmental Justice Reader: Politics, Poetics & Pedagogy*. Tucson: Arizona University Press.
- Curtin, Deane 1999. *Chinnagounder’s Challenge: The Question of Ecological Citizenship*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

- Evans, Mei Mei 2002. 'Nature' and Environmental Justice. In Adamson, Joni, Mei Mei Evans & Rachel Stein (eds): *The Environmental Justice Reader: Politics, Poetics & Pedagogy*. Tucson: Arizona University Press.
- Garuba, Harry 2005. The Unbearable Lightness of Being: Re-Figuring Trends in Recent Nigerian Poetry. *English in Africa New Nigerian Writing* 32,1: 51-72. Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40239029> (Accessed October, 19 2011.)
- Ghosh, Amitav 2002. Petrofiction: The Oil Encounter and the Novel. In *Imam and the Indian: Prose Pieces*. Delhi: Ravi Dayal Publishers.
- Guha, Ramachandra 1997. The Authoritarian Biologist and the Arrogance of Anti-Humanism: Wildlife Conservation in the Third World. *The Ecologist* 27:14 - 20. Available at: <http://classes.maxwell.syr.edu/soc400/readings/Guha%20Authoritarian%20biologist.pdf> (Accessed September 12 2010).
- Harvey, David 1996. *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference*. London: Blackwell Publishers.
- Hitchcock, Peter 2010. Oil in an American Imaginary. *New Formations* 69, 1: 81 - 97.
- Hunt, J Timothy 2006. *The Politics of Bones*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart).
- Martin, Joanne & Caren Siehl 1983. Organisational Culture and Counterculture: An Uneasy Symbiosis. *Organisational Dynamics* 12, 2: 52 - 64.
- Meja-Pierce, Adewale 2005. *Remembering Ken Saro-Wiwa and Other Essays*. Lagos: The New Gong.
- Obi, Cyril & Siri Aas Rustad 2011. Introduction: Petro-violence in the Niger Delta – The Complex Politics of an Insurgency. In Obi, Cyril & Siri Rustad (eds): *Oil and Insurgency in the Niger Delta: Managing the Complex Politics of Petro-Violence*. Sweden/ London: Nordic Africa Institute/ Zed Books.
- Ojaide, Tanure 1996. *Poetic Imagination in Black Africa: Essays on African Poetry*. Durham: North Carolina Academic Press.
- Ojaide, Tanure 1998. *Delta Blues & Home Songs*. Ibadan: Kraft Books Limited.
- Okome, Onookome 2002. Tanure Ojaide: The Poet and His Delta. In Okome,

Philip Onoriode Aghoghovwia

- Onookome (ed): *Writing the Homeland: The Poetry and Politics of Tanure Ojaide*. Bayreuth: Bayreuth African Studies 60.
- Okuyade, Ogaga 2011. The Cumulative Neglect of Collective Responsibility: Postcoloniality, Ecology, and the Niger Deltascape in the Poetry of Tanure Ojaide. *Matatu* 39,7: 115 - 131.
- Olafioye, Tayo 2000. *The Poetry of Tanure Ojaide: A Critical Appraisal*. Lagos: Malthouse Press.
- Peel, Michael 2010. *A Swamp Full of Dollars: Pipelines and Paramilitaries at Nigeria's Oil Frontiers*. Ibadan: Bookcraft Limited.
- Reed, TV 2002. Toward an Environmental Justice Ecocriticism. In Adamson, Joni, Mei Mei Evans & Rachel Stein (eds): *The Environmental Justice Reader: Politics, Poetics & Pedagogy*. Tucson: Arizona University Press.
- Sallah, Tijan 1995. The Eagle's Vision: The Poetry of Tanure Ojaide. *Research in African Literature* 26, 1: 20 - 29.
- Slaymaker, William 2001. Ecoing the Other(s): The Call of Global Green and Black African Responses. *PMLA* 116, 1: 129 - 144.
- Sze, Julie 2002. From Environmental Justice Literature to the Literature of Environmental Justice. In Adamson, Joni, Mei Mei Evans & Rachel Stein (eds): *The Environmental Justice Reader: Politics, Poetics & Pedagogy*. Tucson: Arizona University Press.
- Tsaaio, James 2005. Poetics, Politics and the Paradoxes of Oil in Nigeria's Niger Delta Region. *African Renaissance* 2,6: 72 - 80.
- Ushie, Joe 2006. Challenges of the Creative Writer in the Niger Delta. *The Ker Review* 2,2: 3 - 26.
- Vital, Anthony 2008. Toward an African Ecocriticism: Postcolonialism, Ecology and *Life & Times of Michael K*. *Research in African Literatures* 39, 1: 87 - 121.
- Wiwa, Ken 2000. *In The Shadow of a Saint*. Toronto: Knopf Canada.

Philip Onoriode Aghoghovwia
Doctoral Fellow
Department of English
University of Stellenbosch, South Africa.
16467531@sun.ac.za