COURSE GUIDE

ENG 871

STUDIES IN WRITTEN AFRICAN POETRY

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INTRODUCTION ENG 871 – STUDIES IN WRITTEN AFRICAN POETRY

ENG 871 is a one-semester course of three credit units. It is developed and written to cater for the study needs of postgraduate students of departments of English in Nigeria. The course has twenty three units which include a general overview on poetry, the oral background of African poetry, the scope of written African poetry, aesthetics in African poetry, the pioneer African poets, poetry and African experience, colonial rule and African poetic response, the shortcomings of African independence, the Africa's cultural crisis/cultural rediscovery, the poets in exile, new protest voices and the woman's voice in African poetry. Other units examine the style and themes in the poems of some selected African poets which include Leopold Senghor, Wole Soyinka, Christopher Okigbo, Okot p'Bitek, Kofi Awonoonor, Lenrie Peters, Kofi Ayindoho, Niyi Osundare, Sipho Semphala, Funso Aiyejina and Tenure Ojaide among others.

The materials and examples used for this course are suitable for Nigerian post graduate students of English. The examples are drawn variously from selected popular African poetic renditions. However we have designed ENG 871 to improve upon students' already acquired knowledge of African poetry in previous similar courses taught at the undergraduate class.

WHAT YOU WILL LEARN IN THIS COURSE

The overall aim of ENG 871**:** Studies in Written African Poetry is to familiarize the students with the general knowledge of written African poetry. Your understanding of this course will provide you adequate knowledge of written African poetry.

COURSE AIMS

This course is designed to take you through a critical study of African poetry from a detailed thematic and stylistic perspective. It is meant to:

- Acquaint the student with the general background of written African poetry including its historical development and the concept of African aesthetics.
- Draw ttention to certain issues in African poetry such as the relationship between African poetry and colonialism and the shortcomings of African independence.
- Rekindle interest in some new issues in African poetry such as feminism, exile poetry and protest poetry
- Provide deep knowledge of the themes and style in the poetry of some selected African poets
- Introduce themes and style in the poetry of some selected contemporary African poets.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

To achieve the aims set out above, there are overall objectives. In addition, each unit has specific objectives. The unit objectives are always included at the beginning of each unit. They should be read before going through the units. One should always look at the unit objectives on completing the unit to ensure that you have done what the unit required and that you have acquired the competencies it aimed to inculcate.

Stated below are the wider objectives of this course. By meeting these objectives, you should have achieved the entire aims of the course. The student, at the end, should be able to:

- Provide a general overview on poetry
- Outline the oral background of African poetry
- Discuss the background and scope of written African poetry
- Examine the concept of aesthetics in African poetry
- Discuss the poetry of some pioneer African writers
- Examine the idea of poetry and African experience
- Discuss the relationship between colonial rule and African poetic response
- Discuss the shortcomings of African independence in African poetry
- Examine the themes of Africa's cultural crisis/cultural rediscovery in written African poetry
- Explain the themes in the poetry of African poets in exile
- Examine the new protest voices in written African poetry
- Discuss the women's voices in African poetry
- Discuss the themes and style in the poems of each the following early African poets: Leopold Senghor, Wole Soyinka, Christopher Okigbo, Okot p'Bitek, Kofi Awonoonor and Lenrie Peters and
- Examine the themes and styles in the poems of each the following contemporary African poets: Kofi Ayindoho, Niyi Osundare, Sipho Semphala, Funso Aiyejina and Tenure Ojaide

WORKING THROUGH THIS COURSE

To complete this course, you are required to read the study units, read recommended books and other related materials you can lay your hands on. Each unit contains self-assessment exercises, which you are expected to use in assessing your understanding of the course. At the end of this course, there will be a final examination.

COURSE MATERIALS

Major components of this course are:

- Course Guide
- Study Units
- Textbooks
- Assignment File
- Presentation Schedule

STUDY UNITS

There are twenty three study units in this course. They are as follows:

Module 1: BACKGROUND OF WRITTEN AFRICAN POETRY
Unit 1 An Overview on Poetry

Unit 2 Oral Background of African Poetry
Unit 3 Background and Scope of Written African Poetry
Unit 4 Aesthetics in African Poetry
Unit 5 Written African Poetry: The Pioneers

Module 2: ISSUES IN WRITTEN AFRICAN POETRY

Unit 1 Poetry and African Experience
Unit 2 Colonial Rule and African Poetic Response
Unit 3 Shortcomings of African Independence
Unit 4 Africa's Cultural Crisis/Cultural Rediscovery
Unit 5 Poets in Exile
Unit 6 New Protest Voices
Unit 7 The Woman's Voice

Module 3: SELECTED AFRICAN POETRY: THE EARLIER POETS

Unit 1 The Poems of Leopold Senghor
Unit 2 The Poems of Wole Soyinka
Unit 3 The Poems of Christopher Okigbo
Unit 4 The Poems of Okot p'Bitek
Unit 5 The Poems of Kofi Awonoonor
Unit 6 The Poems of Lenrie Peters

Module 4: SELECTED AFRICAN POETRY: THE CONTEMPORARIES

Unit 1 The Poems of Kofi Ayindoho
Unit 2 The Poems of Niyi Osundare
Unit 3 The Poems of Sipho Semphala
Unit 4 The Poems of Funso Aiyejina
Unit 5 The Poems of Tenure Ojaide

The first five units in the Module 1 provide the general background of written African poetry while the seven units in Module 2 discuss some issues in written African poetry. The remaining six units in Module 3 and five units in Module 4 discuss the themes and style employed by some selected African poets.

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ASSIGNMENT FILE
This file contains the details of all the assignments you must do and submit to your tutor for marking. The marks you obtain from these assignments will form part of the final marks you will obtain in this course.

PRESENTATION SCHEDULE
The presentation schedule included in your course materials gives you the important dates for the completion of your tutor-marked assignments and when to attend tutorials. Remember that you are required to submit your assignments according to the schedule.

ASSESSMENT
There are two aspects of assignment in this course. The first aspect includes all the tutor-marked assignments, while the second is the written examination.

In tackling the assignments, you are expected to apply the information and knowledge you acquired during the course.

The assignments must be submitted to your tutor for formal assessment in accordance with the deadlines stated in the Assignment file. The work you submit to your tutor for assessment accounts for 30% of the total marks accruing to the course.

At the end of the course, you will sit for a final three-hour examination that will carry 70% of the total course marks.

TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT
Each unit has a tutor-marked assignment. You are expected to submit all the assignments. You should be able to do the assignments from the knowledge you derived from the course, and information you acquired from the textbooks.

When you have completed the assignment for each unit, send it along with your TMA (tutor-marked assignment) form to your tutor. Make sure that the completed assignment reaches your tutor on or before the deadline in the assignment file. If you cannot complete your assignment on time due to a cogent reason, consult your tutor for possible extension of time.

FINAL EXAMINATION AND GRADING

The final examination for ENG 871 will be for the duration of three hours. The examination will carry 70%. It will consist of questions that will reflect the type of self-testing practice exercises and tutor-marked assignments you have come across. All areas of the course will be examined.

You are advised to revise the entire course after studying the last unit before you sit for the examination. You will find the revision of your tutor-marked assignments equally useful.

COURSE MARKING SCHEME

The table below shows how actual course marking is broken down.

Assessment	Marks
Assignments 1-4	Four assignments, best three marks of the four counts as 30% of course marks.
Final Examination	70% of overall course marks
Total	100% of course marks

Table 1: Course marking scheme

COURSE OVERVIEW

The table below brings together, the units, the number of weeks you should take to complete them, and the assignments that follow them.

Unit	Title of Work	Week's Activity	Assessment (End of Unit)
	Course Guide	1	
MODULE 1: BACKGROUND OF WRITTEN AFRICAN POETRY			
1	An Overview on Poetry	1	Assignment 1
2	Oral Background of African Poetry	2	Assignment 2
3	Background and Scope of Written African Poetry	3	Assignment 3
4	Aesthetics in African Poetry	4	Assignment 4
5	Written African Poetry: The Pioneers	5	Assignment 5
MODULE 2: ISSUES IN WRITTEN AFRICAN POETRY			
1	Poetry and African Experience	6	Assignment 6
2	Colonial Rule and African Poetic Response	7	Assignment 7
3	Shortcomings of African Independence	8	Assignment 8
4	Africa's Cultural Crisis/Cultural Rediscovery	9	Assignment 9
5	Poets in Exile	10	Assignment 10
6	New Protest Voices	11	Assignment 11
7	The Woman's Voice	12	Assignment 12
MODULE 3: SELECTED AFRICAN POETRY: THE EARLIER POETS			
1	The Poems of Leopold Senghor	13	Assignment 13
2	The Poems of Wole Soyinka	14	Assignment 14
3	The Poems of Christopher Okigbo	15	Assignment 15
4	The Poems of Okot p'Bitek	16	Assignment 16

5	The Poems of Kofi Awonoonor	17	Assignment 17
6	The Poems of Lenrie Peters	18	Assignment 18
MODULE 4: SELECTED AFRICAN POETRY: THE CONTEMPORARIES			
1	The Poems of Kofi Ayindoho	19	Assignment 19
2	The Poems of Niyi Osundare	20	Assignment 20
3	The Poems of Sipho Semphala	21	Assignment 21
4	The Poems of Funso Aiyejina	22	Assignment 22
5	The Poems of Tenure Ojaide	23	Assignment 23
	Revision		
	Examination		

HOW TO GET THE MOST FROM THIS COURSE

In distance learning, the study units replace the university lecture. This is one of the advantages of distance learning: you can read and work through specially designed study materials at your own pace, and at a time and place that suit you best. Think of it as reading the lecture instead of listening to a lecturer. In the same way that a lecturer might set for you some reading to do, the study units tell you when to read your set books or other materials. Just as a lecturer might give you an in-class exercise, your study units provide exercises for you to do at appropriate time.

Each of the study units are written according to common format. The first item is an introduction to the subject matter of the unit and how a particular unit is integrated with the other units and the course as a whole. Next is a set of learning objectives. These objectives guide you on what you should be able to do by the time you have completed the unit. You should use these objectives to guide your study. When you have completed the units, you must go back and check whether you have achieved the objectives. This habit will improve your chance of passing the course.

READING SECTION

Remember that your tutor's job is to help you. So, when you need help of any sort, call on him or her. Do not fail to do so.

1. Read this Course Guide thoroughly
2. Organise a study schedule or time table. Refer to the course overview for more details. Note the time you are expected to spend on each unit, and how the assignments relate to the units.
3. Once you have created your own study schedule, do everything you can to stick to it. The major reason students fail is that they lag behind in their course work.

If you get into any difficulty with your schedule, do let your tutor know it before it is too late for help.

4. Turn to unit one and read the introduction and the objectives for the unit.
5. Assemble the study materials. Information about what you need for a unit is given in the overview at the beginning of each unit. You will always almost need both the study unit you are working on and one of your books on your table at the same time.
6. Work through the unit. The content of each unit has been arranged to provide a sequence for you to follow. As you work through the unist you will be instructed to read sections from your set books or articles. Use the units to guide your reading.
7. Review the objectives for each study unit to confirm that you have achieved them. If you feel unsure about any of the objectives, review the study material or consult your tutor.
8. When you are confident that you have achieved a unit's objectives, you can then start on the next unit. Proceed unit by unit through the course and try to face your study so that you keep yourself on schedule.
9. When you have submitted an assignment to your tutor for marking, do not wait for its return before starting on the next unit. Keep to your schedule. When the assignment is returned, pay particular attention to your tutor's comments, both on the tutor- marked assignment form and also on what is written on the assignment. Consult your tutor as soon as possible if you have any questions or problems.
10. After completing the last unit, review the course and prepare yourself for the final examination. Ensure that you have achieved the units' objectives (listed at the beginning of each unit) and the course objectives (listed in this Course Guide).

FACILITATORS/TUTORS AND TUTORIALS

There are eight hours of tutorials provided in support of this course. You will be notified of the dates, time and location of these tutorials, together with the name and phone number of your tutor, as soon as you are allocated a tutorial group. Your tutor will mark and comment on your assignments, keep close watch on your progress and on any difficulties you might encounter and provide assistance to you during the course. You must mail your tutor-marked assignments to your tutor well before the due date (at least two working days are required). They will be marked by your tutor and returned to you as soon as possible.

Do not hesitate to contact your tutor by telephone, e-mail, or discussion board if you need help. The following might be circumstances in which you will find help necessary.

CONTACT YOUR TUTOR IF:

- You do not understand any part of the study units or the assigned readings,
- You have difficulty with the self-tests or exercises,
- You have a question or problem with an assignment, your tutor's comments on an assignment, or with the grading of an assignment.

You should try your best to attend tutorials. This is the only chance to have face to face contact with your tutor and ask questions which are answered instantly. You can raise any problem encountered in the course of your study. To gain the maximum benefit from course tutorials, prepare a question list before attending them. You will learn a lot from participating in discussions actively.

SUMMARY

ENG 781: *Studies in Written African Poetry* makes a critical study of African poetry from a detailed thematic and stylistic perspective. By the end of the course, students should be able to answer questions bordering on: general background of written African poetry, some issues in written African poetry and the examination of style and themes in the poetry of some selected African poets. The course will make you to be very conversant with written African poetry.

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MODULE 1 BACKGROUND OF WRITTEN AFRICAN POETRY

UNIT 1 AN OVERVIEW ON POETRY

CONTENTS

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Poetry is the oldest of the three major forms of literature with roots deep in the rituals and religious observances of antiquity. This unit will examine the concept poetry, the methods of appreciating poetry, the concepts of meaning, intention and tone, the poet's use of imagery and symbolism, metre and rhyme, sound effects and other devices and the various figures of speech employed in poetry. Below are some of the objectives of this unit.

2.0 OBJECTIVES

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- Define and explain what you understand by poetry
- Discuss the various functions of poetry
- Identify different features of poetry

3.0 MAIN CONTENT

3.1 What is poetry?

The Concise Oxford's Dictionary defines poetry as 'elevated expression of elevated thought or feeling in metrical or rhythmical form'; and it equally defines a poet as a 'writer in verse, especially one possessing high powers of imagination, expression, etc.' The words 'poet' and 'poetry' may appear neutral until you turn out the light when they will be seen still to glow in the dark like hot coals. When the fashion in twentieth-century literature turned against the more extravagant claims for the poet's art inherited

from the romantic movement, the words ‘poet’ and ‘poetry’ were given a rest. ‘Poetry’ became ‘verse’, and ‘poets’ ‘practitioners’. This was the period when anthologies had titles like *The Faber Book of Modern Verse* (1936), *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse* (1936), *The Penguin Book of English Romantic Verse* (1968), and so on.

The words ‘poet’ and ‘poetry’ could not be neutralised simply by giving them a neutral context. They brought with them grand claims and magical associations. If literature was to be rid of that baggage, the words had to be set aside. But as the words have come back, so have the associations, which were probably in any case never effectively shed. There are a number of reasons for this curious power that resides in the idea of poetry, and hence in the word. One is that language more than anything else is what distinguishes us as a species, and poetry has been generally conceded to the most comprehensive and demanding use, or manifestation, of language.

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

From the above discussions, attempt a definition of poetry in your own words.

3.2 The Funtions of Poetry

Poetry has *Aesthetic* and *Moralistic* functions. Traditionally, poetry was enjoyed. It gives pleasure. It represesed beautiful things and was itself beautiful. This was the decorative aspect of the art of poetry. On the other hand there is always the feeling that when this side became overemphasized, poetry lost some of its power and its weight. A part from aesthetic function poetry has a moral function. It has to delight and also instruct. In fact its aesthetic function, from this point of view, was hardly more than a sugar coating so that the pill of morality would be effortlessly swallowed. So, in the late years of the nineteenth century there was a reaction against poetry-as-morality—the Art for Art’s Sake movement. Thus, poetry has two major functions; it embellishes language and entertain the audience by the high quality of its language. It is an instrument for language preservation. This quality is manifested in the use of ryme, rhythm, and meter among many other qualities that make a poetic language unique and special and it advocates high moral standard among humans that corresponds to the moral values of its community. From this point of view poetry must be didactic. In other words the content of poetry should be educating. It should teach the moral values of its community via a highly embellished language.

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Attempt a detail discussion on the functions of poetry.

3.3 Features of Poetry

There are elements of craft skill with poetry as with all other arts; but what seems to be implied when we distinguish between an art and a craft is that learned skills will not be enough—there must be that in-born potential as well. And because poetry is an art with a long history, the poet must inherit the tradition through the medium of the ancients. Not that poets must have read assiduously back through the ages but most past

poetry is present in the poetry of the present. The poet reads rather in the way the body breathes, drawing life from what has gone before as from an atmosphere. Some critics argue that the poet's individual talent is not sufficient to account for poetry. Only those who have acquired, by however selective method the sense of a living tradition flowing through poetry from age to age into the present, this carries the tradition forward.

In addition, it is true that the history of poetry is full of schools, wars, and youthful rebellions. The romantic poets rebelled against the Augustans; modernists rebelled against the great figures of the nineteenth century and so on. But where rebellion occurs the flow-on effect is never less marked, and sometimes more. There is no need for rebellion where what has gone before has had no effect. It is because, in literature as in society at large, the French are such traditionalists that they have such need of rebellion. In the popular mind—that is to say, among people who do not normally read poetry—a poem is distinguishable by the fact that it is broken up into lines which usually rhyme and have some metrical pattern. Poetry is manifest in its form. Even before modern poets began to abandon regular forms, this notion was less than satisfactory. It must always have been apparent that you could write out a statement that would satisfy the formal requirements of a sonnet, or of any other verse form, without achieving poetry; while, conversely, passages of prose—in the King James Bible, or Moby Dick, or Wuthering Heights, to take only three very obvious examples—were so heightened, and so powerful in their effects, that no reader would want to quarrel with the suggestion that they were poetry. Poetry then, almost by definition, is a quality, not a form; though of this you may add, if your disposition is strongly conservative, that the quality 'poetry' does not alone make a poem, and that a poem occurs only when that quality finds itself in conjunction with one or another of the traditional forms.

Moreover, poems exhibit in their writing some quality (force, intensity, density, texture, incandescence) which makes them exceptional. The language seems to have a life beyond its most obvious function, which is to 'mean'. Reading it is an experience demanding and receiving more of the reader than is the case with a non-poetic text. But all of that is true of most texts which are literary as distinct from those texts which are not. So we have, really, a spectrum of literary texts from the least to the most intense, from the least to the most densely textured, from the least to the most semantically active and alive with a talent for composition, and somewhere along that spectrum we pass into the realm of 'poetry'.

Traditional forms have given an illusion of marking a clear dividing line between the one and the other, but all they signal really is an intention on the part of the writer. The distinction of poetry, as already observed, resides more in a quality of language than in a measurable form.

One of its commonest features is said to be imager, in part to agree, in part to question. But perhaps less challengeable as an inevitable feature of poetic language is economy and this is so even in a writer like Shakespeare, where at a glance what we appears to have is linguistic opulence, words in excess of the needs of the statement. However, we are told frequently that

economy is a stylistic virtue; that 'brevity is the soul of wit'—and so on. If that is the case, it must be for a better reason than that generations of teachers and critics have said so. And the reason is probably relatively simple. If all of whatever was intended in twelve words—evocation, meaning, emotion, aural and visual effect—can be conveyed in eight, then those eight words, because they are working harder, doing more, will seem more active, energetic, muscular, radioactive than the twelve doing the same work. And this has the paradoxical effect of making us more rather than less aware of language as language. The language does its work; but it exists also for its own sake and in its own right. When that happens we begin to feel the action of poetry.

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Discuss the peculiar features of poetry that distinguish it from the other genres of literature.

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

1. Write a detail essay on what you understand about poetry including its various definitions and distinguishing features.
2. Discuss the role of poetic devices in poetry.

4.0 CONCLUSION

This unit have provided you with an overview of what poetry is. Through examples, it had taking you through the various meanings of poetry and the various concepts related to poetry including its functions and features.

5.0 SUMMARY

In this unit you have learned the followings:

- The definition and meaning of poetry
- Functions of poetry
- Features of poetry

6.0 TUTOR MARKED ASSIGNMENT

Read and answer the questions below:

1) Define and explain what you understand by poetry.
2) Outline and discuss the functions of poetry
3) Discuss the distinguishing features of poetry

7.0 REFERENCES/FURTHER READING

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UNIT 2 BACKGROUND TO AFRICAN POETRY
CONTENTS

1.0 INTRODUCTION

To have a clear idea of what constitutes Written African Poetry, you need to know the root from which it stems. Within the broad definition, the study will distinguish written African poetry from the oral tradition. The unit will therefore introduce you to the concept of literature, the poetry of pre-literate African societies, preliterate oral poetry and the different types of pre-literate African social poetry. Below are some of the objectives of this unit:

2.0 OBJECTIVES

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- Discuss the poetry in pre-literate African societies
- Discuss the concept of pre-literate African oral poetry
- Explain some types of pre-literate African poems and how they relate with present written African poetry

3.0 MAIN CONTENT

3.1 The Concept of African Traditional Oral Poetry

According to Sotunsa (2002), the existence, quality and value of African indigenous oral poetry were a matter of debate until about five decades ago, while the controversy over the authenticity of African oral poetry as 'true' poetry motivated African oral literature scholars to collect, and analyse reasonable samples of African oral poetry. He further mentioned that assiduous efforts were made to disprove the argument that there was no poetry in Africa until the arrival of European civilization. This assertion was made by some European and Eurocentric scholars. According to Isidore Okpewho (1985), such scholars argue that poetry is a mark of advanced culture or civilisation and the business of men of specialised skill and training who devote their time to observing and commenting on life with beauty and seriousness. In the view of these critics, traditional African societies were still groping in the dark with rudimentary problems of existence and were yet to attain the level of achievement whereby men could indulge in the pursuit of poetic excellence. Besides, their languages were not yet

sufficiently developed to cope with the complex techniques of poetic expression. Nevertheless, it has been proved beyond doubt that, "oral poetry possesses all the beauty of language, content and style associated with the best of written poetry. The case for the recognition of oral poetry as true poetry has been most successfully made" (Olajubu 1981).

Aderemi Bamikunle (1985) opines that, instead of defensive criticism, textual analysis of our literature should concern oral literature scholars. This is so because "we should disregard "the pre-judicial judgement of western critics who in ignorance said the most atrocious things about oral literature." What is the nature of African oral poetry? Oral poetry has been defined by various people and many explanations have been offered on its nature. Emovon (1981) opines:

> Traditional oral poetry must be seen within the context of folklore – that is songs or recitations having measured rhythm and dealing with verbal aspects of customs, observances etc of a people… Essentially, a traditional poetry is a song that very often tells a story. It is a poem that no matter how composed has been transmitted primarily by word of mouth and learnt by imitation or example. This definition underscores the musicality of oral poetry (1981:205).

Moreover, Finnegan (1992) explains that "oral poetry essentially circulates by oral rather than written means in contrast to written poetry. Its distribution, composition or performances are by word of mouth and not through reliance on the written or printed word." She nevertheless warns that many generalizations made about oral poetry are over-simplified and misleading. According to Finnegan, oral poetry can take many different forms and occur in many cultural situations. It does not manifest itself only in the one unitary model as argued by some scholars.

By Finnegan's critical standards, Emovon's earlier quoted definition appeared to be an over simplified view of oral poetry. He reduced oral poetry to traditional songs only. Okphewo (1985), on the other hand, explains that "there are two types of music which we generally hear in the performance of oral poetry. One of these is the instrumental music… the other kind of music we hear in oral poetry is vocal or tonal". From Okphewo's assertion, we can deduce that music, either instrumental or vocal is a component of oral poetry but there are still other features. Finnegan (1992) further states that:

> What we must look for is not one absolute criterion but a range of stylistic and formal attributes – features like heightened languages, metaphorical expression, musical form and accompaniment, structural repetitiveness like recurrence of stanzas, lines or refrains, prosodic features like metre, alliteration, even perhaps parallelism so that the concept of poetry turns out to be a relative one depending on a combination of stylistic elements no one of which need necessarily and invariably be present.

The nature of Yoruba oral poetry is elaborated upon by Olajubu (1981). Yoruba oral poetry is a living and dynamic verbal art. It is meant to be sung, chanted and intoned in

performance in the presence of an audience at a given social, cultural, religious, political or informal occasion. Its performance is usually accompanied with drum, music and dance. The poets perform either separately or in groups but most of them perform in orchestras made up of soloist, singers, chorus, drummers and dancers. Therefore, the poem in Yoruba is essentially a song and its performance is a musical dramatic opera.

However, Olajubu's conclusion, which reduces all poems in Yoruba to songs, seems to be wrong. Yoruba poetry as pointed out by Olatunji (1982) have three modes, namely the *speech, chant* and *song* modes. Nonetheless, Olajubu's definition highlights the performance feature of oral poetry. In addition to rhythm, oral mode of transmission and other stylistic elements, performance is an integral component of oral poetry.

Finnegan (1992) postulates three ways of determining any oral poem. They include composition, mode of transmission and performance. She further reveals that oral poetry does indeed possess a verbal text like written poetry but for a piece of oral literature to reach its full actualisation, it must be performed. The text alone cannot constitute the oral poem. For this reason, no discussion of oral poetry can afford to concentrate on the text alone, but must take account of the nature of the audience, the context of performance, the personality of the poet-performer and the details of performance itself. "The poet in Yoruba oral poetry is a performer. In reality, he is a singer and an actor because his performance involves a combination of singing, drama and dancing, masquerading and costume parade…" (Olajubu 1981). The importance of performance in oral poetry is further emphasized by Isidore Okpewho (1985) in *The Heritage of African Poetry*. He likens the performance of oral poetry to a modern stage play in which a performer has to support his words with the right movement of his body or control his voice in order to make an effective impression.

Olajubu (1981) opines further:

> A written poem exists and is transmitted and perpetuated in print. But Yoruba oral poetry like all oral works of art exists and is transmitted and perpetuated in performance, that is, without performance, a Yoruba oral poem has no means of existence.

Another significant feature of African traditional oral poetry is the audience. They constitute a very important part of the performance. In many instances, audience play active role in the performance, even though the main artist is easily distinguishable. "Oral poetry achieves its forcefulness not only at the hands of the performer himself, part of this forcefulness comes from the participation of various persons (present at the scene of performance) in the creative act taking place" (Okpewho 1985).

Olajubu (1981) identifies three elements that inform the performance of the oral poem: *the situation, the audience and the text*". Similarly Opefehintimi in "indigenous criticisms of Yoruba Orature" recognises the role of the audience as critics of Yoruba orature performance (YOP). According to Opefehintimi (1995):

> …the audience uses various means to command and praise the effort of YOP artists who impress the audience. This can be done in various ways. First, occasional para- linguistic nodding of heads in certain manner can be indicative

> of approval. Second the placing of money on the foreheads of artists is a glaring evidence of aesthetic approval. Third, the audience often finds it irresistible to have shouts and claps of applause in situations of aesthetic satisfactory experiences… Therefore criticism on stage is the interaction between the artist and the audience, the latter contribute through statements of critical acuity and even chorus of songs while the artists endeavour to satisfy the audience by involving them in YOP in diplomatic ways. Therefore, the stage performance critical facet of YOP is essentially dialogue oriented. Often, questions and answers feature between artists and audience as a proof of this interaction.

It was widely believed that oral poetry is fixed and has to be transmitted verbatim (Sotunsa, 2002). The texts are seen as communal properties of older generations which the whole community, and not an identifiable individual, is credited with its composition. The texts are built over time and enriched by each succeeding generation. New artists apparently learn the fixed texts by 'rote' method of memorisation.

Conversely, Olajubu (1981) argues that the text of any oral poem was composed by a particular poet-composer at a point in time. According to him:

> Yoruba oral poetry like most forms of African verbal art is composed in performance. That is the artist performs his poetry/song as he composes it in the presence of his audience. The two cannot be separated. They go on simultaneously. The whole process is extempore and impromptu. There is no room for rehearsals or pre-prepared/ composed poems… No Yoruba oral artist can make repeat performance in the past. Each attempt he makes to repeat an old chanted poem yields a new different poem.

Olajubu's position here is based on the concept of variability of the three elements affecting the performance of an oral poem. According to Olajubu, the three elements that control the performance of the oral poem (the situation, audience and the text) are highly variable. For instance, the setting of a performance may change and this change will affect the actualisation of the performance even if the basic text remains the same. If the setting of the performance remains constant, the socio-economic and political situation in which the poem was performed may have changed and this may also have an effect on the performance. If the audience also changes, there will be differences in audience participation. In fact where the audience remains the same, if the performance is repeated, there might be differences in audience participation. Variability in any of the elements affecting the performance produces a 'new' performance. Olajubu's position is similar to Lord's (1965) who claims that an oral poem is composed in performance. Nevertheless, Olajubu admits that the composition and performance of oral poetry is learned and agreed that the text of the artist is already set. According to him:

> The oral artist supplements his verbal efforts with dramatic actions, gestures, charming voices, facial expression, dramatic uses of pauses and rhythms and receptivity of the reactions of the audience. These are all integral parts of the composition process. Those non-verbal actions described above together with the costume of the artist and the prevailing mood at the moment of performance

all add to the meaning of the oral poem. Therefore, in a way, the performing of the Yoruba oral poem is much more than mere verbal creation.

The composition of the oral poem must have been undertaken by a poet-artist at a particular point in time. The exact manner and time of composition cannot be easily determined because it is an oral form. Most oral forms are not exact because there would have been additions and alteration over a long period of time.

In recent times, there have been attempts to indigenise written/modern African poetry. As a result of this, many written poems are performed. In addition, more features of oral poetry are introduced into the written mode in order to add local 'flavour'. In such poems, there is a greater degree of musicality such that the poems can be set to music and its performance is made a public event like those of oral poetry. Ojaide (1995) observes that modern (written) African poetry which hitherto was condemned as elitist, intellectual, difficult and obscure is now enjoying new popularity. This is, according to the critic, due to the "possibility of some aesthetic strength hitherto unrealised in written African poetry in the new works which have successfully adapted oral poetic techniques into the written form."

Furthermore, Ojaide (1995) identifies two significant changes in recent poetic practice and the use of oral elements; repetition and musicality. Also, it is common now to find code mixing, code-switching and ideophmic elements in written African poetry in English. Similarly, Bamikunle (1995) and Ohaeto (1996) attempted to identify the oral poetic techniques in the works of by some modern African poets. Kofi Anyidoho's *Earthchild* (1985) and Niyi Osundare's *The Eye of the Earth* (1986), are good illustrations of such oral adaptations. The writers include, among other things, oral features like, high degree of musicality, translations and transliterations from the poet's mother tongue, and actualization of their poetry through performance. The integration of oral poetic features into the written mode supports Finnegan's (1992) assertion that oral poetry and written poetry share a common boundary, and are very similar such that a clear line of demarcation may not likely differentiate them. According to the critic,"Oral poetry like written poetry possesses a verbal text." (Sotunsa, 2002)

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Attempt a detail discussion of the concept of African oral poetry

3.2 The Poetry of Pre-Literate African Societies

In his *Modern African Poetry* (Undated), a course material for students of Centre for Distance Learning, University of Maiduguri, Ishaku discusses the poetry of pre-literate African Societies. According to hims, poetry is a branch of literature, an imaginary expression of deep thought and experience that makes its effect by sound and imagery of its language. It is often in verse form and arranged in patterns of sound and lines. A poem may be spoken, recited or sung. Poetry therefore, is a branch of literature that gives concentrated imaginative utterance to experience in words so chosen, and so arranged that they create an intense emotional response through the union of theme, language, sound and rhythm. A famous English poet, William Wordsworth, says *all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful emotions* by a man who, being

possessed of more than usual organic sensibility and has fought long deeply. Poetry is written to give immediate pleasure to a human being possessed of that information which may be expected from the poet, not as a lawyer, a physician, a mariner an astronomer or a natural philosopher, but as man. In his preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), Wordsworth describes poetry thus:

> The image of men and nature
> Acknowledgement of the beauty of the universe
> A homage paid to the native and naked dignity of man, to the grand elementary principle of pleasure, by which he knows, and feels and lives and moves
> Is the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge. It is the first and last of all knowledge
> It is immortal as the heart of man

In a similar manner, Edgar Allan Poe described poetry as 'the rhythmical creation of beauty'. While Arlington Robinson says, poetry is 'language that tells us through a more or less emotional reaction to something that cannot be said'. Poetry is about experiences, feelings and beauty. It is more intense, less direct, more suggestive and ambiguous.

The term 'Written African Poetry' may bring to your mind the thought of an 'older poetry' before the 'written' one. To clear your mind about this subject, we shall devote the next few pages of this unit to the earlier poetry of Africa before the *Written African Poetry*. Written Africa poetry takes its origin from the oral poetry of pre-literate African societies. That goes to say before written African poetry, there was African poetry but in oral form. Poetry at that level performs distinct significant functions in the society ranging from social, occupational, religious to 'oracular' (Ishaku, Undated).

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Discuss poetry in pre-literate African societies citing as many examples as possible

3.3 Pre-Literate Oral Poetry

Poetry in Africa before the advent of written African poetry combined all bodies of work created by African artists of different origins and fields of endeavours. Different criteria such as location, profession and purpose of the artists, history, sociological or geographical conditions of the performers, the subject matter of the poetry - e.g. ancestral worship, profession, love, can be used in identifying the functions of poetry in such societies. Each class of poetry has its peculiarities commiserate with its function. For example, under cult the poems listed are religious, medicinal and oracular. These, at the formal level, share the form of generally being rendered in a heightened voice, functionally being part of magic or prayer and sharing some significant aspects of the occult art itself.

At the social level, *the dirge* may share the same formal quality - slow solemnity with some *Ijala*, the Yoruba hunters' poetry listed under 'occupation'. The group listed under 'occupational' includes poetry that is peculiar and specific to certain trades. For example, hunters among Yoruba are bound by their allegiance to *Ogun*, the god of hunting, which unites them with blacksmiths. But hunters also share the love of forests

and animals; hence, they participate in a more cultic essence of Ogun. The *Ijala*, one of the most popular occupational poetry, is a speech-like song chanted at the gatherings of the devotees Ogun. *Ijala* contains imagery drawn from all aspects of non-human life. It deals with human relations, provides admonitions for ethical conduct and covers the whole range of traditional mythology. Its subject matter includes a salute to animals, stressing their attributes, characteristics or roles in legend. The *Ijala* also contains a salute to particular lineages and distinguished individuals, which form by far the largest division of the subject matter, sharing something with the Yoruba *Oriki* praise song poem which has a broader communal appeal. Other occupational groups use poetry as an essential aspect of work. These poems go beyond being just mere work songs since they are part of a reportorial accumulation used in specific religious functions pertaining to the group's calling. A good example is the Ewe fisherman's song tradition. These poems invoke the sea, fish lore and ceremonies pertaining to specific nets. They are a times accompanied by drums; they are marked by a quick, almost martial rhythm.

Cult poetry covers religious poetry, medicinal poetry, and oracular poetry. Religious poetry includes the praise poems of gods, or what may be called hymns. For instance, the Yoruba god *Esu-Elegba*, the messenger deity, has his own worshippers who perform his rituals with his praise names.

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Examine the concept of pre-literate African oral poetry

3.4 Classification of pre-literate African Poetry

According to Ishaku (Undated), various attempts were made to classify oral poetry into sub-genric forms. Finnegan (1992) identifies the following genres of oral poetry: epic, ballad, panegyric, odes and lyric poetry. Nevertheless, she states, "one has to accept that the whole idea of a genre is relative and ambiguous, dependent on culturally accepted canons of differentiation rather than a universal criteria." Previous classifications of African oral poetry by critics like Olukoju (1978), Olatunji (1984), Olajubu (1981), Kolawole (1990) and Ogunjimi and Na'allah (1994) have often been based on the following criteria: structure, content, language and musical accompaniment. For instance, Ogunjimi and Na'allah (1994) classify African oral poetry according to themes. This classification is based on the content. They identify religious poetry, incantatory poetry, salutation or praise poetry, funeral poetry, occupation poetry, heroic poetry, topical poetry, lullaby and occasional poetry. Each genre is further classified into sub genres. This classification is facile, ambiguous and overlaps. For instance "incantatory poetry" is religious in nature. Similarly, "heroic poetry" is essentially or primarily praise poetry, neither is "topical poetry" well defined, Olukoju (1978) attempts to re-classify categories of Yoruba oral poetry. He identifies three modes of discourse in Yoruba oral poetry. These include (1) *speech mode* (2) *chant mode* (3) *song mode*. Under the "speech mode" is the drum verse. Olukoju observes that previous researchers have based their classification of Yoruba oral poetry on the following criteria: The group of people to which the reciter belongs and the technique of recitation; Stylistic devices employed in the recitals and the mode in which each genre should sound in performance; The manner of voice production employed

and the internal structure in addition to the mode of chanting; The subject matter dealt with (reference to oral texts in general). On the other hand, Kolawole (1990) bases his categorisation on the theme or content of the poem. The following are the sub-genres of Yoruba poetic forms according to him; Esu Pipe (Esu invocatory chant), Iyere Ifa (Ifa divination chant), Oya Pipe (Oya Invocatory chant), Esu Egungun (Masquerade (ancestral) chant), Sango Pipe (Sango invocatory chant), Ijala (Hunter's chant), Ire Moje (Hunter's funeral dirge),Oku Pipe (Funeral dirge), Ekun Iyawo (Nuptial chant), Oriki Orile (Lineage praise chant), Rara (Praise chant), Etigeri (Satirical chant) and Ofo (Incantation).

Similarly, Akpabot (1981) suggests that Efik/Ibibio oral poetry exists in two major categories: ritual poetry and non-ritual poetry. According to him, most examples of Efik/Ibibio oral poetry are functional. This categorization, does not cater, among other things, for the formal attributes of poetry.

From the examination of African traditional poetry therefore, the following fundamental features can be identified: It is transmitted through oral means, and actualized in performance. Furthermore, it is realized in any of the three modes – speech, chant and song. In addition, audience participation is an integral aspect of the performance. Besides, scholars have used the following criteria to classify it: content, theme, structure, function and mode of delivery. Finally it is a communal property because of the contributions of various artists over time although a poet/composer must have composed it at a point in time.

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Write a rich essay on the oral background of written African Poetry with ample examples

4.0 CONCLUSION

You have learnt that poetry in Africa, before the advent of written African poetry, generally expresses itself in the songs, ritual incantations, prayers to gods, or salutations to gods and men. It covers all that ordinary every day speech does not express. In everyday life, good deal of poetry is performed in the name of gods. The pouring of libation before a meal or a drink is a prayer and a poem. Thus, poetry involves an extremely complicated sense of materials and structures, the manipulation of multiple elements. Its boundaries are limitless in the sense that the total world-mythology, legend, music, dance, worship-is embraced in a feeling for "the solidarity of all life". Its folk nature is only discernible within the scope of the genius of individual talent flowers, for the poem is carried by the voice. The most significant fact is that the ultimate realization of this material lies in the occasion and atmosphere of its performance.

5.0 SUMMARY

In this unit you have learned the followings:

- The Concept of African Oral Poetry
- Poetry in pre-literate African societies
- The concept of pre-literate African oral poetry
- Classification of pre-literate African Poetry

6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

Read and answer the questions below

1) Discuss the poetry in pre-literate African societies
2) Discuss the concept of pre-literate African oral poetry
3) Explain the types of pre-literate African poems you learned

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UNIT 3 BACKGROUND AND SCOPE OF WRITTEN AFRICAN POETRY

CONTENTS

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Written African literature, as opposed to its oral actecedents, is an artistic study of the African predicament from the colonial era, through the time of the attainment of political independence, to the post-independence era. And it is from this point of view that written African literature not only manifests glaring human relevance, but also reflects the writers' awareness of social reality coupled with an imaginative response to that reality. According to Thomas E. Kakonis and Barbara G. T. Desmarais, 'reality provides the basis for even the most abstract and imaginative of the artist's conceptions and the shared experience of reality permits him to communicate with other men.' But in dealing with reality, the artist does not merely reproduce it - 'he arranges, he orders, he selects'; and this helps him to 'perceive its faults and envision its remedies', though the remedies are only implied in the writer's attitude (Egudu, 1978). In this unit, we shall identify and evaluate the various thematic components of written African poetry. Below are some of the objectives of this unit.

2.0 OBJECTIVES

- Explain what you understand by Written African poetry
- Give a detailed explanation of the historical development of written African poetry
- Discuss the themes in written African poetry
- Explain the following themes in African poetry:
    - the theme of religious and cultural suppression
    - the theme of political and economic exploitation
    - personal themes

- contemporary and post-independence themes

3.0 MAIN CONTENT

3.1 What is Written African Poetry?

Written African poetry refers to the written form of poetry by poets of African descent. Earlier, we have learned that African poetry in the preliterate African societies was basically oral. Written African poetry on the other hand is largely written. It is the re-arrangement of traditional images of Africa by African poets into a cohesive whole (Dathone 1982). Written African poetry, like the earlier poetry of Africa, expresses the totality of the experience, worldview, and sensibility of Africans in written forms (Ishaku, Undated). The middle of the 19th century witnessed the consolation of Western imperial interests in Africa.This brought about European culture and education and the rise of a westernized middle class which began to write. It is this class of writing, especially in poetic form that we now call written African poetry.

African literature generally, and poetry in particular, is a reproduction of African culture religion, language and art. It expresses the totality of the experience, worldview and sensibility of Africans. Written African poetry combines two traditions: the African (oral tradition) and the Western (written tradition). As a result, understanding it requires the knowledge of:

- Traditional oral literature
- Africa's history
- The African environment (Flora and Fauna), and
- The influence of Western languages and literary conventions

Orality is one of the cultural determinants that have given written African poetry its tonality. It involves a totality that conjoins communication and participation as a communal event. Written African poetry is therefore highly indebted to the oral poetry of Africa- proverbs, axioms, folklores and epics.

Africa's history involves the experience of slavery, Apartheid, colonialism, neo-colonialism, military and civilian dictatorships, civil wars, religious, tribal and political crises. These serve as constant reference for African imagination. Eustace Palma (1979) and Irele Abiola (1981) argue that African literature generally is a reaction to the consequences of imperialism. Written African Poetry, in the opinion of these critics, is reactive to historical developments: first to external (the European) encounter with Africa and later to internal (African) experience since political independence. The flora and fauna of Africa assume symbolic significance wile the African world-view and sensibility serve as background of Written African Poetry.

Before the emergence of what is now known as written African poetry, writings had actually begun in the metropolitan languages as a result of regular contact with European settlers and traders. One of the best-known authors of this era is Phyllis Whitley, seven year old girl captured into slavery from Senegal in 1760. She wrote accounts of her experience as a slave girl in a publication "On Being Brought from Africa to America". Her style and language were imitative of the vogue in English poetry, with much recourse to Christian scriptures and hymn books for tone and ethic.

She was the first black woman to publish a book of verse in the United States. Her poems on *Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1973) went through 11 editions before 1816.

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

What do you understand by Written African Poetry?

3.2 Historical Development of Written African Poetry

While African poetry in English only began to impact upon literary circles during the nineteen fifties, there is enough evidence suggesting the existence of written poetry in earlier times. Written poetry in English has been shaped largely by, and has reacted to, colonial experience which, because of its imperialistic nature, brought with it a great sense of cultural dispossession on the part of the indigenous population.

In the tension between old and new, African poets and other writers in general began to revalue the oral literary traditions of Africa. Ama Ata Aido contends that:

> From various cultures sacred songs, praise poems, religious chants, funeral dirges have influenced the poets writing in English who have mediated between inherited African modes and poetic techniques and the English language they have acquired. In some cases the poem was first written in the indigenous language - *Song of Lawino* (p'Bitek's 1967:10).

Literary production began overtly to acquire political and ideological ambitions. A figure worth mentioning in this development is Edward Blyden, the nineteenth-century Afro-American essayist who foresaw both the romanticism of enigmatising Black Africa and the tendency by both African Nationalism and Pan Africanism to rely upon the West. As a consequence of the six conferences that were organized by William Du Bois and the inimitable Marcus Garvey between 1900 and 1945, the spirit of nationalism amongst African students who were studying abroad grew. It was at about this time that negritude was appropriated as a literary movement. This was to have far-reaching implications in as far as literature was concerned. Because political leaders and writers in general were inclined to emanate from the literary elite, it became easy for literature to be tied to the struggle for political liberation because as Harlow (1987) aptly maintains that:

> Poetry is capable not only of serving as a means for expression of personal identity or even nationalist sentiment. Poetry, as part of the cultural institutions and historical existence of a people, is itself an arena of struggle.

That written African poetry owes much to, and reflects major influences of, traditional African culture and colonial experience beyond doubt. Although traditional cultural influences often vary from one region to another, and thus shape the nature, character and identity of a specific regional poetry, colonial experience is a common denominator which is not only shared, but also spans a variety of African cultural experiences. This commonality of colonial experience amongst African people has had significant influence in the development of literature in general and poetry in particular. Nkosi (1985) observes that:

> What linked the various African people on the continent was the nature and depth of colonial experience; and this was the final irony. Colonialism had

> not only delivered them unto themselves, but had delivered them unto each other, so to speak, with a common language and an African consciousness; for out of rejection had come affirmation.

He emphasises on the interplay between traditional and colonial experiences which made it feasible to divide literature into clearly discernible traditions: East African, West African and Southern African, and each with its own distinctive style, themes and experiences dictated by local material conditions prevailing in each circumstance.

The founding of Black Orpheus in Ibadan in 1957 by Ulli Beier and Janheinz Jahn, a journal which became very influential in and greatly impacted on literary circles, introduced the literate English-speaking elite to black literary accomplishment in French by first translating from French to English and later on by publishing inventive work in English.

Beier was also instrumental a few years later in the establishment of what became known as the Mbari Club in Ibadan, which fostered an atmosphere in which literature in general could thrive by publishing, staging plays and encouraging exhibitions. In the club's publication writers of note including Dennis Brutus, John Pepper Clark, Wole Soyinka and Christopher Okigbo made significant regular contribution. In South Africa and East Africa the nature of events took a different turn. Where West African writers had Mark Orpheps as their literary outlet and mouthpiece, their counterparts in the East were largely dominated by Makerere University College - once hailed as the home of Africa's intelligentsia - until the coup de tat that brought General Amin Dada to power signalled the demise of that institution. The College's demise coupled with Tanzania's policy of promoting literature in Swahili exclusively, left Kenya as a dominant force in East Africa. On the other hand written African poetry can be said to have come in three phases. Historical consciousness of each period matters in its thematic preoccupation. As you continue with this unit, you come to discover that these phases dovetail into each other and the dividing line becomes so thin because poems, poets and issues reoccur in each phase. Much as the poets address historical issues and happenings in their environment actually dictate their themes. The poets sought to commend their faith in Africa and so they show no interest in historical accuracy. As a result, there is little of direct historical documentation and dating as would refer to in historical material in the poems.

Senanu and Vincent in their anthology entitled: *Selection of African Poetry* (1976) suggest the divisions into generations from the pioneering phase to the contemporary. Those who started to write poetry in the written way are called the pioneers. Their works are more of apprentice literature. This group include Dennis Odadebay of Nigeria, H.I.E. Dlomo and Bendict Wallet of South Africa, Michael Dei Anang, Gladys Casely-Hayford and R.E.G. Armottoe of Ghana. These poets approved colonialism without reservation. Osadebay's "Young Africa Thanks" ignored loss of indigenous culture, forced labour of natives, unfair taxes, siphoning of natural resources and suppression of local freedom. This group was generally preoccupied with themes of race, Christianity and heroism and was influenced by missionary hymn books, the Bible, Greco-Roman allusions and mimicry of Victorian diction. While the ones already listed are poems of English extraction when we include the Negritude poems of the French extraction, and that of Portuguese extractions which were written much later,

we shall have a solid period of 20 years of poetry writing i.e. 1931-1943. It is this period that is referred to as the pioneering phase of written Africa poetry.

3.2.1 Long, Long Have You Held

This is a poem by Léopold Sédar Senghor of French extraction.

> Long, long have you held between your hands the black face of the warrior
> Held as if already there fell on it a twilight of death.
> From the hill I have seen the sun set in the bays of your eyes.
> When shall I see again, mu country, the pure horizon of your breast?
> Hidden in the half-darkness, the next of gentle words.
> I shall see other skies and other eyes
> I shall drink at the spring of other mouths cooler than lemons
> I shall sleep under the roof of other heads of hair in shelter from storms
> But every year, when the rum of springtime sets my memory ablaze,
> I shall be full of regret for my homeland and the rain from your eyes on the thirsty Savannahs. (Senanu 2001:65)

3.2.2 Night

Agostinho Neto's "Night" best illustrates the Lusophone pattern from the Portuguese type.

> I live
> In the dark quarters of the world
> Without light, without life
>
> They are slave quarters
> Worlds of misery.
> Dark quarters where the will is watered down.
> And men have been confused
> With things.
>
> Anxious to live,
> I walk in the streets
> Feeling my way
> Leaning into my shapeless dreams
> Stumbling into servitude.
>
> I walk lurching
> Through the unlit unknown streets crowded
> With mystery and terror,
> I arm in arm with ghosts,
> And the night too is dark. (Senanu 2001:80)

You should note the ambivalent target of its protest: both oppressors and their victims. This surrounds the use of "walk" to describe the only living activity of the speaker. Although the poem begins by refereeing to "dark quarters of the world", the rest of the poem gives a specific character to the speaker's situation. The vague references as well as the specific location are very important for the total effect of the poem.

However, the second phase of written African poetry came of age at the end of colonialism in the late 1950s and 1960s. The poetry of this period condemned colonialism and was characterized by freshness of imagery, innovative use of language, utilization of the African experience in a personal way, and established the cannon of the written African poetry. The poets were educated, mostly taught by Europeans in African universities and very much aware of literature as an art form. Poets like Senghor and Okara expressed historical grievance against slavery and colonialism as demonstrated in racial /culture conflict of African versus European, identity issues as in negritude and African personality.

These poets lived in a period of transition, so they expressed their unease with the new ways, as in Pbitek's *Song of Lawino* and *Song of Ocol.* These poets wrote in one voice for all Africans, acted as defenders of all Africa against denigration and as a result of education, important elements of the Western structure of mind were integrated in their works. The use of individual and universal experiences as Mtshali, Nwosu, Senghor, Soyinka and Clark is characteristics of their poems. These poets were influenced by the writtenists' use of language: paradox, irony, allusiveness and difficulty/obscurity. Hence, intertextuality and acute sense of craft in Dennis Brutus, Okigbo, Clark and Soyinka. This is ironical as they used Western writtenist techniques while advocating African culture.

The third generation is made up of the new poets who came of age from the mid-1970s, a period characterized by declining economies due to energy crisis, civil wars, military coups, apartheid, civilian /military dictatorships, and other forms of social, economic and political instability. Some examples of these poets include Mapanje, Ojaide, and Osundare who were highly educated and exposed. They see themselves as agents of change –attacking corruption, injustice, and economic mismanagement. In their writing is a growing rebelliousness –anti-establishment and anti-status quo. The women in particular write about their private lives and individual experiences, their bodies and sex. This group of poets attached so much importance to communicating a message; so, the poets use simple language i.e., the syntax of prose as in African oral tradition and loosening of form in the use of Pidgin English and colloquialisms. This phase is often criticized for ignoring craft at the expense of urgent meaning and differs from the first phase in the use of repetition for emphasis, not just for music, as in Okigbo.

The more recent period is characterized by military /civilian dictatorships, religious/ethnic violence, political thuggery, energy crisis, corruption, misrule, unemployment, god-fatherism, human trafficking and terrorism. These are issues that made available themes for poets to address. Poets like Niyi Osundare, Tanure Ojaide, Kofi Anyidoho, Jared Angira, Funso Ayejina, and Cyl-Cheney Cooker, feature prominently. Niyi Osundare and Funso Ayejina particularly have shown a firmer grasp

of the contemporary situation through the intensity of their understanding of traditional aesthetics.

Written African poets of these phases created a clear difference from their European counterpart by shedding of conventions like rhyme, alliteration and assonance for traditional forms like dirges, abuse, praise songs, proverbs, axioms and folklore. This gives birth to national literatures; thus, we have Nigerian, Kenyan, South African, Ugandan and Zimbabwe.

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Discuss the historical background to written African poetry.

3.3 Themes in Written African Poetry

3.3.1 The Theme of Religious and Cultural Suppression

With the coming of European education in the mid-19th century, (Ishaku, Undated) argues: African culture came to be downgraded by Africans who have been exposed to the "new things". Africans started to rush after the new way of life, new form of dress, attitudes and general mannerism that were contrary to the African way of life. This affects religious activities where African religions were considered heathenism. The poets who took up these issues did not ask questions about Western practices but were opposed to being asked to abandon their indigenous religious beliefs and practices in preference to the supposedly 'superior one'. This is the point George Awoonor-Williams is making in the "Weaver Bird":

> The weaver bird built in our house
> And laid its eggs on our only tree
> We did not want to send it away
> We watched the building of the nest
> And supervised the egg-laying.
> And the weaver returned in the guise of the owner
> Preaching salvation to us that owned the house
> They say it came from the west
> Where the storms at sea had felled the gulls
> And the fishers dried their nets by lantern light
> Its sermon is the divination of ourselves
> And our new horizons limit at its nest
> But we cannot join the prayers and the answers of the communicants.
> We look for new homes every day,
> For new alters we strive to re-built
> The old shrines defiled from the wear's excrement.

In Kwesi Brew's "Least we should be the last", the poet presents in cynical way the disappointment and disillusionment of the early Christian converts who on getting into Christianity become disillusioned because they did not get something new

3.3.2 The Theme of Political and Economic Exploitation

Politics is usually integrated into a people's culture and everybody is in one way or the other affected by politics. Political practices are part of a people's culture. Thus, politics forms an important thematic preoccupation for written African writers. In poetry, like other genres of literature, the writer and the context are important. Time and space, history and place set the context of a literary creation. The history of a society is also essential as many themes stem from a society's historical background. Written African poets are greatly influenced by their rich oral literature which is essentially didactic. Most poets make use of the functional didacticism of oral literature to reflect the culture, history, politics and society as a whole in their writings. The experience of Africans after independence was so terrible and called for protest. African poets being an integral part of the struggle for independence felt cheated and so being disillusioned they started to write. An example of this poetry is Abioseh Nicole's "The Meaning of Africa" which is based on the situation of Africa after independence. Africa is presented as a continent of multiple complexities. For instance, David Diop's "Africa" the political theme is fully illustrated in a moving and rhetorical language.

3.3.3 Personal Themes

This involves poems that discuss personal themes but with universal applications. Poets like Gabriel Okara, Wole Soyinka and Lenrie Peters are concerned with what on the surface look like personal problems but have universal applicability to the rest of humanity. For instance, Okara in "The Call of the Nun" is worried about man's prospects on the journey of life from dawn to that inevitable end. In "Death in the Dawn", Soyinka warns the early traveller to be curios because the rest of the day might hold something ominous in store for him. Senghor's "African Woman" and Peter's "The Fire has Gone Out" are classified as the frustration of hopes at the initial stage of one's life. However, these poets think locally but write globally.

3.3.4 Contemporary and Post-Independence Themes

The failure of independence to bring about a new dispensation is a hot cake for writers. The abundance expected from independence was unfortunately just a bag-load of unprecedented social upheavals. There are incessant military coups that have plagued most of the African states since independence. Political instability, coupled with economic instability, disorganized the society and made life unbearable for the ordinary people. Corruption became endemic with the rich becoming richer and the poor poorer. J.P. Clark's "The Casualties" and "A Song for Ajegunke" by Niyi Osundare are about post-independence problems. The poems discuss the marginalised citizens who have been reduced to sub-human level in society, while Ojaide's "The Fate of the Vulture" depicts military in politics'.

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Discuss the themes in Written African Poetry with examples

4.0 CONCLUSION

Written African poetry is actively influenced by African oral tradition, culture issues, African encounters with Europe, effects of colonialism and socio-political events of the past and present. Like other genres of literature, written African poetry, is a major participant in all the vigorous revolutionary struggles of the 19th and 20th centuries. Therefore, politics imposes greater strain on the written African poetry than any other factor. Written African poetry in its characteristic of addressing historical issues, usually determines where and how the poet lives and prefigures a degree of personal struggles greater than that which poets of the free world tend to experience.

5.0 SUMMARY

In this unit you have learned the followings:

- The concept of written African Poetry
- The historical development of written African poetry
- The analysis of some written African poems
- The themes in written African poetry, including the themes of religious and cultural suppression, the theme of political and economic exploitation, the personal themes and the contemporary and post-independence themes in written African poetry.

6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

Read and answer the questions below:

1) Explain what you understand by written African poetry
2) Give a detailed explanation of the historical development of written African poetry
3) Explain the following themes in written African poetry
    i. The theme of religious and cultural suppression
    ii. The theme of political and economic exploitation
    iii. Personal themes
    iv. Contemporary and post-independence themes

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UNIT 4 AESTHETICS IN AFRICAN POETRY

CONTENTS

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Aesthetics may be defined as the philosophical study of beauty and taste. It comprises of what is good and bad in any work of art. It deals with nature and value of arts as well as those responses to natural objects that find expression in the language of the beautiful and ugly. The term African aesthetic refers to the African perception and appreciation of the nature, beauty, and value of artistic expressions or representations of African origin. It is embedded in the plurality of African cultures and embodied in people's practices within their lived African societal contexts. It draws from and is directly related to the diverse geographical, environmental, historical, cultural, religious, or spiritual experiences of African people. It is therefore a significant component of African people's tangible and intangible cultural heritage that simultaneously affirms their diversity and reinforces their cultural unity (Shava, 2015). Below are some of the objectives of this unit.

2.0 OBJECTIVES

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- Explain the concept of African Aesthetic
- Discuss the expressive nature of the Aesthetic
- State the Significant elements of Aesthetics
- What are the commemorative functions of Aesthetics?
- Which are the motifs in Aesthetics
- Discuss the idea of Aesthetics in African poetry

3.0 MAIN CONTENT

3.1 The Concept of Aesthetics

Aesthetics (the study of beauty) is a subject that has developed, especially in Germany, into a formidable one. Lack of space forbids any attempt to deal with its philosophical and psychological problems here; but some discrimination may be made to clarify and amplify its use as a critical term (Childs and Fowler, 2006). First, *aesthetic pleasure* may be distinguished from other pleasures – according to the Kantian definition now widely accepted – as that which is disinterested, the result of perceiving something not as a means but as an end in itself, not as useful but as ornamental, not as instrument but as achievement. To perceive it so is to perceive its 'beauty' (if it turns out to have any). Such beauty, being the counterpart to use or purpose, which largely depend on content, must spring from formal qualities, as must the special pleasures its perception gives rise to. Non-moral, non-utilitarian and non-acquisitive, this is the purest of the pleasures, the one least exposed to bias from areas outside the work of art (and therefore the one most appropriate for defining what 'art' is). Second, aesthetic pleasure may be distinguished from *aesthetic appreciation*. The former emphasizes one's experience of the work, which may be mistaken, untutored or injudicious; the latter emphasizes the characteristics of the work, and implies a critical assessment of their 'beauty'. Third, both presuppose *aesthetic attention*. Unless a work is regarded in the way indicated above – for what it is, not for what it is up to – its aesthetic qualities, if any, are likely to go unperceived. For this reason works where the subject, or manner, deeply involves the reader are less likely to give aesthetic pleasure or to prompt aesthetic appreciation than those that encourage aesthetic attention by formal devices that lend *aesthetic distance*. Finally, *aesthetic merit* should be distinguished from aesthetic qualities and reactions, for a work might possess genuine aesthetic qualities, properly provide for their appreciation, yet be a poor specimen of its kind. Merit and pleasure, too, are not necessarily related. An untrained or naturally crude sensibility could clearly be aesthetically pleased by a crude work and so, in certain circumstances, could a trained and refined sensibility.

Moreover, *Aesthesis* (aesthetic perception) is normally a blend of aesthetic pleasure and appreciation, and may be of three kinds: *aesthesis of composition*, resulting from purely formal harmonies of part and part, or parts and whole, and more characteristic of the fine arts than of literature; *aesthesis of complementarity*, resulting from the matching of form and content; and *aesthesis of condensation*, resulting from the perception of aesthetic qualities in part of a work only.

In addition, the *Aesthetic Movement*, or *Art for art's sake*, which started in France during the latter part of the nineteenth century and flourished in England in the 1880s and 1890s, was less concerned with such niceties than with a general reaction against the Art for morality's sake so characteristic of the earlier part of the century. When Wilde averred that 'all art is quite useless' he spoke truly – if art is defined in aesthetic terms. But the pleasures of literature are usually multiple and its proper appreciation therefore rarely limited to the aesthetic. Critics, such as Paul de Man and Terry Eagleton, have argued that the aesthetic is primarily an ideological category reflecting and promoting Western bourgeois taste (Childs and Fowler, 2006).

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Examine the concept of Aesthetics in literature

3.2 The African Aesthetic

Explication of African aesthetic requires an operative definition of aesthetic. Admittedly, the term evolved out of the Greek word *aesthetikos*, which means "perceptive," but the term aesthetic is widely held to connote a philosophy of beauty. We normally speak of an aesthetic as representing the standards by which a society assigns value to their cultural productions, especially their expressive art forms; as music, dance, theater, and the visual arts (e.g., painting and sculpture) (Asante and Mazama, 2005). Aesthetics, according to the *Hamlyn Encyclopedic Dictionary* is recognized as a science in philosophy and its stands for that which "deduces from natures taste and rules and principles; the science of the beautiful…" Also in psychology aesthetic is seen as "the study of the mind and emotions in relations to the sense of beauty even if nothing else rings a bell about aesthetics from both philosophy and psychology, one does namely, that aesthetics has to do with the beautiful. According to Akpan and Etuk as cited by Johnson (2004) aesthetics experiences are usually obtained from enjoying work of art… we very easily and naturally tie our aesthetics experiences to work of art which are man-made object". Aesthetics is also concern with moral or ethical judgment of human behaviour. Aesthetics involves every aspects of human social life in relation to the work of art pp.19-28.

The encyclopaedia Britannica also defines aesthetics as the study of beauty and to a lesser extents of it opposite, the ugly. It has often been defined as the science of the beautiful suggesting an organised body of knowledge of a special subjects matter. It is usually concerned with the theoretical study of the beauty in work of arts, with effort to understand and explain them.

Although many African ethnic groups do not have a specific word or term similar to the word aesthetic, the value that they place on their artistic productions – music, dance, sculpture, and masked spiritual entities – is equal to the value that other societies place on similar art forms, and thus an African aesthetic exists in practice even if not in name.

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

What is Aesthetic in Literature?

3.3 The Expressive Nature of Aesthetic

Melodic speech that comes down to us as song is probably as old as speech itself, and movement to music-dance- is synchronous in inception with speech and song. Visual expression reaches at least as far back as the Paleolithic age, and it is through this early recorded art form one can plausibly points to ritual dance scenes that would also, no doubt, involve incantations or song. Furthermore, Africa's expressive arts can be identified because their character is distinctive from that of other cultures' artistic modalities. Although no exact formal philosophy of African art exists, when the practice of African art is scrutinized over time and space, it speaks volumes. Black Studies scholars have investigated ways of developing an aesthetic construct that encompasses

one African art form and can also be applied to other African art forms. (Asante and Mazama, 2005).

3.3.1 The Significant Elements

An examination of African art from the early period down through the ages reveals the embodiment of three significant elements: craftedness, originality and spirituality. The fact that at different sites different types of images are identifiable reveals that certain stylistic norms were being practiced even during the Paleolithic period. Such adherence to an acceptable mode of creating images or scenes is a communicable craftedness. Within the various identifiable types, subtle variations appear to have been permissible, allowing for a certain amount of originality. While specific religious intentions cannot be proven or corroborated, most paleontologists and art historians agree that some, if not most, of the human images with symbols connoting natural or celestial concepts represent some form of spirituality or spiritual ritual. Thus the ability to craft the images to meet specific group criteria, but with individual variation, and yet have the image exude or suggest a certain spiritual aura follows African art's evolution and metamorphosis down through the ages. A close study of Paleolithic African art therefore establishes that even in this early age a predilection for particular expression, a predisposition for specific icons, a propensity for symbolic images with religious implications, an "aesthetic" is indisputable (Asante and Mazama, 2005).

Anthropological field research has shown that traditional African art's function is related to one or more of life's passages—birth, initiation, marriage, eldership, death, rebirth. This need to create art for a ritual or ceremony to celebrate the rites of passage is a sociological behaviour shared by most of Africa's indigenous groups. It is through an examination of certain images, icons, and symbols, as well as an unprecedented use of mixed media to create the unique concepts of African art, that one can discern a plausible connectedness of African art across time and space. This diachronic and synchronic inquiry also reveals that African art is often spiritually based, even when such art serves a cultural function rather than having been created for or used in a specific religious ceremony. That African art has continued to have a cultural function when many other cultures ceased to use art in such a fashion is indicative that there is a shared African aesthetic.

3.3.2 The Commemorative Functions

Examples of the continued use of art with a cultural function are the commemorative sculptures of African rulers—earlier on the monumental Pharaohs of ancient Kemet and Nubia, and more recently the Ndop of the Bakuba. Just as the Kemetians and the Nubians felt that their rulers were god-kings (i.e., rulers endowed with godlike qualities), the Bakuba symbolize Ndop's significance as Chemba Kunji. Each sculptural image is a commemorative work of art paying homage to a beloved and respected ruler by the portrayal of his physical likeness or by indicating symbolic embellishment his attributes and contributions that enhanced his people during his reign. As the ruler, he is revered unquestionably because his ordination began with a divine ritual giving him the sacred abilities of the supreme creator. The same can be

said of the images of the Oni of Ile Ife, of the Oba of Benin, and of the Bangwa of the Bamaleke (Asante and Mazama, 2005). Other examples of how different African ethnic groups share an aesthetic of a spiritually based art are the mother-and-child figures of the Asante, the Yoruba, the Senufu, the Bamana, the Bakongo, the Chokwe, and the Makonde, to name just a few. All of these mother-and-child images serve the same purpose as the earlier image of Auset holding Heru. A comparison of the religious practices of Kemetians (ancient Egyptians) and those of the Nubians and other indigenous Nilotic peoples reveals similarities. The religious practices one finds in Egypt and Sudan, one also finds in Congo and Benin. The mother figure as gestator, nourisher, and giver of life symbolizes the earth as mother and the African woman as the visual prototype. A Paleolithic rock painting of this Madonna motif and a sculpture of the earliest portrayal of Auset and Heru leave no question about the Africanness of either of these mother-and-child figures symbolizing birth, regeneration, and nourishment.

The unique variations of masked figures among most African groups—such as Nimba of the Baga, Kponiugo of the Senufu, Banda of the Nulu, and so on—have their counterparts in early rock and cave art, as well as in the Kemetian panoply of sacred images that are part human and part animal (e.g., Sphinx, Anubis, Sekhmet, etc.). Many African scholars agree that a primal reason for African people art from prehistoric times forward is that it serves a survival function that involves giving physical form to spiritual meaning. African artists create a synthesis of visual elements that exemplify the special attributes of the spiritual entity being represented.

3.3.3 The Type Motifs

Motifs are recurring structures, contrasts, or literary devices that can help to develop and inform the text's major themes. There are many type-motifs that symbolize various aspects of culture. These type-motifs may be the exaggeration of content-loaded concepts, such as enlarged breasts, oversized genitals, the pregnant stomach, or the expanded protruding navel, suggesting nourishment, procreation, or continuity of life. Such aesthetic standards become visual canons, general formulas, artistic conventions that must be followed by the artists or artisans of each ethnic group; otherwise viewers from outside of the particular cultural groups would not be able to recognize Yoruba art as being distinct from Asante art, Bakuba art as distinct from Dan art, Senufu art as distinct from Bayaka art, and so on. While the art of each group is distinct from the art of every other group, each discernible practice is nonetheless one of multiple expressions of similar cultures sharing a common origin of interconnectedness flowing from earlier rock and cave art. It is clear that this vast interconnected African art shared a beginning from which flowed similar content concerns with spiritual and religious ramifications. Through an examination of the form—medium selection, decorative motifs, design patterns—an African aesthetic becomes even more incontrovertible (Asante and Mazama, 2005).

African artistic expression is older and more numerous than any other group's artistic achievement the world over. From thousands of Paleolithic rock and cave paintings to the monumental art of the Nile Valley civilizations to traditional and

contemporary expressions throughout Africa and the pan-African world, a multitude of African groups have shared unique and distinct artistic idioms.

There is no separation between form and content in African art. A broad analysis of the form of Africa's art, from its masked spiritual representations to its expressive sculptural statues to its textiles and tapestries, reveals cultural productions that are complex— brightly colored with multifarious patterns and/or embellished with intricate designs. This type of expressive elegance is also exhibited in Africa's other expressive art forms, such as music, dance, and theater, as well as in different religious rituals. The richness of African music and dance has long been accepted and documented as a viable contribution to world culture.

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Write short notes on functions and significant elements of African Aesthetic.

3.4 Contextualization of the African Aesthetic

The essence of the African aesthetic is its representation as a construct of African people on the continent and people of African descent in the diaspora that articulates African culture, identity, and spirituality. It is how Africans consciously define their own concept of beauty—that is, the African-derived standards of perceiving, appreciating, appraising, or applying aesthetic values or knowledge of things African. The African aesthetic is African centred, and it reveals the cultural bond between Africans in the continent and abroad. The African aesthetic embraces a rich variety of creative forms and styles peculiar to people of African origin that incorporate a combination of practical, physical, material, temporal, and spiritual aspects. It includes African artistic expressions— visual and performative images, verbal arts (poetry, oratory performance), music (song and dance), dress, rhythm, hairstyles, cosmetics, designs and crafts in and from Africa. It can be decorative and ceremonial as well as serve a functional purpose (Shava, 2015).

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Describe the content of African aesthetics.

3.5 Aesthetics in African Poetry

Praise poetry is a common practice among African communities. Praise accompanies community leaders in ceremonial functions describing the prowess of such leaders. For instance, the Nguni izimbongi praise poetry for kings and chieftainships attest to that stance. Praise is also used to thank and to appease other community members. The use of totemic praise is common among the Shona tribe and is applied to both men and women as a greeting, gesture of respect, or means of appreciation. It is applied in diverse contexts, from private bedrooms to public occasions. Poetry is also a form of entertainment at Shona ceremonial gatherings, whereby the poet, mudetembi (the Shona term for poet), will demonstrate his or her creative oratory prowess in relation to the occasion through poetry interpolated with the appropriate use of idioms and proverbs. Similarly, among West African peoples such as the Ashanti and the

Yoruba, poetry and proverbs formed the basis for logical argument in personal relations, legal proceedings, and political negotiations.

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Discuss the concept of aesthetics as it relates to written African poetry.

4.0 CONCLUSION

The African perception and appreciation of the nature, beauty, and value of artistic expressions or representations of African origin is embedded in the plurality of African cultures and embodied in people's practices within their lived African societal contexts. It draws from and is directly related to the diverse geographical, environmental, historical, cultural, religious, or spiritual experiences of African peoples. It is therefore a significant component of African people's tangible and intangible cultural heritage that simultaneously affirms their diversity and reinforces their cultural unity. It provides symbolic representations that communicate what it is to be an African to future generations on the continent and in the diaspora. Most Africans in the diaspora have retained some of their traditional aesthetic elements, which are exhibited in their dress, hairstyles, ornamentation, music (song and dance), and artworks. These various artefacts are symbolic elements defining and sustaining their identity and origin. Below are some of the objectives of this unit.

5.0 SUMMARY

In this unit you have learned the followings:

- The concept of African aesthetic
- The expressive nature of the aesthetic
- The Significant elements of aesthetics
- The commemorative functions of aesthetics?
- The type motifs in aesthetics
- Aesthetics in African poetry

6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

Read and answer the questions below:

- Explain the concept of African aesthetic
- Discuss the expressive nature of the aesthetic
- State the Significant elements of aesthetics
- What are the commemorative functions of aesthetics?
- Which are the type motifs in aesthetics
- Discuss the idea of aesthetics in African poetry

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UNIT 5 WRITTEN AFRICAN POETRY: THE PIONEERS

CONTENTS

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The beginning of Written African poetry can be traced to "African exiles in Europe and slaves and ex-slaves in the New World" (Nkosi 1981: 108). Slavery initiated a new consciousness among Africans. Slaves became educated and tried their hands in the arts of their masters. With the coming of Christianity in Africa, some Africans acquired education and started writing poems. Poems of people like Juan Latino, Philis Wheateley and B.W. Vilakazi are good examples of the first generation of Written African Poetry. The poems of the ex-slaves were largely imitations of the West. Some reveal their African identity and contain some form of protest. Others reveal acceptance of Christianity and glorify their white masters. The relationship between African literature and African historical experiences is characterized by slavery and colonialism. The earlier responses to colonialism by writers of African origin can be seen as origin of written African literature. This unit is going to introduce you to the African pioneer poetry which are mostly characterised by early responses to slavery and colonialism by writers of African origin such as Phillis Wheatley, Francis Williams, Juan Latino and B.W. Vilakazi. While these writers spent almost their entire life outside Africa, they are of African origin and express so through their writings. Below are some of the objectives of this unit:

2.0 OBJECTIVES

At the end of this unit you should be able to:

- Discuss the pioneers of written African poetry
- Examine early responses to slavery and colonialism by writers of African origin, with specific references to:
    - Phillis Wheatley
    - Francis Williams
    - Juan Latino

- B.W. Vilakazi

3.0 MAIN CONTENT

3.1 The Pioneers of Written African Poetry (Pre-Independence Echoes)

According to Okon (2013), from the beginning, modern African poetry has illuminated the political concerns of its history. Putting aside Benibengor Blay's imitative poetry,[1] we find the politics of anti-colonial struggle highlighted in the poems of Gladys Casely-Hayford, R.E.G. Armattoe, D.C. Osadebay, Micheal Dei-Anang, and Vilakazi. The first echoes of nationalist protest against colonial rule can be found in the works of these early poets. These poets used African imagery and concepts to realize their aims.

In Gladys Casely Hayford's "Rejoice" African nationalism is expressed. The persona exhorts Africans (blacks) to rejoice:

Rejoice and shout with laughter.
Throw all your burdens down,
If God has been so gracious
As to make you black or brown.

The persona attributes a great birth and a glorious heritage to Africa, and therefore urges all Africans to rejoice in spite of their present political denigrations. Therefore, Africa is painted in a positive light:

For you are a great nation,
A people of great birth
For where would spring the flowers
If God took away the earth?
Rejoice and shout with laughter
Throw all your burdens down
Yours is a glorious heritage
If you are black, or brown (Nwogu, 1975:5).

A similar vein runs through the poem of R. E. G. Armattoe: "Africa", where Africa is portrayed as a sad maiden:

I once saw a maiden dark and comely,
Sitting by the wayside, sad and lonely.

The poet portrays the helpless plight of Africa in the midst of an acquisitionist industrial Europe:

'I am neither sad nor lonely,' she said,
'But living, Sir, among the deaf and dumb;
Relentlessly watching these shameless dead,
Makes my warm heart very cold and numb'. (Nwogu, 1975:11).

Osadebay's "Who Buys my Thoughts" projects the thinking of Africa from the perspective of the masses and their basic problems:

Who buys my thoughts
Buys not a cup of honey
That sweetens every taste;
He buys the throb,
Of Young Africa's soul,
The soul of teeming millions,
Hungry, naked, sick,
Yearning, pleading, waiting.

It is also the dilemma of young Africans caught in the clash of cultures:

Or restless youths who are born

Into deep and clashing cultures,

Sorting, questioning, watching.

Finally, it is the thoughts of the Nationalist struggle that seeks to rid the African continent of colonial rule:

…Buys the spirit of the age,
The unquenching fire that smoulders
And smoulders
In every living heart
That's true and noble of suffering; it burns all over the earth,
Destroying, chastening, cleansing. (Nwogu, 1975:15-16).

Also, in 'Young Africa's Plea', Osadebay argues against the preservation of African traditions and culture for their sociological allure to pamper European tastes:

Don't preserve my customs
As some fine curios
To suit some white historian's tastes.

Rather, let the African be modern by working with the Whiteman's methods while doing his own thinking and being independent in every sense:

Let me play with the Whiteman's ways
Let me work with the blackman's brains
Let my affairs themselves sort out.

It is only in this way that the African can regain his lost self-respect and face the world manfully. After all, those who denigrate Africa, in reality, fear her strength and talents in private:

Then in sweet rebirth
I'll rise a better man
Not ashamed to face the world.
Those who doubt my talents

In secret fear my strength
They know I am no less a man.

For these reasons, he calls on Africa's detractors to have a change of heart and give Africa her freedom; unconditional freedom of which there shall be nothing to regret:

Let them bury their prejudice,
Let them show their noble sides,
Let me have untrammeled growth,
My friends will never know regret
And I, I never once forget. (Nwogu, 1975:17).

Dei-Anang exhorts Africans to wake up from their long slumber and display their love for the continent, in his poem "Dear Africa". In addition, he points to the danger posed to Africa by its lure that has attracted foreigners (Whites) to colonise her:

Awake, thou sleeping heart!
Awake, and kiss
The Love-lorn brow
Of this ebon lass, Dear Africa,
Whose virgin charms
Ensnare the love-lit hearts
Of venturing youth
From other lands. (Nwogu, 1975:21)

The urgency of the situation is stressed: *Awake, sweet Africa Demands thy love,*

Thou sleeping heart!
... Know then, thou sleeping heart, Dear Africa stands
Knocking at the door. (Nwogu, 1975:21).

In the above examples giving by Okon (2013), pioneer African poets have been shown to have used the prevailing colonial situation at the time as subject-matter of poetry. They are so called 'pioneers' because their works represent the first major, serious attempts by Africans within the continent to write modern poetry with modern concerns. Besides, chronologically, writing in the early 1920s and 1930s, their works pre-dated the main-stream of modern African poetry that took off effectively with the formation of the Negritude movement in the 1930's up to the early 1960's. Interestingly, much as these early writers were unaware of Negritude, however, their objectives were similar to the later Negritude poets in the urge to project a respectable image for the Blackman as well as protest the colonial domination of Africa. In both these respects, their poetry was successful. The success of their political and cultural message can be seen in their subject-matter and diction. For example, words like "us", "black", "dark" and "ebon" as found in the above examples of representative poems represent the black/African

personality. These words too, shall be seen in the poetry of the Negritude movement. It is on the strength of this that we refer to them as pioneers, as their works represent pre-echoes of the Negritude phase in African poetry (Okon, 2013).

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Discuss the themes of African pioneer poets with special reference to Senghor's "Black Woman"

3.2 Early Responses to Slavery and Colonialism

Indeed, "the story of the development of black writing in written European languages is part of the history of black contact with the written European world" (Ogude, 1983). In other words, earlier writers were of slave origin and their writings were a response to the history of Slave Trade and the brutalities that went with it as well as the desire for independence. Although the style in which the blacks wrote was largely imitations of the forms of literary genres of the eighteenth century, they evolved a unique tradition which has been regarded as "protest literature." It was a kind of literature that was related to anti-slavery movement, which is comparable to the written protest literature represented by anticolonialist and anti-apartheid writings.

Those writers wrote to their white audience who viewed them with astonishment and sometimes even contempt. Although they cannot be said to have influenced African writers of the contemporary period, their writings have affinity to the contemporary writing in their "presentation of themes that have definite African slant", in their expression of "a concern for African society, an African way of life", "for African man" (Ogude, 1983). This shows that Written African Literature is related to early writings of the black people in exile in content and thought. Practical example can be seen in the excerpts of works from Phillis Wheatley and Francis Williams, as follows.

3.2.1 Phillis Wheatley

She was the first creative talent that emerged among those of slave origin. She lived most of her life in Boston. She was brought to America in 1761 and bought in a slave market by John Wheately and his wife. Mary, the daughter of the Wheatley family became her teacher. She learnt Latin and English literature of that period. Phillis was known and respected as a poet. Her poems were modeled after poets like Milton, with religious undertones. Some of her poems however reveal spirit of rebelliousness. One of such is entitled: "To the Right Honourable William, Earl of Dartmouth." As the following lines show, the poem suggests attack on the British government of those days:

> No more America, in mournful strain
> Of wrongs, and grievance unredress'd complain,
> No longer shall thou dread the iron chain
> Which wanton Tyranny with lawless hand
> Had made, and with it meant t'enslave the land.

In the following stanza Phillis casts her mind back to Africa and reflects the pain of separation and the cruelty of slavery.

Should you, my lord, while you peruse my song,
Wonder from where my love of Freedom sprung,
Whence flow these wishes for the common good,
By feeling hearts alone best understood
I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate
Was snatched from Afrc's fancy'd happy seat:
What pangs excruciating must molest,
What sorrows labour in my parent's breast?
Steel'd was that soul and by no misery mov'd
That from a father seiz'd his babe belov'd:
Such, such my case. And can I then but pray
Others may never feel tyrannic sway? (Nkosi, 1981)

3.2.2 Francis Williams

He was well known in both England and the West Indies in the 1750s. He wrote a long ode, upon which his reputation rests till today. The ode was dedicated to George Haldane, a leading political figure in the British Imperial Authority. Williams's poems constantly refer to the issue of colour and contain emotionally charged words, which are signs of tension, inferiority complex, the myth of racial superiority and protest. In the lines below, quoted from the ode, although he confesses his blackness, he also makes clear the black man's claim to humanity.

Yet may you deign to accept this humble song
Tho' wraps in gloom, and from a falt'ring tongue;
Tho' dark the stream on which the tribute flows
Not from the skin, but from the heart it rose.
To all human kind, benignant heaven
(Science nought forbids) the one common soul has giv'n.
This rule was 'stablished by th' Eternal Mind;
Nor virtue self, nor prudence are confin'd
To colour; none imbrues the honest heart;
To science none belongs and none to art. (Nkosi, 1981)

3.2.3 Juan Latino

Juan Latino was brought with his mother to Spain in the 16th century at the early age of twelve. He studied poetry, music and medicine. Married to a daughter of Spanish noble man, he wrote poems in standard Latin praising important personalities, including clergy men and aristocrats. His praise poetry reveals a connection with African style of panegyrics. But it can also be connected to the widespread practice in those days of writing laudatory poems on powerful personalities. Although he seemed to have integrated into the Spanish society, his poems portray his sense of identity as African. In his poem addressed to the Pope, Latino portrays awareness of racial identity as follows:

For if the Blackness of our king offends your official ministers
Your whiteness does not delight the men of Ethiopia

There, whoever in his whiteness visits the East is scorned,
And there are black leaders; the king too is black
Queen Candace and her race of black ministers
Had sent her son in a chariot to Christ (Nkosi 1981: 109).

Latino's works reveal unconditional acceptance of Christianity and Spanish patriotism. For example, in one of his poems he said: "Famous Philip, you are my protector against the Turks/ Reigning as a catholic, you have been accustomed to defend our countries, and in a more holy way to cherish the Faith" (Nkosi, 1981).

3.2.4 B.W. Vilakazi

Vilakazi's poems deal with the South African situation of oppression and racism. Vilakazi was a protest poet who, according to Nkosi was one: "among the founding members of the strongest protest movement which has been the marked feature of South African verse in more than a quarter of a century" (Nkosi, 1981)

In his poem "On the Gold Mines" (translated from Zulu into English) the persona presents an interesting picture of a white foreman. He (the white foreman) is seen as the representative of his race and civilization: a civilization that is sterile, mechanical, in-human and, at once, totally alien to the African and his environment:

Bellow you frenzied bulls of steel!
Far is the place where first you came to life
And – roasted by fiery furnace
Until you were ready and only ash remained-
Were quickly dispatched, and having crossed the sea
Were loaded on trucks, for puffing fuming engines
To bring you to Goli, place of gold and us.
Loudly you bellowed, till we, like frightened dassies
Swarming towards you, answered your strident summons (Tasks and Masks, (Nkosi, 1981:111-13*).*

Note the use of "bellow" and "bull" in the poem. They allude to the unnecessary use of force, and by extension, violence by colonists against the natives. In other words, the Whiteman is seen as behaving like a bull, and by inference, a bully (Okon, 2013).

In another poem, entitled: 'Because', Vilakazi focused on the theme of exploitation of workers in cities. The poem represents the voice of a protesting commoner. His style of composition varies. In most cases he observed the rules of English prosody, although he did not apply exact imagery and terminology of the West. Part of Vilakazi's 'Because' goes as follows:

Because when night approaches,
You see me loosening the chains
Of daily drudgery,
And, meeting people black like me,
Dance with new-born energy

While chanting tribal songs
That roused our stifled zest
And banish weariness:
You think me but an animal
Who, should it die, is soon replaced (Nkosi 1981: 112).

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Describe the features of pioneer written African poetry with references to the pioneer poets

4.0 CONCLUSION

The development of black writing in written European languages is part of the history of black contact with the written European world, and that the first responses to slavery and colonialism came from ex-slaves living outside Africa. Although the works of these early writers were fashioned after the forms of literary genres of the eighteenth century, they evolved a unique tradition which has been regarded as "protest literature." It was a kind of literature that was related to anti-slavery movement, which is comparable to the written protest literature represented by anti-colonialist and anti-apartheid writings. The nature of these responses can be illustrated with excerpts from poems of Phillis Wheatley and Francis Williams.

5.0 SUMMARY

In this unit you have learned the followings:

- The African pioneer written poetry
- The early responses to slavery and colonialism by writers of African origin, with specific references to:
    - Phillis Wheatley
    - Francis Williams
    - Juan Latino
    - B.W. Vilakazi

6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

Read and answer the questions below:

1) Discuss the African pioneer written poetry
2) Examine early responses to slavery and colonialism by writers of African origin, with specific references to the following pioneer writers and citing relevant examples from their writings:

    i. Phillis Wheatley
    ii. Francis Williams
    iii. Juan Latino
    iv. B.W. Vilakazi

7.0 REFERENCE/FURTHER READING

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MODULE 2 ISSUES IN WRITTEN AFRICAN POETRY

UNIT 1 POETRY AND AFRICAN EXPERIENCE

CONTENTS

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Written African literature is an artistic study of the African predicament mostly from the colonial era, through the time of the attainment of political independence and the post-independence era. And it is from this point of view that written African literature not only manifests glaring human relevance, but also reflects the writers' awareness of social reality coupled with an imaginative response to that reality. According to Kakonis and Desmarais (1969) 'reality provides the basis for even the most abstract and imaginative of the artist's conceptions and the shared experience of reality permits him to communicate with other men.' However, in dealing with reality, the artist does not merely reproduce it - 'he arranges, he orders, he selects'; and this helps him to 'perceive its faults and envision its remedies', though the remedies are only implied in the writer's attitude. Therefore, in treating 'human existence' in his work, 'the artist is profoundly reminded of its deficiencies, for what he does is to measure reality against the deal.' This is what contemporary African writers do regarding the life in the African society during the colonial and post-colonial periods. Poetry has man with his life as its raw material, that natural material to which it gives an artistic shape and life by means of its imaginative breath. What the poet does with this basic raw material, how he reshapes, re-creates, re-clothes and transfigures it for our emotional and imaginative enjoyment, entirely depends on his imaginative resources and his linguistic and visionary powers; for 'art is life seen through a temperament'. Written African poetry, therefore, keeping to this tradition of poetry, is intimately concerned with the African people in the African society, with their life in its various ramifications

cultural, social, economic, intellectual, and political. It endeavours to give us a new version and assessment of that life, to present it to us interpreted and re-dressed by the artistic genius and craftsmanship of the poets, and to awaken in us a fresh awareness and pleasantly shock us into a renewed recognition of that life with its activities and problems, which we may have always known. The following are some of the objectives of this unit:

2.0 OBJECTIVES

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- Discuss the Sociological Approach to African Poetry
- Explain the Written African Poetry
- Describe the African Experience in Written African Poetry

3.0 MAIN CONTENT

3.1 Sociological Approach to African Poetry

Every research endeavour should be premised around a theoretical framework. In literary criticism, there are a lot of methods available for a critic in the analysis and criticism of literary works. These methods are known as literary theories. Among the available literary theories, the one that is best suited for our work in this unit is sociological criticism. In other words, the theoretical framework that will be adopted here is the sociological criticism. Sociological criticism is a type of criticism that can include discussion of society, of social relationship and of historical issues. It shows the relationship between the artist and the society in which they live as society affects an artist. This particular theory examines the work of art in its social context and it also describes the experience of people who live in a particular society.

Sociological criticism starts with a conviction that art's relations to society are vitally important and that the investigation of these relationships may organize and deepen one's aesthetic response to a work of art. Constantine Taine called literature the consequence of the moment, the race and the milieu. Sociological critics "place the work of art in the social atmosphere and define that relationship." In this approach, the critic examines literature in the cultural, economic and political context in which it is written or received. It examines both the writer's background as well as the role the audience play in shaping the literature. Sociological critics believe that the relations of art to society are important. Art is not created in a vacuum. Language itself is a social product. A writer is a member of a society and he takes his material from the society. According to the sociological theory, literature portrays the experience of the society in which it is produced. Part of the aspects of the society which is reflected in literature is the culture of the society in which it is produced.

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Using at least three poems, examine the cultural, economic and political context in which they were written.

3.2 Written African Poetry

Written African poetry encompasses a wide variety of traditions arising from Africa's 55 countries and from evolving trends within different literary genres. It is a large and complex subject, partly because of Africa's original linguistic diversity but primarily because of the devastating effect of slavery and colonization, which resulted in English, Portuguese and French, as well as Creole or pidgin versions of these European languages being spoken and written by Africans across the continent (Arifayan, 2005). As Ziljima (2002) points out, "because there are literally thousands of indigenous languages spoken in Africa and many more dialects, every African country has an official language (or II as in the case of South Africa). This official language acts as the "lingua franca" or at least a reasonably sized region". According to Ushie (2005):

> Written African poetry has a double heritage – Pre-colonial and western. As in most post-colonial situations the tilt of our writings should be more towards the pre-colonial Africa literary heritage as manifested in the song, dirge, folktale, elegy, panegyric or riddle. Essentially, such art was meant for the whole community rather than for a few initiates.

Poetry, as an art form, has undergone several phases of evolution from pre-colonial to colonial and then to post-colonial eras in most African countries. There existed a thin line between poets and musicians who composed and rendered poetry in musical form. Poets then published their works in form of renditions at funerals and marriage ceremonies with themes focused on praising virtues and condemning vices in the society. The contemporary African poets equally strive to fulfil the above mentioned role of the traditional poet. Written African poetry is therefore the kind of poetry that emerged as a result of the contact between Africa and Europe. The coming of the colonial masters brought about the act of writing. Many Africans became educated in the language of the colonial masters and were therefore able to write their literary works in English or the indigenous languages. This kind of poetry emerged as a result of colonialism. This poetry was committed to exposing the ills of colonialism in the different regions of Africa. So, written African poetry emerged as a result of the contact between Africa and the West and the need to react to the activities of these European countries in Africa.

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Provide a detail description of Written African Poetry.

3.3 African Experience in Written African Poetry

African poetry from its earliest time has evolved alongside Africa's historical experiences. As earlier mentioned, the first contact between Africa and Europe was brought about by the slave trade. This is to say that the first African experience to be portrayed in written African poetry was the experience of slavery. According to S. E. Ogude in his essay *African Literature and the Burden of History* (1991), "the first Africans to write in English were all unwilling exiles and children of unwilling exiles. And they all wrote in response to historical conditions that denied them their humanity".

The unwilling exiles referred to by Ogude above are the Africans who were sold into slavery in America and other parts of Europe. Some of them include Phillis Wheatley, Ottobah Cugano, Olaudah Equiano and many others.

This group of African writers wrote against the background of the harsh realities of slavery and the painful experience of man's inhumanity to man. This experience is well encapsulated in the poetry of Phillis Wheatley. In the poetic piece below, Wheatley portrays vividly, this experience.

> Should you, my lord, while you peruse my song,
> Wonder from whence my love of freedom sprung,
> Whence flow these wishes for the common good,
> By feeling hearts alone best understood;
> I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate
> Was snatched from Africa's fancy'd happy seat;
> What pangs excruciating must molest
> What sorrows labour in my parent's breast?
> Steel'd was that soul and by no misery moved.
> That from a father seiz'd his babe beloved
> Such, such may case. And cant then but pray
>
> Others my never feel tyrannical sway? (Culled from Ogude's *African Literature and the Burden of History, 1991*)

The above lines clearly portray an expression of a very personal emotion that bothers on the painful and lugubrious experience of slavery. After the experience of slavery came another advanced form of slavery in the garb of colonialism. For the African poet of this time according to Iyengar Srinivas (1968), poetry became a powerful medium through which they conveyed to the world audience, not only their:

> Despairs and hopes, the enthusiasm and empathy, the thrill of joy, and the history as it moved from freedom to slavery, from slavery to revolution, from revolution to independence and from independence to task of reconstruction which further involves situations of failure and disillusionment.

When we read African poetry of the colonial period, one thing that occurs to one's mind is that colonialism was at its harshest in Africa. As history stands proof, it was highly exploited and savaged by the ambitious white man. In South Africa, the poetry of Dennis Brutus and other South African poets portrayed the experience of apartheid in South Africa.

One of the most important phases in written African poetry emerged during this period of colonialism and this is the literary movement of Negritude. Negritude was a powerful literary movement founded by Aime Cesaire of Senegal. Among other things, the Negritude poets favoured the theme of glorification of Africa. They worshipped anything African in scintillating rhymes. Anger at injustice meted out to the colonized Africa is also one of the oft-repeated themes of their poetry. Here is an example from David Diop poem "Africa".

Africa, my Africa
Africa of proud warriors in ancestral
Savannas...
Is this you, this back that is bent
This back that breaks under the weight of
humiliation
This back trembling with red scars
And saying yes under the
Midday sun...
That is Africa your Africa
That grows again patiently obstinately
And its fruit gradually acquires
The bitter taste of liberty (Norasimhaiah, 1990)

Dennis Brutus, a South African poet, was subjected to torture by a cruel regime. His writing is full of images of love for Africa contrasted with images of death thus:

Desolate
Your face gleams up
Beneath me in the dusk
Abandoned
A wounded dove
Helpless
Beneath the knife of love (Thereoux, 1986).

Similarly, great feeling for Africa is felt in Abioseh Nicol's poem "The Meaning of Africa" thus:

Africa, you were once just a name to me
... So I came back
Sailing down the Guinea coast
... You are not a country Africa,
Happiness, contentment and fulfilment (Povey, 1968).

A poet's affirmation of his love for Africa shines radiantly through the following lines.

Dark Africa
My dawn is here,
Behold! I see
A rich warm glow in the East,
And my day will soon be here (Norasimhaiah, 1990)

The praise of Africa is a fit topic for many African poets. Perhaps this is their reaction to the self-glorification and the civilizing zeal of the imperial powers of Europe. Bernard Oadie's poem attains special significance viewed in that light. He says in a poem entitled: *I Thank God*,

I thank God for creating me black.
White is the colour for special occasions

Black the colour for every day
And I have carried the world since the down of time
And my laugh over the world, through the night creates
The day (Norasimhaiah, 1990)

In Africa, the advent of the white's civilizing mission displaced scores of native societies form their cultural roots. The impact of the spread of Christianity combined with material benefits, such as class room education and well-paid jobs forced many Africans to abandon their own faith and adapt the religion of the pale-faced aliens. This situation is responsible for the native's cultural alienation. Nevertheless, the native is expected to owe allegiance to his own tribal culture. This is a point that will be pursued further under this chapter.

According to Sam Awa (1967) "moreover, African poetry is protest in nature. It comes as a reaction to various forms of injustice meted out on Africans by the colonial masters and later, post-colonial masters". This underscores the fact that African poetry has been committed to the portrayal of African experiences.

Most African nations gained their independence in the 1950s and 1960s and with liberation and literacy. Since the 1960s, political, economic, and cultural events have begun to shape African poetry. Gone are the days when the shades of colonialism were an unending preoccupation of African poets. In written African poetry, works that focus on the healing and purging of the country and families have dominated African poetry. Poets in Africa have faced issues in ways that not only explain how indigenous cultures are absorbed by Western standards but also how limiting in vision their leaders have been.

Furthermore, in Nigeria, we have three generations of poets and none of them have been able to walk away from the experience of the Nigerian society. In Soyinka's poems, (first generation) this experience has a continental reach. In his *Ogun Abibiman* and *Mandela's Earth* and other poems, both are dedicated to the struggle for liberation in Southern Africa- the first on Mozambique's 1975 declaration of war against the apartheid regime of South Africa and the second on the South Africa struggle itself as epitomized by the indomitable Nelson Mandela, then chained, like Prometheus, to the rocks of Robben Island. Among the other poems of this highly lyrical collection are those who focused on the brutal and cannibalistic leadership that Africa has had to suffer in the past three decades.

The character of commitment to portrayal of African experience of the second generation poets is typified in the poetry of Odia Ofeimun and Niyi Osundare. Both of them are Marxists whose artistic credo is an unwavering commitment to the cause of the proletariat and emancipation of the masses. The poets in this second generation have taken it upon themselves to document the daily experience of the people.

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Give a detail discussion on the African experience in Written African Poetry.

4.0 CONCLUSION

Written African literature was produced in the crucible of colonialism. What this means among other things is that the men and women who founded the tradition of what we now call written African literature in European and indigenous languages were without exception, products of the institutions that colonialism had introduced and developed in the continent. In fact this encounter forms part of the themes espoused in written African literature. In each phase of African literature, the need to portray the dehumanising experience of Africa has always been the ultimate goal of writers. The African experience has oscillated from slavery to colonialism and now to neo-colonialism and post-colonial disillusionment. The African writer has not lost focus of his role as a social moralizer in all these phases of experiences. The written writer even though in an alien tongue, understands that he is a "town crier" who must firmly identify with his cultural heritage as an African because he must first of all be an African before becoming an African writer.

5.0 SUMMARY

In this unit you have learned the followings:

- The sociological approach to African poetry
- The written African poetry
- The African experience in written African poetry

6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

Read and answer the questions below:

1) Describe the sociological approach to African poetry
2) Highlight the scope of written African poetry
3) Comment on the African experience in written African poetry

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UNIT 2 COLONIAL RULE AND AFRICAN POETIC RESPONSE
CONTENTS

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Like all the other arts poetry is a compendious symbol of diverse reactions - mental and emotional - organised by the force of imaginative response to what had been, what is, and what will be. The African poets who have handled colonialism as their subject are to that extent concerned with what had been, with a past that was overwhelming in itself and still remains overwhelming in its undesirable intrusion into the present. In this unit, we are going to look through responses to colonialism by some contemporary African poets. The unit specifically take you through the responses to colonialism by African poets such as Christopher Okigbo, Kofi Awoonor, David Diop and Okot p'Bitek. Below are some of the objectives of this unit:

2.0 OBJECTIVES

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- Highlight the poetic responses to colonial rule
- Describe how some African poets responded to colonial rule, using poems by the following poets for illustrations
    - Christopher Okigbo
    - Kofi Awoonor
    - David Diop
    - Okot p'Bitek

3.0 MAIN CONTENT

3.1 Poetic Responses to Colonial Rule

The words poetry uses are words that do not just represent life, but a transmutation of life; and that is art. The kind of transmutation or picture of the colonial forces as they operated in Africa, which has been effected by the poets, depends largely on their individual imaginative orientations and the influences of their cultural and intellectual backgrounds. To read their poetry therefore is to be treated to varying

imaginative and emotional exhibitions that are held together by a central theme - colonialism - which has had a terrible impact on their life and culture.

According to Cartey (1971), 'the theme of colonialism is one of the most persistent notes in African literature and in fact in that of all newly emerging nations. It appears of historical necessity and will continue to be present in many literatures, for its effects on individuals and societies have been deeply wrenching, precipitating... 'And expatiating on these 'effects', Cartey says:

> The whites who came from Europe to Africa filled different positions in the colonial societies. They were governors, administrators, road builders, ministers of God, merchants, or landowners. The native turned alternately to one group and then to another, but soon he discovered that with none of them could he escape *brutality* or find relief from *exploitation.* The material exploitation of the colonial administration was no harsher than the *spiritual domination* exercised by the missionaries.

These are the bare facts of history to which various African poets have responded. The task before us now is to see how these poets have used imagery to represent those forces that organised this tragic past of their.

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Examine how African poets use their creativity in responding to colonial rule in their poetic writings. Cite examples from differents poems.

3.2 African Poets and their responses to colonial rule

3.2.1 Christopher Okigbo

The images of colonialism which dominate the relevant works of these poets are those of fright, danger, repulsion, and oppression. In the poetry of Christopher Okigbo (Nigerian) (d. 1967) the assemblage is terrifying: we see unrolled before us (as we read through some of his poems) pictures and pictures of destruction and death. In 'DARK WATERS of the beginning, for example, the ominous setting can only support a confused drama of struggles and conflicts: short violet 'rays' are confronted with thick 'gloom' which they try to 'pierce'; the deadly 'rainbow' is already 'arched like boa bent to kill'; and the 'rays' on one hand and the 'rainbow' on the other foreshadow respectively 'fire' and 'rain' - two forces which are eternally irreconcilable, and which ultimately come into collision: 'rain and sun in single combat'.

The image of hostility grows into one of bodily injury inflicted ironically in the name of salvation in 'Initiations':

> SCAR OF the crucifix
> over the breast,
> by red blade inflicted
> by red-hot blade,
> on right breast...

This injury inflicted by two forces of cannibalism – sword and fire - was said by the oppressors to be the symbol of mysterious baptism which the protagonist received 'upon waters of the genesis from Kepkanly'. Kepkanly and 'John the Baptist' are two agents of this baptism, who represent the mental injury also inflicted on the protagonist and his kind. 'Kepkanly' is a name coined by Okigbo for the teacher-catechist who taught him the Catholic catechism in preparation for his baptism. Derived from two Igbo expressions, *aka-ekpe* and *aka-nli*, which stand for 'left' and 'right' respectively, 'Kepkanly' is symbolic of the apeish manner in which some Africans deliberately mispronounced words in their own mother tongue as the English colonialists did, in order to echo the English. For the English would pronounce *aka-ekpe* as 'aka-epe', so that as the teacher-catechist kept the rhythm for pupils marching in the field, he would be saying' *k'ep - 'kanli* (left - right). It is this shortened form of *aka-epe - aka-nli* (the Englishman's version) that Okigbo transformed into 'Kepkanly'. For one to drop the right and natural pronunciation of words in one's own language, and adopt the incorrect foreign mode, is unhealthy imitation. 'John the Baptist', the representative of the Catholic religion, indoctrinates the Africans. The 'gambit' which he preaches is 'life without sin, without life'. Okigbo's idea here is of course that to preach 'life without sin' is tantamount to preaching life without life, and that this recommendation is unrealistic, and therefore deceptive; for the preacher gives the impression that man can in this world become an angel. Even T. S. Eliot, convinced Anglo Catholic as he was, recognised that 'sin is Behovely' to man.

The preaching started by John the Baptist is continued by 'Flannagan' who 'preached the Pope's message', which was: 'To sow the fireseed among grasses/ & 10, to keep it till it bums out...'. 'Fireseed' is a parody of the mustard seed as it appears in St Luke, 13: 19. While the 'grain of mustard seed.. grew and waxed a great tree' harbouring the 'fowls of the air' in its branches, the 'fireseed' is meant to destroy; and this shows that the early Christian missionaries came to Africa not to sow the mustard seed of the Kingdom of God in the African cultural soil, but rather to sow the 'fireseed' which would burn up the 'grasses' of African cultures, and in order to ensure that this unholy act against the cultures was accomplished, the agents of Christianity, incarnated in birds of prey, the eagles, invaded the habitat of the 'Sunbird' and the 'twin gods' who constitute the bedrock of these cultures. Thus in 'Limits X', they first 'killed the Sunbird', who is the minion of the gods, and then

> Their talons they drew out of their scabbard,
> Upon the tree trunks, as if on fire-clay,
> Their beaks they sharpened;
> And spread like eagles their felt-wings,
> And descended upon the twin gods of Irkalla
>
> And the ornaments of him,
> And the beads about his tail;
> And the carapace of her,
> And her shell, they divided.

This is the culminating point of the Christian missionaries' sacrilege against the protagonist's indigenous culture. The way these 'murderers' went about the 'ornaments', 'beads' and the 'shell' of the gods is an indication that their religious mission was compounded with an economic quest. The indigenous religions of the Africans they would not tolerate, but the wealth in the shrines they would acquire.

It was this deracination which forced Okigbo's protagonist into exile, where he had to live a false life, as we gather from 'Newcomer'. The bells of the angelus become the 'bells of exile', and of course the protagonist, like true believers, has to pray - to 'sign/remembrance of calvary'. But we know he is not sincere, for he is merely wearing a 'mask over my face' and he does not believe in the doctrine about the guardian angels. That is why he asks 'Anna of the panel oblongs', who is one of the believers and who has been tempting him with the offer of the foreign faith, to protect him 'from them fucking angels/protect me/my sandhouse and bones.'

It is because Okigbo felt brutalised and uncomfortable in the Christian world that he now stages a dramatic retreat homewards like the Biblical prodigal son:

> Before you, mother Idoto,
> naked I stand;
> before your watery presence,
> a prodigal
>
> Under your power wait I
> on barefoot,
> watchman for the watchword
> at *Heavensgate;*...

Idoto is a river in Okigbo's village, Ojoto. After his period of spiritual buffeting, loss and aridity in the desert of the Christian religion, Okigbo's protagonist returns to a water goddess - to water which is the source and symbol of life. He is now under the power of the goddess, the power of life; and it is by the power of this goddess that he hopes to win salvation, for he is already at *'Heavensgate'.* The imagery here strikes a note different from that of the imagery of Christian forces: there is here genuine humility, a sense of security and hope. For to Okigbo and other Anglophone West African poets 'that which is African is rich and meaningful and that which is non-African (White, European) is disruptive and destructive' (Egudu, 1978).

3.2.2 Kofi Awoonor

Like Okigbo, the Ghanaian Kofi Awoonor sees the destruction committed by colonialism as both physical and psychological. The short but effective poem 'The Cathedral' deals with physical destruction which has material and spiritual implications:

> On this dirty patch
> a tree once stood
> shedding incense on the infant corn:
> its boughs stretched across a heaven
> brightened by the last fires of a tribe.

They sent surveyors and builders who cut that tree
planting in its place
A huge senseless cathedral of doom.

The tree that is cut down is more than an ordinary tree: it is the tree of life, giving sustenance by 'shedding incense on the infant corn', and having a protective influence by 'stretching across a heaven' that shelters the 'tribe'. The last line of the poem in which the word 'senseless' appears superfluous informs us of what has supplanted this symbolic tree - an artefact organised by the 'builders' in place of the natural symbol of life and protection, an artificial creation which spells doom for the Africans.

At times such destruction of nature in Africa by the white man has an economic rather than a religious motive behind it. In Part I of J. P. Clark's 'Ivbie' we are told of 'strangers' 'from far-fabled country' who invaded 'our virgin jungle' and ravaged 'our occult groves'. These strangers, Part II informs us, were searching for 'gums and oils' which were finally carried 'in barrels off to foreign mills'. The result of this operation was that the African soil became 'quarried out of recognition I As never would erosion/another millenium'.

But returning to Kofi Awoonor, we find that the psychological and spiritual harm done to Africa is much more disturbing. For the 'psychological destruction of the African and his mode of being' was part of the white man's design. He imposed 'his own customs, religion and values on the black man' and 'native tradition and way of life were interrupted by proselytizers'. 'The Weaver Bird' (p. 37) is a central poem in this connection. The bird-imagery we noted in Okigbo's poetry is present here also, but the birdagent is different in both cases. Here it is the weaver bird. Awoonor 'uses imagery of the weaver bird and its notorious colonizing habits, which often kill the chosen tree, to unfold a vision of the whole colonial period in Ghana'. One factor which gives this poem the tragic intensity with which it is imbued is the contrast between the friendliness of the Africans and the callous ingratitude of the white man whom the weaver bird symbolises:

The weaver bird built in our house.
And laid its eggs on our only tree.
We did not want to send it away.
……
And the weaver returned in the guise of the owner.
Preaching salvation to us that owned the house.

This theme of tenant turned landlord is also the basis of the poetic reaction in South Africa. The 'weaver bird' has not settled down to supervise its newly acquired domain, for that would have presented it as humane, which it is not. It rather embarked upon fouling 'trees, totems, and shrines so that the contemporary African has to build anew':

We look for new homes every day,
For new altars we strive to re-build
The old shrines defiled by the weaver's excrement.

Gerald Moore, while commenting on the word 'excrement', said that the poem distils 'its arrested bitterness into the single word "excrement"'. This word expresses the poet's picture of the weaver bird and what it symbolises, and not his emotion of anger of bitterness. 'Excrement', being that of the weaver bird, is used to show how insensitive to human values the bird is - it deposits faeces on shrines; and to show how oppressive the colonial attitudes to the indigenous African religion were, for the bird exercises no control over the distribution of its own dirt. The word therefore sums up, not the poet's bitterness, but the contempt with which he holds the weaver bird and all it represents.

In Awoonor's poetry the gods with their shrines are victims not only of oppression by the whites, but also neglect by their own 'children' who happen to be converted into the new religion. Gerald Moore was conscious of this fact when he said that Awoonor's 'poetry abounds in laments for the neglected shrines and forgotten gods, ignored by a society now intent upon individual status and materialism'. That the 'shrines' and the 'gods' were neglected, ignored and forgotten is a correct observation; but that the cause of this was the society's quest for 'individual status and materialism' is far from the truth. The true cause according to Awoonor was the foreigners who by preaching other kinds of shrines and gods distracted some members of the society from discharging their duties to their own gods. Even in the same poem, 'The Years Behind' (p. 59), lines 8-11 of which Moore quoted to illustrate the fact of neglect, Awoonor hints at the cause of this neglect: 'My life's song falls low among alien peoples.' That is to say that his entire life - song, culture, religion - was looked down upon by these 'alien peoples' who condemned his culture and set up a foreign one for his adoption.

This desertion is very dramatically presented in another of Awoonor's poems, 'Easter Dawn'. In this poem we learn that

> the gods are crying, my father's gods are crying
> for a burial - for a final ritual -
> but they that should build the fallen shrines
> have joined the dawn marchers
> singing their way towards Gethsemane...

This is not all, for, a few lines later, we see the tragedy clinched by the priest of the gods deserting them himself:

> the gods cried, shedding
> clayey tears on the calico
> the drink offering had dried up in the harmattan
> the cola-nut is shrivelled
> the yam feast has been eaten by mice
> and the fetish priest is dressing for the
> Easter service.

And at this point the desertion is complete; but the deserters are not pursuing individual status or material wealth - they are drawn into another religion, Christianity. This is natural, for every act of conversion is counterpoised by another of aversion. And as Taban Lo Liyong would put it, they are withdrawn from one type of superstition and

planted into another (if superstition means 'credulity regarding the supernatural'). In one of his Haiku-like poems Liyong says:

> I'd have loved god more
> had Christian missionaries confirmed my superstitions
> its hard to believe
> after being undeceived

The absence of punctuation is the poet's making; and so is the use of the lower case g for the Christians' 'God'. The argument of this short poem is of religious and historical significance. It is believed by many that Christianity has not been effective in African societies because the early missionaries did not base their religion on the Africans' religious consciousness which they (Africans) developed even before their contact with the Europeans. The rather belated realisation of this 'sin' of omission has recently led to frantic, sometimes haphazard, efforts at using indigenous African musical instruments during the Christian service (especially the Mass). But the substance of the service remains unchanged. And many people are waiting, rather cynically, for the time when the indigenous wooden and clay vessels will also replace the imported golden chalice and ciborium on the altars.

The African is a victim of historical determinism. He has lost something of his religious inheritance and, according to another poem by Awoonor, he is threatened with loss of identity. The imagery this time is no less terrifying. The scene now shifts to the smithy in 'The Anvil and the Hammer' (p. 29). The African now becomes the crude iron in the hands of the smith, goldsmith not blacksmith, since his colour must be other than black. Thus the African is 'caught between the anvil and the. hammer/In the forging house of a new life'. In this 'forging' there is a lot of confusion: 'The trappings of the past, tender and tenuous' are 'laced with the flimsy glories' of the present symbolised by 'paved/ streets'; and in an attempt to resist the new formation, the Africans endeavour to remain pure and original when they sing, but find themselves spontaneously using 'snatches/from their [whites'] tunes'.

The smith's job is therefore wrong from the beginning. Indeed the word 'forging' in the poem becomes pleasantly ambiguous, for 'forgery', 'counterfeiting', 'falsifying' are all equally implied. For complete transformation would mean dehumanisation of the African. But in the circumstances change, that is modification, is inevitable; and the poet himself concedes this. That is why he pleads for a kind of admixture, which is no synthesis, for synthesis is impossible:

> Sew the old days for us, our fathers,
> That we can wear them under our new garment,
> After we have washed ourselves in
> The Whirlpool of the many rivers' estuary.

It is significant that the two kinds of garment are to be made from different materials - the old and the new. Thus the African retains his old self but adds on to it something borrowed from the imported culture. Furthermore, it is remarkable that the 'garment'

made up of the ‘old days’ is to be worn close to the skin, for that is nearest to his heart, and it is, as it were, protected by the borrowed garment.

The protagonist of this poem has therefore achieved a measure of success in his bid for ‘cultural salvation’ in the face of ‘cultural turmoil’. He has not yielded to a total change of himself as the enemies of his culture aimed at in their ‘forging house’; but he has not come out unscathed from it either. For it was through fire he went, and washing ‘ourselves in/The Whirlpool of the many rivers’ estuary’ can only be a euphemism for the pangs of purification experienced in the ‘whirlpool’.(Egudu, 1978)

3.2.3 David Diop

Another African poet who has employed images of brutality, both physical and psychological, to depict the colonial monster is David Diop (d. 1960) from Senegal. Commenting on Diop’s ‘The Vultures’ Knipp says: ‘In one of the most effective political images in all African poetry, the white man becomes a vulture’. In this short poem, Diop displays colonialism in its hydra-ramifications of administrative oppression, religious domination and economic exploitation. His weapon consists of a collection of powerful images, three of which have behind them the combined effects of metonymy and personification:

In those days
When civilization kicked us in the face
When holy water slapped our cringing brows
The vultures built in the shadow of their talons
The bloodstained monument of tutelage
In those days
There was painful laughter on the metallic hell of the roads
And the monotonous rhythm of the paternoster
Drowned the howling on the plantations
O the bitter memories of extorted kisses
Of promises broken at the point of a gun
Of foreigners who did not seem human
Who knew all the books but did not know love
But we whose hands fertilize the womb of the earth
In spite of your songs of pride
In spite of the desolate villages of torn Africa
Hope was preserved in us as in a fortress
And from the mines of Swaziland to the factories of Europe
Spring will be reborn under our bright steps

Apart from the pictures created, there are also in the poem a number of words that have particular effect, and these are ‘kicked’, ‘slapped’, ‘extorted’ and ‘torn’, which in themselves are sufficient symbols of the harshness and violence that marked colonial administration - ‘metallic’ which multiplies the effect of an already hot hell; and ‘drowned’ which, with the implied presence of a sea, best portrays the callousness and sadism involved. Some other words are specially apt in their depiction of the suffering condition to which the Africans were subjected by the beastly forces: their brows are

'cringing', they were in the 'shadow' of death created by the vultures' talons, their 'laughter' was 'painful' (oxymoron), and they were 'howling on the plantations'. Many critics have earlier observed the effectiveness of this poem in its portrayal of the lot of the Africans in the hands of the colonial masters. Wilfred Cartey has, for example, noticed that 'Diop makes use of words arid images denoting harshness, brutishness, destruction. Through the use of connotative words charged with sound effects the poet constructs a picture of harsh material exploitation and its agonizing results'. But in spite of this agony, Diop, as is usual with him, expresses a sustained hope of survival and triumph.

In many others of Diop's poems it is the consequences of historical forces that are dwelt upon, but here and there a stroke is landed on the directors of the forces. For example, in 'Africa' Africa's back is bent - 'this back that breaks under the weight of humiliation/This back trembling with red scars/And saying yes to the whip under the midday sun'. And quite correctly, Taiwo points out that this refers to 'the great humiliations which Africa has suffered in history with slave trade and colonialism, which resulted in untold hardships for the people'. In 'Nigger Tramp', the black tramp is presented as "You who move like a battered old dream/A dream trans pierced by the blades of the mistral', and who carry 'your old coat of thorns'. He has become another Christ, but for a crown he has a coat. The picture is clinched in lines that epitomise the effect and the cause:

> Now you stand naked in your filthy prison
> A quenched volcano exposed to others' laughter
> To others' riches
> To others' hideous greed

For Diop there should be no basis for association with the white man who imprisoned and muzzled the tramp and who stole all his wealth. It is for this reason that he indicts with characteristic anger that African renegade whom the white man has succeeded in changing into something detestable. In The Renegade' this victim of dehumanisation is presented as 'my brother' who flashes his 'teeth in response to every hypocrisy', and 'my brother with gold-rimmed glasses' who gives his 'master a blue-eyed faithful look',and who screams, whispers and pleads 'in the parlours of condescension'. He is one whose face has been 'bleached/by years of humiliation and bad conscience'. The word 'brother' and the apparent tone of 'pitying' are ironical, for Diop could neither have such a brainwashed African for a brother, nor genuinely sympathise with one who shamelessly sold his true self for a false one. Thus when Wilfred Cartey observed that Diop 'ridicules and yet pities the negro who has allowed himself to become whitewashed and who can now go through the same grimaces so condemned by the poet of Negritude', he was right except in so far as he thought that Diop actually pitied the renegade. Diop has put up the renegade before the world, saying, as it were, here is one case of the dehumanising effect of colonialism in Africa. (Senono and Vincent, 2001)

3.2.4 Okot p'Bitek

Two other examples of ‘whitewashed’ Africans are ‘Ocol’ and ‘Clementine’ as they are presented to us by ‘Lawino’ in Okot p’Bitek’s Song of Lawino. This book is a beautiful schema, a bold balance-sheet on which the profit and loss of acculturation are displayed, with loss heavily outweighing the gain, and on which the African cultural values far outweigh those of the white man. p’Bitek presents Ocol and Clementine (Tina) to demonstrate the tragedy of being a slave to foreign cultures.

Section 12 of Song of Lawino is devoted to Ocol’s complete deracination and its emasculating effect on him. He is so well read ‘like white men’ that ‘in the ways of his people/He has become/A stump’. He ‘abuses all things Acoli’ (indigenous) and says that the ‘ways of black people/Are black’. The second ‘black’ connotes something sinister. Ocol’s house is described as ‘a dark forest of books’, with pieces of paper lying scattered on his desk. The ‘backs’ of the books and the ‘papers’ on the desk are compared to snakes and oppressive giant trees:

> Their backs shine like
> The dangerous *OTom* snake
> Coiled on a tree top
>
> …….
>
> The papers on my husband’s desk
> Coil threateningly
> Like the giant forest climbers,
> Like the *Kituba* tree
> That squeezes other trees to death.

These images are in consonance with Lawino’s notion of the destructive force of the white man’s culture. For those books which are the products of white ‘civilization’ are to Lawino ‘the ghosts of the dead men/That people this dark forest’, ‘the ghosts of the many white men/And white women’. These ghosts have ‘captured’ Ocol’s ‘head’ so that he has become ‘a walking corpse’. They have so transformed him that

> He cannot hear
> The insults of foreigners
> Who say
> The songs of black men are rubbish!

Lawino then calls her husband’s attention to what he has become - ‘a dog of the white man’ - and summarises the functions of such dogs. Besides barking at night, chasing ‘away wild cats/That come to steal the chicken’,

> The dogs of white men
> Are well trained
> And they understand English!
>
> When the master is eating
> They lie by the door

And keep guard
While waiting for left-overs.

This is the final stage of the ugly transformation of the black slave of the white man's culture: he is now reduced to the level of an animal, a beast.

It is for this reason that Lawino summons the whole clan to a communal weeping: 'Let us all cry together', 'let us mourn the death of my husband.' It is indeed 'death', for, culturally speaking, Ocol's is life-in-death or death-in-life. But it is not only Ocol that is so dead; he is only a representative figure of his kind. The mourning is for many others:

For all our young men
Were finished in the forest,
Their manhood was finished
In the classrooms
Their testicles
Were smashed
With large books!

The male organ, which is regarded as the centre of a man's life as a man, symbolises culture which is the centre of a man's nationality and the bedrock of nationalism.

The other cultural tragic figure is Clementine (Tina). Lawino sarcastically refers to Tina as 'the woman with whom I share my husband'. This role of Tina's as homebreaker is only one aspect of the total ugliness of her cultural transformation. For she is also physically 'bleached' (to borrow Diop's term) or 'whitewashed' (to borrow Cartey's). The result of Tina's aspiration 'to look like a white woman' is as follows:

Her lips are red-hot
Like glowing charcoal,
She resembles the wild cat
That has dipped its mouth in blood,
Her mouth is like raw yaws
It looks like an open ulcer,
Like the mouth of a field!
Tina dusts powder on her face
And it looks so pale;
She resembles the wizard
Getting ready for the midnight dance
She dusts the ash-dirt all over her face
And when little sweat
Begins to appear on her body
She looks like the guinea fowl! [Section 2]

The irony of Tina's efforts is that she believes her face which has been bleached ('some medicine has eaten up Tina's face') is beautiful 'because it resembles the face of a white woman'.

Using more frightful images, Lawino builds up a complete picture of Tina. Her body ‘resembles/The ugly coat of the hyena’; ‘She looks as if she has been struck/ By lightning/ or burnt... in a fire hunt’; ‘her head is huge like that of the owl/She looks like a witch.’ Furthermore,

> Her breasts are completely shrivelled up,
> They are all folded dry skins
> They have made nests of cotton wool
> And she folds the bits of cow-hide
> In the nests
> And calls them breasts.

Tina is obviously no longer young, but she struggles to pretend to be. Her pretence is typical of all who try to assume false natures. This is precisely what Kofi Awoonor would call the ‘impiety of self-deceit’. Finally, we have the following about Tina’s hair-dressing:

> When the beautiful one
> With whom I share my husband
> Returns from cooking her hair
> She resembles
> A chicken
> That has fallen into a pond;
> Her hair looks
> Like the python’s discarded skin. [Section 5]

Besides imagery, words are carefully chosen for various effects. ‘Beautiful’ is ironic; ‘share’, ‘cooking’ and ‘discarded’ constitute a parody. The imagery itself is as effective and original as that in other sections of the poem we have already seen. As Gerald Moore has rightly observed, ‘Lawino uses the imagery of traditional Acoli funeral and dancing songs... to give her song depth within the culture and enable it drink from the abundant springs of inherited experience’.

Part of the cultural destruction effected by colonialism in Africa as noted before is religious. When G.-C.M. Mutiso said that ‘Lawino condemns the missionaries who only wanted to make her a house-girl’ and who could not ‘explain Christianity and show how the “sacrifice” of Christ... is any different from traditional sacrifices’,36 he only told part of the story. For in Sections 8 and 9 Lawino levels a much more comprehensive attack not only on all the missionaries and aspects of the Christian religion, but also on their African agents who have in the first instance embraced the foreign religion. The first aspect of Christianity attacked is the ‘meaningless’ Christian name - ‘oh how young girls/Labour to buy a name!’ ‘Buy’ is indeed the word, and the price paid is the girls’ entire humanity. They do all sorts of menial work for the priest and the teachers, from ‘drawing water’ to ‘harvesting their crops’. To show her utter contempt for the Christian names, she says:

> Who understands
> The meaning of the Christian names?

…….

To me
They all sound
Like empty tins,
Old rusty tins
Thrown down
From the roof-top.

Lawino next indicts the Catholic Confession and also the Holy Communion which implies (in her opinion) cannibalism. For the priest asks people 'to come and eat/Human flesh' and 'human blood'. And all these Christians are therefore 'wizards' who 'exhume corpses/for dinners'. Church prayers are equally 'meaningless phrases' which are 'drummed' into the people by the teachers in the evening classes.

As for the priests and teachers, they are lecherous, materialistic and intimidating. The priests and teachers alike use their religious positions to attract girls who give them carnal pleasure:

They have sharp eyes
For girls' full breasts;
Even the padres
Who are not allowed
To marry
Are troubled by health,
Even the fat-stomached
Who cannot see
His belly-button
Feels better
When he touches
A girl's breasts,
And those who listen
To the confessions
Peep through the pot-hole
And stab the breasts
With their glances.

Though these vices may not be peculiar to foreign priests, the point is that the whole religious system was transported to Africa by them. And to Lawino it is all a sham.

These missionaries are as materialistic as they are lecherous. Their sermons are baits for the people's money. For after shouting on the people as they preach, they collect money from them, frightening them into donating generously:

Immediately
They start collecting
The gifts

You hear:

Who sows a little
Will reap a little
Who sows much
Will reap much
It is not by force
The Hunchback thanks those who give with soft hearts

To say that 'it is not by force' sounds ironical, for the priests employ all the psychological force which ensures hell fire for those who do not give 'much'. The word 'Hunchback' used for God is incidental here, but it is most appropriate in view of Lawino's whole attitude towards the Christian religion and it's God. 'Hunchback' has curious significance in Bitek's community: 'The name of the Christian God in Lwo is Rubanga. This is also the name of the ghost that causes tuberculosis of the spine, hence Hunchback' (p. 157). But Lawino's reaction to the priests' quest for money is also shown in a more direct and violent manner. She asks if 'they buy the places in Skyland with money?' She also wonders if 'the stools/on the right hand of the Hunchback' are reserved only 'for moneyed fellows', and 'fat-bellied men/The backs of whose necks/Resemble the buttocks of the hippo'.

Afraid of intelligence and rationality, as if they were not certain about the faith they are propagating, the missionaries and the teachers prevent their followership from asking questions about the new religion. To them, 'asking too many questions/Befits only Martin Luther.' If asked any questions, the 'Padre' and the 'Nun' quarrel and become angry with the questioner 'as if it was I/Who prevented them marrying'. Because ofthis attitude of intimidation, Lawino sees them as those who welcome only cowards and imbeciles:

To them
The good children
Are those
Who ask no questions,
Who accept everything
Like the tomb
Which does not reject
Even a dead leper!
Who accept everything
Like the rubbish pit
Like the pit-latrine
Which does not reject
Even dysentery.

The imagery here smacks of scatology, but it is very effective, and it reflects the seriousness and forthrightness with which the traditional African condemns what he considers evil, that is, without resorting to the hypocrisy of euphemism.

To appreciate Lawino's stand in this poem fully would require a high degree of objectivity, such as has been shown by G.-C.M. Mutiso when he said: 'Lawino is not simply a throwback to a pre-colonial era advocating a return to the ways of the past. Rather she is a sensitive person who argues for a cultural relativity and the acceptance of the validity of this position by those who call themselves educated and therefore written, but who does nothing more than engage in blind imitation not necessarily of what is European but of what they perceive as European.... These people ignore their traditional games, dress... dances, and religion'. Lawino's 'song' is a study in comparative culture. She has, as it were, placed the white man's culture and that of the black man side by side and left us to decide which is richer, more natural and appropriate for an African to embrace and retain.

The entire poem is almost paradoxically the traditional African's pre-perception of written logical positivism. All Lawino is asking for is some evidence, according to the rule of verifiability, to prove that the white man's culture is superior to the black man's; or that the white man's religion is less superstitious than the black man's; or indeed that the black man's belief has a less valid basis than the white man's. That is why it sounds illogical to her that God made the earth, yet this God has no hands, no legs; and there was no 'clay' for 'moulding' the earth, and there was no ground on which God was to stand while 'moulding' the earth. In the same vein, the 'birth of Christ' seems ridiculous to Lawino. She could not see any rationality in the Christian belief that Christ's 'mother did not know man' and yet 'the bridewealth had already been paid' (Section 9). The whole opposition of metaphysics, especially that aspect relating to God's omnipotence, by logical positivists crystallises around such want of verifiability. Lawino, in all her 'primitivism' and illiteracy, reasons right through like any of those positivists.

'Second Olympus' by Mabel Segun of Nigeria provided an early pointer to the perspective in which colonialism would be viewed in later days by the poets:

> From the rostrum they declaimed
> On martyrs and men of high ideals
> Whom they sent out,
> Benevolent despots to an unwilling race
> Straining at the yoke,
> Bull-dozers trampling on virgin ground
> In blatant violation.
> They trampled down all that was strange
> And filled the void
> With half-digested alien thoughts;
> They left a trail of red
> Wherever their feet had passed
> Oh, they did themselves fine
> And strutted about the place,
> Self-proclaimed demi-gods
> From a counterfeit Olympus.
> One day they hurled down thunderbolts

On a toiling race of earthworms...

Though these lines are uneven in terms of artistic effectiveness, they contain enough significant and vivid images to constitute a synopsis of the picture of colonialism which the African poets who wrote later expanded and developed with imaginative vigour and vision.(Senanu and Vincent, 2001)

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

What is the relationship between written African poetry and colonialism? How did they influence one another? Your answer should include citations from different African poets.

4.0 CONCLUSION

African poets who have handled colonialism as their subject are to that extent concerned with what had been, with a past that was overwhelming in itself and still remains overwhelming in its undesirable intrusion into the present. The kind of transmutation or picture of the colonial forces as they operated in Africa, which has been effected by the poets, depends largely on their individual imaginative orientations and the influences of their cultural and intellectual backgrounds. To read their poetry therefore is to be treated to varying imaginative and emotional exhibitions that are held together by a central theme - colonialism - which has had a terrible impact on their life and culture. The theme of colonialism is one of the most persistent notes in African poetry in particular and literature in general.

5.0 SUMMARY

In this unit you have learned the followings:

- The African poets' poetic responses to colonial rule in Africa
- How some African poets responded to colonial rule, using poems by the following poets for illustrations:
  - Christopher Okigbo
  - Kofi Awoonor
  - David Diop
  - Okot p'Bitek

6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

Read and answer the questions below:

1) Discuss the employment of poetry in responses to colonial rule by contemporary African writers.
2) Describe how the following African poets used their poems in responding to colonial rule in Africa:
   i. Christopher Okigbo
   ii. Kofi Awoonor
   iii. David Diop
   iv. Okot p'Bitek

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UNIT 3 SHORTCOMINGS OF AFRICAN INDEPENDENCE

CONTENTS

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The disillusionment poetry of 1960s was characterised by the experiences of independence. The prospect of independence and self-rule brought high expectations when Africans thought that self-rule would bring forth an Eldorado and the continent would transform into a utopia. However, this was not the case because most African leaders became grossly corrupt and dictatorial and the people's expectations were shattered and this result to disappointment which later metamorphosed into disillusionment. The poetry of this period has socio-political themes and the poets decried the corruption of African leaders. The South African poetry on the other hand is usually related to the apartheid political system. The tone of some poems like those of Dennis Brutus' *Letter to Martha* are critical and defiant while others like Mtshali's *Sounds of Cowhide Drum,* are cautious in their criticism. Others are revolutionary, fire-breathing poems like Keorapetse Kgosile's *Spring Unchanted* and Sipho Sepamla's *The Soweto I Love*. Oswald M. Mtshali's "Just a Passer-by" was analysed to illustrate apartheid poetry. Below are some of the objectives of this unit:

2.0 OBJECTIVES

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- Explain the concept of disillusionment poetry
- Analyse Christopher Okigbo's "Hurrah for Thunder" as a poem of disillusionment
- Describe Apartheid poetry
- Discuss the themes and techniques in "Just a Passer-by" Oswald M. Mtshali

3.0 MAIN CONTENT

3.1 Disillusionment Poetry

In each phase of African literature, the need to portray the dehumanising experience of Africa has always been the ultimate goal of writers. The African experience has oscillated from slavery to colonialism and now to neo-colonialism and

post-colonial disillusionment. The African writer has not lost focus of his role as a social moralizer in all these phases of experiences. The modern writer even though in an alien tongue, understands that he is a "town crier" who must firmly identify with his cultural heritage as an African because he must first of all be an African before becoming an African writer. African literature is being employed as a veritable weapon for depicting the postcolonial disillusionment in African nations (Kehinde, 2004).

According to Orhero (2017), the term disillusionment poetry used to refer to the poetry of the 1960s. The experiences of independence, coloured the poetry of the period. While by 1960 most African countries were free of European rule after the struggle for independence, the prospect of independence and self-rule was accompanied by high expectations. However, African leaders became grossly corrupt and dictatorial, shattering the expectations of the masses. There was disappointment which later metamorphosed into disillusionment. The poetry of this period was socio-political and poets decried the corruption of African leaders. Nwachukwu Agbada describes this period as that of "Afro-Pessimism". Most of the poets of this period had written earlier but had not been socially concerned. However, the activities that permeated the society were too gloomy for the poets to be private and obscure. They wrote to address the failure of leaders to meet expectations. Their themes centred on bad leadership, tyranny, corruption, and social commitment. Their techniques were largely Writtenist and based on techniques such as imagery, realism, symbolism, etc. Poets of the time include Wole Soyinka, Christopher Okigbo, Lenrie Peters, Kwesi Brew, Kofi Awoonor, and others (Orhero, 2017).

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Discuss the concept of disillusionment poetry.

3.1 Christopher Okigbo's "Hurrah for Thunder"

To illustarete poetry of disillusionment, Orhero (2017) analyses Christopher Okigbo's "Hurrah for Thunder". According to him, the poem, which can represent disillusionment poetry, addresses the dashed hopes of the people in the newly independent African society. This poem was regarded as prophetic by some critics. The poet persona thematises corruption in the verse: "But already the hunters are talking about pumpkins:/If they share the meat let them remember thunder" (Okigbo). The poet persona airs his anger through the metaphor of "thunder". The "hunters" is used as a symbol of corrupt politicians and the idea of sharing the "meat" suggests the looting of the collective wealth of the people. Stylistically, the poem is full of symbols and images. In the first few lines of the poem, the "elephant" is used as a symbol to represent Nigeria's federal and regional governments "whose tenacity in monopolising power made the thunder clap inevitable" (Eyoh, "Political Leadership").

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Examine the theme of disillusionment in Okigbo's "Hurrah for Thunder".

3.3 Apartheid Poetry

According to Egudu (1978), while the modern African poets who wrote about colonialism were concerned with a past problem and that their poetry, like yam shoots, flowered out of the corpse of colonialism, the South African poets have painted and are painting from life, Apartheid, their model, is before them and very much alive in all its ugly aspects, terrorising the poets as they write and demonstrate various attitudes towards that enemy. Apartheid is a hydra-headed beast, which more than colonialism, brutalised and dehumanised the black South Africans. This situation of racist oppression – Apartheid - has forced South African poets to write poems depicting its gory aspects to the world, in a bid to muster world disapproval for it, which would lead to its dismantling (Okon, 2013). In the words of Orhero (2013), in Apartheid South Africa, where the white rulers segregated the blacks, the rulers instituted racially discriminatory laws which limited the freedom and total life of the black South Africans. They were not allowed to go to the same schools, attend churches and live in the same places with whites and were not allowed to vote or to be voted for. The aboriginal blacks were reduced to mere occupants in their own land. Some South African poets wrote to address these divisions and talk to the conscience of the white oppressors. Most of them were harassed and detained. Their themes included segregation, racism, oppression, protest, pain, inequality, etc.

The major technique of the Apartheid poets was the protest form, critical and socialist realism, imagery and symbolism (Orhero). Poets in this tradition include Mazizi Kunene, Lewis Nkosi, Dennis Brutus, Oswald Mtshali, Wally Serote, Richard Rive, Njabulo Ndebele and others. According to Okon (2013), oppression, brutality, pain and unmitigated suffering of the masses is aptly depicted in Dennis Brutus' "This sun on this rubble". Physical battery and torture are here highlighted:

... Bruised though we must be
……
Under jackboots our bones and spirits crunch
forced into sweat-tear-sodden slush
- now glow-lipped by this sudden touch:

But in spite of battery and torture, the people are unyielding, resilient, and with the hope of revenge upon their white torturers:

... our bones may later sing
or spell out some malignant nemesis
Sharpevilled to spear points for revenging
(Nwogu, 2008:58)

3.4.1 Themes and Techniques in "Just a Passer-by" Oswald M. Mtshali

Ishaku (Undated) discussed Mtshali's poem, "Just a Passer-by". The poem will be analysed thematically and stylistically so that the theme of the poem can be discussed and he poetic techniques employed by the poet can as well be identified. Oswald M. Mitshali is one of the black South Africa's most talented poets. He was born in Natal and was a victim of the Apartheid system which denied him admission into the University of Witwatersand. However, this did not diminish his desire for literary

progress as he published his first volume of poems titled *Sounds of the Cowhide Drum* (1971) which established him as a significant poet.

Mitshali's poems are about the people and their life in a hostile society which he is part of. The theme of survival in a defiant and hostile society runs through a number of his poems. The quiet control and the colloquial tone is noticed when the poet writes of his peoples' sufferings. There is no venom of hatred expressed but most of the themes are conveyed through distilled lyrical verses and ironic humour. Similarly, irony and cynicism are the main characteristic features of his poetry as can be seen in the poem below:

"Just a Passer-by"
I saw them clobber him with kieries
I heard him scream with pain
like a victim of slaughter;
I smelt fresh blood gush
from his nostrils,
and flow in the street.
I walked into the church
and knelt in the pew
"Lord I love you.
I also love my neighbour. Amen."
I came out
my heart as light as an angle's kiss
on the cheek of a saintly soul.
Back home I strutted
past a crowd of onlookers.
Then she came in –
My woman neighbour:
"Have you heard ? They've killed your brother."
"O! No! I heard nothing. I've been to church."

This is a very ironic and sarcastic piece of poetry through which the poet expresses the helpless condition of many blacks in apartheid South Africa. The poem incorporates a number of themes besides describing the gruesome incident of brothers being 'clobbered' while he (the poet) passes on by without rendering any help. The poet draws an ironic parallel with parable of the Good Samaritan. The religion of the whites (Christianity) that preaches one to be his brother's keeper is itself the cause of violence. But the irony of what the poet considers an escapist religion is that the poet instead of helping his brother from ticklers goes instead to the church to pray for the brothers' soul. The poem is indicative of the height of violence and the helplessness of the people in the society the poet lives in (Ishaku, Undated).

In his "The Master of the House", Mtshali takes a satirical look at the apartheid system in which the white minority are the masters while the black majority are the servants, doing degrading menial jobs. But even under this condition the blacks have learnt to survive and outwit the inhuman system:

Master I am a stranger to you
But will you hear my confession?
I am a faceless man
Who lives in the backyard/of your house
I share your table/so heavily heaped with
bread, meat and fruit/it huffs like a horse
drawing a coal cart.

The master's luxury contrasts sharply with the deprivation of the persona; a situation not unlike the Biblical parable:

As the rich man's to Lazarus,
the crumbs are swept to my lap/by my Lizzie:
'Sweetie! Eat and be satisfied now,
Tomorrow we shall be gone'.

The last two lines demonstrate the precariousness of life for the blackman in South Africa, and also bring out the South Africans' seeming consciousness of time (Okon, 2013). Nonetheless, the Blackman seems in someway to live with the system by outsmarting and spooking it, but this also underscores his consciousness of the time element:

So nightly I ran the gauntlet,
wrestle with your mastiff, Caesar,
for the bone pregnant with meat
and wash it down with Pussy's milk.
I am the nocturnal animal
that steals through the fenced lair/to meet my mate
and flees at the break of dawn
before the hunter and the hounds/run me to ground.
(Mtsheli, 1971:55)

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Discuss some shortcomings of African independence as portrayed in various African poetic responses.

4.0 CONCLUSION

The poetry of disillusionment of the 1960s was coloured by the experiences of independence. The prospect of independence and self-rule brought high expectations when Africans thought that self-rule would bring forth an Eldorado and the continent would transform into a utopia. Unfortunately, this was not the case. African leaders became grossly corrupt and dictatorial and the people's expectations were shattered and this result to disappointment which later metamorphosed into disillusionment. The poetry of this period was socio-political and poets decried the corruption of African leaders. On the other hand, the South African poetry is usually related to the apartheid political system. The tone of some poems like those of Dennis Brutus' *Letter to Martha* are critical and defiant while others like Mtshali's *Sounds of Cowhide Drum*, are cautious in their criticism. Others are revolutionary, fire-breathing poems like Keorapetse Kgosile's *Spring Unchanted* and Sipho Sepamla's *The Soweto I Love*.

5.0 SUMMARY

In this unit you have learned the followings:

- The concept of disillusionment poetry with illustrations from Christopher Okigbo's "Hurrah for Thunder"
- The concept of Apartheid poetry
- The themes and techniques employed in Oswald M. Mtshali's "just a passer-by"

6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

Read and answer the questions below:

- Explain the concept of disillusionment poetry
- Analyse Christopher Okigbo's "Hurrah for Thunder" as a poem of disillusionment
- What is Apartheid poetry?
- Discuss the themes and techniques in "Just a Passer-by" by Oswald M. Mtshali

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UNIT 4 AFRICA'S CULTURAL CRISIS/CULTURAL REDISCOVERY

CONTENTS

1.0 INTRODUCTION

African poetry would not have gained the momentum it has gained in the nineteenth century, if not for negative and biased portraits and images of African, painted by European writers, like Joyce Cary and Joseph Comrade. Hence, much of the Poetry that were weaved that era were to respond consciously to the colonialist false representations of Africa as a way of writing back and critically engaging on the realities of society. (Okon, 2013) argues: "In Africa the poet cannot just play around with words. It is natural that he should handle some of the realities of his society"**.** This reveals that African poetry actually emerged to recreate Africa in a better light, to X-ray its cultural ingredients like language, custom, type of food, clothing, folktales, song, myth etc. to the global village with the aim of reclaiming her lost dignity and pride. In this unit, we shall use relevant works from each region to illustrate how the poets of that period were able to assert and affirm the beauty and glory of Africa through the Negritude ideology and apartheid poetry. Below are some of the objectives of this unit:

2.0 OBJECTIVES

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- Discuss how written African poetry manifest African cultural heritage
- Explain the concept of Negritude
- Highlight the philosophy of Negritude
- Discuss the Negritude's aspects of cultural affirmation
- Explain how African poets manifests African cultural affirmation in their poems

3.0 MAIN CONTENT

3.1 Written African Poetry and African Cultural Heritage

Written African poetry, even though written in foreign languages is not divorced from African cultural heritage. In human history, where a group of people are dominated, decolonization is in most cases, a gradual process. Indeed, while it has often been much easier to end the physical occupation, mental purging of a formerly

dominated group is usually the most difficult process and requires conscious and concerted effort. One reason for this is that the actual physical domination of a people by another, if it is to succeed and be beneficial to the group, must be preceded by a deliberate and systematic attack on the cultural foundations of the group to be preyed upon. Hoogvelt sums it that: "No society can successfully dominate another without the diffusion of its cultural patterns and social institutions" (109). And central to culture is language as people's means of communication and interaction, as a bearer of their culture, and as a conveyor of their world view. Sapir, for instance, maintains that "language does not exist apart from culture that is from the socially inherited assemblage of texture of our lives (Language, 207, Culture, 34). Since the independence of various African countries, the question of what language(s) to use in African literature has naturally engaged the attention of African scholars, linguist, literary artists and critics as well as general public. At its broadest level, the question has been, "what should the African, who is educated in the language of his colonial master do with the erstwhile master's language? "Should he continue to express himself and his culture through these languages? If so how can he guarantee that these languages can effectively convey his culture and world view? And if he has to switch to an African language, what happens to the large audience that English offers him? Joe Ushie in his "Many Voices", (50-51) summarizes the major positions adopted by African scholars on this debate as follows:

i. Those who, following Obi Wali, have continued to advocate the use of African indigenous language. Example Ngugi wa Thiong'O and Ime Ikideu.
ii. Those who have followed the sophisticated formal English expression, example Okigbo, Soyinka, Dennis Brutus, J. P. Clark etc.
iii. Those who following Jonhernz John have suggested that European languages for instance English be used in such a way that the languages bear the African cultural experience while remaining intelligible internationally. The poetry of Okot P. Bitek and Kofi Awoonor illustrate this category.

The key question here is: How can the African poet continue to use non-African languages, and in the printed form, and still ensure that the African folklore and culture, which are thus transferred preserve their identity as African cultural heritage. In other words, what linguistic choices does the African poet has to make that would ensure that his oral culture is preserved even in print and foreign tongue rather than swept into the sea of world literature and culture without race? This is important as it often happens that tributary contributions to major world civilizations that had left no residue of their origin had been unacknowledged and subsequently appropriated by other cultures. The dominant features of African orality in written African poetry include the presence of repetition, the use of refrain, proverb, the pronoun and the evocative and also other elements of performances.

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Drawing examples from Niyi Osundare's *Songs of the Market Place*, discuss the African cultural heritage in written African poetry.

3.2 Negritude and Its Philosophy

About the origin of Negritude, Jack (1996) quoted Kesteloot on the coming of a 'new literature':

> With the awakening of the African continent, demanding its freedom, it is time to recognize that black writers of the French language form a comprehensive literary movement. As early as 1948, "Black Orpheus," Jean-Paul Sartre's brilliant preface to L. S. Senghor's *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de langue française* ["Anthology of the New Negro and Malagasy Poetry in French"] saluted the accession of the poets of "Negritude." Today, everything about this poetry, its abundance and quality, its diversity of style and form, its incontestable originality, prompts us to consider these neo-African authors as creators of an authentic literary school.

According to Timibofa (2007), Negritude is a cultural movement launched in 1930 by Paris-French speaking black graduate students from France Colonies in Africa and the Caribbean territories. The intellectuals converged around issues of identity and black internationalist initiatives to combat French imperialism and found solidarity in affirming their pride in their shared black identity and African heritage and reclaiming Africa self-determination, self-reliance and self-respect. In addition their struggle signalled an awakening of race consciousness among blacks living at Diaspora. It provided a renewed hope that at last the disfigured and blatantly weaved images of Africa were re-created and given scholarly and magnificent representation. It is uncontested that this African renaissance, healed several wounds of African all over the world: "Today the Black man raises up his head…He refuses henceforth a white imposed destiny…He says no to servitude and rejects the prejudices heaped on his race(Lilyan).

The guiding principle of Negritude is broadly, a return to African cultural values in the face of gross attack by colonial values and its history dates back to 1932 when a group of West Indian blacks including Etienne Lero, Rene Menil and Jules Monnerot brought out a journal called *Legitime Defence*. The journal celebrates Africa and laid the philosophy which inspired the negritude poets. In 1934, a set of students including Leon Damas, Aime Cesaire, Leopold Sedar Senghor and later Birago Diop and Ousmane Soce founded another journal, *L/Etudiant Noir*. Those associated with this journal became negritude poets. According to Aime Cesaire (1969) "Negritude is the simple recognition of the fact of being a Negro and acceptance of its cultural and historical consequences" (quoted in Mohammed).

Senghor sees it as:

> The sum total of black Africa's cultural values'
> …the cultural heritage, the values and above
> All the spirit of Negro- African civilization'
> 'the re-affirmation our being, and development of
> African cultural values.
> Ikeddeh avers that the term has political overtones within its cultural frame work:
> This is first of all negation…rejection of the

Other, refusal to assimilate… rejection of the
Other is self-affirmation.'
… so that our negritude should be effective instrument for a liberation.'

Moreover, Irele (1965) in his "What is Negritude" also noted, that:

> The term thus has been used in a broad and general sense to denote the black world in its historical being in opposition to the West and in this way resumes the total consciousnesses of belonging to the black race as well as awareness of the objectives, historical and sociological implication of that fact.

In other words, Negritude is is a movement with a strong and solid philosophy that everything called or termed as black is beautiful and the consciousness of being superior and never inferior to any alien culture. Not only that; but also proudly building the consciousness to radically defend it at all course; even at dagger points to refurbish her image. Therefore, Negritude can said to be a movement geared towards creating a black renaissance, accepting our state of being black, appreciating it, rejecting foreign influence on our culture, and raising our culture above theirs through conscious assertion of its beauty and ethical standard.

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Examine the concept of Negritude and how it is employed for the affirmation of African cultural heritage.

3.3 Cultural Affirmation: Specific Aspects

Negritude poetry is geared towards affirming Africa's cultural heritage (Timibofa, 2007). However, to achieve this, Negritude poets reflect and capture these integral specific aspects of African culture: language, dress code, food, songs, dance, rituals, festival, norms, custom, rites, folklore, myth, legend, colour etc. in their poetry in comparison to the west, thereby foregrounding Africa's for general appreciation and acceptance. This is because culture itself is fully expressed in these areas. In the words of Isidore:

> One of the most notable nationalist ideologies of this country has been the philosophy of negritude, especially as propounded by Leopold Sedar Senghor in his poetry and essays. The aim of negritude was to project everything African-the colour black, the physical features of the African and his environment, the human quality of African culture, etc. as beautiful and salutary.

In his work, the poet tries to demostrate how language is used and expresses its beauty and he does so by code mixing and switching, neologism and transliteration. Sometimes, the poet also attempts to write in his own language so as to reach his local audience. In reality, the radical school of thought argues that literature be composed and expressed in our indigenous languages. In their view, until when African literature is written in African languages, is it not African. According to Obi, (2007):

> Until these writers and their midwives accept the fact that any true African Writer must be written in African languages, they would be merely pursuing a dead end which can only lead to sterility, uncreativity and frustration.

In his view, Ngugi asserted that African literature must be written in Africa languages: "written literature and oration, one the main means by which a particular language transmit the combats of the world contained in the intuitive it carries languages". He also argues that the only way to affirm that aspect of our cultural heritage is to express it in our own way. Okara also supports this argument in his poem that western culture is nothing but confusion and full of complexities. It is also against this background that Achebe tries to create what he calls new English; that diluted or Africanize English to carry African interpretation and meanings all in an attempt to glorify the language. He asserts below:

> The price world language must be prepared to pay is submission to many different kinds of use. The African writer should aim to use English in a way that brings out his message best without altering the languages (sic) to the extent that its value as a medium of international exchange will be lost.

Similarly, the African customs, norms and attires are also celebrated as a way of expressing culture. African poets deliberately celebrate the African made clothes, rich customs and norms in their poems. They do so in their poetry to attract global attention (Timibofa, 2007). In addition, the various African foods and medicines which are other aspects of African culture are celebrated by the poets, portraying their qualities as higher than foreign delicacies and medications. This can be seen in Okot p'Bitek *Song of Lawino & Song of Ocol*. In the poem, Bitek compared African food and drugs and foreign made medicine and food to affirm the quality of African made food and medicine.

African poets were also known to draw attention of readers to African myth and rituals, the performed norms, songs and rite during those events. They do this to show the uniqueness of African made products. Thus, the poems of Okara, Clark, Osofisan, Soyinka etc. and more importantly, David, Cesaire, Birogo, and Senghor were composed to foreground these different aspects of African culture.

Other aspects of culture celebrated are the skin colour, lips, legs and other parts to affirm their uniqueness in comparison to the European. Hence, the negritude poets attempted to capture all these aspects of African culture in their poems. To this end, Muhammed (2011) has this to say:

> Skimming through African works with or without negritude inclination, we see similar sentiments and sensibilities. Senghor's "I will pronounce Your Name", carries out re-assessment of beauty of African culture of the poets Africaness.

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Using Senghor's "I will Pronounce Your Name", discuss the theme of cultural affirmation in written African poetry.

3.4 African Poets and their Affirmatory Poems

One of the the recurrent themes in African poetry, is an attempt at affirmation of African cultural identities. According to Timibofa (2007), Aime Cesaire, in his popular poem, "Return to my Native Land", writes:

> my negritude not a stone.
> Nor deafness flung out against the clamour of the day
> my negritude not a white speck of dead water
> on the dead eye of the earth
> my negritude is neither tower nor cathedral
> it plunges into the red flesh of all soil
> it plunges into blazing flesh of the sky
> my negritude riddles with holes
> the dense affliction of its worthy patience….

The poet coined the term to emphasise and maintain the ideology behind the concept so as to ensure its message is clear and achieve its intention. Also, in another poem, 'Black Woman', Senghor celebrates the African woman and her beauty. Using imageries, he adores her naturally endowed features and wishes that she remains with him forever. In this poem, Senghor begins by praising the addresses colour, which according to him, is life and her form which is beauty. He affirms that it is in her shadows he grows which is Africa. In stanza two, he stated that her blackness strikes him like the flesh of an eagle. He stressed further that, even her nakedness itself is beautiful. As he puts it: Naked woman, black woman clothed with your colour/which is life with your form is beauty/in your shadows I have grown the greatness of/your hand was laid upon my eyes (Naked) lines -4) (Timibofa, 2007). Senghor went further to celebrate her voice and the song produced. He does so to show that only in Africa can this kind of rendition be found. Again, he appreciates her skin and her hair stating that he has to do so urgently before she answers the call of nature: "Before jealous fate turns you to ashes to feed roots of life" (Naked. line 22).

Similarly, David Diop in Senghor's tradition affirms some aspects of African culture in his poems. In his "vulture" Diop argues that Africa had an organized system of Education that taught people the basics of ethics. According to him, these institutions groomed African on relationship and how to treat man humanly. He asserts in this poem that, the system of education introduced by the European is too light to be assimilated because it never taught people to be human and also preach a philosophy of segregation which is alien to Africa. In his words: "of foreigners who did not seem human "Who knew all books but did not know love" (Vulture, lines 12-13). David implies here that the Whiteman brought a system of education that does not practice what it teaches. Therefore to this form of education can at best be called *shadows* which is why; it kicks them on their faces (Timibofa, 2007).

David also condemned their monotonous kind of music and songs that are not thought provoking and inspiring like Africa's beats… "And the monotone rhythm of the paternoster" (Vultures, line 8). Again in his "Africa" he made us to understand Africa had her form of storytelling and praise poetry before the colonial invasion. In his

flash back technique and historical allusion he brings to bear how he came to know about Africa through the songs and rendition about African from his mother. He puts this way*;* "Africa my grandmother sings of in the far distant river" (lines 2-3). In a more radical and militant manner Bernard Dadie affirms certain aspects of its culture. In his poem "I give you thanks my God" Bernard Dadie affirms that his colour, hair, hips, legs and skin are unique this is because both are black which symbolize beauty. David asserts in this poem that black is a universal colour while white is an improvised colour for an occasion. He states that he thanks God for his nose which is not pointed because it will enable him to breathe well. Also he appreciates God for his thick skin which according to him allows him to stand out. Same thing applies to his short leg that allows him to walk the whole earth without weakness.

Dennis Brutus does same in his poem "At a Funeral" though dedicated to a dead friend who died after been awarded a doctorate degree, Dennis, in this poem was not only concerned about her fame but her black beauty which will soon be dissolved into mother earth by worms. He affirms her dark colour and even the graves' panting which were also black that will be lowered. His jealousy is that this black African beauty that shines as gold will no longer be seen again; "**b**lack, green and gold at sunset. Pageantry and stubble graves: expectant of eternity…" (lines 1-2)

Gabriel Okara (1963) affirms same in his "Piano and Drums" that everything about African culture is complex and incomprehensible. He noted that the tone produce from the piano which represents European is cumbersome and does not communicate any meaning to its listeners, contrary to his drum that is comprehensive and the voice produces is inspiring and mind blowing. In this poem Okara draws our attention to this reality that African culture was at its best before its rape by the European. He uses his flashback device to give us a picture of Africa when it was still a virgin drawing our attention to the fact that African culture is the best and should be embraced. Isidore Okpewho, lends his voice again: "*the aim was to demonstrate that Africa has had, since time immemorial traditions that should be respected and culture to be proud of"* Also he tries to tell us how peaceful and harmonious Africa was before its sudden invasion by the colonizers:

> When at break of day at a riverside…
> Then I hear a wailing piano solo
> Speaking of complex ways…
> And I lost in the labyrinth of its complexities. (Piano, 23 - 24)

Gabriel ends the poem on a note of confusion indicating that at best what the western culture is known for is confusion and complexities. In a more vivid way, the Ugandan poet Okot P'Bitek shows us beautiful portraits of Africa in his poem "Song of Lawino and Song of Ocol". In this poem Okot reputes the colonial claims about Africa of being dark and black. In this poem okot affirms that indeed Africa is black but that is her unique identity. He takes time to compare his Alcholi culture from the western through his stubborn character Lawino who represents an advocate of the African culture. She defends the African culture radically and with all seriousness to ensure that she has recreates African image that has been misrepresented by the western world.

Like black America writer high Langston asserts same: We the creators of a new generation want to give expression to our personality without shame or fear" It is same vision that Okot p' aims to achieve and we see his portraiture of the western culture represented by Clementine as he uses Lawino to satirize and mock her: Hear what he says:

Brother, when you see Clementine!
The beautiful one aspires
To look like a white women;
Her lips are red-hot like glowing charcoal,
She resembles wild cat
That has dipped it's month in blood
Her mouth is like raw jaws
It looks like an open ulcer,
Like the mouth of a field!
Tina dust power on her face
And it loves so pace;
She resembles a wizard
Getting ready for the midnight dance.
(Lawino p.37 lines 17-32)

Okot went further to describe her physical appearance which according to him is disgusting:

You feel a little pity for her!
Her breasts are completely
Shriveled up,
They are all fold dry skins
They have made nests of cotton wool… (P. 39 lines 28 -30)

Okot went to mock their dance styles which he compares with African styles:

I am completely ignorant
Of the dances of foreigners
Holding each other
Tighting, tighting
In public,
I cannot
I am ashamed
Dancing without a song
Dancing solemnly like wizards
Without respect; drunk…
If someone tries
To force me to dance this
Dance
I feel like hanging myself
Feet first… (Page 47, lines 8-23)

He argues that his Acholi songs and dances styles are far better than theirs

…I sang sweetly…
Nobody's voice was sweeter
Than mine!
And in the area
I sang solo
Loud and clear
Like the *ogilo* bird
At sunset…

Okot tries in the poem to demonstrate that his Acholi (African) culture is the best using similes and metaphors to show us in the poem affirming that everything the Whiteman brought was already here from same to song, clock, food, school and even medicine which functions better than the western (Timibofa, 2007).

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Examine in detail, how African poets use their poetry in response to cultural crises created by longterm colonisation of the continent, citing many examples from written African poems.

4.0 CONCLUSION

Negritude poetry generally rejected colonialism and the policy of "Assimilation" which sought to make all colonial subjects Frenchmen. They opted for a celebration of African womanhood, blackhood, the ancestors and their cultures. Some of their features were also political and denounced the oppression and exploitation in the colonial system. From the foregoing it has been made clear that African poetry is a by-product of cultural affirmation. African writers like the negritude poet and other writers use poetry to show a contrast between their culture and the western in a humble attempt to bring out the African culture that dies into westernism. Hence, the poets through this media show that everything black which the Whiteman perceives with contempt is more beautiful than the artificially made white that is not natural as Africa's.

5.0 SUMMARY

In this unit you have learned the followings:

- How written African poetry explore African cultural heritage
- The concept and the philosophy of Negritude
- The Negritude's aspects of cultural affirmation
- How some African poets employ their poems for African cultural affirmation

6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

Read and answer the questions below:

- Discuss how written African poetry manifest African cultural heritage
- Explain the concept of Negritude
- Highlight the philosophy of Negritude

- Discuss the Negritude's aspects of cultural affirmation
- How do African poets manifests African cultural affirmation in their poems

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UNIT 5 POETS IN EXILE

CONTENTS

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Exile occupies a vital place in poetic exploration in particular and literary conception in general. This may not be unconnected with the fact that human history world over is characterized by elements and moments of dislocation at one point or the other. George Lamming's (1960: 24) asserts that "The exile is… a universal figure… and to be in exile is to be alive". This unit will discuss the concept of exile poetry with specific references to the African poets' exilic experiences together with citing relevant examples from their poems. Below are some of the objectives of this unit:

2.0 OBJECTIVES

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- Discuss the concept of exile literature
- Show the relationship between exile and African experience
- Discuss the concept of exile in written African poetry
- Provide some illustrations of African exile poetry

3.0 MAIN CONTENT

3.1 The Concept of Exile

Considered in the orthodox sense for the purpose of convenient discursive departure, exile, that result of dislocation from one's native land, occupies a conspicuous place in poetic exploration in particular and literary conception in general. This is perhaps so because human history world over is characterized by elements and moments of dislocation at one point or the other. The veracity of this remark is underscored by an assertion as George Lamming's (1960: 24) that "The exile is… a universal figure… and to be in exile is to be alive". But perhaps there must be an admission of an extremely allegorical twist to this notion of Lamming's apprehension of the concept. This is in view of the fact that the context from which the assertion extracts articulation revolves around the capacity of the political to engender estrangement. More literally, therefore, exile must be viewed as a human condition

which is defined by dispersal or drift usually against the wish of an individual or community.

The fact of humanity's vulnerability to exile is evident in the various circumstances and incidents by which it is necessitated. These circumstances and incidents range from war to famine to political crisis and in some cases, a dissident stance. It thus becomes understandable why the literary contents of peoples' cultural traditions, whether oral or written, are replete with engagements of dislocation. To return to the exposition on exile, the triumphs and tribulations of it are indeed expressed and evident in the representation of the Jewish race in biblical times as nomadic. The simplicity of this view is however blurred in the Pauline hermeneutics which inverts the literal understanding of the Jewish race by introducing an allegorical twist by which as many as are converted to the Christian faith, a theology that is complicitous with the civilizing alibi of western colonialism is to be Jewish (Daniel Boyarin and Jonathan Boyarin 1995: 332). Nevertheless, the all-embracing, spiritualizing liberalism of this philosophy is thoroughly compromised by the historical persecutions to which genealogical Jews have often been subjected especially in the western world, so much so that, the word Jew is a metaphor for the dreaded, rootless and rejected "Other" against whom all measures of exclusion must be executed (Gorge Mosse 1995: 196). Not surprisingly, therefore, exile, as soberly reviewed by Edward Said (2001: 173) with insightful acuity, invariably becomes that strangely compelling condition whose "achievements… are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind".

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Give a critical discussion of the concept of exile.

3.2 Exile and African Experience

In terms of Black Africa's first major dispersal of diasporic magnitude to the West, the period is generally, but not exclusively, agreed to date back to the 16th century. Nevertheless, scholarly evidence abounds to the effect that it is not in all cases that the "pre-Columbian scheme" (Okpewho 1999: xii) can be wished away. The circumstances of this dispersal were as epochal as they were evolutionary. Again, we would choose to invoke Okpewho's paradigm here, which identifies three imperatives in the said dispersal and making of Black diaspora in the West. The first of the imperatives is the "labor imperative" which stresses the era of the West's unbridled quest for the slave labour of Africa's "sons and daughters" via the agency of the trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. Logically following on the trail of the first is the "territorial imperative" which, in response to America's monopoly and foreclosure of any further European colonization of Latin America, pushed European imperial powers to convergently scramble and partition Africa. The third imperative is the "extractive imperative", an era "when Africa's mineral wealth had become the main focus of western interest in the continent"8. In their cumulative significance, the imperatives have built a major Black presence in the West. Indeed, the historical circumstances under which the unenviable condition of exile translated into diaspora have resulted in a dispersal experience. However, this experience for the most part continues to point to how the posterity of the uprooted Black race lives through a world with evidence to the

fact of "the loss of something left behind" on the African continent. This is essentially because of the tribulations that have dogged the lives of the African diaspora in the West. Of course, while this view is a basis for why Africa remains crucial in the discussion of Black diaspora, it does not fail to inspire counter-critical perspectives which interrogate this view as one may find in articulations of the sentiments of the Black Atlantism as advocated by Paul Gilroy and others in this school of thought. In this case, Black Atlantism, among other things, seeks to transcend the question of race or soul in the contemplation of Africa and its diaspora (Michael Echeruo 1999:3).

However, to say that persecution is all there is to the configuration of African diaspora in the West is to miss the mark. The point returns the discussion to the "Black presence" phenomenon especially in America, which Okpewho (1999: xiii-xiv) contends is manifest in every area of the American configuration: from culture to literature to the making and consolidation of the American capitalist economy. To the extent that there is a measure of logic in the foregoing argument, exile with respect to the conditions of African diaspora originally formulated through the historical antecedent of slavery must as well be considered from an angle that transcends the calamity that defines the initial expulsion of people from their homeland. To echo Nikos Papastergiadis (1993: 1), the apprehension of exile must transcend inflections of political banishment and incorporate, among other things, "the dislocation of peoples by economic pressures and (more substantially as in the case of the bulk of Black diaspora) the redefinition of values and norms through cultural transformation. In this sense exile embraces the totality of ruptures that pervade the mechanisms and constitute the dynamism of social change."

In the process of establishing the genesis of African large scale migration/exile to the West, it is also important to incorporate the memory of the trade and its aftermath for African exile. This is in order to show what subsequently followed on the continent, especially as colonialism was a follow-up to the antecedent of the trade. Once this historical liberty is granted, the discourse of exile in African literature begins to have its appeal of logic as it presents a holistic approach since the place of the continent as a primordial homeland for its diasporas in the West cannot be obscured. Moreover, it also provides the groundwork for the possibility of presenting an argument about the continuum of African exile in the West, and showing how the dimensions have changed over the centuries owing to the ever-changing historical epochs the continent has witnessed.

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Examine the African experience in exile.

3.2 Exile and Written African Poetry

The engagement of African poets of the first generation with exile was basically cultural, giving a strong validity to the "importance of the language-place disjunction" (Ashcroft, et al 1989) in the construction of the post-colonial realities. Beginning with the poetics of Negritude as most exemplified by Sedar Senghor, one encounters a reaction to colonialism and its consequences of disjunction which is that of a double

alienation from African heritage and that of the West. The attempt at reclaiming the lost African ontological space and its endowments becomes the focal point of Senghor and other negritude artists. Among other things, the imposition of the paradigm of western modernity on Africans and the ambiguity of identity it created in them due to the fact that the conflation of indigenous and western epistemological practices was indeed a crisis in itself. One way of resolving the conflict as exemplified by Senghor, was to pursue a quest for synthesis both in "life and poetry" (Mortimer, 2002). This brings into perspective the cultural exile that resulted from the contact with western culture and its impact on Africa. Such synthesis through which Senghor finds some kind of parallel between, say, "Sine and Seine", goes to show the dilemma of cultural exile. Senghor "combined Sine with Siene, the rivers of Africa and Europe, knowledge of the culture and traditions of his native Senegal with that of his adopted French heritage". This is because caught between both ends of conflicting epistemologies, an attempt to internalize and become an embodiment of both can be regarded as some kind of metaphorical return. This way the cultural exile is able to utilize the knowledge of both worlds to redefine his identity.

Christopher Okigbo dwells on the same theme in Heavensgate where his atonement becomes vicarious as there is a sense in which it speaks for the pains of the severance of the modern African from the otherwise authentic African culture as a result of the purchase of colonialism on him in all its ramifications. For Okigbo therefore, exile is painfully spiritual as it is physical. The cultural implications of his inability to take up the path charted for him by the dictates of tradition are not only regretted, they also go to validate the Spanish etymological underpinning of exile as "los despistados", that is, the disoriented (Wojciehowski, 1992). Also from West Africa, Soyinka's "The Telephone Conversation" touches on the theme of exile, this time in the physical sense. Similarly, in the poetry of Portuguese-speaking writers, the preoccupation with the condition of the exilic among writers of this generation is remarkable; Antonio Jacinto's "Poem of Alienation" comes to mind here. With Okot p'Bitek, the issue assumes a grand dimension of extended metaphors as one finds in Song of Lawino and Song of Ocol. In both, there is a contextualization of the socio-cultural tensions of exile. There is however a parallel twist to the notion of exile among poets of the first generation in South Africa, as it is in the main an experience engendered by the aberrations of the politics of apartheid. It is in fact for this reason that Udenta (1996) asserts that during this period, it was impossible to talk about South African poetry without discussing exile. This trope is most represented by the poetry of Brutus.

In a similar vein, various critical works have been done on African poetry in general and the concept of exile in particular. In the context of the first generation prominent among such was Ken Goodwin's *Understanding African Poetry*. The work consciously selects poets of English expression in a manner that places it, even two decades after, as a critical intervention not only intent on recognizing the accomplishment of the poets, but making statements of canon formation at the same time. In understudying the impact of western tradition on these poets the journey motif associated with modernity is also manifest. This is because either in the literal or metaphoric sense, the internalization of western poetic traditions and the influence on the works of the African poets speaks to the question of exile which, as has been seen,

is crucial in one way or the other to the understanding of poets in this generation. The list runs from West to Southern Africa: Christopher Okigbo, Wole Soyinka, Gabriel Okara, Lenrie Peters, John Pepper Clark, Kofi Awoonor, Taban lo Liyong, Okot p'Bitek, Mazisi Kunene and Dennis Brutus. Earlier Romanus Egudu had published *Modern African Poetry and the African Predicament* which was linguistically all encompassing by looking at the commitment of African poetry to the socio-political realities of sub-Saharan Africa.

Bound by the paradigm of periodization, one is constrained to assess the works of poets of the second generation against the backdrop of the influence of their emergence. Their preoccupation with exile becomes more literal than allegorical; that is, while it is possible to locate part of their thrust within the project of cultural reclamation, their poetry within the context of exile bears more "of the material forces of politics [and] economics". This is achieved as they confront in the immediate sense, mementos of the dead end of post-independence euphoria, an attitude informed by the alienation agenda constituted in the manner of the ruling class which leaves most of the countries in an array of crisis. Invariably, the recognition of their poetry as postcolonial in relation to exile becomes more challenging as it necessarily takes into account the trend of human migration from the latter part of the 20th century especially as a global phenomenon. As Joseph (1999) succinctly puts it:

> Migration has become a way of life in the latter part of the twentieth century. The large scale displacement of people from the rural to the urban or across nations has heightened the precariousness of arbitrary boundaries while fuelling contemporary identifications with ossified national identities. The 1970s in particular witnessed a global reconfiguration of national citizenship. As new nations contended with older ones, new geopolitical arrangements neocolonialism, globalization, structural adjustment shifted relations of power in less unilateral directions, creating multiple nodes of transnational interrelatedness. In the process, peoples around the world have aspired to conception of world citizenship while also asserting their particular social identities.

Locating the thrust of the second generation of African poets within this trajectory is apposite, as a combination of factors has resulted in the articulation of their African stint to what has come to be identified as the continual "restless movement of peoples and cultures" (Venn 2006). Yet it is also for this reason that Venn, like many theorists of postcolonialism, insists that the contemporary disposition of the world order demands a development of "a [new] critical postcolonial standpoint that extends the focus and terrain of postcolonial theory. By so doing, an understanding of the works of these poets will primarily stem from the contemporary workings of the representation of space and movement across spaces, a tendency within postcolonial discourse which is otherwise construed as "nomadism" (Lowe. 1993). However, before yielding to the ideal of the global expressed in the contention that "the spatial framing of historical arguments and the 'visualization' of events is not simply a neutral process independent of the events… 'out there'" (Cameron and Ronen, 2004), one must first and foremost rivet on these "historical arguments" in their African neutrality before considering what possible

configuration they extract from the "event out there". Just as the nations and regions on the continent are different, so too are there different and various challenges which have in the past two or three decades induced exile. This is so especially in the Africans' search for better fortunes thought as attainable in the First World, and identified as a tendency on the part of the "formerly colonized people to turn to migration as an option to living difficult lives" (Dorkor, 2005).

To start with, what then are the circumstances that produce in these countries of destination the psyche of hostility? Secondly, what in particular are the realities of exile as an intimate experience of Africans? It is for this reason, whatever one encounters in the works of these writers should not be seen as emanating exclusively from the authors' experiences, but rather should appropriately be gleaned as representative of the much larger community of African exiles for whom they have become advocates, as "representations of colonialism, nationhood, postcoloniality, the typology of rulers, their powers, [and] corruptions" (Ahmad, 1992) on the one hand; and on the other, the purchase of western neo-liberalism as well as structures of exclusion against immigrants along race, class, and gender lines in the First World. Therefore, even when the experience being related can in some cases be interpreted to be personal as in the case of the Malawian poet Jack Mapanje, it has to be gleaned more substantially as speaking for many other fellow Africans who have fallen victim to exile. The obligation of speaking on behalf of others by writers should not come as a surprise once we bracket them in the category of intellectuals. For the intellectual, according to Said:

> is an individual endowed with a faculty for representing, embodying, articulating a message, a view, an attitude, philosophy or opinion to, as well as for, a public. [He is also] someone who cannot easily be co-opted by governments or corporations, and whose raison d'etre is to represent all those people and issues that are routinely forgotten or swept under the rug. (Said, 1996)

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Describe the poetic experiences of African poets in exile with examples from their different poems.

4.0 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, writing with specific response to the conditions of exile and the response of writers to it, Guyer (1997) states that "writers' fates provide direct testimony to those conditions, and their capacity to write makes accessible an experience that they share with many others who are less artistically endowed." Thus by virtue of their artistic endowment, these writers are obligated to articulate the burdens of their contemporary psycho-social circumstances among which is exile. They all have not however experienced exile the same way; neither have they all responded to it in the same way. This in itself makes the study all the more exciting and intriguing at the same time. Nevertheless, the works of African poets dealing with the issue of exile and migration are united by how across different regions the writers have been

able to explore those factors and conditions, both internal and external, which have induced the experience of exile in Africans especially in the past two to three decades.

5.0 SUMMARY

In this unit you have learned the followings:

- The concept of exile literature
- The relationship between exile and African experience
- The concept of exile in written African poetry

6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

Read and answer the questions below:

1) What do you understand by the concept of exile literature?
2) What are relationships between exile and African experience?
3) Discuss the concept of exile in written African poetry
4) Provide some illustrations of African exile poetry

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UNIT 6 NEW PROTEST VOICES
CONTENTS

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The civil war poetry in Africa is informed by the several civil wars fought in the African continent over the years, most notably the Nigerian civil war which was fought from 1967-1970. Civil wars in Africa are usually caused by socio-political and ethnic tensions. Corruption, tribalism, nepotism, military incursion and dictatorship usually serve as background to the outburst of a civil war. Alter/Native Poetry on the other hand refers to the generation of poets that wrote in the 1970s and 1980s. The poets are referred to as the younger generation by Okon (2013) and were tutored and influenced by the poets of the earlier generation. Their poetry was mass-oriented and it employed the Marxist ideological stand. Niger Delta or Ecopoetry developed mainly in the 1990s. In this tradition the poets are mainly from Nigeria's Niger Delta Region. The poets mostly take it more personal due to the activities of the oil companies which exploit their crude and destroy their flora and fauna without any succour whatsoever. However, Protest Poetry in Southern Africa results from the region being open to multi-cultural contact for the longest period, and this has had far-reaching implications and ramifications in the shaping of South African literature in general and poetry in particular. Below are some of the objectives of this unit:

2.0 OBJECTIVES

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- Discuss the civil war poetry in Africa
- Explain the concept of alter/native poetry
- Examine Niger Delta/Ecopoetry of the Delta region of Nigeria
- Trace the development of protest poetry in South Africa

3.0 MAIN CONTENT

3.1 Civil War Poetry

According to Orhero (2017), civil war poetry in Africa is informed by the numerous civil wars fought in the African continent over the years and most notably the Nigerian civil war which was fought from 1967-1970. Civil wars in Africa usually

resulted from socio-political and ethnic tensions. Corruption, tribalism, nepotism, military incursion and dictatorship usually serve as background to the outburst of civil wars in the continent. For instance in 1965, Nigeria was torn apart by the widespread political violence of the general elections which all started in the Western regional political crisis of 1964. On the African continent, political chaos engulfed the Republic of Congo (Kinshasa) later Zaire; disagreements between the regional based parties and the centre and the consequent conflicts that resulted, led to the assassination of the Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba in 1962; and finally civil war. Others include civil wars in Liberia and Sierra-Leone.

The Nigerian civil war was fought between the Biafran secessionists who were mainly Igbo and the Federal Republic of Nigeria. The war was fought to keep Nigeria as a united federation against the secession and formation of the Biafran Republic. This secession was informed by ethnic tensions, military incursion and human rights abuses. Civil war poetry usually thematises pain, the horrors of war, grief, anguish, hunger, famine, death, etc. It employs techniques which include realism, symbolism, imagery and satire. Some of the known civil war poets are J.P. Clark, Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Mamman Vatsa, Christopher Okigbo, Pol Ndu, among others.

J.P. Clark's "Dirge" is a written African civil war poem. The poem thematises grief, pain, loss and destruction. The poet persona says: "Show me a house where nobody has died, /Death is not what you cannot undo/yet a son is killed and a/Daughter is given..." (Clark, 1970). In these lines, pain is conveyed by the theme of death. Death is so pervasive that there is no house where none has died. This is the true image of war. Iyabode Daniel believes that Clark decries, in this poem, the loss of community and nationalism among Nigerians "over and above his pain over the loss of his friends" (152). Eyoh confirms the foregoing when he asserts that the poems in Clark's *Casualities*, in which "Dirge" is found, deal with "violence, pain, loss, and sorrow [...] with war" (Luke, 2005). In terms of style, the poem is simplistic and it employs vivid imagery and realism to convey the war experience. (Orhero, 2017)

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Give a detail discussion on civil war poetry citing relevant examples from some African poems.

3.2 Alter/Native Poetry

"Alter-Native" is a term coined to suggest home grown ideas, concepts, theories which are typically African and which take cognizance of all informing cultural and sociological imperatives (Dasylva, 1999). The term "alter/native" was employed by Funso Aiyejina to refer to the generation of poets that wrote in the 1970s and 1980s. These poets are referred to as the younger generation by Okon (2013). These poets were tutored and influenced by the poets of the earlier generation. Their poetry was mass-oriented and it employed the Marxist ideological stand. They wrote against the background of military dictatorship, corruption, ethnic unrest and mass hysteria. They also wrote in simple diction and employed oral poetic strategies in the poems. Their themes were centred largely on corruption, military dictatorship, disillusionment,

revolution, nepotism, etc. Their techniques include realism, oral aesthetics and satire, among others. Some of the poets include Tanure Ojaide, Niyi Osundare, Jack Mapanje, Kofi Anyidoho, Funso Aiyejina, Ossie Enekwe, Harry Garuba, Jared Angira, Steve Chimombo, among others (Orhero, 2017).

A representative poem of this period is Odia Ofeimun's "How Can I Sing?" This poem discusses corruption at its worst manifestation and the role of the poet in treating societal ills. These themes are laid bare in the lines: "I cannot blind myself/to putrefying carcasses in the market place/pulling giant vultures/from the sky". In this verse, the poet thematises societal ills and refers to them as "putrefying carcasses". These ills, caused by the corrupt leaders, attract "giant vultures" which are symbols of war, death and decay. The poet, however, assures the readers of his commitment to fighting these ills by saying that he cannot blind himself. Stylistically, this poem uses symbolism as a form of satire. The poet uses the symbol of "carcasses" and "market place" to represent the death of the African society and its propensity towards corruption (Orhero, 2017).

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Discuss the thematic preoccupation of alter/native poets.

3.3 Niger Delta/Ecopoetry

Orhero, discusses the Niger Delta poetry in his "Trends in Modern African Poetic Composition: Identifying the Canons" (2017). According to him, this canon of written African poetry developed mainly in the 1990s. The poets in this tradition are mainly from Nigeria's Niger Delta Region. Other poets, who write mainly eco poetry, come from a wide variety of backgrounds. These poets all have something in common; they decry the constant destruction of our natural and environmental habitats.

The Niger Delta poets, however, take it more personal due to oil companies which exploit their crude and destroy their flora and fauna without any succour whatsoever. Nigeria made a great deal of fortune from the oil boom of the 1980s. This fortune was made at the cost of the Niger Deltans whose lands/environments have been desecrated, fishes poisoned, animals killed and human inhabitants sent packing. The ecopoets decry the destruction of the ecosystem by human activities and writtenisation. They predict a final decline in the ecology which will be detrimental to all life. The Niger Delta and Ecopoets write using satire, symbolism and realism. Some of the poets in these traditions include Tanure Ojaide, Ogaga Ifowodo, Niyi Osundare, Onookome Okome, Joe Ushie, Bassey Nnimmo, Ibiwari Ikiriko, etc.

Moreover, in Ifowodo's "Jesse", we find the themes of pain, bitterness and environmental devastation. The poet decries the ill maintenance of oil pipelines which causes oil spillage that kills and destroys the ecology. He describes these oil pipes "as corroded and cracked/ by the heat of their burden". The poet also decries the destruction of forests and natural habitations saying: "The forest quivered as trunk after trunk snapped/and a nameless rage wagged greenfingered/branches in the air as they fell to the hungry axe". All these inform the thematic thrust of Niger Delta and Eco poetry. Stylistically, the poet employs symbolism to represent some of the factors militating against the ecology and the Niger Delta at large. An example of such symbol is the

“hungry axe” which stands for man’s destructive tendencies to his own environment (Orhero, 2017).

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Discuss the environmental concern of the Niger Delta poets.

3.4 Protest Poetry in South Africa

South Africa has been the region in Africa open to multi-cultural contact for the longest period, and this has had far-reaching implications and ramifications in the shaping of South African literature in general and poetry in particular.

For written poetry by a person of non-European descent in South Africa, the earliest attempt was claimed to be a hymn composed by Ntsikana who has been described by Albert Gerard as “the first African Christian bard” (1971). Ntsikana’s endeavour offers the first individual composition by a, black writer in Southern Africa as well as the first attempt at linking “traditional oral techniques with a new cultural situation” (Jones, 1973). Ntsikana was rivalled by Makana whose brand of poetic hymns emanated from his distrust of the British. This distrust was evident in his propagation of a separatist type of Christianity.

Lovedale Mission station, a product of the 1820 settlers, marked the beginning of what was to be a milestone in South African Black literature in general. The establishment of the Lovedale Press became very significant as this institution became the “hub of African intellectual life”. This was clearly “represented in the activities of... the Lovedale Training Society and the Lovedale Literary Society” (Mphahlele, 1992). The influence of the two societies became more and more evident when the educated People also formed the core of the so-called political elite of the day. Proof of this was the delegation of John Tenio Jabavu (1859-1921) and Walter B Rubusana (1858-1916) to Britain in 1901. These were highly educated writers and it was hoped that this could help them influence the British against the enforcement of the colour bar in the Union’s constitution. These writers continued to show faith in the customs and established practices of their community with its concomitant traditional poetry and lore. As well as writing articles of a political nature, Rubusana gathered a number of proverbs and praise poems and published them in Labanta. Later on he wrote A History of South Africa from a Native Standpoint (circa 1907) and became one of the founder-members of the Native Congress in 1912 (Mpha hlele, 1992).

When Vilakazi (1906-1947), a poet and academic, contended that there was a need for Zulu poetry to follow Western devices such as rhyme and rhythm while utilizing the African experience as content (Mphahlele, 1992), a fierce debate on aesthetics ensued. Herbert Dhlomo (1903-1956), a poet whose composition bakeaseslhaasandallla (1941) is acclaimed as the first sustained attempt by a “black South African at composing a serious’ long poem in the alien language of a dominant race” (Gerard, 1971), differed fundamentally from Vilakazi. To Dhlomo a traditional literary piece had to be seen as an esoteric item that defied academic analysis”. He saw rhyme as a “cold tyrant” (Mphahlele, 1992). Any preoccupation with it or any poetic

technique was perceived as undermining the spontaneous nature of poetry by turning it into a self-conscious creation.

Dhlomo's assertion that "rhythm is essentially African" (Mphahlele, 1992) invariably puts him in closer to the negritude views of Senghor and Cesaire who strongly believed that there was nothing that African poetry could derive or even learn from European rhyme and rhythm. They believed that within the African context, it was almost impossible to separate poetry and dance.

The coming to power of the then exclusively Afrikaner Nationalist party in 1948, the entrance in the 1950's of the Drum writers into the cultural scene and the political agitation by mass-based organis:ations had a tremendous impact on the general population. As a consequence of the National Party's ascension to power, suppression, censorship and banning became the order of the day. Nevertheless Drum writers continued asserting their presence with works imbued with protest and a style which was both racy and impressionistic. But continued suppression and the piling up of anti-black legislation, particularly after the Sharpeville massacre, began to suffocate most writers. After the government

> had succeeded in rounding up or driving out virtually everybody capable of organising effective resistance, they followed this up by banning the writing of almost an entire generation of black writers.... (Mzamane, 1992).

Subsequently South African protest and resistance literature in English thrived only in exile. However, the picture began to change towards the end of the nineteen sixties because of the resurgence of the mood of militancy and cultural revival, catapulted by the rise of the Black Consciousness Movement. This was helped, in the field of poetry, by the publication of short poems by Dollar Brand in 1967. As Mbulelo Mzamane puts it

> Africa. Music and Show Business: An Analytical Survey was the first substantial body of poems by a black to be published in South Africa in the 1960's (Mzamane, 1992: 352).

From then on a number of poems by black South Africans began to be published in The Classic and other magazines such as Contrast., 0ohir, Bolt, Tzwi Labantu and eventually in an anthology compiled by Robert Royston whose tongue-in-cheek title To Whom It May Concern (1973) is the title of a poem, also in the compilation, which highlights the indignities suffered by black people in general in the South African cities. Poetry began to blossom. This poetry was imbued with freshness and energy which gave it a unique immediacy and vivid intimacy in addressing issues. This can be attributed to the fact that when the poets of the "new era" began to write, most of their predecessors' works had been banned and, therefore, could not be published in South Africa. Thus the poetry produced in this era was without an established tradition or pattern because of the alienation. The direct way in which poets approached issues unsettled those in power and many poets were dragged before the courts to answer charges of instigating violence. As Mphahlele puts it, one African academic gave evidence to the effect that: poetry, unless it was utterly bad verse, could not incite anybody to violence. Then one

would have to give it another name and not poetry (Mphahlele, 1992). The academic further contended that there were more immediately felt human constraints that led to violence.

The above is indicative of the anguish suffered by many blacks for daring to antagonize legislated racism. Nonetheless, black organisations such as the South African Students' Organisation (SASO) and the Black People's Convention (BPC) continued to agitate for the psychological emancipation of the black person from the shackles of Apartheid which had virtually emasculated them. These organisations extolled the poets of the Harlem renaissance, espoused the works of Fanon and Freire as well as the negritude ideas of Aime Cesaire. It was, therefore, not by chance that South Africa's poetic renaissance coincided with the advent of SASO as the major proponent of Black Consciousness. Poets had to respond to new urban contexts where almost the whole of Africa was caught in the frenzy and euphoria of Uhuru, South Africa being the only exception. This then served as a backdrop against which poets and writers in general had to look at themselves. It also helped in the furtherance of the dramatic politicisation of creative writing, a movement away from pure entertainment to revealing the brutality of Apartheid, whose roots can be traced back to the days of the banning of the African National Congress (ANC) and Pan Africanist Congress (PAC). Consequently this type of writing, which was to be known as protest literature, received a lot of criticism from the powerful, Eurocentric, liberal establishment which denounced this literature in general and protest poetry in particular as "unartistic, crude and too political", claiming that "there was more politics in it than art" (Ndebele, 1992).

In this new poetry blacks began to talk to themselves as opposed to earlier writers who directed their work to a predominantly white audience in the hope that somehow this would bring about change in the heart of the oppressor. As Watts comments:

> Now, however, they recognized the need to direct their work at the black community, and to use it to transform the consciousness of their people, to reverse the process of alienation (1989: 30).

This change of focus and attitude has had significant implications in so far as the aesthetics of this poetry is concerned. A further characteristic worth noting is the self-critical nature and the desire to make a thrust at oneself as opposed to the proclivity to blame all things and everything on the "system" and whites, while exonerating blacks on all accounts. This new development is perhaps not far from the attitude adopted by Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* (1958), wherein the author painstakingly juxtaposes the merits and demerits of both the African way of life and that of the coloniser. As already indicated, this self-critical process had as its ideological background the Black Consciousness Movement's clarion call for the black community to rid itself of, and be emancipated from, all forms of psychological and physical slavery encapsulated in the slogan: "Black man you are on your own". The publication of Mbuyiseni Oswald Mtshali's Cowhide; am in 1971 took the South African literary community, starved by years of censorship and banning, by surprise. Through this anthology Mtshali "confirms the fact of oppression" (Ndebele, 1982) and is an interpreter without necessarily inflaming the reader into action. Mtshali employs dry humour as well as satire to bring out circumstances, mental states of being and emotions

that help in the shaping of life in the township (Ndebele, 1982). Mtshali's collection was followed by the publication of Mongane Wally Serote's Yakhal'inkomo in 1972. In this volume Serote uses unconventional open-ended poetic forms to bring to the reader's attention both the physical and psychological manifestations of apartheid and how individuals respond to these conditions of existence.

In any attempt to trace the different strains of protest and resistance poetry, the name of Don Mattera deserves to be mentioned. Mattera's predecessors include Bloke Modisane and the intrepid Can Themba. While Mattera's writing straddles the period from Sharpeville to the forthrightness characteristic of Soweto poetry, his poetry deals with the dehumanisation inflicted by Apartheid and the culpability of the white community that sustained its perpetuity.

There are numerous additional poets whose contribution to the development of protest and resistance poetry is not any less, but who, because of the limitations imposed by space and time constraints, cannot be discussed at length. These are poets such as Dennis Brutus whose collection A Simple Lust (1973) illustrates his deep concern for the misery of oppression and jail, Sipho Sepamla whose publication Hurry Um to It (1977) deals with the futility of the fragmentation of the South African society, Jeremy Cronin with his depiction of the dilemma of ideology, commitment, resistance and oppression in Jncide (1983), Mafika Pascal Gwala, Stan Motjuwadi, Mazisi Kunene, Peter Horn, Wopko Jensma and a host of other poets.

After the Soweto uprisings of 1976 a number of poets emerged on the poetic scene amongst whom were Farouk Asvat, who despite being banned between 1973 and 1978 for his involvement in the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) completed his medical studies and undertook research into health services amongst blacks which became the backdrop for his poems such as "Ou China en die AmperIntellectual". Also relevant are Dumakude ka Ndlovu and Ingoapele Madingoane. Ndlovu became co-founder of the Azanian Poets and Writers Association (AZAPOWA) which was later renamed MEDUPE when members realised that the word "Azania" would attract the government's unwanted attention. However, this did not stop the government from banning MEDUPE together with seventeen other Black Consciousness organisations. As a consequence of this, most members went into exile. In spite of all hindrances poets of the seventies, and other writers in general, overcame the disadvantages imposed by the absence of a "vigorous and continuous black South African literary tradition, an absence which was seen as a handicap by the inaugurators of the literary revival after Sharpeville" (Chapman, 1992).

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Discuss some protest poems in Africa, examining their aims and effects.

4.0 CONCLUSION

The poetry of civil war in Africa resulted from the numerous civil wars fought in the African continent. Socio-political and ethnic tensions were the major causes of civil wars in African. Some of the known civil war poets are J.P. Clark, Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Mamman Vatsa, Christopher Okigbo, Pol Ndu, among others. The

"alter/native" poets are the younger generations poets who were tutored and influenced by the poets of the earlier generation. They wrote against the background of military dictatorship, corruption, gloom, ethnic unrest and mass hysteria. The Niger Delta poets who are mainly from Nigeria's Niger Delta Region have something in common other poets who write eco poetry and decry the constant destruction of natural and environmental habitats. The Protest Poetry in South Africa was informed by the multicultural contact of the region which generated far reaching implications.

5.0 SUMMARY

In this unit you have learned the followings:

- The African civil war poetry
- The concept of alter/native poetry
- Niger Delta/Ecopoetry of the Delta region of Nigeria
- The protest poetry in South Africa

6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

Read and answer the questions below:

- Discuss the civil war poetry in Africa
- Explain the concept of alter/native poetry
- Examine Niger Delta/Ecopoetry of the Delta region of Nigeria
- Trace the development of protest poetry in South Africa

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UNIT 7 THE WOMAN'S VOICE

CONTENTS

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Gender issues in every discourse are usually sensitive; this is because they often generate controversies. Gender is the space carved out by culture for male and female to operate in the society. The stratification of spaces is organized in such a way that put the men at the upper stratum and the women at the lower stratum. These stereotypes, through which gender inequalities are justified (Lois, 1999), that have tarnished the image and self-esteem of women and reduced them to insignificant beings assigned insignificant roles in the order of affairs in society have spurred the women to challenge the male hegemony and assert their humanity. This is the major preoccupation of 'feminism'. Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie (2007) submits that feminism can be defined simplistically as anybody of ideology and social philosophy about women since the word itself etymologically stems from the Latin word 'femina' meaning 'woman'. To her, this definition gives us enough leeway to encompass various types of feminisms. Feminism is a counter-hegemony discourse against patriarchy in order to create space for women in the male-centred world. Feminism as an ideology that promotes women's rights begins in the 19th century in Europe and America as a result of women's consciousness of their marginalization, subjugation and oppression; this consciousness makes them take bold steps in order to right these wrongs done to them (Sotunsa, 2008). Chidi Maduka (2009) summarizes that feminism as an ideology has a long history; it develops with the ideas of "provocative female thinkers" such as Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millet, Virginia Woolf, Mary Ellmann, Elaine Showalter and Michele Barrett, who in their own ways question "the phallocentric notion that a woman is but an appendage to man, having been created from a man's rib." This unit will introduce you some gender issues, particularly women voices in the arena of written African poetry. Below are some of the objectives of this unit:

2.0 OBJECTIVES

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- Highlight the gender issues in written African poetry
- Discuss the women voices in written African Poetry
- Examine the poetry of some Nigerian Female writers with examples from the poems of:
    - Catherine Acholonu
    - Flora Nwapa
    - Molara Ogundipe-Leslie
- Discuss the male writers' imaging of women in African poetry

3.0 MAIN CONTENT

3.1 Gender Issues in Written African Poetry

There is indeed a great awareness today on gender and the issues it presents in written African poetry. Different theorists have given voice to new theoretical bases for approaching this elusive term. Gender is important in the society as well as in literary discourse. As Alan Wolfe observed "of all the ways that one group has systematically mistreated another, none is more deeply rooted than the way men have subordinated women. All other discriminations pale by contrast" (Onarinde, 2013).

According to Onarinde (2013), gender is seen as the variable cultural interpretation of sex and it is not only a cultural construction imposed on identity as Butler puts it, but a process of constructing oneself into a particular sex/gender. Gender in this sense has been turned into a project. Therefore, gender in an important sense according to Akujobi (2004) is not traceable to any definable origin. This is so because it is itself an originating activity. Akujobi contends that one must constantly remember that social existence requires an unambiguous gender affinity. 'It is not possible for one to exist outside established gender norms hence one must either be a man or a woman except that person is a hermaphrodite, in this case, the person is existing outside established gender norm. To stray outside this norm is to put one's existence into question' Akujobi (2004).

Gender as it were, has changed the shape of literary conversation and is now a recognised phenomenon; perhaps this is the reason why Showalter (1989) quoting Rutven considers gender a "crucial determinant in the production, circulation and consumption of literary discourse". Gender therefore, is very vital in literary analysis. For Showalter quoted by Akujobi (2004) gender encompasses speech and in every language, gender is a grammatical category. It is one of the universal dimensions on which status differences are based. Unlike sex, which is a biological concept, gender is a social construct specifying the socially and culturally prescribed roles that men and women are to follow.

As Akujobi (2004) observes, there is so much social constraints placed on gender compliance and deviations today because most people feel deeply offended if they are told that they are not really acting manly or womanly. They are deeply injured when they are reminded of their failure to execute their manhood or womanhood properly. She states that there is also the problem of accepting a particular gender and what it carries, for instance motherhood as an institutional rather than an instinctual reality. This difficulty or problem of acceptance according to her expresses the same interplay

of constraint and freedom but to her, that the problem is known gives perhaps the most credence to the notion that gender identity rests on the unstable bedrock of human invention (Onarinde, 2013).

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Assess the concern on gender issues in written African poetry.

3.2 The Women Voices in Written African Poetry

In the words of Onarinde (2013), "just like every other sphere of the human society", written African poetry is an arena of the war of sexes where women contest male dominance. Though few women write poetry in Africa when compared to the number of male poets; the few like Finuala Dowling, Malika Ndlovu, Mary Watson, Fatima Alkali, Lobogang Mashile and Angela Miri, who write through their poems challenge patriarchal dominance, assert their womanhood and legislate equal right for men and women in all facets of life.

Gcina Mphophen captures the subjugation of women in her poem "We are at war", she emphasises how the South Africa society striped women naked of their rights and make them second class citizens. She explains that:

Women of my country
Young and old
Black and white
We are at war
The winds are blowing against us
Laws are ruling against us
We are at war
But do not despair
We are the winning type
Let us fight on
Forward ever
Backward never

Mphophem explains no woman is excluded from the struggle against discrimination, and the firm grip of androgenic subjugation. She explains that women are silenced at home, discriminated against in school, and perceived to be of no value to the society. Through the use of patriachal ideologies the society also relegates women to the background through myths, law and religion:

Women of my country Mothers and daughters
Workers and wives
We are at war
Customs are set against us
Religions are set against us
We are at war
But do not despair
We are bound to win
Let us fight on
Forward ever

Backward never

However, she stresses that despite all these odds the female bloc shall continue in the struggle for equality and self-assertion by fighting for equal civil rights, education and derogatory practices against the girl child. Thus, rejecting the status quo of been baby machines and supporter of men.

Like Malika Ndlovu's "Woman Being", Finuala Dowling in her poem "Doo-woop Girls of the Universe" eulogise the excellence and greatness of women. She refers to them as the "doo-woop" girls of the universe who make the world go round. Dowling's persona explains that every woman she has met is hardworking not minding the nature of her job. Finuala explains that:

I know something you don't know
about the women you know –
those makers of decisions,
physicians, rhetoricians,
amiable stage technicians,
indignant politicians,
formidable statisticians,
quiet dieticians
and the non–icians too,
the lovely –ists:
the linguists,
lyricists,
artists,
activists.
Almost every woman I've ever known –
whether she be –ician or she be –ist –
has told me once or shown
she'd really come into her own as
a doo-wop girl.

Not minding the woman's place in the society(social status and class), Dowling advocates a revolutionary stance, that all women should abandon their present duty and step up to the public domain to speak out against male dominance that has made women dumb, speechless and invisible members of the society.

Give her the mike, Mike
or I'll call my sisters,
'cause I got sisters,
and I'll say: "Sisters,
you hang up those rubber gloves
you freeze that chicken
you unplug that iron
you come with me
we be free
we be threeness
we be supremes
we be the unforced
force of fourness

not sad, not terse:
doo-wop girls of the universe.

Dowling's persona stress the fact that if all women could come together irrespective of class and social boundaries in "threeness" and the use of force "of fourness" they shall surmount male hegemony and eventually be listened to by my men (Onarinde, 2013).

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

With relevant examples, examine the place of woman voice in written African poetry.

3.3 Some Nigerian Female Poets

Nigeria has produced few female poets, although some female writers have been publishing poems in various journals and anthologies. In contrast, female novelists have been geometrically increasing. The female poets thus deserve attention because they not only constitute some of the "unheard voices," but they also possess significant insights into the realities of con- temporary times. Lloyd Brown (1981) feels: "the women writers of Africa are the other voices, the unheard voices, rarely discussed and seldom accorded space in the repetitive anthologies and the predictably male-oriented studies in the field"

3.3.1 Catherine Acholonu

Catherine Acholonu poems in *The Spring's Last Drops* draw their subject matter from the realities of life and contemporary events. The poems are also modulated by the sensitivity of female mind that reacts to personal experience and incidents through a consideration of their wider implications. The poems are interestingly divided into three sections bearing the titles "Cultural Loss," "Anger of the Gods," and "A Celebration of Silence." In the section "Cultural Loss," Acholonu explores tradition through the use of numerous personae. However, the persona that dominates most of her poems is seen as a creator - one who has been sent to the world to mend some of the divine and mundane deficiencies in human nature. In the title poem, "The Spring's Last Drop," the poet presents the labour and suffering undertaken by the persona in order to acquire the truth:

I have laboured up the hill
through toil and sweat
and I cannot spill it
this water so pure
so clear so sweet
the dying spring's last drop (16).

The poems in "Anger of the Gods" are used also to explore tradition. But in these poems, Acholonu indicates that tradition should not be discarded recklessly. In the poem, "A Child's Plea," for instance, she writes:

but mama
a tiny hole
by a tiny palm tree
was all I needed
Why did you deny
me tomorrow? (43)

She used a persona whose after-birth is not buried where it can be recognized but rather is discarded in a pit latrine to illustrate the manner in which worthwhile customs are crazily abandoned. In effect, she explores oral tradition as a viable model for the examination of current social, political, and economic issues disconcerting Nigeria.

The poems in the section "A Celebration of Silence" are mostly symbolic. The longest poem, "The Message," which is about seven pages is placed in this section. The persona in the poem is seen as a seed that will germinate into a useful human being. This poem codifies (apparently) the poetic view of Acholonu. The last stanza of the poem is significant for it says:

> You have many more
> miles to walk
> may your midday offering
> ripen into evening
> and your
> evening offering
> last till a very long time (57).

The implication is that the persona, perhaps like the writer, has just commenced the onerous task of acting as conscience, which is one of the unenviable tasks of a poet.

The poems in *The Spring's Last Drop* are lyrical. The author has made obvious efforts to make them chantable especially with the adept use of repetitions and refrains. A poem like "A Child's Plea" is particularly lyrical, and in these poems, full of emotion, Acholonu excels.

One significant feature of the poetry of Acholonu is that she is neither a rabid feminist nor an unadulterated traditionalist. There is an element of neutrality in her poetry which generates the impression that she wants to be seen first and foremost as a poet before she is considered a woman. In the final analysis, something about the poetry of Acholonu, both technically and thematically, creates a lasting impression in the minds of the reader. The poems are relevant, alluring, and fairly competently executed. They are neither obscure nor excessively simple, and the poet manages to strike a balance between form and matter.

3.3.2 Flora Nwapa

The subject matter that informs Flora Nwapa;s long poem "The Cassava Song and Rice Song" could be autobiographical in the sense that it is taken from the author's experience. In "The Cassava Song," Nwapa pays tribute to the cassava plant which has a tradition as one of Nigeria's staple food. In this song, Nwapa enumerates the various uses to which cassava is put. It could be made into foo-foo; it could be transformed into the delicacy garri; and it could be made into cassava pottage. Moreover, she praises the cassava plant for sustaining people during the Nigerian civil war when almost all other crops failed. She compares it with cocoa and palm trees and wonders why it has been neglected despite its invaluable service.

By contrast, in "The Rice Song" Nwapa condemns the society's penchant for rice. She acknowledges that rice was not supreme in people's diet but that dishonest businessmen surreptitiously introduced it until "our people gradually / Began to have a

taste for rice." And like all acquired appetites, rice has managed to lessen the desire for locally grown food items. Nwapa therefore insists that rice must be banned and that local growers of other food items should be encouraged.

"The Cassava Song and the Rice Song" are patriotic poems by a sensitive writer who uses the poetic medium to comment on sundry events. The two songs could be perceived as symbolic, for while the cassava song symbolizes tradition, the rice song symbolizes western influence. In the process, Nwapa indicates the subtle manner through which corrupt and destructive influences could be introduced into the society.

In terms of subject matter, Nwapa has performed a relevant task, but her poetic talents leave room for improvement. She does not care for such vehicles of poetic technique as rich imagery. She makes straightforward statements that are prosaic except that they are placed in stanzas.

3.3.3 Molara Ogundipe-Leslie

Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, in her collection entitled *Sew the Old Days and Other Poems* tackles all those feminist issues that Acholonu and Nwapa gloss over. She therefore produces poems that retain their relevance from people to people and from country to country. "Sew the Old Days" is divided into two sections: the first part entitled: "heralding desire" and the second part called "From Our Toes, Roses Grow." Quotations from the poetry of the Angolan president, Agostinho Neto, herald these opening sections. It is clear from the dedications that Ogundipe-Leslie admires several African poets including Okigbo, Neto, p'Bitek, Okara, Awoonor, Angira, Senghor, and Diop as well as black Ameri- can writers like Paule Marshall, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker. More- over, the impression is that Ogundipe-Leslie has synthesized her admiration into a literary focus for a better understanding of the foibles of man and woman.

The poems are varied, depicting not only originality eloquence and innovativeness. However, most of the Ogundipe-Leslie's commitment to the realities made it clear in various essays published in diverse hood in Africa is a neglected state. She blames women for men to exploit them, in the poem "Man to Woman Ogundipe in Laughter)." The image of a fly says to the eye:

> you too, you too
> my foolish you!
> to lay self-open
> for me to rake! (23)

This image is used to illustrate the consequence of that exploitation and the eventual blame heaped on the unsuspecting woman. Although the poet insists that this poem is constructed in laughter, it nevertheless portrays her perception of the perennial war of the sexes. Her concern for honesty is also illustrated in her treatment of the relationship between men and women. In the poem, "Yoruba Love," she indicates that when people smile and whisper words of endearment one should "run for shelter, friend/run for shelter" (24).

Although feminism is at the root of several poems in *Sew the Old Days and Other Poems,* Ogundipe-Leslie extends its tentacles to explore the variegated aspects of

human existence. In the poem, "Letter to a Loved Comrade: A Prose Poem," she asks fundamental questions about the role of women in the struggle for a just social order. The contradictions, the paradoxes, and the conflicting desires of revolutionary struggles are tabulated as the poet points out: "These are the pains we face in Africa today; the truths we seek in/all the struggling world, from place to place" (27). This poem apparently codifies Ogundipe-Leslie's convictions that the nature of women is often misunderstood, and their peculiar problems are insensitively neglected in the bid to make them react like men in crisis moments. The poet, therefore, illustrates that quite often a dividing line cannot be conveniently drawn between altruistic motives and inevitable actions.

The poems also touch the ever present reality of Africans in the diaspora. The poet obviously feels that, despite the distances separating peoples of African descent, they are united by their common historical tribulations. In the poems, "For a Friend, a Poet of Negritude," she illustrates the relevance of having a heritage which is capable of eliciting viable progressive ideas for contemporary times. The hope which emerges in the poems is illustrated in the poems, "Africa of the Seventies (to a Comrade)" and "A Harsh Beauty Must Be Today"; and it comes out clearly in a line from the poem "Tendril Love of Africa," where the poet hopes "that life does not slaughter our dreams."

However, the paradox of the diaspora is not glossed over in the poems. In the poem, "Song to Black America of the Sixties," Ogundipe-Leslie reveals that part of Africa's problems is lack of self-knowledge. She uses images of Black Americans who scream: "Yeh man, to survive, man, you need survival skills,/not history, shit and culture'n stuff/you can get hung up on history, man,/and forget how to survaaaaaive" (ii) to epitomize the enormity of ignorance.

The virtue of Ogundipe-Leslie's poetry is that it does not cease at mere pontification on the travails of women. She rather uses the reality of present times to symbolize fundamental events. In the poem, "When Fater Experience Hits With His Hammer (Song for the Middle Class African Women)," she uses instances, of what she regards as the unwillingness of men to alleviate the suffering of women, to comment on the nature of Africa. She questions:

> But when was the master
> ever seduced from power?
> When was a system ever broken
> by acceptance?
> When will the Boss
> hand you power with love?
> At Jo'Burg, at Cancum or the UN? (33)

The message to be derived from this symbol of power is that power is never given but taken by all lovers of freedom. Ogundipe-Leslie has successfully slaughtered two birds with one literary stone, for while she succeeds in condemning the bondage of men, she has also successfully extended the metaphor to explore the substantial continental issues of bondage that are important to the dispossessed peoples of the world.

In terms of style, the poet incorporates the Japanese haiku technique. In these succinct poems like "Firi: Eye Flash Poems" and "Haiku to Ripening Guava," the poet effectively illustrates the art of using few words to make timeless statements. Perhaps some of the other shorter poems in the collection are influenced by the haiku style for their brevity does not diminish the appropriateness of the themes. The poem, "Mating Cry" is particularly significant for it says:

> Love, roll a ball of sunlight in your hands
> throw it to the minds, and
> let its incandescence
> melt us (48).

This poem captures the overpowering effects of love and likens it to the sun which melts, in a captivating illustration of the mingling of bodies and minds which love generates. Furthermore, this love theme is explored in a highly relevant poem, "The Errors of Our Rendering," which explores the relationship between men and women by using the refrain: "and there are here/the errors of the rendering" - a reference from Christopher Okigbo's poem. She uses the idea of love in this poem to comment on the trepidations of Africa as she asks:

> And so many errors that our history
> is unrendered and cannot be rendered
> by minds mininourished and political children (5 6).

The poet conceives self-deception in Africa as one of its most prominent causes of disasters. This poem is then not only an individualistic exploration but also a communal reassessment of the realities of Africa.

Ogundipe-Leslie is not only concerned by the relevant themes but also by technical competence. The poems have a taut style that portrays a fair control of images towards a poetic vision of a viable social order. However, the tender poems indicate that she is championing the battle for the assertion of women's rights. This tendency to weave in so many strands in her poetry generates a diffuseness that often jars the clarity of her vision. It is erroneous for Ogundipe-Leslie to perceive whatever man (male human beings) represents as fashioned to subjugate women. In the final analysis, the impression she succeeds in creating in the reader is that the elimination of man would create a utopian society, which she apparently wants; but this is contrary to any commonsensical evaluation of reality.

Nevertheless, Ogundipe-Leslie has shown in Sew the Old Days and Other Poems that poetry is capable of revealing diversities in both themes and technique. The poems portray the emergence of a female poetic voice that is insisting on a re-evaluation of poetic connotations, through the depiction of vivid imagery, tight control of syntax, fresh vision and relevant thematic concerns to reflect the realities of womanhood. Acholonu, Nwapa, and Ogundipe-Leslie offer us highly illuminating poetic stances. The ideological convictions of their poetry make the issue of womanhood in contemporary Nigeria very controversial. While Acholonu and Nwapa seem interested in making a case for their appreciation as women, Ogundipe-Leslie insists that she must be heard as a rival who is anxious to "de-ego" men who are stuffed full of numerous macho ideas. The contrasts in these poetry collections are between radicalism and conservatism, modernism and traditionalism, and communalism and individualism.

Acholonu and Nwapa would appear to want to reach a compromise, but Ogundipe-Leslie would want a confrontation.

Artistically, Nigeria's female poets still need to be adventurous. How- ever, the female poets should be commended for as Katherine Frank observes, "there are surely vast silences to be broken, silences of African women who have ceased to write or who have never written at all because they have felt there was no audience to hear their words (1984, 47). Nevertheless, the fact that these faltering early steps are being taken indicates that this is the planting season of female poets in Nigerian poetry. In the harvest, we fervently hope to pluck the robust yam tubers and the fledgling seed- lings. The study of contemporary Nigerian poetry may never be complete without the assimilation of these feminine poetic impulses.

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Discuss the thematic concern of Nigerian female poets, citing as many examples as possible from different poets.

3.4 Male Imaging of Women in African Poetry

Poetical representation is one of the genres that uncover a significantly different range of images from the stereotypical image of women as mothers, wives and marginalized beings. From the anthology of Poems of Black Africa edited by Wole Soyinka (1975) it is evident that women are given a multi dimensional and broad perspective. An appraisal of some of the poems project women as community-builders; their productive and reproductive roles are highlighted and the African woman is celebrated in negritude poetry. In spite of the fact that African poets underscore the primordial role of women in their societies, they are also preoccupied with behaviour and practices that negate women. Some of the themes explored include: prostitution, poor mothering, barrenness and infertility. Lapin (1995) notes that men in the early years were usually the first educated, and hence the first authors. They populated their literature with women but in an idealized mode, woman was mother-nurturer and by extension symbol of a sweeter, more secure Africa which the educated man left behind. The community building role of women is brought to the fore in *Benin Woman* by Odia Ofeimun. The poet pays tribute to a fallen heroine whose extraordinary powers led to the liberation of her society. The poet salutes her courage. 'Emotan, I make my solemn prostration to your guts!' Even the bronze statue erected in her honour is not enough consolation to the poet who is perturbed by the loss 'And how I wish some woman now would bear your name anew for my sake' (52).

Women's community servitude, reproductive and productive role is emphasized in *Black Mother* by Viriato da Cruz. The black voices dotted all over the globe from "the cane plantains, the paddy fields, the coffee farms, the silk works, the cotton fields" show appreciation for the relentless efforts of the black mother.

The physical capability of the black mother is x-rayed through her "gleaming back" as she has to stoop low to till the "world's richest soils" (81). Her "sustaining milk" has given several generations a livelihood. In *Woman* by Valente Malangatana, the poet eulogizes women for their indispensable role in production and procreation.

This is illustrated in a vivid description of woman as one "who adorns the fields … woman who is the fruit of man" (260).

The virtues of the African woman are celebrated in Negritude poetry, a movement that attempts to recapture Africa's glorious past. Leopold Sedar Senghor- one of its principal ideologues is caught in the feeling of nostalgia for a distant homeland. To ward off the sense of aloofness, Senghor in the poem *For Khalam* celebrates the African ancestry and landscape with emphasis on the African woman.

"When shall I see again my country, the pure horizon of your face?"

"When shall I sit down once more at the dark table of your breast"? (270).

According to D'Almeida (1994), the image is one in which Africa is compared to a nurturing mother and the African mother is given the proportion of the whole continent. Unfortunately, this notion is far removed from the reality of women's daily existence and the negritude author's seemingly positive portrayal of the African women operated against the latter's interest (D'Almeida, 1994: 91 Stratton 1994: 40).

Despite the exaltation accorded the African woman, African poets have vigorously condemned practices like prostitution, infanticide; poor mothering that neutralize the virtues of motherhood. In *The Roses are Withering,* Richard Ntiru frowns at the vice of prostitution which has eaten deep into the social fabric of his society. The society is morally debased and women take centre stage in perpetrating the vice: "At the centre of every woman is a core of a prostitute'. The poet also lashes out at the men who use 'cheques as a passport to sex' (148). This vice is also echoed by Jared Angira in the poem "Phlora". The poet presents Phlora who becomes a fortune seeker by indulging in a series of love affairs that end in a fiasco. After wasting her youthfulness, it dawns on her that she cannot realize her materialistic dreams. Tibenderama on his part is concerned with poor parenting in *The Bastard*. The poet recounts the suffering and horrendous experiences of orphans due to the absence of motherly love and affection and irresponsible fathers who shun their responsibilities. The absence of parental love leads to a lamentable situation where the woman takes to the streets. The "unlucky creation" (bastards) "never will he know motherly love or feel soft hands".

They either end up as dumped foetuses in latrines and ditches or abandoned children for the lucky ones who go through a smooth reproduction. The poet cries out at his crime-ridden society "O crime! O murder of small flesh that might have grown to greatness and wisdom" (150). The economic resources the women are purportedly after does not change their livelihood as "their own meal is a cassava stick with salt" (151). The poem, *To the childless* by Kittobe, is a treatise to barren and unfertile women. They are described as "cold nests" in which "the migrant bird lays no eggs" and as "fruits that ripen, rot" (155). Such cases represent women as a negation to the virtues of womanhood.

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

1. Discuss the portrayal of women in the poems of African male writers
2. Provide a detail discussion on the role of women in written African poetry

4.0 CONCLUSION

The insignificant presence of the feminist perspective in the canonisation and criticism of written African poetry contrasts with the experience in the criticism of the other literary genres. It reflects the marginalisation of the female voices in anthologies of African poetry. Stella and Frank Chipasula in the Introduction to *African Women's Poetry* stress the fact that its "exclusive focus on women's poetry is a necessary first step towards reversing the objectification of women and rendering visible the invisible poets themselves" (Chipasula 1995: xvii). However, there are still some female voices within the written African poetry.

5.0 SUMMARY

In this unit you have learned the followings:

- Gender issues in written African poetry
- Women voices in written African Poetry
- The poems of the following Nigerian Female writers:
    - Catherine Acholonu
    - Flora Nwapa
    - Molara Ogundipe-Leslie
- The male writers' imaging of women in African poetry

6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

Read and answer the questions below:

1) Highlight gender issues in written African poetry
2) Discuss the women voices in written African Poetry
3) Examine the poetry of the following Nigerian Female writers:
   i. Catherine Acholonu
   ii. Flora Nwapa
   iii. Molara Ogundipe-Leslie
4) Discuss the male writers' imaging of women in African poetry

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MODULE 3 SELECTED AFRICAN POETRY: THE EARLIER POETS

UNIT 1 THE POEMS OF LEOPOLD SENGHOR
CONTENTS

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Leopard Sedar Senghor, poet, philosopher, scholar and statesman, is one of the oldest and most prominent living persons associated with African poetry and the exposition of African culture. He was born in 1906 at Joal, Senegal. Educated in Senegal and France, he made history as the first West African to graduate from the Sorbonne and teach in a French University. Among his numerous publications are five volumes of poetry and many critical and philosophical essays on aspects of African culture. In this unit, you are going to be introduced to Senghor's poems which includes those for the longing of Senegal like "All Day Long" and "For Khalam", "Black Woman", which describe the African woman in Senghor's poetry, Senghor's Ancestor Poems like "Night in Sine", "Totem" and "Prayer to Masks", his poems on the attitude to France and Europe with examples from "The Dead (Martyrs)" and "Paris in the Snow" (Dathorne, 1975) and finally the poetic techniques of Leopord Senghor will be discussed.Below are some of the objectives of this unit.

2.0 OBJECTIVES

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- Discuss the biography of Leopold Sedar Senghor

- Describe the main features of Senghor's poetry
- Analyse the following themes in Senghor's, using citation from at least one poem for each:
    - Longing for Senegal
    - African Woman
    - The Ancestors
    - Attitude to France and Europe
- Discuss Senghor's poetic techniques

3.0 MAIN CONTENT

3.1 LEOPOLD SEDAR SENGHOR

Leopard Sedar Senghor, poet, philosopher, scholar and statesman, is one of the oldest and most prominent living persons associated with African poetry and the exposition of African culture. Senghor was born in 1906 at Joal in Senegal. He was the President of Senegal for many years. He was described as "the greatest of the African poets to write in a European language" (Zell and Silver 1972). Senghor met in Paris poets of African origin like Aime Cesaire and Leon Damus of the Negritude movement. Negritude was a movement that arose among French West Indian colonials as a result of their desire to create their past imaginatively. The pioneers of the movement were born and bred in alien lands and had experienced no indigenous culture. The movement attempted to express "the sum total of the cultural values of the Negro world" (Dathorne 1975). The movement "expressed concern for the predicament of their race and the legacy of a colonial bondage." The uniqueness of the movement was that it was not concerned with individual tribal themes, but expresses "a conscious effort to look back at wide array of traditional values" with a new "approach to semantics, rhythm and subject-matter" (Dathorne 1975). Among Senghor's numerous publications are five volumes of poetry and many critical and philosophical essays on aspects of African culture.

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Trace the literary biography of Sedar Senghor and explain his role in the formation of the negritude movement.

3.2 Senghor and His Poetry

Senghor's poetry is dominated by ancestor image. By this his poems are similar to other African poems. However, the styles of some of his poems are also like European poetry. In his poem entitled: "Woman" he uses the word 'woman' to refer to both his country as much as to a real woman. The imagery of "nakedness, blackness" is used in positive terms. Senghor's images describe the objects and evoke "emotions and spiritual realities about the object of praise" (Nwoga 1983).

In this unit, we will embark on thematic and stylistic analyses of a poem by Leopold Sedar Senghor, the greatest exponent of the philosophy of *Negritude*. As an ideology, Negritude was merely developed as a reaction to cultural deprivation that

African poets experienced in Europe. This led the educated elite to revive, through literature, cultural values and beauty of Africa by extolling their ancestral glories.

This led to the use of traditional imagery, symbols and rhythm. Negritude has passed through a number of phases and was at times accused of over sentimentalism. Nevertheless Senghor's poetry gained great importance and won many international prizes for his contribution to African literature as a whole and African poetry in particular. Let us analyse Senghor's poem *"*I Will Pronounce Your Name*".*

I will pronounce your name, Naett, I will declaim you, Naett!
Naett, your name is mild like the cinnamon, it is the fragrance in which
the lemon grove sleeps,
Naett, your name is the sugared clarity of blooming coffee trees
And it resembles the savannah, that blooms forth under the
the masculine odour of the midday sun.
Name of dew, fresher shadows of tamarind,
Fresher even than short dusk, when the heat of the dusk is
silenced.
Naett, that is the dry tornado, the hard clap of lightning
Naett, coin of gold, shinning coal, you my night, my sun!---
I am your hero, and now I have become your sorcerer, in order to
pronounce your names. (Vincent and Senanu, 2001: 58)

Though this is a written poem, the word "pronounce" in line 1 and the repetitious declamation of "Naett" suggest an orality which links the poem to the traditional form of poetry found in oral literature. The repetition evokes the passion of fondness the poet has for the subject "Naett". This passion is reinforced by the poet's exuberant comparison of "Naett" with various states in nature: "mild like cinnamon", "the fragrance in which the lemon grove sleeps", "the sugared clarity of blooming coffee trees" and "the freshness of dew of the "tamarind". He compares Naett even to a "dry tornado" and "the hard clap of lightning". Up to this point we get no clear indication of who Naett is. But when he likens Naett to "coin of gold", "shining coal, you my night, my sun! -- -", we get the impression that this person who is so precious to the poet could be a black woman. This impression is reinforced when he refers to her as "Princess of Elisa" in the last line. The poem is symbolic in nature. In the poem, Senghor expresses his love and reverence to Black Africa. Naett seems to symbolize everything African. In an evocative manner, the poet celebrates his love for Africa and gives her the image of a woman. Using similes and metaphors Senghor praises black Africa in the manner of Negritude poets. The name "Naett" sounds like "night" which suggests darkness or blackness.

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

What are the major preoccupations of Senghor's poetry? Your answer must include as much as possible citations.

3.3 Senghor's Themes

3.3.1 The Longing for Senegal

All Day Long

All day long, over the long straight rails
Like an inflexible will over the endless sands
Across parched Cayor and Baol where the baobabs twist
their arms in torment
All day long, all along the line
Past the same little stations, past black girls jostling like

birds at the gates of schools
All day long, sorely rattled by the iron train and dusty and

hoarse
Behold me seeking to forget Europe in the pastoral heart
of Sine!

In what Tempestuous Night
What dark tempestuous night has been hiding your face?
And what claps of thunder frighten you from the bed
When the fragile wails of my breast tremble?
I shudder with cold, trapped in the dew of the clearing.
Oi I am lost in the treacherous paths of the forest.
Are these creepers or snakes that entangle my feet?
I sup into the mudhole of fear and my cry is suffocated in a
watery rattle.

But when shall I hear your voice again, happy luminous
morn?
When shall I recognize myself again in the laughing mirror
of eyes, that are large like windows?
And what sacrifice will pacify the white mask of the goddess?
Perhaps the blood of chickens or goats, or the worthless
blood in my veins?

Or the prelude of my song, the ablution of my pride?
Give me propitious words.

For Khalam

I do not know in what age it was, I always confuse Childhood and Eden
As I mingle Life and Death – a bridge of sweetness joins them.

Now I was returning from Fa'oye, having drunk deeply at the solemn tomb
As the manatees drink at the Simal.
I was returning from Fa'oye, and the horror was at its height
And it was the hour when one sees Spirits, when the light is transparent
And one has to shun the footpaths, to avoid their brotherly deathly hand.

The soul of the village was beating on the horizon.
Where they live or dead?

"May my poem of peace be tranquil water on your feet and on your face
"And may the shade of your courtyard be cool to your heart," she said to me.
Her smooth hands dressed me in a *pagne* of silk and esteem
Her speech charmed me every delectable dish – sweetness of the midnight milk
And her smile was more melodious than her poet's *khalam*
The morning star came and sat among us, and we wept with pleasure

Most of Senghor's poetry was written in France, away from the homeland of his childhood days. In "*All Day Long*", Senghor expresses a strong desire ("unbending will") as unbending as a rails which pass through his restless land. He seeks to forget "forget Europe" and find solace and belonging "in the pastoral heart of Sine". Although the scene described may not be beautiful: "the dryness of Cayor and Baol" and "arms of the baobabs twist in anguish", "through tiny station, each exactly like the last", "dust covered, wheezing, antique train", and even the "chattering little black girls, uncaged from school", these images are aspects of the environment which bring memories of belonging. They are therefore, the objects of his nostalgic feeling.

This longing is seen again and again in the poems. We see it again in his poem "*For Khalam*" that starts with "*Long, long you have held between your hands* the black face of the warrior". We see it again in the question "when shall I see you again my country, the pure horizon of your face"? In this poem, the poet addresses his country as if she is a woman with whom he is in love. "When shall I sit down once more at the dark table of your breast". Thus, the woman and his country fuse together as one object of his longing:

But every year, when the ruins of spring time set my memories ablaze
I shall be full of regret for my home land and the rains from my eyes on the
Thirsty savannahs

In this poem, the poet has been absent from his home country. This makes him feel as if he is dead. He is the "warrior" in the poem whose face was "Held as if already there fell on it a twilight of death". . (Vincent and Senanu, 2001)

It is from the distance in space and time that the speaker longs for his country.

3.3.2 African Woman in Senghor's Poetry

Black Woman
Naked woman, black woman
Clothed with your colour which is life,
with your form which is beauty!

In your shadow I have grown up; the
gentleness of your hands was laid over my eyes.

And now, high up on the sun-baked
pass, at the heart of summer, at the heart of noon,

I come upon you, my Promised Land,
And your beauty strikes me to the heart
like the flash of an eagle.

Naked woman, dark woman

Firm-fleshed ripe fruit, sombre raptures
of black wine, mouth making lyrical my mouth
Savannah stretching to clear horizons,
savannah shuddering beneath the East Wind's
eager caresses

Carved tom-tom, taut tom-tom, muttering
under the Conqueror's fingers

Your solemn contralto voice is the
spiritual song of the Beloved.

Naked woman, dark woman

Oil that no breath ruffles, calm oil on the
athlete's flanks, on the flanks of the Princes of Mali
Gazelle limbed in Paradise, pearls are stars on the
night of your skin

Delights of the mind, the glinting of red
gold against your watered skin

Under the shadow of your hair, my care
is lightened by the neighbouring suns of your eyes.

Naked woman, black woman,
I sing your beauty that passes, the form
that I fix in the Eternal,

Before jealous fate turn you to ashes to
feed the roots of life.

(Vincent and Senanu, 2001)

Black woman is a symbol for Africa. The woman is represented at two levels, as the mother and as the beloved lover. These two images are idealised as the writer seeks to immortalise the African woman.

The African woman is presented in her natural qualities. She is always depicted as "naked woman" or "black woman". Her natural qualities are immortalised in these images: "Clothed with your colour which is life, with your form which is beauty!" In

Negritude, “black” is the colour of life, while “white” is the colour of death. The first image is that of a mother who brings up the child: “In your shadow, I have grown up, the gentleness of your eyes was laid over my eyes”. The woman was associated with Earth’s figure: “my promised land”, and associated with the poet’s love for his country.

In stanzas two and three, the woman is presented as a lover and projected very much as a sexual object, described in images of objects of taste, to be eaten, to be drunk and to be sung: “firm fleshed ripe fruit, sombre raptures of black wine, mouth making lyrical, my mouth”.

Even at this level, the woman is best appreciated in her association with the earth and the country: She is “Savannah stretching to clear horizons, savannah shuddering beneath the East wind’s caresses”.

From all the above, the sexual images are obvious, just as it is obvious in “Carved tom-tom, taut tom-tom, muttering under the conqueror’s fingers”. The woman is idolised: “I sing your beauty that passes the form that I fix in the eternal”. In spite of this idealisation, the impression one has is that the woman exists to be of use to man.

3.3.3 The Ancestors in Senghor’s Poems

Night in Sine
Woman, place your soothing hands upon my brow,
Your hands softer than fur.
Above us balance the palm trees, barely rustling
In the night breeze. Not even a lullaby.
Let the rhythmic silence cradle us.
Listen to its song. Hear the beat of our dark blood,
Hear the deep pulse of Africa in the mist of lost villages.

Now sets the weary moon upon its slack seabed
Now the bursts of laughter quiet down, and even the storyteller
Nods his head like a child on his mother’s back
The dancers’ feet grow heavy, and heavy, too,
Come the alternating voices of singers.

Now the stars appear and the Night dreams
Leaning on that hill of clouds, dressed in its long, milky *pagne*.
The roofs of the huts shine tenderly. What are they saying
So secretly to the stars? Inside, the fire dies out
In the closeness of sour and sweet smells.

Woman, light the clear-oil lamp. Let the Ancestors
Speak around us as parents do when the children are in bed.
Let us listen to the voices of the Elissa Elders. Exiled like us
They did not want to die, or lose the flow of their semen in the sands.
Let me hear, a gleam of friendly souls visits the smoke-filled hut,
My head upon your breast as warm as tasty dang streaming from the fire,

Let me breathe the odor of our Dead, let me gather
And speak with their living voices, let me learn to live
Before plunging deeper than the diver
Into the great depths of sleep.

Totem

I must hide him in my innermost veins
The Ancestor whose stormy hide is shot with lightning and thunder
My animal protector, I must hide him
That I may not break the barriers of scandal:
He is my faithful blood that demands fidelity
Protecting my naked pride against
Myself and the scorn of luckier races.

Prayer to Masks

Masks ! Oh Masks !
Black mask, red mask, you black and white masks.
Rectangular masks through whom the spirit breathes,
I greet you in silence !
And you too, my pantherheaded ancestor.
You guard this place, that is closed to any feminine laughter, to any mortal smile.
You purify the air of eternity, here where I breathe the air of my fathers.
Masks of maskless faces, free from dimples and wrinkles.
You have composed this image, this my face that bends over the altar of white paper.
In the name of your image, listen to me!
Now while the Africa of despotism is dying - it is the agony of a pitiable princess
Just like Europe to whom she is connected through the navel.
Now turn your immobile eyes towards your children who have been called
And who sacrifice their lives like the poor man his last garment
So that hereafter we may cry ‘here’ at the rebirth of the world being the leaven that the white flour needs.
For who else would teach rhythm to the world that has died of machines and cannons?
For who else should ejaculate the cry of joy, that arouses the dead and the wise in a new dawn?
Say, who else could return the memory of life to men with a torn hope?

. (Vincent and Senanu, 2001)

The ancestors are never far from the surface of Senghor's poetry. The ancestors are represented by many things. In "*Totem*", totem is an object, animal or tree that is sacred to the ancestral culture of the group and revered as such. The totem can also be seen as the guardian animal: "Protecting any naked pride against/myself and all the insistence of lucky races." The lucky races are those that colonised Africa. Against their evils, it is only the ancestor's culture (represented by other totem) that offer protection.

In *"Prayer to Masks"*, the carved masks collectively represent the culture of the Fathers: "You distil this air of eternity in which I breathe the air of my Fathers". The living is connected to the past by the masks. It is these masks and the glorious culture that represent the poet's appeals in the face of colonialism and the death of contemporary Africa and Europe.

The Africa of the empires is dying, see the agony of a pitiful princess.
And Europe too where we are joined by the navel.

The masks and the African culture represent the resources from which Africa can save Europe, "teach rhythm to the dead world of machines and guns", "provide yeast which white flour (white world) needs". Though despised by the world, the African past provides life that is close to Earth. "We are men of the dance/whose feet draw new strength pounding the hardened earth.

In *"Nuit de Sine"*, which is a very explicit and accessible poem, the ancestors are shown to be alive, not dead, and are able to communicate with the living. The poem is interesting in the visionary way it depicts a typical African moonlit night. The typical scenes showing the dead of the night when the ancestors speak to the living are vividly described.

3.3.4 Attitude to France and Europe

The Dead (Martyrs)
They are lying out there beside the captured roads, all along the roads of disaster
Elegant poplars, statues of sombre gods draped in their long cloaks of gold,
Senegalese prisoners darkly stretched on the soil of France.

In vain they have cut off your laughter, in vain the darker flower of your flesh.
You are the flower in its first beauty amid a naked absence of flowers
Black flower with its grave smile, diamond of immemorial ages.
You are the slime and plasma of the green spring of the world
Of the first couple you are the flesh, the ripe belly the milkiness
You are the sacred increase of the bright gardens of paradise

And the invincible forest, victorious over fire and thunderbolt.
The great song of your blood will vanquish machines and cannons
Your throbbing speech evasions and lies.
No hate in your soul void of hatred, no cunning in your soul void of cunning.
Black Martyrs immortal race, let me speak the words of pardon.

Paris in the Snow
Lord, you visited Paris on the day of your birth

Because it had become paltry and bad.
You purified it with incorruptible cold,
The white death.
This morning even the factory funnels hoisted in harmony
The white flags.
'Peace to all men of good will.'
Lord, you have offered the divided world, divided Europe,
The snow of peace.
And the rebels fired their fourteen hundred cannons
Against the mountains of your peace.

Lord, I have accepted your white cold that burns worse than salt.
And now my heart melts like snow in the sun.
And I forget
The white hands that loaded the guns that destroyed the kingdoms.
The hands that whipped the slaves and that whipped you
The dusty hands that slapped you, the white powdered hands that slapped me
The sure hands that pushed me into solitude and hatred
The white hands that felled the high forest that dominated Africa,
That felled the Sara, erect and firm in the heart of Africa,
beautiful like the first men that were created by your brown hands.
They felled the virgin forest to turn into railway sleepers.
They felled Africa's forest in order to save civilization that was lacking in men.
Lord, I can still not abandon this last hate, I know it, the
hatred of diplomats who show their long teeth
And who will barter with black flesh tomorrow.
My heart, oh lord, has melted like the snow on the roofs of Paris
In the sun of your Goodness,
It is kind to my enemies, my brothers with the snowless white hands.
Also because of the hands of dew that lie on my burning cheeks at night.

(Vincent and Senanu, 2001)

There are poems of better experiences in Senghor's collections. Among these are poems which describe the experiences of Senegalese soldiers who fought in Europe to defend France and freedom. They sacrificed their lives but were not appreciated. Rather, they suffered discrimination in the hands of the French. Poems of this nature include the five part poem: "*Prayer for the Tirailleurs of Senegal*" and "*Camp 1940*" which describes the experiences of prisoners of war and death on the battle field. "*Martyrs"* is also of this category of poems. It describes the wasted deaths of Senegalese volunteers:

They are lying there among the captured roads, along the roads of disaster
Slender poplars, statues of the sombre gods wrapped in long golden cloaks
The prisoners from Senegal lie like lengthened shadows across the soil of France.

In spite of this and instead of being bitter like the poems of David Diop such as "*Africa",* "*One who has Lost Everything", "Defiance Against Force"* – the poems of Senghor preach forgiveness and reconciliation with the oppressor. This is the obvious theme of

"Snow Upon Paris". The poem must have been written to celebrate Christmas. It is addressed to the Lord, "on this day of your birth" in which everything is singing "Peace to men of goodwill". This is an allusion to the song the angels and shepherds sang to celebrate the birth of Jesus. Snow in this poem symbolises purity and peace, "the snow of your peace" which suggests healing power for the divisions of the world. The long second stanza catalogues the crimes and sins of Europe against Africa – the sins of colonialism:

> And I forget.
> White hands that fired the shots that brought the empires crumbling,
> Hands that flogged the slaves that flogged you.

Against men that destroyed the material and human resources of Africa, he has forgiveness: "My heart, Lord, is melted like the snow on the roofs of Paris". He forgives and forgets all, as the Lord has forgiven and forgotten.

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Examine the theme of ancestors in Senghor's poems.

3.4 Poetic Techniques of Leopord Senghor

The poems are written from the "I" personal narrative voice of the poet, who speaks as a representative of Africa. The poems project African view of existence. They criticise Europe and her civilisation and celebrate African culture. Often these two cultures are put side by side for comparison. The poems draw a lot of images from African myths, legends, and beliefs. They use materials from African fauna and flora for images. On the surface, the poems look and sound like prose because of the long lines, but there is a lot of symbolism in them that make them more poetic than prose. There are frequent references to African and French history.

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Discuss other themes and style of some Senghor's poems that were not captured here.

4.0 CONCLUSION

Senghor is one of the oldest and most prominent persons associated with African poetry and the exposition of African culture. Among his numerous publications are five volumes of poetry and many critical and philosophical essays on aspects of African culture. Some of the themes discussed in Senghor's poetry incude those of longing for Senegal, African woman, ancestors and attitude to France and Europe.

5.0 SUMMARY

In this unit you have learned the followings:

- The biography of Leopold Sedar Senghor
- The major characteristics of Senghor's poetry

- The major themes in Senghor's poems
- Senghor's poetic techniques

6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

Read and answer the questions below:

1) Discuss the biography of Leopold Sedar Senghor
2) Describe the main features of Senghor's poetry
3) Analyse the following themes in Senghor's, using citation from at least one poem for each:
    i. Longing for Senegal
    ii. African Woman in
    iii. The Ancestors
    iv. Attitude to France and Europe
4) Discuss Senghor's poetic techniques

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UNIT 2 THE POEMS OF WOLE SOYINKA

CONTENTS

1.0 INTRODUCTION

In 1986, Wole Soyinka became the first black writer to win the Nobel Prize for Literature. He has published major works in practically every genre of contemporary writing: drama, poetry, fiction, autobiography, and the critical essay. Soyinka has an elaborately developed perspective on art, history, and the place of the artist in the society. In his works, he seeks to synthesize his dual heritage as an African and as someone who has not only been exposed to European civilization, but also appreciates many aspects of that culture and its values. He seeks to make the worldview of his native Yoruba culture relevant to his work as an artist who uses Western forms. His success in doing this is testified to by the fact that the citation that accompanied the award of the Nobel Prize to him remarked the creativity with which his work explores traditional Yoruba culture to fashion a "universal drama of existence." In this unit you will be introduced to the poetry of Wole Soyinka with particular illustration from his "Abiku". (Theresia, 2013) Below are some of the objectives of this unit.

2.0 OBJECTIVES

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- Discuss the Biography of Wole Soyinka
- Discuss the influences on the poetry of Wole Soyinka
- Explain the unique features of Wole Soyinka's Poetry
- Analyse the themes and Techniques employed by Wole Soyinka in some of his poems.

3.0 MAIN CONTENT

3.1 Wole Soyinka's Biography

Soyinka was born in Abeokuta, South-western Nigeria, to parents who were practicing Christians and closely associated with Christian missions and institutions of education. His father was a school teacher, and as his autobiography *Aké* (1981) shows,

his upbringing in that environment has had a crucial impact on his career as a writer. He attended Government College and later, University College, both in Ibadan. His training at these institutions made him part of an elite class within his generation, and prepared him to play an important role in the Nigerian nation-state that was then in the process of attaining its independence from Britain. Soyinka subsequently attended the University of Leeds, where he acquired a BA honors degree in English. After his degree, he stayed on in the United Kingdom, working as playreader at the Royal Court Theatre. He had started writing in his days at University College in Nigeria, but it was during his time in the United Kingdom that he began writing dramatic pieces that revealed his dedication to being a serious writer. He returned to Nigeria in 1960, the year that Nigeria became independent from Britain. He formed a theater group that performed many of his plays. This period can be said to mark the first major phase in Soyinka's artistic career. Although they probably date from his days in the United Kingdom, *The Swamp Dwellers* (1964) and *The Lion and the Jewel* (1963), a comedy, can be identified with this period. Other plays like *A Dance of the Forests* (1963), a poetic drama written for Nigeria's independence celebrations, *Camwood on the Leaves* (1973), a radio play, and *The Trials of Brother Jero* (1964), a satire, can also be identified with this period.

From about the mid-1960s, the freshly independent Nigeria became mired in a series of political upheavals and violence. Soyinka's readiness to voice or act on his convictions made him a prominent participant in the political controversies and developments of the period. In October 1965, he was arrested and charged with holding up a radio station at gunpoint and replacing the tape of a speech by the premier of Western Nigeria, Chief Samuel Ladoke Akintola, with a different one accusing the premier of election malpractice. Soyinka was acquitted of the charges, but the very fact that he was thus charged speaks to his actively visible role in the affairs of his country. As a consequence of the controversies of the period, a brutal civil war broke out in 1967 in the country. The war (1967–70) pitted the federal government against the southeastern region which had seceded and declared itself as the independent nation of Biafra. Soyinka was arrested and incarcerated by the federal military government, allegedly for activities sympathetic to the Biafran secessionists. He spent a substantial part of his imprisonment in solitary confinement. Many writers from the West condemned the incarceration and called for his release, but it was not until 1969 that he was released. He addresses this experience in his prison memoir, entitled *The Man Died* (1972). As one might expect, Soyinka uses the opportunity of this prison memoir not simply to criticize his jailers, but also to reflect on the role of the artist in society.

The role Soyinka ascribes to vocational writers in the midst of political unrest accounts for the form and substance of his major works from this period. To this phase belong *Kongi's Harvest* (1967), a critique of authoritarian rule; *The Road* (1965), an exploration of a hubristic character's search for the meaning of death amid the corruption and cultural complexities of urban Nigeria; "Idanre" (1967), a long poem in which Soyinka first presents a sustained literary treatment of Ogun, the Yoruba god of iron, as metaphor for societal collapse and regeneration; and *A Shuttle in the Crypt* (1972), a collection of poetry that deals with his imprisonment. He also wrote *Jero's Metamorphosis* (1973) as a sequel to *The Trials of Brother Jero*. In this sequel, the main character, a fraudulent, self-proclaimed "prophet" named Brother Jero, adopts symbolic

features like the military uniform and the marching band for his church. A thorough scoundrel and opportunist, Brother Jero transforms the image of his church so as to blend in with the prevailing militarized dispensation of the day. In this way, Soyinka makes fun of the hypocrisy and shallowness of the military rulers of the period, just as *The Trials of Brother Jero* had satirized the opportunistic politicians of the previous era in Nigerian politics. His brooding play *Madmen and Specialists* (1970) and his novels *The Interpreters* (1965), and *Season of Anomy* (1973) should also be interpreted in light of the moral demands and intellectual pressures that Soyinka must have felt as he contemplated his society's degeneration into sectarian violence, crass materialism, and collective disorientation.

In 1973 Soyinka accepted a position as Fellow at Churchill College in Cambridge University. During his stint at Cambridge, he wrote *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975), seen by many as his greatest achievement in the genre of poetic drama. He also wrote *The Bacchae of Euripides* (1973), a commissioned adaptation and rewriting of Euripides' play. A series of lectures on drama that he delivered at Cambridge became the book *Myth, Literature and the African World* (1976). This book includes as appendix an essay that Soyinka had written earlier, entitled "The Fourth Stage: Through the Mysteries of Ogun to the Origins of Yoruba Tragedy." The book encapsulates Soyinka's central ideas and constitutes a watershed in the writer's career. In it, he surveys modern African literature by setting out the diverse philosophical sensibilities of a number of prominent African writers. He also links what was going in African literature to artistic trends and productions in the African diaspora. And characteristically, he sought to account for these trends within an overarching framework that is based on traditional Yoruba mythology and ritual.

From the late 1970s on, Soyinka has continued to address black Africa's problems as the last vestiges of colonialism were being contested and defeated, even as independent African countries floundered or came under the mismanagement of politicians and tyrants. For instance, Soyinka turned to avenues other than the printed word by releasing a record album, *Unlimited Liability Company* (1983), and a film, *Blues for a Prodigal* (1984), to criticize the depredations of the civilian government that ruled Nigeria between 1979 and 1983. In the long poem *Ogun Abibiman* (1976), and the lead poems of the collection *Mandela's Earth and Other Poems* (1989), he addresses the apartheid situation in South Africa, then still under the racist regime of the Afrikaner Nationalist Party. (Theresia, 2013)

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Assess the biography of Wole Soyinka giving special emphasis on his contributions to development of African poetry.

3.2 Wole Soyinka's Poetry

Myth, Literature and the African World constitutes Soyinka's most sustained elaboration of his theory of art, culture, and the individual in society. Consequently, a full apprehension of Soyinka's work to date requires proper understanding of the vision set out in this book. For Soyinka, the lessons of history and individual or collective struggle are often encoded in mythology. He set out to demonstrate that African peoples have rich cultural traditions and systems of knowledge that should be seen as alternatives to Euro-American traditions. As in his use of Western literary forms to explore the particularity of Africa's problems, Soyinka's theory shows his debt to two cultures—traditional Yoruba and Western European. From Yoruba mythology, he chooses the god of iron and metallurgy, Ogun, as the metaphor for artistic and technological creativity. By this choice, he makes Ogun a symbol of the kind of spirit that black Africa, like all other cultures in the modern world, requires to ensure spiritual health and social prosperity.

Soyinka identifies a commonality between Ogun and such classical archetypes as Orpheus and Prometheus, who stand for unwavering resolve and the capacity to act in the service of one's vision. Soyinka believes that the inevitable fate of the visionary archetype is punishment and suffering. But the suffering is not altogether bad, because it often accompanies a socially redemptive act of will. In this way, Ogun symbolizes visionary creativity and leadership. In the Yoruba mythological narrative that Soyinka adapts, all the spheres of existence, all of humanity's potentiality, were once concentrated in the figure of the deity Obatala, or Orisha-nla (arch divinity). According to Soyinka, Obatala embodies social order as well as what humankind is capable of within that conventional order. Obatala reigns over an inherited, pre-constituted cosmic/social situation and human destiny. To serve him in this dispensation is a slave, another mythic figure named Atunda or Atooda. This slave initiated a transformative rupture by rolling a huge boulder over Obatala, shattering the god into a thousand and one fragments. These fragments stand for the one thousand and one gods in the Yoruba pantheon, as well as the sphere of life with which each god is associated. Because of Atunda's action, the gods were separated from human beings and yearned to be reunited with us, even as we desire to get closer to them.

Ogun's sphere—his specialty, so to speak—is iron and metallurgy. His attribute as worker of iron makes him the one who among the gods undertook the original journey to reunite the realm of the gods with the world of mortals. He forged the first weapon, cleared the path separating gods from humankind, and led the way as the gods journeyed to be reunited with humans. For Soyinka, Ogun's journey symbolically promises a reunion of "self" with "essence," what we are in reality with what we can be. Ogun is able to achieve this restoration in Yoruba mythology, thereby offering symbolic enactment of its possibility in the secular world, because he embodies a fusion of artistic and technological creativity. Thus, the artist and the scientist become for Soyinka members of society who should combine their creative gifts to ensure social progress.

The years 1995 through 1998 witnessed the consolidation of a particularly repressive military regime in Nigerian politics. Once again, Soyinka denounced the authoritarian and divisive tendencies of the nation's rulers, tendencies that brought the nation to the brink of another civil war. He was at the forefront of an international

movement that agitated for a return to a democratically elected government. He published *The Open Sore of a Continent* (1996), in which he retraced the country's history and analysed the roots of its political crisis. Soyinka's creative and political writings clearly put him in the company of the more explicitly politicized writers in African letters. It is perhaps to be expected that his work has sometimes generated intense critical debate. But there is no doubt as to the value of his work for various kinds of critical methodology or socio-political vision. In prose, poetry, or drama, Soyinka's contribution to African literature has been intensive and permanent. Alongside any other purposes it may serve, his writing holds our attention because of the combination, within it, of philosophical depth and stylistic grace. (Ojaide, 1988)

3.2.1 The Influences on the Poetry of Wole Soyinka

A survey of Wole Soyinka's influences reveals the admixture of indigenous and foreign qualities in the poems. These influences affect the poet's materials, concepts, language, and technique. The poet combines traditional African and Western influences so dexterously that he creates a personal authenticity (Ojaide, 1988).

In addition to growing up and living within the Yoruba culture, Soyinka has shown special interest in the culture of his people. Based at Ibadan between 1960 and 1962, he used a Rockefeller Foundation research fellowship to collect and study Yoruba folk drama. Even though the study had primary relevance to his plays, the dialogue, chant-like rhythms, proverbs, and praise name epithets used in Yoruba folk drama also enriched his poetry. Soyinka's translation of D. O. Fagunwa's *Ogbo ju Ode Ninu Igbo Irunmale* from Yoruba into English as *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons* also enhanced Soyinka's verbal facility and his knowledge of Yoruba literature, which directly and indirectly affects his own writing. *Myth, Literature and the African World*, for example, demonstrates Soyinka's profound knowledge of Yoruba myths and world view. To Soyinka, "the African world" is synonymous with the Yoruba world; hence, his traditional African influences are essentially Yoruba. He admits that the Yoruba "aesthetic matrix is the fount of my own creative inspiration; it influences my critical responses to other cultures and validates selective eclecticism" (Gibbs 4).

Soyinka makes use of Yoruba myths, superstitions, and beliefs in his poetry. There are references to Yoruba gods and what they represent, beliefs about the presence of ancestors who receive offerings from the living to protect them, and "the same child who dies and returns again and again to plague the mother" *(ldanre* 28).

Soyinka copiously exploits the Ogun myth. The dual-natured god, who manifests himself in seven ways, is "God of Iron and metallurgy, Explorer, Artisan, Hunter, God of war, Guardian of the Road, the Creative Essence. His season is harvest and the rains" (86). The qualities of Ogun, a war monger and yet a shield to orphans, destructive and creative, form the background to "Idanre" and *Ogun Abibimaii*.. Sometimes, as in "Dawn," the myth is subtly used. In addition to Ogun, many gods, including Orunmila, $ango, Orisa-nla, and Esu, are alluded to in "Idanre." Soyinka chooses not Orunmila, principle of order, wisdom, and authority, as his divine mentor, but Ogun, the creative but destructive god; for to the poet, creation is paramount. Not only is Ogun a selfless explorer, but he possesses qualities relevant to a Third World country in this

technological age. Yoruba myths enrich "Dawn," "Death in the Dawn," "In Memory of Segun Awolowo," "Abiku," "Dedication," "ldanre," "Hunt of the stone," and *Ogun Abibimaii.*

Interwoven with the myths and culture are the value system, the love of ceremonies, and the agrarian preoccupations of the people. Soyinka expresses the Yoruba value system of a successful life as combining wealth, children, and long life in "Dedication." The poem is based on *isomoloruko,* the naming ceremony, which is a Yoruba household celebration. "Koko Oloro" is a rendition of a "children's propitiation chant" (23). The agrarian and religious society provides the poet materials for his poems in the form of food and sacrifices to the gods. There is emphasis on fertility and increase, and images of farming are abundant in "Idanre." Harvest in "Idanre" becomes a synthesis of social and religious activities.

Yoruba myths could prove obscure to the reader not conversant with the poet's native world picture-a possible problem Soyinka seems aware of in "Idanre," where he appends notes to help the uninitiated reader. In some other poems for which the author provides no notes, the reader may lose the profundity of the expressions. M. J. Salt's explication of "Dawn" explains allusions and offers suggestions which are obvious to the reader knowledgeable in Yoruba myths but indiscernible to the non-Yoruba novice. It is only the initiate who will link "Death the scrap-iron dealer/Breeds a glut on trade. The fault/Is His of seven paths whose whim/Gave Death his agency" (14) from "In Memory of Segun Awolowo" to the demanding Ogun, who destroys human beings on the very roads he is meant to guard. In fact, not every Yoruba-speaking person will detect these allusions, only persons versed in Yoruba myths, who might also be outsiders. These allusions give a traditional African character to the voice and viewpoint of the poet.

Soyinka is also much influenced by Yoruba poetic forms, which enrich his poetry. There are qualities of *Ila, etiyeri, ijala,* and *oriki* poetic forms in *Idanre, A Shuttle in the Crypt,* and *Ogun Abibimaii. Ila,* divination, is conducted by a medicine man called *babalawo,* who usually recommends that the patient perform sacrifices to counter the evil forces affecting him. *Ila* has its own poetry, which is usually chanted. The *etiyeri* is a masquerader who performs in the evening and satirically attacks anti-social attitudes in the society. *Ijala* is poetry of hunters and blacksmiths, and it is usually in the form of chants. *Oriki* is a praise chant. These latter two forms involve a kind of praise, and the chant could also be termed an *oriki.*

According to Wande Abimbola, "Two of the most important and characteristic features of Ifa style are repetition and word-play" (31). Puzzles, obscurity, and personification are also common in Ifa divination poetry. These features abound in Soyinka's poems. Repetitions of words, phrases, or lines occur in, among other works, "Idanre," "O, Roots!" and *Ogun Abibimaii.* There is a certain exuberance in Soyinka's use of words comparable to Ifa's. And the density of his poetry is in the tradition of Ifa, in which prophetic words are not to be taken literally.

Soyinka seems also to be influenced by the *etiyeri* tradition of Yoruba satire, in which the poet is a masquerader who wants to maintain the social and moral ideals of

his environment. In that pursuit, he ridicules and accuses violators. Soyinka's early poems- some of the October 1966 poems of *Idanre* and many poems in *A Shuttle in the Crypt*- are perhaps indebted to this Yoruba tradition of satire. The poet's use of sarcasm, metaphors, repetitions, and refrains is also part of this poetic form. His use of abuse and curse, especially in "Malediction," might be related to the *etiyeri.*

The poet is also indebted to the *ijala* poetry of hunters and to the *oriki* praise tradition. *Oriki* involves descriptions, eulogy, oblique references to events, appellation, epithets, hyperbole, and apostrophe (Olajubu 4-12). These qualities are common in Soyinka's poetry, especially "Idanre" and *Ogun Abibimafi*. Ogun, "of seven paths" *(Idanre* 14), is variously "the silent blacksmith" (62), "the lone one" (70), and "the Creative Essence," who has a "large creative hand" (61). These *oriki* features give dignity to the protagonists of Soyinka's poems, who are heroes in the Yoruba epic tradition. Homage and prayers, as in "Dawn" and "O, Roots!" respectively, are in the *oriki* tradition. In *ijala* poetry, there are invocations and salutations to powerful gods such as Ogun and $ango. Following this convention in *Ogun Abibimafi*, the poet calls on Ogun to assume generalship of the black freedom fighters and lead them to victory against a racist minority establishment. The poem's incantatory rhythm, repetitions, and Yoruba "figures" are influenced by *ijala* and *oriki* poetic forms.

Some of these possible influences on Soyinka from Yoruba poetic forms involve properties common to oral poetry in particular. Examples of hyperbole, metaphors, repetitions, and refrains abound not only in Yoruba poetry but in Ewe, Urhobo, and Zulu literatures, which are also oral. In the case of praise poetry, Soyinka absorbs both the Yoruba and Zulu praise conventions in *Ogun Abibimafi*, where he appropriately seeks the combined efforts of Ogun and Shaka to assert black independence. Some of these Yoruba techniques are therefore universal, and might have been acquired from any oral literature. Even in a poem like "Dedication," which is an undisguised model of the Yoruba naming ceremony, Soyinka does not always stick to the traditional meaning of symbols. He writes:

> ... and leave this taste
> Long on your lips, of salt, that you
> may seek None from tears. (26)

Salt here is meant to forestall tears, which have salt as part of their chemical content. This is a different, more scientific, meaning of *salt* than that which the Yoruba people traditionally take it to be.

Abimbola, expressing the traditional belief on salt, says it could be regarded as the commodity which one must have in order to have the secret and important knowledge which can affect the choice of one's destiny in life. In other words, salt is synonymous with good, orderly and civilised life while Jack of it represents primitive useless life. This is probably why salt is used during the christening ceremony of Yoruba children. Salt is synonymous with good, happy and sweet life. (180)

Soyinka gives a personal touch to the traditional symbol. The Yoruba tradition gives Soyinka an African identity, since the poetry shows a sense of cultural roots. The

use of Yoruba materials is a nostalgic act which makes the African reader identify more readily with the poems. To the Western reader, Soyinka's poetry is an exotic medley. The Yoruba mythical allusions give profundity to the poetry; furthermore, the particular is made universal and the universal made particular in the Yoruba gods, who are local manifestations of classical gods. The local influences affect his technique in the use of repetitions, metaphors, and epithets, and partly fashion his viewpoint. I have already mentioned the Yoruba concept of a successful life expressed in "Dedication." Soyinka's attitude toward women seems to me traditionally African. His women are basically sources of sex and increase, and, consequently, he uses images of farming for sex. He is agrarian and ambivalent towards technology, looking back to an idyllic state. He perceives life in terms of farming, and there are many references to seeds, growth, and harvest. The poet is critical of technology, which to him is a shallow conception of life when compared to the profounder truths and power of nature.

Soyinka is, however, not influenced by Yoruba culture alone. His "book" education inevitably brought him into contact with Judeo- Christian and Western literary traditions. He was bound to come into contact with the Bible and Christianity in his elementary and secondary schools, since Religious Knowledge was a common subject. In *Ake* he recalls being taught the Bible (54). Soyinka may no longer be a practicing Christian *(Spear* Interview 19), but the Biblical influence on him is strong. "The Dreamer" and "Idanre" refer to Christ, and Joseph and Potiphar's wife of Genesis are the subject of "Joseph" in *A Shuttle in the Crypt.* "Easter" in *ldanre* is based on a Christian concept. In "the lone figure" poems of *Idanre,* Christ is the archetype of the lonely and prophetic individual unacknowledged until after his death. The poet himself is a Christ figure in "Journey." The many references to bread, as in "Ikeja, Friday, Four O'Clock" *(ldanre)* and "Relier' *(A Shuttle in the Crypt),* are related to Christ's feeding multitudes with a few loaves of bread. He uses wine in "Journey" with a Biblical undertone. Besides, "Usurpers hand my cup at every / Feast a last supper" *(Shuttle* 85) has Christ's last supper with his apostles as its source. "Space" subtly alludes to Noah's ark, and Lazarus is mentioned in "Seed." The poet also alludes to Herod and Elijah in *A Shuttle in the Crypt.* Lamenting the destruction in his country, the poet says "tares/Withhold possession of our mangled lawns" (63), an apparent reference to one of Christ's parables.

Soyinka has doses of both traditional African and Judeo-Christian religions which come out in his work now and then. Judeo- Christianity affords him materials for allusions and metaphors, and does not appear as a force against which he struggles, unlike Okigbo, Awoonor, and Okot p'Bitek; he does not satirize Christianity. His absorptive personality blends the Christian tradition into his being. Religious words such as *canonization, martyr, saint,* and *baptism* appear in the poems to broaden and universalize the experiences the poet attempts to convey.

The curriculum of the English departments at the Universities of Ibadan and Leeds in Soyinka's undergraduate days would have included Shakespeare and the Elizabethans, the metaphysical poets, Jacobean dramatists, and twentieth-century writers such as W. B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, Dylan Thomas, and James Joyce. If my own studies in the English department at Ibadan some dozen years later are a

reflection, a bachelor's program in English would have made Soyinka intimate with major British and a few American writers. Soyinka has also taught literature at Lagos, Ibadan, and lle- Ife, and this would have exposed him to many literary figures and schools.

The poet's knowledge of Western literatures filters into his poetry, affecting his technique, allusions, and literary concepts. His preface to *Idanre* is a variation of a speech in Shakespeare's *Tempest.* One of his archetypes is Hamlet, and in his poem "Hamlet," he makes reference to one of Macbeth's speeches. Soyinka's obsession with death and violence seems Jacobean. Apart from the Yoruba tradition of satire, he may have borrowed a leaf from the nee-classical tradition of Swift, Pope, and Dryden. He has a poem, "Gulliver," in which he likens his mistreatment by the Nigerian establishment in the crisis years to Gulliver's in Lilliput. And there is a Miltonian echo in "ldanre." Soyinka's practice is that of the epic poet inspired by the muse-with him, Ogun. He is spokesman for the black race in *Ogun Abibima.ii.* The elegies on Fajuyi, Banjo, and Okigbo are reminiscent of Milton's *Lycidas.*

"Every young man's heart," Malraux says, "is a graveyard in which are inscribed the names of a thousand dead artists but whose only actual denizens are a few mighty, often antagonistic, ghosts" (Bloom). Soyinka shares characteristics of the modernist tradition, such as fragmentation and allusiveness, with Yeats, Pound, Eliot, and Joyce. The early poems of Yeats were chants, and he makes use of Celtic myths and legends of the Irish people. Soyinka himself has absorbed Yoruba incantatory rhythms. Two of Yeats's poems, "On a Political Prisoner" and "Prayer for My Daughter," have a bearing on Soyinka's "Prisoner" and "Dedication." Soyinka quotes Yeats in the third part of *Ogun Abibiman* to convey his contradictory attitude toward violence. To Yeats violence is negative; not so to Soyinka if it is the only means to defeat repression and racial indignity. Soyinka's difficulty, use of the objective correlative and persona, and advocation of non-narcissism on the part of the poet are comparable to the modem conventions of Ezra Pound and **T. S.** Eliot. He is familiar enough with Pound apparently to accuse Okigbo of regrouping Pound's images around the oilbean and the nude spear ("From a Common" 389). In "Flowers for my land," where there is a waste land motif, his "I do not/Dare to think these bones will bloom tomorrow" (62) echoes Eliot. There is a subtle allusion to the Holy Grail legend in "Vault centre." His density and use of compound words appear Joycean. He wrote a poem, "Ulysses," for his Joyce class, an indication that he taught *Ulysses* and is familiar with Horner. He explores the quest theme, alludes to Circe's transformation of Ulysses' companions to swine, and alludes to Scylla and Charybdis. Soyinka's "wine-centred waves" (29) and "swine-scented" (28) in that poem are light variations of Homer's description of the sea as "wine-dark waves." His "By Little Loving" is modelled on Thomas Blackburn and reveals an awareness of contemporary British poetic trends.

Soyinka's essays and creative work reveal a voracious reader of Western literatures. Soyinka is an exception to the typical African intellectual whom Chinua Achebe describes as reading a few uninspiring British novels (61-66). His passion for drama brought him into contact with Greek and European dramatists. References to Antigone, the Stygian mysteries, and Lethe are part of the classical culture underlying

his work. The Greek dramatists (Sophocles, Euripides, and Aeschylus) would particularly have appealed to the Yoruba-raised poet because of their similar attitude toward gods and tragedy. Hence his equating Yoruba gods to Greek gods and his references to Dionysus and Prometheus are not surprising. Here is a ready synthesis of African and European cultures in which the local is universalized and the universal simultaneously localized.

The poet's study, work, and travels have broadened his awareness. He uses foreign seasons to express himself. He talks of "Sudden winter" in "Death in the Dawn" and refers to autumn in "Massacre October '66." These references give variation and universal dimension to the poetry. His social observations in Britain inspired some of his early poems: "Telephone Conversation," "My Next-Door Neighbor," "The Immigrant," and "And the Other Immigrant." He has been to Holland, the United States, West Germany, and Ghana, among other countries. During his sojourn in Ghana in the mid-1970s he wrote *Ogun Abibimaii, abibimaii* being an Akan word for the land of Black peoples. "Around Us, Dawning" and "Luo Plains" are travel poems. The travels have given him fresh experiences and enriched his sensibility.

Two other possible influences on Soyinka's poetry are his work in the theatre and his relationship with his Nigerian literary colleagues J. P. Clark and Christopher Okigbo. He spent eighteen months with the Royal Court Theatre as a play reader. He founded the 1960 Masks in Nigeria. In addition to writing plays, he has directed and taken part in many productions of his plays and in those of other writers. His practical interest in the theatre may thus be responsible for the dramatic dialogue in "Telephone Conversation," the boasting of "Abiku," and the stage comments in the early poems. He describes the behaviour of government and prison officers in theatrical terms in "Purgatory."

Okigbo, Clark, and Soyinka were close colleagues at Ibadan and read poems to each other. Soyinka's "Abiku" seems to be in deliberate opposition to Clark's "Abiku." Soyinka has a love-hate attitude toward Okigbo: He is not impressed by Okigbo's *Heavensgate* and *Limits,* as his sarcastic comments in *The American Scholar* (1963) reveal. However, he praised him after his death. Some of the poems of *A Shuttle in the Crypt,* especially "O, Roots!", have the incantatory rhythm which characterizes Okigbo's poetry. Okigbo's egocentricism may have driven Soyinka into distancing himself from his subject. If these speculations on Soyinka's relations to Clark and Okigbo are valid, it means the poet's contemporary colleagues inclined him to go in a different direction in ideas and poetic concepts. In his opposite positions in relation to Clark's "Abiku" and Okigbo's narcissism, Soyinka projects virile and valid alternatives.

The degrees of explicit Yoruba and Western influence vary in Soyinka's poetry. Apart from "Koko Oloro" and "Dedication," which are based on Yoruba tradition, and "the lone figure" poems and "Journey," based on Western concepts, most other poems combine African and Western features more subtly and unevenly. The Yoruba influences help create the poet's celebratory and critical voices. The Western influences seem to be stronger in the contemplative poems. The Western poetic tradition is behind the poet's use of formal stanzas and rhymes. The special appeal of compound words, epithets, possessives, metaphors, personifications, alliterations, and repetitions can be

attributed to a combination of Yoruba and European modernist influences. The Western influences give his voice and viewpoint an intellectual accent.

But there is another aspect to Soyinka's poetry. History, especially Nigerian, has dictated the direction of Soyinka's writing. Independence brought with it a sense of nationalism which influenced the poet's use of materials from his culture as he had not done before in Britain. The Nigerian crisis and the poet's imprisonment have also affected his voice and viewpoint. The killings he describes in "Massacre October '66" convinced him of the bestiality of maR. He describes the then military leader as selfish, tyrannical, bloodthirsty, and hypocritical. The anti-Gowon poems are mainly satirical. The voice of the poet in *A Shuttle in the Crypt* is somber due to the reality of experience. In *A Shuttle in the Crypt* the poet is no longer an observer and witness who is sometimes distant, as in the early poems and in *Idanre,* but is a victim. As he says in "Ulysses," practical experience is shocking, unlike toying with concepts:

> It was a crystal cover on the world
> A rake of thunders showered its
> fragments To a slow dissolve in
> hailstones, and I was
> Held awhile to its truthfulness of transcience. (28)

It is out of this devastating experience that the poet gains insight. The increasingly dark vision of the poet which develops up through *A Shuttle in the Crypt* does not preclude positive lessons. The poet's sense of history also gave birth to *Ogun Abibiman,* which was inspired by Samora Machel's declaration of war against the then minority-ruled Rhodesia.

For Wole Soyinka, the Yoruba, Nigerian, and African as well as the Judeo-Christian, Western literary and social influences are integrated into one confident personality. There is no conflict in his use of indigenous and foreign materials and techniques. Though the Western reader may be uneasy about the Yoruba myths and the African may be tasked by the range of Soyinka's allusions and modernist techniques, the poems are an expression of an individual's complex sensibility. The two main sourcE3s of influences give variety and vitality to the poetry. The variety is not indiscriminate but a unity-in-variety. There is tension between the unity and the variety, a quality which gives vigour to the poetry. Like the Ogun he reveres, Soyinka in his poetry is a fusion of polar qualities. He is at once modern and conservative. His influences are blended into a new authenticity consonant with a native-culture-conscious Nigerian intellectual who is Western-educated and widely travelled. Soyinka acknowledges the "limited amount of originality in the creative ideas. Innovations have a slightly larger scope but ultimately what we all do mostly is the renovation and development of existing ideas" (qtd. in Omole 4). Soyinka's influences do not make him a less original poet; he is as original as any poet can be in the totality of his work.

3.2.2 Whole Soyinka and the Poetry of Isolation

Wole Soyinka's reputation as a poet rests on two slender but highly organized volumes, *ldanre and Other Poems*, a collection of poems written over eight years, and

A Shuttle in the Crypt, consisting mostly of poems which Soyinka wrote in prison (Ogungbesan, 1977). Both volumes bring out his preoccupation, familiar to readers of his plays, especially *The Strong Breed* (1963), *The Road* (1965), *Madmen and Specialists* (1971), and *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975), with the meaning of death and his anguish of the general lack of awareness within his society.

ldanre has perhaps done more than any play or novel to sustain the charge of " obscurity" and "difficulty" usually levelled against Soyinka. In *A Shuttle,* the most important artistic product of the Nigerian Civil War, Soyinka attempted a more direct idiom and thereby produced poems of remarkable power and intensity. His subjects have remained essentially unchanged, but in *A Shuttle* physical imprisonment adds a new note of urgency and deeper anguish to Soyinka's personal predicament and his treatment of his themes, all of which are filtered through the sensibility of a poet in confinement. "The landscape of the poems," Soyinka himself says of his prison poems, hinting at the most obvious-physical-type of isolation, "is not uncommon; physical details differ, but finally the landscape of the loss of human contact is the same." But even before physical imprisonment made isolation an obvious denomination of his poems, a deep sense of personal isolation had haunted Soyinka's poetry.

Isolation as a *motif* is not peculiar to Soyinka's poetry. Indeed, the sense of personal isolation is one of the most obvious impressions conveyed by modern African writing. To a large extent this derives from the general dilemma of the writer in modern African society. Christopher Okigbo's unforgettable lines seem to have permanently established the writer's dissociation from his milieu:

> Then we must sing
> Tongue-tied without name
> or audience Making harmony
> among the branches.

Wole Soyinka who, more than any other African writer, has been preoccupied with the necessity for the writer to make an appropriate response to the politic al moment of his society is well aware of this *motif* (Ogungbesan, 1977). In an address to other African writers in 1967 he attempted to place the isolation of the contemporary African writer in its historical perspective, tracing the development of modern African writing from the united opposition during the colonial era to the present mood of disillusionment.

But Soyinka's poetry demonstrates a unique response to the preoccupation with alienation in modern African literature. After all, every artist has only himself to give to his work. Soyink a, the poet, is more than the delegate of an era; he not only voices the general dilemma of the modern African artist, but registers his own response to this dilemma. "To be a poet," he has written, "is presumably to be persuaded not only of the inexhaustible poetry of the self, but to presume the even more transcendentalist view that the poetic self is in itself inexhaustible."

According to Ogungbesan (1977) view, Soyinka's poetic self, especially his sensitivity to the frustrations and tragedies of human life, isolates him from his fellow men; furthermore, isolation is indispensable to the exploration of his life-theme, death.

In words written from prison he has confirmed his own awareness of a disposition which has influenced his poetry right from the beginning:

> Thought is hallowed in
> the lean Oil of solitude.

An examination of Soyinka's poetry risks becoming a chronicle of the political crises of his society. Soyinka's belief that a poet fulfils himself fully only in action has meant that he has been constantly forced to define the poet's role within the changing circumstances of his society. For example, his preoccu-pation with the reality of everyday death reflects Soyinka's gloom at the direction his society has taken immediately after independence in 1960.

The first group of poems in *ldanre,* entitled "Of The Road," supplements Soyinka's symbol of the Nigerian road in his play *The Road* as a death trap, over which presides Ogun, the insatiable god of iron. Death is "the scrap-iron dealer." The relationship between life and death as an inexplicable irony is the theme of "Death in the Dawn." Soyinka, employing the dramatist's technique, has set the desolate scene, in a prefatorial note to the poem, a device he seldom uses in his poetry:

> Driving to Lagos one morning a white cockerel flew out of the dusk and smashed itself against my windscreen. A mile further I came across a motor accident and a freshly dead man in the smash.

In spite of the sacrifice of the cockerel, "dawn's lone trumpeter," and the woman's prayer that her son "never walk/ When the road waits, famished," Ogun claims "the heavier meat" in the accident that follows. The grim irony, evinced by the title of the poem, that dawn may be both the beginning and end of life, takes on a peculiarly grim overtone when the poet transmutes the fate of the freshly dead man into the predicament of the modern Man - victim of his own invention:

> ...such another Wraith!
> Brother, Silenced in the
> startled hug of
> Your invention - is this
> mocked grimace This closed
> contortion - I?

Soyinka's anguish, resulting from his self-identification with this lone victim, would become deeper as the political crisis in Nigeria increased the number of victims. But it was there right from the beginning, the latter harrowing tone suggested in the early stages by such a "personal" poem as "In Memory of Segun Awolowo," where Soyinka mourns the death of a friend and age-mate. His feeling of personal loss, conveyed by the phrase "my youth," is matched by his personification of the death-dealing road:

> The road, the aged
> road Retched on this
> fresh plunder Of my
> youth.

Death is a bad reaper: it plucks the unripe fruits first; "plunder" evokes the ravage that has taken place. The whole of society, including the poet, is bewildered as it confronts the plunder of this youth.

Soyinka deepens the mystery further in the group of poems entitled "Of Birth and Death," most of which portray the death of infants. Here he makes use of his society's belief in reincarnation to bring out his awareness of the cyclical pattern of existence. "A First Deathday," whose subject is the death of a child at about the time of its first birthday, reaffirms the truth that in the midst of life we are in death: life and death are knotted inextricably.

In "Abiku," the most important of this group of poems, Soyinka, unlike J.P. Clark in a poem of the same name, does not consider the *abiku* (literally "child-born-to-die") as belonging in the human world, and so does not try to reach it through human emotions, not even pity; his creation casts a cold and mocking eye on human endeavours. It is ageless, and a thing forever apart. Soyinka uses the *abiku* concept to restate some of his basic ideas on life and death:

> The ripest fruit was saddest;
> Where I crept, the warmth was
> cloying In silence of webs,
> Abiku moans, shaping
> Mounds from the yolk.

"The ripest fruit was saddest" most graphically conveys the idea that life, at its fullest, is closest to death, as in the case of *abiku* who keeps the cycle going endlessly by preparing for death and rebirth simultaneously. *Abiku* converts the egg-yolk, the universal symbol of regeneration, to burial mounds.

Soyinka gives this idea natural reference in "Season" by likening human beings to reapers waiting for the fruits of life to ripen, so that they can garner them and move on to death, the fruit of life at its most mature. "Rust is ripeness" the poem opens, in what must certainly be one of the most economical statements in poetry, and concludes with what should be our attitude to this harvest of life:

> Now, garnerers we
> Awaiting rust on tassels, draw
> Long shadows from the dusk,
> wreath Dry thatch in wood-
> smoke. Laden stalks Ride the
> germ's decay- we await
> The promise of the rust.

The poet posits our fear of death as the best evidence of our fear to live fully, and bids us to accept the fact of death, indeed to earn our death by confronting with passion the enigma of life. We are asked to accept the fact of corruption and decay as a part of life, and from there live fully in order to justify our death. We are responsible to life; it is a road we should negotiate as nobly as possible in order to deserve fully "the promise of the rust":

Let us love all things of grey;
grey slabs grey scalpel, one
grey sleep and form grey
images.

Grey is the dominant colour in *Idanre,* showing Soyinka's abiding interest in that transitional period between life and dissolution. The group of poems entitled "grey seasons" details the poet's anguish at the wave of political violence that has engulfed his society. In the title poem, Soyinka uses the myth of Ogun's pilgrimage to Ireto warn his countrymen of the dire consequences of this self-inflicted violence. Ogun had been persuaded against his will by the elders of Ire to forsake his abode in the heights and lead their people in war; but "drunk with wine and blinded by gore," he devoured his own men. The poet, Ogun's devotee, anticipates the trend of violence in contemporary Nigeria and warns:

To bring a god to supper is devout, yet
A wise host keeps his distance till
The Spirit One has dined his full. What mortal
Brands a platter with an awesome name,
Or feeds him morsels choice without
Gauntlets of iron. A human feast
Is indifferent morsel to a god.

Soyinka's warning is addressed to the people of Nigeria who, by so casually unleashing violence on their land, have let loose a weapon which they would not be able to control. At Ire when Ogun finally stayed his own hand, it was "to late for joy"; for mortals, truth always dawns too late.

Too late came warning that a god
Is still a god to men, and men
are one When knowledge
comes, of death.

The depth of Soyinka's emotion in this season of violent death in his society badly flaws most of the poems in "Grey Seasons." The simple titles of such poems as "Night" and "Fado Singer" reveal very little of the depth of anguish which they attempt to plumb, laying the poet open to the charge of deliberately courting obscurity. "Malediction" is perhaps the worst example, but Soyinka's heap of curses on a woman who rejoices at these wanton killings reaches the height of absurdity, resulting in an ineffective poem in spite of its gargantuan emotions, shrill to the point of incoherence:

a sky of scab-blacked tears glut but
never slake
Those lips
crossed in curse corrugations thin
slit in spittle silting
and bile-blown tongue
pain plagued, a mock man plug wedged

in waste womb-ways
a slime slug slewed in sewage.

Soyinka's grief for the Ibos massacred in Northern Nigeria alienates him from his society; his deep sensitivity makes him indignant to the lack of awareness which enables most Nigerians to ease through the crisis without being disturbed by their fellow countrymen's suffering. In a poem significantly - and, in the light of later events, prophetically - entitled "Prisoner," Soyinka seems to have accepted this isolation as the inevitable consequence of his tragic sensitivity:

He knew only
Sudden seizure. And time conquest Bound
him helpless to each grey essence. Nothing
remained if pains and longings Once, once set
the walls; sadness
Closed him, rootless, lacking cause.

All the poems written at this period show Soyinka's hurt that his way of looking at the situation is unshared by the vast majority of his countrymen. In "Ikeja, Friday, Four O'clock," for example, he pities as mere fodder Federal troops bound for the war front, extends the imagery of the harvest, so pervasive in his works, to portray the impending death of these soldiers as the harvest of anger, a feast devoid of rejoicing:

Unbidden offering on the lie of altars

A crop of wrath when hands retract and reason falters.

This is a wasteful sacrifice, for their death would have no meaning, like the death of the thousands of Ibos who had been murdered in the North. "Now the sun moves to die at mid-morning," Soyinka laments in another poem, "Harvest of Hate," where he compares the purposelessness of death in Nigeria with what might have been, in a true harvest:

There has been such a crop in time of growing
Such tuneless noises when we longed for sighs
Alone of petals, for muted swell of wine•buds In
august rains, and singing in green spaces.

That sensitivity to the frustrations and tragedy of human life which inescapably alienated Soyinka from most of his countrymen also produced some of his best poems. When in 1966, his mind reeling under the horror of the killing of the Ibos Soyinka sought refuge outside Nigeria, he turned to poetry for its therapeutic effect, in an attempt to exorcise despair by the rigorous discipline of art. This impulse produced "Massacre: October '66," the best poem in *ldanre,* certainly the most closely textured and best integrated. Composed in Tegel, a residential area of Berlin, it was an attempt to gauge the depth of the poet's anguish by recording his awareness of external nature:

Shards of sunlight touch me here

Shredded in willows. Through stained-glass
Fragments on the lake I sought to reach
A mind at silt-bed

The lake stayed cold
I swam in an October flush of dying leaves The
gardener's labour flew in seasoned scrolls
Lettering the wind

Swept from painted craft
A mockery of waves remarked this idyll sham I
trod on acorns; each shell's detonation Aped the
skull's uniqueness.

However, even thousands of miles from Nigeria, the poet remained at loggerheads with his environment, the persistent reiteration of "I" pointing out his subtraction from the landscape. His German haven was no haven at all, for everything around reminded Soyinka of that disaster from which he had sought to escape: the dying but uncontrollable leaves which mock the gardener's labours, the wavelets on the lake which "remarked this idyll sham," the acorns which responded like shells to the poet's tread and reminded him of death, and, finally, the Nazi *pogrom* against the Jews, so similar to the Hausa massacre of Ibos. With his deep sensitivity Soyinka could not find succour anywhere.

I borrow seasons of an alien land
In brotherhood of ill, pride of race around me
Strewn in sunlit shards. I borrowed alien lands
To stay the season of a mind.

Neither voluntary exile in Germany not subsequent imprisonment by the Nigerian Government provided Soyinka with any safeguard against the anguish of death as civil war raged in Nigeria. In prison Soyinka identified with the collective tragedy of his society and produced movingly powerful poems whose austere clarity reflected not only the barren landscape of gaol but represented the poet's deep-seated need to establish rapport with his society. In "Flowers for my Land," he used the title of a protest song against American involvement in Vietnam to condemn wastage all over the world, and conveyed the pain of loss, national and personal, by suggesting what was needed and then following with what had happened:

Seeking:
Voices of rain in sunshine Blue
kites on ivory-cloud Towers
Smell of passing hands on mountain flowers
I saw:
Four steel kites, riders On
shrouded towers Do you
think
Their arms are spread to scatter mountain flowers?

This is verbal economy at its most fruitful. Soyinka has made use of the same words in the two stanzas, yet the effects are totally different, in fact opposite. Nature sows

flowers, human beings sow death; rain, the work of nature, nourishes the flowers, but man-made bombs kill human beings. The kites have become bombers, and death is all over Nigeria, even within the prison walls.

In the group of poems entitled "Chimes of Silence," which Soyinka claims forms the core of *A Shuttle,* the atmosphere reeks of death. "Wailing Wall," according to the poet, was so named, "because it overlooks the yard where a voice cried out in agony all of one night and died at dawn, unattended." The constant hymns and prayers of the inmates are "matched only by the vigil of crows and vultures," birds of ill-omen whose presence the poet turns into a frightening picture of doomsday. All the prisoners are "the living dead" in this "link of all bereaved." The grey colours return anew, in fact have visibly darkened, and more poignantly foretell of death.

> Pale bats at twilight
> Rank incense to
> efface the sun A
> dark of shifting
> shadows Vapours of
> the purple paste Of
> sunset.

Soyinka returns with a new urgency to his exploration of the meaning of death when he examines the fate of the five prisoners condemned to death. "Procession," which opens with the ominous words: "Hanging day," records the journey of the men as they walk with their manacled feet, with a rhythm most harrowingly conveyed by a skilful use of onomatopoeia: "Tread. Drop. Dead. Drop. Dead" The poet alone of his fellow prisoners claims kindred with them; like them he "had journeyed far from the present." Yet, although he empathizes totally with these victims, Soyinka postulates, in what has since become the kernel of another play, *Death and the King's Horse man,* that the final recognition in the face of death must be that of the self, to be achieved alone. "This is the last turning on the road," he repeats in "Last Turning," a poem dedicated to "the last among the five" condemned men:

> This is the last turning of
> the road Around this rock
> face, self-Encounters self,
> turn pilgrim now Into
> soul's kingdom.

The image of the road, an obvious link with Soyinka's play of that name, symbolizes his continuing recognition (as in the case of the Professor's quest in the play) of mankind's longing for intimations of immortality. What lies beyond the veil of death? "Recession," like *The Road,* provides an answer, of a sort. In the poem Soyinka attempts to register "the consoling experience of man in the moment of death, the freeing of his being from the death of the world." When a man dies to this world and wakes into the "black dawn" of the next, "to a dark of insight," he discovers alone the secret of death:

> a spring is touched by

appointed fingers and
whirlwinds fold into the dark
a glacier mind of all-
being slows to a last
enduring thought
a deadweight seal of
silence sways upon the
secret - at this wake
none keeps vigil. none.

The hurt of loneliness pervades Soyinka's poetry. At the beginning of his poetic career, he sometimes shows this hurt by open statements, as in "Song: Deserted Markets" and "By Little Loving" where he dwells on the dangers of physical and emotional estrangement, portraying himself as a seed which does not come to fruition because it lacks the nourishment that comes from contact with a kindred soul. These are really poor poems. Even "By Little Loving" the most successful in this group of poems, demands attention mainly for its autobiographical information: as an account in the poet's life when, acting from a nihilistic impulse, he attempted to flee from the pains of life by shunning companionship. Yet, as he himself is forced to admit, isolation does not provide a refuge from pain:

By little spending once I had built
A hoard of peace, yet wondered at the hurt.

At the end, the instinctive outflow of his passion, "Bursting from within," redeemed him from the spiritual prison where he had been slowly dying, "phoenix of each pyre forestalled."

Soyinka is even less successful when, through the use of inverted emphasis, he attempts to show the burden of isolation. Perhaps because the pain of isolation is so palpable to him, he fails to prove that the best way to portray the paralysing effects of solitude is to show the boundless joy and fruitfulness of communion. "Psalm," "Her Joy is Wild," and "Bringer of Peace" are songs of joy which examine the theme of mutual affection between man and woman, the frustrations where affection is missing, and the joy and potentialities where the two hearts are allowed to reach out to each other without restrictions.

Yet, in spite of their unconvincing emotions, these poems demonstrate Soyinka's gift for vivid imagery. "Psalm" proclaims the fruition that has taken place between two lovers, by drawing an analogy between the woman and nature:

the seeds have ripened fast
my love and the milk is
straining at the pods the
ever-eager thought is
chaste
at the ruin of your corn-
stalk waist swaddling's of

my gratitude
sit within your plenitude.

The suggestion of a bursting ripeness finds an apt image in the comparison of the woman's shape to the cornstalk. Soyinka evokes surprise by extending a stock poetic image – mother nature: pregnancy has disfigured the woman just as the cornstalk is bent by the weight of the fruit. Because the union between the poet and his mistress has come to fruition, the two lovers have lost their individualities, and now exist in each other: they represent the continuum of life, "threads of ever linking rings" which are rooted in earth and yet "yield" to light.

Soyinka, so deeply aware of the hurt of isolation, was particularly endangered by imprisonment. "Among so many other things," he has testified in *The Man Died,*

> the anguish of being in prison is also a deep need to communicate with one's fellow human beings. It is a need that suffocates one at times.

Such poems as "To the Madmen over the Wall" and "Procession" show Soyinka casting about for communion with his kind. Even in "Vault Centre," "Space" and "Seed" where he dramatizes the freedom and gregariousness of birds, "standard bearers of twilight" and "pride of sky-order," he is commenting on his own situation - earthbound, alone, inactive and devoid of belief. "I testify," he has affirmed, "to the strange, sinister, byways of the mind in solitary confinement, to the strange monsters it begets." Forced to acknowledge his vulnerability to succumb to all sorts of corruption and temptation Soyinka pleads for strength in "O Roots !" an invocation to "earth" the poet's being in the elements. The poem ends with Soyinka cursing himself in case his will fails and he succumbs to these failings.

In spite of his political awareness Soyinka in his earliest poems did not demonstrate any particular ideological commitment. The belief in socialism which became marked in the works he produced after his release from detention. especially in "Poems of Bread and Earth" and in his second novel. *Season of Anomy* (1973), was originally expressed in poetry simply as sympathy for the rejects of the earth, who were usually portrayed as solitary beings over-burdened with anguish and yet lacking support from their fellow human beings.

The hunchback of Dugbe, in the poem of that name, is completely isolated from his countrymen, and wanders alone around the city of Ibadan, the poet being the only person to bother about him.

I wondered always
where He walked
at night, or lay
Where earth might
seem
Suddenly in labour when he sighed.

When the hunchback is fatally run over by a cement mixer and becomes another victim of man's progress, the poet is not only relieved that the latter's mad wanderings are

over, but sees the hunchback as transfigured at death beyond the concerns of this world. Instead of his physical ugliness, the hunchback is now "beyond ugliness or beauty"; no more his tattered existence, he now walks in ghostly "motley," nakedness. Yet, he remains a lonely wanderer, and as a ghost haunts his old scenes.

Soyinka's sympathy is even more highlighted by the preponderance of women among his outcast s ("The Last Lamp," "A Cry in the Night," "Black Singer" and "To One in Labour") and the dramatic power with which he conveys their anguish. In "A Cry in the Night," the most visually rendered of these poems, a bereaved mother acts out her inconsolable grief within a completely antagonistic universe.

As who would
break Earth,
grief
In savage pounding,
moulds Her forehead
where she kneels. No
stars caress her
keening The sky
recedes from pain
Nor will this night dark
Shield her.

The poet here obeys the first rule in art - tact. The woman's anguish is all the more powerfully dramatized by its not being verbalized; she merely beats her forehead against the ground, without uttering a word. Her isolation is total; she has been deprived of her baby and even of comfort from the elements: the sky recedes from her, and there are no stars. Finally she alone has to bury the child.

The political figures whom Soyinka celebrates are also lone sufferers, men of vision who had lived largely in their dreams, although they invariably dreamt of a grand design that would benefit the whole society and lift the people from their spiritual morass. A visionary is inevitably an isolated figure, for the process of dreaming is perforce personal. The visionary lives, as he dreams, alone. President Julius Nyerere of Tanzania is singled out among African leaders for his socialist policies, which the poet extols. Like the poet, Nyerere is intent on the "trade of living," for his policy is aimed at rejuvenating the whole earth.

Your black earth hands
unchain Hope from death
messengers, from In-bred
dogmanoids that prove
Grimmer than the Grim
Reaper, insatiate Predators on
humanity, their fodder.
Sweat is leaven, bread,
Ujamaa Bread of the
earth, by the earth
For the earth. Earth is all people.

By contrast Soyinka condemns Nigerian leaders and their foreign capitalist backers, for their lack of social conscience. His celebration of Adekunle Fajuyi, Victor Banjo and Christopher Okigbo - all of them dead - was meant to point out the dearth of men of vision in his own country. Fajuyi, the first Military Governor of Western Nigeria, was a soldier and thus a man of action whose sterling qualities were not fully revealed until "the stress of storms." He was a sacrifice - for Nigerian unity - so someone set apart, as were Okigbo, Banjo, George Jackson, "And All, All, All," all men of vision. Soyinka compares his own fate with that of Okigbo, friend and fellow-poet, who died on the war front:

> Yet kinder this, than a spirit seared
> In violated visions and truths immured
> Eternal provender for Time
> Whose wings his boundless thoughts would climb.

Soyinka would have preferred to die like Okigbo, satisfied that his self could confront self without shame, than live to see his vision tarnished by disillusionment and having to endure the corroding disappointment of seeing his sacrifice violated. Unlike J. P. Clark who in his tribute, "Death of a Weaverbird," saw Okigbo's death as Nemesis, to Soyinka it was a heaven-sent act of mercy which saved the dead poet from a worse fate. The death of this man of vision is a national loss, leaving his society "as blank a slate/As eyelids on the wall of fate." Similarly, instead of sharing the prevalent opinion in Nigeria that Banjo's death was a just retribution for the part he played in the January 1966 coup and the subsequent civil war, Soyinka considers Banjo's death a tragedy, because be too had attempted to rejuvenate the earth.

> He wondered in a
> treasure-house Of
> inward prizes, strove to
> bring Fleeting messages
> of time
> To tall expressions, to granite
> arches Spanned across
> landslides of the past
> Even in the blind spoliation,
> amidst Even the harrying of
> flames, he wished To
> regulate the turn of hours
> He lit the torch to a summons
> Of the great procession - and, what of it?
> What of it if thus he died
> Burnt offering on the altar of fears?

Soyinka's feeling of isolation has its deepest roots in his conception of the poet as possessing sources of inspiration and insight lacking in the generality of his society. The artist figure, a common protagonist in his major works, invariably appears as the Messianic figure who suffers for his vision. "The Dreamer," the first in a group of poems called "Lone Figure" opens:

Higher than trees a
cryptic crown Lord of the
rebel three
Thorns lay on a sleep
of down And myrrh;
a mesh
Of nails, of flesh
And words that flowered free.

In spite of the hint in the last line that the visionary's suffering will not be in vain, emphasised later in the poem by "bitter pods gave voices birth," it is the suffering that is most palpably felt and conveyed.

In "Easter," another exploration of the theme of poetic isolation, the messianic artist, a "god-apparent," is rejected by his society, in spite of his self-appointed task to heal its wounds. The poet as sacrifice, the "One bough to slake the millions," forsakes society's preoccupation with the trivia of life, doggedly pursues his chosen path, although he remains unrecognized by his society. Within the pattern of the poem's metaphor society celebrates Easter but does not feel concerned about rebirth, because the people are afraid of suffering:

Do we not truly fear to bleed?
We hunt Pale tissues of the
palm, fingers groping Ever
cautious on the crown.

The belief that the poet should suffer, if necessary, to bring awareness to his society informs Soyinka's longest poem, "Idanre," cast in the form of a quest, in the familiar pattern of the cycle of the heroic monomyth - Departure, Initiation, and Return. In his quest for the true poetic essence, Soyinka, "the lonely seeker," follows in the footsteps of Ogun, the Yoruba creative god, and becomes simultaneously a companion to and devotee of the "Outcast Deity." Ogun was the only god until Atunda his slave rolled a boulder on the godhead and "shred the kernel to a million lights." The assertive act of Atunda is glorified as leading to the diversity which is the essence of living, rather than the uniformity of death:

It will be time enough, and space,
when we are dead To be a spoonful of
the protoplasmic broth
Cold in wind-tunnels, lava flow of
nether worlds Deaf to thunder
blind to light, comatose
In one omni-sentient cauldron
Time enough to abdicate to astral tidiness
The all in one, superior
annihilation of the poet's
Diversity...

By reaffirming the poet's diversity Soyinka is simultaneously warning every artist and his society not to annihilate the poetic essence by subduing the artist's individuality. The celebration of Atunda lifts his action from betrayal to a divine creation:

> All hail Saint Atunda, first
> revolutionary Grand
> iconoclast at genesis.

Thus Soyinka exalts the individual who singly sets out to redeem his society. Analogous to Atunda, the former slave who becomes a god, the poet, the lonely visionary, ceases to be an outcast and becomes a divine, the conscience of his society.

> Let each seek wisdom where
> he can, life's Puppetry creaks
> round me hourly
> Trunks and motions in
> masquerades grotesques Post-
> mortem is for quacks and
> chroniclers Who failed at
> divination.

Soyinka, as a visionary poet, opts for that journey into himself instead of into the past, in his quest for the truth that will redeem his society. His obsessive assertion of the superiority of vision provides Soyinka's main dramatization of the subjective isolation of the individual. The belief that one possesses an inner light inevitably leads to isolation. In the nineteenth century Romantic poets the same conviction caused joy rather than uneasiness. But in Soyinka, faced with "the very collapse of humanity" in the twentieth century, the perennial sense of difference seems to have created the exact opposite of "joyous optimism."

Is Soyinka a pessimist? This familiar charge, first made with the publication of his first major play, *A Dance of the Forests* (1963), and constantly repeated since, would be difficult to sustain on the basis of his poetry alone - until the monotonous life in prison, "yielding nothing but past and future evidence of the unchanging nature of humanity," infused into his poetry the awareness, evident in his plays, of the unbreakable cycle of tyranny. Soyinka was very alert to the corrosive dangers of pessimism in his physical isolation in prison, yet he found it difficult to avoid pessimistic conclusions when in two key poems, "Conversation at Night with a Cockroach" and "When Seasons Change," he attempted to fit the happenings in his own country within the general historical pattern of mankind.

In "Conversation" the poet, dogged in his quest for truth, pits his wit against that of the cockroach, an insect symbolizing the destructive principle. In spite of Soyinka's spirited condemnation, as "stale deception" and "blasphemer's consolation," the cockroach's attempt to justify the killing of the Ibos as a necessary sacrifice, an indispensable rite of regeneration, it is the cockroach that triumphs at the end:

> A little stone

Disgorged its tenant. The
cockroach Spread his wings
in a feeble sun
And rasped his saw-
teeth. A song Of
triumph rose on
deadened air A feeler
probed the awful silence
Withdrew in foreknowing contentment -
All was well. All
was even As it was
in the beginning.

This conclusion, which is the kernel of Soyinka's play, *Madmen and Specialists* (1971), is his admission that events in Nigeria fit into the universal cyclic pattern of destruction.

> It is not possible [he said after his release from prison], to look at the event s which surround one's life without constantly seeing in the background the mocking grin of history. There is something depressing about the repetitiousness of history.

Soyinka takes this awareness a stage further in "When Seasons Change" where, by posing the seasonal variations against his own unchanging status in prison and the permanence of history, he admits that the great truths of life never change.

...it is an old earth
Stirring to fresh touch of old
pretensions Throbs of dead
passion, chilled rebounds
From sensations of the past, old hands and voices
The blows of battle and the scars,
old fences And cold betrayal, old
sacrifices
The little victories and the
greater loss Thus, purity of
ideals, clarity of vision,
And oh, let innocence have brief
mourning - Old compromises.

The monotonous reiteration of "old" in a poem about changes in seasons points the poet on the road to despair. But although he asks us to grieve - "Shed your hard tears" - he counsels against despair, by insisting:

Yet this progression has been
source For great truths in spite
of stammering Planes for
great building in spite

Of crooked sights, for plastic
strength Despite corrosive
fumes of treachery and spirits
grow despite the midwifery
Of dwarfs; spires, rooted in
quagmires Of the human mind
rise to purer lights And wing
aloft a salvaged essence
Transcending death, legacy of seasons...

This resolution is understandable, is even necessary, if the imprisoned poet is to overcome the worst rigours of isolation and continue living. Yet it is not this somewhat belated note of affirmation that lingers after reading *A Shuttle*, nor even the brief optimism of "Seed," a poem about growth and a new beginning, where Soyinka reaffirms the poet's "trade of living" by invoking the miracle of Lazarus who rose from the dead. Unlike the old prophets, however, Soyinka claims to have come, not to spread a message of doom, but the word for a new beginning, of growth not destruction; he is the spirit of the harvest:

I speak in the voice of gentle rain
In whispers of growth
In the sleight of light...
I wait on the
winnowing run. Of
breezes, on songs
gathered
To green ears
in a field of sap
I wait on footpads of the rain.

Soyinka himself considered the charge of pessimism serious enough to merit a rejoinder. In an interview after his release from detention he said:

> Expressions of pessimism where they crop up are simply a statement of truth which grows from a particular situation, but they do not mean acceptance of that situation. They do not preclude challenge.

However, there is more to it than this. Soyinka himself realizes the painfulness of his viewpoint; and his feeling of alienation, besides leading to anxieties and self-doubt, creates in him an urgent desire to find some palliative for tragic sensitivity. Soyinka, because of his deep sensitivity, rejects resignation as a possible way out of his isolation, yet because of his unflinching honesty to his experience, he cannot, like the Romantic poets, sing of the joy of vision. His belief in the superiority of the visionary imagination is severely tested by the dangers to the man of vision himself, dangers which Soyinka knows from personal experience and the fate of such visionaries as Okigbo, Fajuyi and Banjo. Soyinka never tries to escape from the fact that fidelity to the dream leads the

visionary to danger and disaster; rather he accepts the suffering and even disaster inherent in his exalted position.

In his examination of the fate of revolutionaries through the ages, using such archetypes as Joseph, Hamlet, Gulliver and Ulysses, Soyinka attempts to define his own role within his society. All visionaries draw their ancestry from Joseph, for they pursue truth, interpret dreams and put their faith in the future. Yet Soyinka rejects Joseph's saintly halo; instead of waiting for "time's slow unfolding," he feels he must take a direct hand in changing conditions. Caged and powerless, Soyinka would rather be "a cursing martyr" than time's eunuch, like Joseph. He also rejects the role of Hamlet, another Ione dreamer whose determination was racked by doubt, the fear of committing a greater error than the one he was attempting to right. During Hamlet's long anguish, "Justice despaired," and it took the enormity of treachery upon treachery to force him to act in the end.

The poem entitled "Gulliver" is both an explanation of and a justification for the role Soyinka had played in the Nigerian crisis, portraying himself, the man of vision, as truly a giant among the Nigerian Lilliputians. Having consented to operate in the world of little men, not for favour or reward, but "content in civic duty done," Soyinka now laments that the result has been a dimming of his own original vision. Ironically, the leaders of Nigeria plotted to reward him for his services by depriving him of his eyes, his vision.

> The fault is not in ill-will but
> in seeing ill The drab-horse
> labours best with blinkers We
> pardon him to lose his sight to
> a cure Of heated needles, that
> proven cure for all
> Abnormalies of view –
> foresight, insight
> Second sight and all solecisms of
> seeing-called vision.

The poet finds satisfaction in the role of Ulysses. The poem, "Ulysses," subtitled "notes from here to my Joyce class," contains the lesson Soyinka would want to pass on to future generations. The poet must remain the eternal voyager, in spite of the dangers inherent in the quest; the poetic spirit must forever be restless and questioning, should never accept resignation. "Journey," a much shorter poem, makes the point more economically:

> I never feel I have arrived,
> though I come To journey's
> end. I took the road
> That loses crest to questions, yet
> bears me Down the other
> homeward earth. I know My
> flesh is nibbled clean, lost

To fretful fish among the
rusted hulls - I passed them
on my way
And so with bread and wine
I lack the sharing with defeat and dearth
I passed them on my way.
I never feel I have arrived
Though love and welcome
snare me home Usurpers hand
my cup at every
Feast a last supper.

Soyinka does not find any consolation in the personal world of the dream into which the beacons of the quest constantly takes him, away from the present. He is too honest, too faithful to his own experience, to idealize the dream world over the world of reality. Rather, he postulates in "Ulysses" that as visionary he has found a way out of his tragic isolation by establishing moral and spiritual communion with the rest of mankind on behalf of whom he dares and suffers so much:

We embrace,
The world and I in great infinitudes.
I grow into that portion of the
world Lapping my feet, yet
bear the rain of nails That drill
within to the archetypal heart
Of all Ione wanderers. (Ogungbesan, 1977)

3.2.3 Themes and Techniques of "Abiku" by Wole Soyinka

The thematic and stylistic forms deployed in a poem by Nigeria's foremost poet, Wole Soyinka, will be considered. By the end of the lecture you should be able to discuss the use of tradition in the poem and identify the traditional techniques used in the poem.

Wole Soyinka is one of Black Africa's most distinguished writers. A foremost dramatist, actor, producer, poet and author of a number of satirical reviews, is also a bitter critic of the Nigerian society. A prolific writer he has published fifteen plays and a number of skits. He has also published three volumes of poetry, *Idanre and Other Poems, A Shuttle in the Crypt*and *Ogun Abibima* and an anthology *Poems of Black Africa*. Like Okigbo, he too was educated at University College Ibadan before he left for Leeds. Soyinka often explores human themes in his poems through his cultural milieu. He has won many international prizes including the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1986. *Abiku* is both interesting and intriguing. The poet, among other things, expresses his culture consciousness in the poem. Now read his poem "Abiku" below:

In vain your bangles cast
Charmed circles at my feet;
I am Abiku, calling for the first

And the repeated time.

Must I weep for goats and cowries
For palm oil and the sprinkled ash?
Yams do not sprout in amulets
To earth Abiku's limb's

So when the snail is burnt in his shell
Whet the heated fragment, brand me
Deeply on the breast. You must know him
When Abiku calls again.

I am the squirrel teeth, cracked
The riddle of the palm. Remember
This, and dig me deeper still into
The god's swollen foot.

Once and the repeated time ageless
Though I puke. And when you pour
Libations, each finger points me near
The way I came, where

The ground is wet with mourning
White dew suckles flesh – birds
Evening befriends the spider, trapping
Flies in wind- froth;

Night, and Abiku sucks the oil
From lamps. Mothers! I'll be the
Suppliant snake coiled on the doorstep
Yours the killing cry.

The ripest fruit was saddest;
Where I crept, the warmth was cloying.
In the silence of webs, Abiku moans, shaping
Mounds from the yolk.

(Senanu and Vincent, 2001)

Soyinka's Abiku seems to enjoy the anguish of the parents who are desperate to make him live. In their desperation, they engage the services of various medicine men and diviners who put "bangles" round his ankles, a kind of amulet "in vain", useless, of no consequence. He enjoys his status as Abiku: "I am Abiku, calling for the first/And the repeated time". In stanza 2 he makes the various rituals they perform to hold him down: the goats they slaughter, the cowries they throw at crossroads, the palm oil they pour and the ashes they sprinkle as part of the ritual. He wonders if they are supposed to evoke his pity or make him weep. In stanza 3 he taunts the practice of cutting up the

bodies of suspected Abiku. He urges them to sharpen their knives "And the repeated time, brand me/Deeply on the breast". When he is reborn they will know him by the marks their knives have left on his body from the cuts they gave him from his early life. He stresses the futility of their efforts "And when you pour libations, each finger points me near/The way I came," and reinforces it in the next stanza where he casts himself in the image of a "Suppliant snake coiled on the doorstep" In that context the only option a mother has is "the killing cry." This means that the desperate efforts of the mother to save her child will ironically amount to killing him. In the last stanza, he states that the older he gets the more devastating is his departure. "The ripest fruit was saddest." He finds the love the parents show him to be "cloying" – sickeningly annoying. He complaints silently while all the time devising how to convert life to death or a grave"… shaping/Mounds from the yolk". The "mounds" are the graves or death and "the yolk" is the life-giving part of the egg. Abiku here is implacable; no effort of the parents can alter his tragic destiny.

Abiku is the Yoruba word for a child that dies young to be reborn by the same woman over and over again. Soyinka explores the myth and essence of the capricious, elusive and tyrannical qualities of *Abiku.* The poem speaks of the uncontrollable cycle of birth end early death, until the two ideas of birth and death unite in the paradox of destruction of life only to beget life. The images are all drawn from Yoruba beliefs and practices about *abiku.* The real meaning of the poem cannot be fully understood if one is not conversant with the beliefs and practices of the Yoruba's. Soyinka's great quality as a poet is his ability to distance an immediate experience through the selection and deployment of expressive images.

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Attempt a detailed analysis of some Soyinka's poems other than "Abiku" that is discussed here.

4.0 CONCLUSION

Soyinka's elaboration of his theory of art, culture, and the individual in society *are the major features of his Myth, Literature and the African World*. For Soyinka, the lessons of history and individual or collective struggle are often encoded in mythology. He demonstrated that African peoples have rich cultural traditions and systems of knowledge that should be seen as alternatives to Euro-American traditions. As in his use of Western literary forms to explore the particularity of Africa's problems, Soyinka's theory shows his debt to two cultures—traditional Yoruba and Western European. From Yoruba mythology, he chooses the god of iron and metallurgy, Ogun, as the metaphor for artistic and technological creativity. By this choice, he makes Ogun a symbol of the kind of spirit that black Africa, like all other cultures in the modern world, requires to ensure spiritual health and social prosperity.

5.0 SUMMARY

In this unit you have learned the followings:

- The rich Biography of Wole Soyinka

- The unique features of Wole Soyinka's Poetry
- Influences on Wole Soyinka's poetry
- An analysis of the themes and Techniques employed in Wole Soyinka's "Abiku"

6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

Read and answer the questions below:

1) Discuss the Biography of Wole Soyinka.
2) What are the unique features of Wole Soyinka's Poetry?
3) Discuss the influences on Wole Soyinka's Poetry
4) With adequate citations from the poem analyse the themes and techniques of "Abiku".

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UNIT 3 THE POEMS OF CHRISTOPHER OKIGBO

CONTENTS

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Christopher Okigbo is recognized as one of the leading poets of the generation of Nigerian writers, influenced by modernism, who came into prominence in the early 1960s. Okigbo's ten-year writing career (1957–67) coincided with the last few years of colonialism in Nigeria and the immediate post-independence period, which was brought to an abrupt end by the civil war (1967–70), in which he was killed. His poetry thus occupies a significant period in Nigerian history and captures the exhilarating times associated with independence and nationalism by mirroring the new horizons opened up by political freedom and the innovative and experimental cultural energies it unleashed. The distinctive mark of Okigbo's poetry is his ability to link personal experiences to public themes in a highly sophisticated manner, to achieve a creative synthesis of the inner, spiritual, and aesthetic realm and the outer, phenomenological, and social domain. His poems are characterized by the search for a poetic idiom flexible enough to contain the complex cultural forces that shaped those times and at the same time prove an adequate medium for plumbing the subtle depths of personal experience. By the time *Heavensgate* was published in 1962, it was clear that he had found the solution in the artistic form of ritual, which allowed him ample scope for the interlinking of diverse and fragmentary experiences and the objectification of subjective states and feelings. Below are some of the objectives of this unit.

2.0 OBJECTIVES

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- Discuss Christopher Okigbo's bioghraphy.
- Explain the unique features of Okigbo's poetry
- Examine the themes and techniques in Okigbo's "Come Thunder"

3.0 MAIN CONTENT

3.1 Christopher Ifekandu Okigbo

Christopher Okigbo was born in Ojoto, Anambra State, in 1932 and died in 1967. He was a Nigerian Poet who died for the independence of Biafra. He is acknowledged today as one of the outstanding postcolonial poets in the country. Within his short lifetime, he established himself as a central figure in the development of written poetry in Africa and as one of the most important African poets in English. He saw poetry as a profession and was dedicated to this profession. Okigbo excelled more in sports than in academics during his youth. He attended Government College, Umuahia, in the late 1940s, then went on to study Western classics at the University of Ibadan, where he received his B.A. degree in 1956. After graduation from the university Okigbo held various jobs in business and government. He taught in a secondary school from 1958 to 1960, and then worked in the library at the University of Nsukka, from 1960 to 1962 before becoming a representative for Cambridge University Press in West Africa.

Okigbo published his early poems in the University of Ibadan student publication *The Horn* and the literary journals *Black Orpheus* and *Transition*. Some of these early poems, later brought together as the "Four Canzones," are regarded as apprentice pieces which he was to exclude from his more mature poems collected in the volume *Labyrinths* (1971). Nevertheless, these poems set the style, tone, and direction of his later poetry. The predisposition to lyricism and lament, his endless ritualization of experience, his predilection for musical accompaniment, and his striving to capture the rhythms and cadences of specific musical instruments in his poems are all evident in these early poems. In his introduction to *Labyrinths* (1971: London), Okigbo insisted that though the "poems were written and published separately, they are, in fact, organically related." Indeed, the whole corpus of his poetry, beginning with the earlier canzones to the unfinished "Path of Thunder," sequence, can be read as one long poem in which the central character, a poet-protagonist, journeys through a series of discrete but inter-related experiences. This journey achieves episodic unity through the use of the quest motif and the recurrence of particular images and symbols that give the entire body of poems a mythic coherence. Though his entire poetic output is limited to the poems collected in *Labyrinths* and a more inclusive edition *Collected Poems*, issued in 1986 by Heinemann, Christopher Okigbo is still regarded as Nigeria's foremost poet. (King, 1975)

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

With particular reference to his poetic compositions, provide a detail assessment of the life of Christopher Okigbo.

3.2 The Poetry of Christopher Okigbo

The two collections of verse that appeared during Okigbo's lifetime established him as an innovative and controversial poet, although his poetry also appeared in the important West African cultural magazines *Black Orpheus* and *Transition*. The two collections—*Heavensgate* (1962) and *Limits* (1964)—reveal a personal, introspective poetry informed by a familiarity with Western myths and filled with rich, startling

images. In one of his poems, he sees Idoto as a goddess like the Muse who inspires him. He returns to the goddess for poetic inspirations and his nakedness shows his total surrender. Water is also a source of inspiration but the Christian religion and education separates him from the goddess. The poem is in the African personality mode. He intermingles Christianity and traditional images and feels that he needs to go back to his traditional religion. As a writer he wears a mask which separates the artist in him and his true person. Some critics refer to him as an obscure poet, his poetry is demanding and allusive. It draws freely from the Roman Catholic religion of his family in Ojoto. Okigbo maintained that his poetry should be viewed as an organic whole as it expressed his coming of age as a poet.

Okigbo moved to the city of Enugu on the eve of the Nigerian civil war (1967-1970), he set up a publishing house, Citadel Press with Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe. When war broke out Okigbo joined the Biafran forces, who sought to secede from Nigeria and was commissioned as a major. In August 1967 he was killed in action at Ekwegbe, near Nsukka. His last poems, published posthumously with much of his earlier work in *Labyrinths; with Path of Thunder* (1971), shows a new focus on the impending civil disturbance in his country.

An outstanding personality, Christopher Okigbo tells everyone not to be Sconfined by their cultural, political, artistic, creative and humane limits. Chinua Achebe refers to him as "the finest Nigerian poet of his generation as his work becomes better and more in the world, he will be recognized as one of the most remarkable anywhere in our time". (Achebe ix).

Christopher Okigbo's poetic career was short lived. His first publication was in 1962 and the last one in 1966. Within this very short period he composed and published poems the poems though presented as separate entities, they are linked as they chronicle the historical events in the country from the colonial period to the civil war.

In the poems, he presents his peoples cultural and historical experiences. Romanus Egudu, opine that Okigbo's poetry is distinct. It is characterized by an "artistic excellence that is firmly rooted in his own indigenous cultural tradition" (60). "Heavensgate" (1962) and "Limits" (1964) present the estrangement which the people suffered as a result of their contact with the Europeans. However, Abdul Yesufu views these collections from the ritualistic perspectives. He observes that they are "…essentially ceremonial poems that celebrate, in turns, the fragmentation and restoration of a psyche and the cultural matrixes within which it operates" These poems are replete with "ritual utterances, symbols and movements" which present a picture of "…a great preparation for and an engagement in a life journey undertaken in order to recover the fragments of a person, of his people and of his culture" (236) The dilemma of some people who could not reconcile their alliance to the traditional religion and Christianity is therefore highlighted.

He presented the Christian foreign missionaries as birds of prey that swooped on the traditional gods and destroyed them. He presents his return to his cultural roots in an attempt to fuse his dismembered identity together. He sees himself as a prodigal son who returns to seek fogginess and reunification with his family and community. In the

traditional society, such return is steeped in a ritual that is expected to cleanse him and set him free from the taints of the foreign culture. He therefore announces:

BEFORE YOU, Mother Idoto,
naked I stand;
before your watery presence,
a prodigal"(3)

In "Silences" (1963 – 1965) he presents the politics of the post independent Nigeria that was characterized with rigging, confusion and purposelessness which led to the disillusionment of the people. His poem "The Path of Thunder" depicts the military coup of 1966 in Nigeria which he applauded and foretells the civil war and consequence of the coup. His prophesy became a reality as the crisis after the coup culminated in the civil war of 1967 in Nigeria. Unfortunately, he was killed in that coup.

3.2.1 Themes and Techniques of "Come Thunder" by Christopher Okigbo

Christopher Okigbo is an erudite Nigerian poet. The theme and poetic techniques used in his poem "Come Thunder*"* will be analysed. This is done to enable you discuss the theme as expressed in the poem and to enumerate and discuss the use of traditional poetic devices by the poet. Christopher Okigbo can be considered as one of the most enigmatic of written African Poets. Born in the Eastern part of Nigeria, Okigbo was greatly involved in the development of literary culture in Nigeria. His form and style influenced many younger African poets. His long sequence entitled *Labyrinths* has many fine pieces especially in the sequence *Heavensgate* and *Path of Thunder*. He participated fully in the Nigerian Civil War and was one of the causalities of war. There is a great deal of musicality in his poems for Okigbo strongly believed that music is an essential ingredient of the art of poetry. The poem titled: "Come Thunder*"* is contained in the sequence "Path of Thunder":

> "Come Thunder"
> Now that the triumphant march has entered the last street corners,
> Remember, O dancers, the thunder among the clouds…
> Now that the laughter, broken in two, hangs tremulous between the teeth,
> Remember, O dancers, the lightning beyond the earth….
> The smell of blood already floats in the lavender – mist of the afternoon.
> The death sentence lies in ambush along the corridors of power;
> And a great fearful thing already tugs at the cables of the open air,
> A nebula immense and immeasurable, at night of deep waters-
> An iron dream unnamed and unprintable, a path of stone.
>
> The drowsy heads of the pods in barren farmlands witness it,
> The homesteads abandoned in this century's brush fire witness it:
> The myriad eyes of deserted corn cobs in burning barns witness it:
> Magic birds with the miracle of lightning flash on their feathers….
>
> The arrows of god tremble at the gates of light,
> The drums of curfew pander to a dance of death;

And the secrets thing in its heaving
Threatens with iron mask
The last lighted torch of the century…..(Senanu and Vincent, 2001)

This poem was written during the Nigerian civil war. It was also the period of the first military coup d'etat and its aftermath. In the poem, the poet warns his opponents that their victory and celebration is premature as there are strong major terrible destructions which seem to be eminent. He foresees a lurking sinister force threatening to destroy the country totally. He seems to sound a warning when he writes "Now that the laughter, broken in two, hangs tremulous between the teeth"… and cautions the jubilating victors to "Remember, O dancers, the lightning beyond the earth…." that might strike them when they are least prepared.

The poet-employs a number of images and metaphors such as "thunder", "lightening", "blood", "iron", "stone", "night", "waters" and "death" to warn the impending doom and destruction that Nigeria might face. The rhyme and rhythm gives the poem an original and fresh form. (King, 1975)

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

What are the recurrent techniques employed by Okigbo in his poetry?

4.0 CONCLUSION

A leading poet among the generation of Nigerian poets, Christopher Okigbo was influenced by modernism, which came into prominence in the early 1960s. His ten-year writing career (1957–67) coincided with the last few years of colonialism in Nigeria and the immediate post-independence period. Okigbo's poetry occupies a significant period in Nigerian history and captures the exhilarating times associated with independence and nationalism by mirroring the new horizons opened up by political freedom and the innovative and experimental cultural energies it unleashed. Okigbo's two collections of poems (*Heavensgate*, 1962 and *Limits*, 1964) reveal a personal, introspective poetry informed by a familiarity with Western myths and filled with rich, startling images.

5.0 SUMMARY

In this unit you have learned the followings:

- The biography of Christopher Okigbo
- The characteristic features of Okigbo's poetry
- The themes and techniques in Okigbo's "Come Thunder

6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

Read and answer the questions below:

1) Discuss Christopher Okigbo's bioghraphy.
2) What are the distinctive features of Okigbo's poetry?

3) Explain the themes and techniques employed by Okigbo in his poem, “Come Thunder”, citing relevant examples from the poem.

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UNIT 4 THE POEMS OF OKOT P. BITEK

CONTENTS

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Born in Gulu, Uganda, p'Bitek studied law at Aberystwyth, Wales, and social anthropology at Oxford. In 1966 he returned to Uganda as Director of the Uganda Cultural Centre and later founded arts festivals at Gulu and Kisumu. p'Bitek's early Acoli-language novel *Lak Tar Miyo Kinyero Wi Lobo* (1953; *White Teeth*, 1989) was followed by the long poem *Song of Lawino*, first composed in Acoli rhyming couplets in 1956 and published in English in 1966. One of the most influential African poems of the 1960s, not only in Uganda but throughout Africa, *Song of Lawino* comprises a series of complaints by Lawino, an Acoli wife whose husband Ocol rejects her for a younger, more Westernized woman. This unit will take you through the biography Okot p'Bitek, the Poetry of Okot P'bitek with illustrations from his Song of Lawino and Song of Ocol and finally some techniques of Presentation Used by Okot P'bitek were discussed. Below are some of the objectives of this unit.

2.0 OBJECTIVES

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- Outline Okot p'Bitek's Biography
- Discuss the Poetry of Okot P'bitek
- Give a detail analysis of Okot P'bitek's Song of Lawino and Song of Ocol
- Explain the techniques of presentation in the poems of by Okot P'bitek

3.0 MAIN CONTENT

3.1 Okot p'Bitek's Biography

Ugandan poet, born in Gulu, Uganda, and attended Gulu High School and King's College, Budo. He studied law at Aberystwyth, Wales, and social anthropology at Oxford, completing a bachelor's thesis on the traditional songs of the Acoli and Lango. In 1966 he returned to Uganda as Director of the Uganda Cultural Centre and later founded arts festivals at Gulu and Kisumu. Dismissed from his position for writing critically of the Amin government, he lived in exile in Kenya, where he was a faculty

member of the literature department in the University of Nairobi. He was a Fellow in the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa in 1969–70 and a Visiting Professor at the University of Texas at Austin and the University of Ife in Nigeria in 1978. In 1979, after Idi Amin was overthrown, he returned to Uganda, where he was appointed a Professor of Creative Writing in the Department of Literature at Makerere University.

Okot p'Bitek's early Acoli-language novel *Lak Tar Miyo Kinyero Wi Lobo* (1953; *White Teeth*, 1989) was followed by the long poem *Song of Lawino*, first composed in Acoli rhyming couplets in 1956 and published in English in 1966. One of the most influential African poems of the 1960s, not only in Uganda but throughout Africa, *Song of Lawino* comprises a series of complaints by Lawino, an Acoli wife whose husband Ocol rejects her for a younger, more Westernized woman. *Song of Ocal* (1970) is the sophisticated, self-serving response of the unrepentant Ocol, who embraces the new culture as fervently as he does his new spouse. Another set of paired poems, *Two Songs*, was published in 1971: "Song of Prisoner" and "Song of Malaya" are dedicated to the memory of Patrice Lumumba, the prime minister of Congo who was murdered in 1961. These poems use the voices of a murderer and a street prostitute to reassert Okot's uncompromising position as a social critic. *Africa's Cultural Revolution* (1973) and *Artist, the Ruler: Essays on Art, Culture and Values* (1986) are collections of essays; *Horn of My Love* (1974) is a collection of oral verse translated from Acoli; *Hare and Hornbill* (1978) is a collection of folktales; and *Acholi Proverbs* (1985) is a collection of sayings. He also produced two scholarly works: *African Religions in Western Scholarship* (1971) and *Religion of the Central Luo* (1971). In 2001 Sudanese writer Taban Lo Liyong published a new translation of *The Defence of Lawino* from the Acholi, and other posthumous republications include *White Teeth: A Novel* (2000, 1996, 1989) and *Hare and Hornbill* (1999, 1978).

(Senanu and Vincent, 2001)`

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Outline the biography of Okot p'Bitek.

3.2 The Poetry of Okot P'bitek

In "Oral Techniques and Commitment in The Poetry of Okot P'bitek and Kofi Anyidoho: Their Contributions to Modern African Poetry" Okon (2013), performed an indepth examination of the poetry of Okot p'Bitek. According to him, in his Song of Lawino, Song of Ocol, Song of Prisoner, and Song of Malaya**,** Okot p'Bitek makes a definite impression on written African poetry. In all these poems, (except Song of Ocol to some extent), he makes use of oral tradition as a basic foundation or launching pad. p'Bitek himself, justifies this approach which he says:

> …the vast majority of our people in the countryside have a full-blooded literary culture so deep, so vivid and alive that for the moment the very little written stuff appears almost irrelevant (quotd in Roscoe, 10)

What are p'Bitek's concerns in these "Songs", especially Song of Lawino? It is to make Africans aware of the richness and diversity of their African heritage. By this self-

imposed crusade, he hopes to make meaning out of African traditions to written-day Africans hemmed in on all sides by the destabilizing effects of written western-oriented lifestyles. Commenting on this perspective, Roscoe (32) says:

> Okot's whole career as poet, singer…. has been concerned with the problem of making tradition meaningful to writtenity and avoiding Western solutions to African problems.

3.2.1 Okot P'bitek's Song of Lawino and Song of Ocol

Okon (2013) also analyse p'Bitek's Song of Lawino, which depicts a heroine who laments the rejection of African tradition for western ways by the educated elite. By using the song style, the poem is not just a lament, but a series of songs meant to celebrate African culture. (Cook, 1977: 231) implies this trend when he says that Lawino's: Urge (is) to celebrate in (her) own right the positive qualities of a threatened tradition.

Celebration in poetry is an aspect of African traditional oral culture. Lewis Nkosi confirms this when he asserts:

> …In this community the poet or the artist in general is there to "celebrate" his own or his society's sense of being ….and not there to subvert its social values or moral order. (Cook, 1977: 231)

What are the African values that Lawino celebrates? These are: African aesthetics (or beauty), African concepts of religion, death, education and medicine, among others. These are contrasted with their European counterparts, and the verdict is that the former are superior. For these reasons, the poet-persona keeps repeating the refrain: "Let no one uproot the pumpkin from the old homestead" – meaning that one's traditional culture should not be destroyed or abandoned recklessly. The "pumpkin" and the "homestead" are symbolic of African traditional culture.

Lawino, who also symbolizes African tradition, adopts as the butt of her attacks, her husband Ocol. Ocol is symbolic of the written educated African, who has adopted wholesale, European cultural and mental attitudes. Ocol is artistically presented as rejecting African tradition, when Lawino says in the opening lines:

> Husband, now you despise me
> Now you treat me with spite
> And say I have inherited the stupidity of my aunt;
> Son of the Chief Now you compare me
> With rubbish in the rubbish pit,
> You say you no longer want me
> Because I am like the thing left behind
> In the deserted homestead. (p.34)

It is this rejection of the old for the written that bestows Lawino's song the quality of lament: "My clansmen, I cry" (p. 35).

She soon picks on her husband's mistress, Clementine. In this instance, she portrays the European idea of aesthetics as it relates to women's beauty. The satiric comments Lawino makes about Clementine are sharp and sultry:

> Brother, when you see
> Clementine!
> The beautiful one aspires to look like a white woman;
> …….
> She dusts the ash-dirt over her face
> And when little sweat
> Begins to appear on her body
> She looks like the guinea fowl!
> …….
> And she believes
> That this is beautiful (p. 37)

To this, she juxtaposes the African concept of beauty:

> Ask me what beauty is
> To the Acoli And I will tell you;
> ……..
> Young girls
> Whose breasts are just emerging
> Smear shea butter on their bodies
> The beautiful oil from Labworomor,
> You adorn yourself for the dance
> If your string-skirt
> Is ochre-red/you do your hair
> With ochre ….. (pp. 51 - 52).

She also picks up European religion and compares it with African traditional religions. Her verdict is that the latter is more real to the African than Christianity:

> Ocol laughs at me
> Because I cannot
> Cross myself properly
> In the name of the Father
> And of the Son
> And of the Clean Ghost (p.74)

The above is a reference to Christian catechism. Next, she picks up the church catechists for bashing. The catechist she says, makes only meaningless sounds:

> The teacher was an Acoli
> But he spoke the same language
> As the white priests
> His nose was blocked
> And he tried
> To force his words

Through his blocked nose,
……. …….
Then you look at the teacher
Barking meaninglessly
Like the yellow monkey, (p.76)

Contrasted with this, is her traditional religion, which is partly symbolized by the traditional healer, whom Ocol condemns:

Ocol condemns diviner-priests
And Acoli herbalists.… (p.93)

Aside from the role of the traditional healer as a symbol of traditional religion, he also represents the African notion of medicine. Of course, Ocol as an educated man and a Christian would not allow African medicine or juju into his house. But Lawino goes on to give few examples of herbal medicines as illustrated by this traditional cough medicine.

The shoots of "lapena"
For coughs and sore throats –
You put some salt in it
And chew it! The shoots "lapena" and "olim"
Are chewed when they have
Removed the blockage in the throat (p.96)

She contrasts this with Ocol's predilection for Western medicine:

He says
I do not know/ the rules of health,
And I mix up/matters of health and superstitions….(p.101)

In spite of this, she affirms the potency of African traditional medicine:

It is true
White man's medicines are
Strong/ but Acoli medicines
Are also strong (p. 101)

Western education also comes in for attack. And in this case, Western education is epitomized by her husband's house which she describes as a "forest of books". According to Lawino, the books have made Ocol to lose his head:

Western education also comes in for attack. And in this case, Western education is epitomized by her husband's house which she describes as a "forest of books". According to Lawino, the books have made Ocol to lose his head:

Listen, my clansmen,
I cry over my husband
Whose head is lost
Ocol has lost his head

In the forest of books
……..
My husband's house
Is a dark forest of books (p.113)

Her lament here is strident because her woes arise from the fact of her husband's education which results in his abandonment of "the old one" (Lawino)

Lawino also portrays the African conception of death as being a phenomenon that is all-powerful, and no earthly force could resist it:

White diviner-priests
Acoli herbalists,
All medicine men and medicine women
Are good, are brilliant
When the day has not yet/dawned
For the great journey/the last safari
To Pagak (p. 103).

Finally, she makes commentaries about the lot of the common man, and the mercenary activities of the political elite. She criticizes the political elite's mercenary motives:

The stomach seems to be
A powerful force
For joining political parties (p.108)

And against this mercenary motive, what is the lot of the common man? It is deplorable:

And while the pythons of /sickness
Swallow the children
And the buffaloes of poverty
Knock the people down
And ignorance stands there
Like an elephant
The war leaders
Are tightly locked in bloody
Feuds/Eating each other's liver (p.111)

To Lawino, therefore, modernity has not brought as much benefits as Ocol would want her to believe. She sums up by calling for Ocol's purification and re-admittance into tribal norms:

The blindness that you got in the library
Will be removed by the diviner!
…….
Son of the Bull
Let no one uproot
The pumpkin (pp. 118-120)

This statement or refrain is a re-iteration of African values. Ocol's reply in Song of Ocol lacks the cogency of Lawino's arguments. He prefers to dwell on insults:

Woman
Your song
Is the rotting buffalo
Left behind by
Fleeing poachers
Its nose blocked (p.122)

Ocol who symbolically represents the modern, educated African enamoured of European tradition, presents himself by denigrating African culture:

I see an
Old Homestead
In the valley below
Huts, granaries…
All in ruins.

He is unapologetic and seems to be saying that old things must pass away so that Africa may move along with the times. Africa, to him is too backward:

Africa,
Idle giant
Basking in the sun
Sleeping, snoring
Twitching in dreams …… (p. 125)

He therefore calls for a reconstruction, through demolition:

We will uproot granaries
Break up the cooking pots
And water pots …. (p. 127)
……
We shall build
A new city on the hill (Okon, 2013)

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

1. Discuss the major themes in Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino* and *Song of Ocol.*

2. Explain the difference between African and European cultures as shown in p'Bitek's *Songs of Lawino* and *Song of Ocol* citing relevant lines from the poems.

3.3 Techniques of Presentation Used by Okot P'bitek

What are some of the techniques that Okot p'Bitek uses in realizing his message? Some of these are as follows:

The Use of Monologue: In this case, the monologue is a song: a solo. There is a built-in audience in almost all of his poems. For example, in Song of Lawino we find that Lawino is addressing not only Ocol, but also her clansmen:

> Husband, now you despise me
> Now you treat me with spite…. (p.34).

In Song of Ocol, Ocol addresses Lawino:

> Woman,
> Shut up!
> Pack your things Go! (p.121)

In Song of Malaya, the persona is a prostitute. She addresses an in-built audience comprising fellow prostitutes, sailors, workers, and even wives of men who patronize her:

> And you
> My married sister
> You whose husband
> I also love dearly
> (quotd in Moore, 189)

Similarly, the prisoner in Song of Prisoner addresses himself to his captors:

> Open the door,
> Man
> I want to dance…
> (quotd in Moore, 186)

The Use of the Dirge Style: The poem Song of Lawino is a lamentation, and true to its type, it adopts the African dirge format:

> My clansmen,
> I cry
> Listen to my voice… (p.35)
> ……
> Listen my clansmen
> I cry over my husband ….(p. 113)

The Song-style: That Okot p'Bitek's poems are songs, are proven by their titles: Song of Ocol, Song of Malaya, Song of Prisoner, among others. And within the poems themselves, there are references to song, as in Song of Lawino:

> And they sang silently: Song
> Father prepare the kraal
> The cattle are coming (p.48)

Use of Praise Names: In Song of Lawino, for example, Lawino makes use of praise names in addressing Ocol. This is partly to demonstrate the deep love and respect she

still has for her husband. But at a deeper level, it is symptomatic of an African heroic tradition normally present in panegyrics. Some of the praise names she uses are:

(a) Son of the Bull (p.119)

(b) Son of a Chief (p.34)

Heron remarks that

> Lawino's use of oblique respectful titles reflects the fact that she is …living within a peasant community in which the titles and praise names are still meaningful. (Moore,183)

The Use of Exaggeration: Okot p'Bitek frequently uses exaggeration to make his points, in most of his poems. In Song of Lawino, Lawino exaggerates the ugliness of Clementine, with particular attention to the breasts:

> They have made nests of cotton/wool
> And she folds the bits of cow-hide
> In the nests/And calls them breasts

Describing the charade that was political independence, Ocol in Song of Ocol says:

> The lamb
> Uhuru/Dead as stone,
> The shimmering flies
> Giving false life
> To its open eyes! (p.143)

Similarly, in Song of Prisoner, the prisoner in an attempt to describe the vigorousness of the dance he would like to take part in, uses exaggeration as follows:

> I want to join/the funeral dances
> I want to tread the earth
> With a vengeance/ and shake in bones
> of my father in his grave:
> (Moore,186).

The Use of Language: Okot p'Bitek makes use of language in a unique way. Since his poems are derived from the traditional oral folklore of the Acoli people, his imagery is Acoli, and at once African. His diction is also simple, transliterating the diction and nuances of popular rendition in the African Oral arts. Commenting on this phenomenon, Roscoe (44) says:

> Just as Okot's lines are largely free of inert language, so his actual choice of diction shows a preference for the plain and common core… we must see it within the realms of "orature".

He uses the language of local imagery. To underscore the use of local imagery, Lawino characterizes Clementine as a guinea-fowl; her husband's library is likened to "a forest".

She brings in other images drawn from the locale, like monkey, giraffe, bee, scorpion: and even typically Acoli words like “Pollok, Jok, Malakwang, Oju, lajanawara bird, Lapena and Olim, among others. Ocol also makes references to “moran, shuka, olam, shenzi, etc.

Aside from these, Ocol, in Song of Ocol uses a much more sophisticated and dense language, thus:

> A large arc
> Of semi desert land
> Strewn with human skeletons (p.136)

The reason for such sophisticated language is to reflect correctly, Ocol’s substantial Western education. These are just few of the techniques used by Okot p’Bitek. His intention, as earlier stated, was to make tradition real to the modern African. In this regard, we can see him as holding a vision similar to that held by the Negritude writers - to re-establish the respect and pride of Africa and the Black world (Okon, 2013).

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Outline the poetic techniques employed by Okot p’Bitek in *song of Lawino* and *Song of Ocol.*

4.0 CONCLUSION

Okot p’Bitek has used the style in *song of Lawino* and *Song of Ocol* to identify his poetry closely with traditional African oral poetry. Therefore, his poetry is a continuity of African traditional oral poetry in written form. Besides, his use of language is outstanding in that he makes use of traditional African imagery. By this, p’Bitek is recommending Oral tradition as the source of inspiration for future and present African poets (Cook, 1977: 55). Before p’ Bitek’s time, poetry was characterised by a single persona who in most cases represented not the masses and their yearnings, but the yearnings and private concerns of its creator, e.g the poems of Soyinka or Okigbo. But with the advent of p’Bitek, the communal protagonist, who was the voice of the community was born in accordance with the role of the oral performer in traditional African society. In terms of themes and subject, Okot p’ Bitek has contributed to the theme of the clash of cultures; a key theme in modern African writings. This is demonstrated in Song of Lawino and Song of Ocol. Finally, Okot p’Bitek has made contributions to the theme of Negritude. Even though he may not have subscribed to Negritude as a literary philosophy; his achievements in poetry have put him ahead of this class of writers. He has put into practice what the Negritude writers mainly preached. His subject, his images and symbols are drawn from his local African environment.

5.0 SUMMARY

In this unit you have learned the followings:

- The biography Okot p'Bitek
- A discussion of Okot P'bitek's poetry with specific illustrations from his *Song of Lawino* and *Song of Ocol*
- The techniques of presentation in the poems of by Okot P'bitek.

6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

Read and answer the questions below:

1) Outline Okot p'Bitek's Biography
2) Discuss the Poetry of Okot P'bitek
3) Provide a detail analysis of Okot P'bitek's *Song of Lawino* and *Song of Ocol* citing relevant examples from the poems
4) Explain the techniques of presentation in Okot P'bitek's poetry.

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UNIT 5 THE POEMS OF KOFI AWOONOR

CONTENTS

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Kofi Awoonor who was born in the Volta Region of Ghana is a prominent Ghanaian scholar and poet. He had his early education in Ghana and later studied in London and at the State University of New York where he gained his PhD in Comparative Literature in 1972. Awoonor chaired the Department of Comparative Literature at Stony Brook University, New York after the completion of his doctoral degree. He also taught at the University of Texas. He returned to Ghana in 1975 to teach at the University of Cape Coast in the same English Department. In *A Selection of African Poetry*, (Senanu and Vincent, 2001) write that Awoonor is "very conscious of his roots in traditional Ewe poetry and folk songs and among Ghanaians writing poetry, he is perhaps the most successful in attempting to recover the rhetorical vehemence and the metaphorical intensity of vernacular poetry" (209). This unit will introduce you to the poetry of Kofi Awonoor with particular references to his employment of images of colonialism together with illustration from his poem, "The Anvil and the Hammer" (Senanu and Vincent, 2001). Below are some of the objectives of this unit.

2.0 OBJECTIVES

- Outline the biography of Kofi Awoonor
- Give a description of characteristics of Kofi Awoonor's poetry
- Discuss the images of colonialism as potrayed in Kofi Awonoor's poetry
- Analysis of "The Anvil and The Hammer" by Kofi Awonoor

3.0 MAIN CONTENT

3.1 Kofi Awoonor

Kofi Nyidevu Awoonor (also known as George Awoonor Williams) was born on March 13, 1935 at Wheta, a rural town in the Volta Region of Ghana. Wheta is also the birthplace of his "twin brother," Kofi Anyidoho, another prominent Ghanaian scholar and poet. Awoonor had his early education in the then Gold Coast at Achimota Secondary School, from where he proceeded to the University of Ghana, Legon. He

also studied in London and at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, USA where he gained his PhD in Comparative Literature in 1972. Awoonor chaired the Department of Comparative Literature at Stony Brook University after the completion of his doctoral degree. He also taught at the University of Texas. It was because of his extended stay abroad that Kofi Anyidoho in his collection *Earthchild* dedicated a poem titled "The Song of a Twin Brother" to him in which he insistently reminds Awoonor "not to forget the back without which there is no front" (54). Before Awoonor left Ghana to study and teach abroad, he worked as a Research Fellow at the Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, Legon. He also became the Managing Director of the Ghana Film Corporation.

Awoonor returned to Ghana in 1975 to teach at the University of Cape Coast in the same English Department as Ama Ata Aidoo, another prominent Ghanaian writer. The English poet, Percy Bysshe Shelley, strongly argues in his essay in "Defence of Poetry" that "poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world." In Kofi Awoonor's creative book of essays, *The Breast of the Earth: A Survey of the History, Culture and Literature of Africa South of the Sahara*, he has a variation on Shelley's position. Awoonor writes: "[i]n Africa where despair deepens in the practice of politics and in the lives of the ordinary people, the writers must represent the vanguard of the armies that will liberate the masses from cultural strangulation and restore for them their earlier attachment to life" (Awoonor, 1975: 355). In an insightful essay on Christopher Okigbo, Dan Izevbaye writes that Okigbo "created and lived his myth" (13). It can be argued that Kofi Awoonor also created and lived his myth. The irony of his death through a terrorist attack at the Westgate Shopping Mall in Nairobi, Kenya, on September 21, 2013 sharply reminds us of this. Awoonor was imprisoned not long after his return to Ghana by the Kutu Acheampong military regime for sedition. He became the General Secretary of Colonel Frank Bernasko's People's Action Party when the party was formed. From 1984–88, Awoonor was Ghana's Ambassador to Brazil, and from 1990–94 he was Ghana's UN Permanent Representative, where he also headed the committee against apartheid. During the government of the late President John Atta Mills, Awoonor was the Chairman of Ghana's Council of State.

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Examine the literary biography of Kofi Awonoor.

3.2 Kofi Awoonor and his Poetry

In *A Selection of African Poetry*, (Senanu and Vincent, 2001) opine that Awoonor is "very conscious of his roots in traditional Ewe poetry and folk songs and among Ghanaians writing poetry, he is perhaps the most successful in attempting to recover the rhetorical vehemence and the metaphorical intensity of vernacular poetry" (209).

Kofi Awoonor's immortality is through his poetry. It is through his poetry that the world knew him and it is through his poetry that the world will remember him. Among his many collections are *Rediscovery and Other Poems* (1964), which he wrote while a student of the University of Ghana, Legon, *Night of My Blood* (1971), *Ride Me,*

Memory (1973), *Guardians of the Sacred Word: Ewe Poetry* (1974), The *House by the Sea* (1978), *Until the Morning After: Collected Poems, 1963–1985* (1987), *Latin American and Caribbean Notebook* (1992), *Praise Song for the Land: Poems of Hope & Love & Care* (2002 with Kofi Anyidoho), and a posthumous collection with Kofi Anyidoho and Kwame Dawes, *The Promise of Hope: New and Selected Poems, 1964–2013*. This collection is due to come out on March 1, 2014. In addition to his poetry, Awoonor has two novels, *This Earth, My Brother …*. (1971) and *Comes the Voyager at Last* (1992). Awoonor was also a critic, scholar and commentator. In *Contemporary Literature in Ghana 1911–1978: A Critical Evaluation*, Charles Angmor suggests that the "subject dominant in [Awoonor's] writing is Africa's cultural transformation under Western influence" (103). Angmor is right, but Awoonor goes further: Awoonor also laments the trauma that the colonial experience has been for Africans. This is evident not just in a poem like "Sew the Old Days" but in his critically acclaimed *The Breast of the Earth: A Survey of the History, Culture and Literature of Africa South of the Sahara* (1975), in which he describes in the preface as his "*personal* testament of and salutation to that spirit of Africa that continues through strife, tribulations, and dramatic upheavals to seek her own true self" (xiv). Further in *The Breast of the Earth,* Awoonor writes that in traditional African society "[l]ife and death exist in an indistinguishable continuum" (50). Perhaps Awoonor has already asked the ancestors "while they idle[d] there" ("Songs of Sorrow") as he so tragically died in the dramatic upheaval at the Westgate Shopping Mall. Some of Awoonor's other writings are *The Ghana Revolution: A Background Account from A Personal Perspective* (1984), *Ghana: A Political History from Pre-European to Written Times* (1990) and *Africa: The Marginalized Continent* (1995), and *The African Predicament: A Collection of Essays* (2006).

In one of the epigraphs used for his tribute, Awoonor speaks of the artist as seer. He was indeed a seer. Kofi Anyidoho, Ato Quayson, and others have so eloquently spoken of Kofi Awoonor's integrity as a human being. Perhaps it was because he saw what others were too blind to see, too preoccupied with the acquisition of power just for its sake. His life was a commitment and dedication to a country and continent to which he felt deeply attached. That he died educating others in the service of his continent reminds us all of the life we too often take for granted, and the service we too often forget to render to the continent that continues to be marginalized and exploited. Awoonor, through his works and life, bequeathed us Africans a legacy, a legacy to remember the past in order to forge a better future. No legacy could have been greater.

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

What are the major preoccupations of Awonoor's poetry?

3.3 Images of Colonialism in Kofi Awonoor's Poetry

In Kofi Awoonor's poetry, we find that the psychological and spiritual harm done to Africa is much more disturbing. For the 'psychological destruction of the African and his mode of being' was part of the white man's design. He imposed 'his own customs, religion and values on the black man' and 'native tradition and way of life were interrupted by proselytizers'. 'The Weaver Bird' (p. 37) is a central poem in this connection. The bird-imagery in Okigbo's poetry is present here also, but the bird-agent is different in both cases. Here it is the weaver bird. Awoonor 'uses imagery of

the weaver bird and its notorious colonizing habits, which often kill the chosen tree, to unfold a vision of the whole colonial period in Ghana'. One factor which gives this poem the tragic intensity with which it is imbued is the contrast between the friendliness of the Africans and the callous ingratitude of the white man whom the weaver bird symbolises:

> The weaver bird built in our house.
> And laid its eggs on our only tree.
> We did not want to send it away.
> ……
> And the weaver returned in the guise of the owner.
> Preaching salvation to us that owned the house.

This theme of tenant turned landlord is also the basis of the poetic reaction in South Africa. The 'weaver bird' has not settled down to supervise its newly acquired domain, for that would have presented it as humane, which it is not. It rather embarked upon fouling 'trees, totems, and shrines so that the contemporary African has to build anew':

> We look for new homes every day,
> For new altars we strive to re-build
> The old shrines defiled by the weaver's excrement.

Commenting on the word 'excrement', Gerald Moore said that the poem distils 'its arrested bitterness into the single word "excrement"'. This word expresses the poet's picture of the weaver bird and what it symbolises, and not his emotion of anger of bitterness. 'Excrement', being that of the weaver bird, is used to show how insensitive to human values the bird is - it deposits faeces on shrines; and to show how oppressive the colonial attitudes to the indigenous African religion were, for the bird exercises no control over the distribution of its own dirt. The word therefore sums up, not the poet's bitterness, but the contempt with which he holds the weaver bird and all it represents.

In Awoonor's poetry the gods with their shrines are victims not only of oppression by the whites, but also neglect by their own 'children' who happen to be converted into the new religion. Gerald Moore was conscious of this fact when he said that Awoonor's 'poetry abounds in laments for the neglected shrines and forgotten gods, ignored by a society now intent upon individual status and materialsim'. That the 'shrines' and the 'gods' were neglected, ignored and forgotten is a correct observation; but that the cause of this was the society's quest for 'individual status and materialism' is far from the truth. The true cause according to Awoonor was the foreigners who by preaching other kinds of shrines and gods distracted some members of the society from discharging their duties to their own gods. Even in the same poem, 'The Years Behind' (p. 59), lines 8-11 of which Moore quoted to illustrate the fact of neglect, Awoonor hints at the cause of this neglect: 'My life's song falls low among alien peoples.' That is to say that his entire life - song, culture, religion - was looked down upon by these 'alien peoples' who condemned his culture and set up a foreign one for his adoption.

This desertion is very dramatically presented in another of Awoonor's poems, 'Easter Dawn'. In this poem we learn that

> the gods are crying, my father's gods are crying
> for a burial - for a final ritual -
> but they that should build the fallen shrines
> have joined the dawn marchers

singing their way towards Gethsemane...

This is not all, for, a few lines later, we see the tragedy clinched by the priest of the gods deserting them himself:

the gods cried, shedding
clayey tears on the calico
the drink offering had dried up in the harmattan
the cola-nut is shrivelled
the yam feast has been eaten by mice
and the fetish priest is dressing for the
Easter service.

And at this point the desertion is complete; but the deserters are not pursuing individual status or material wealth - they are drawn into another religion, Christianity. This is natural, for every act of conversion is counterpoised by another of aversion. And as Taban Lo Liyong would put it, they are withdrawn from one type of superstition and planted into another (if superstition means 'credulity regarding the supernatural'). In one of his Haiku-like poems Liyong says:

id have loved god more
had Christian missionaries confirmed my superstitions
its hard to believe
after being undeceived

The absence of punctuation is the poet's making; and so is the use of the lower case g for the Christians' 'God'. The argument of this short poem is of religious and historical significance. It is believed by many that Christianity has not been effective in African societies because the early missionaries did not base their religion on the Africans' religious consciousness which they (Africans) developed even before their contact with the Europeans. The rather belated realisation of this 'sin' of omission has recently led to frantic, sometimes haphazard, efforts at using indigenous African musical instruments during the Christian service (especially the Mass). But the substance of the service remains unchanged. And many people are waiting, rather cynically, for the time when the indigenous wooden and clay vessels will also replace the imported golden chalice and ciborium on the altars.

The African is a victim of historical determinism. He has lost something of his religious inheritance and, according to another poem by Awoonor, he is threatened with loss of identity. The imagery this time is no less terrifying. The scene now shifts to the smithy in 'The Anvil and the Hammer' (p. 29). The African now becomes the crude iron in the hands of the smith, goldsmith not blacksmith, since his colour must be other than black. Thus the African is 'caught between the anvil and the hammer/In the forging house of a new life'. In this 'forging' there is a lot of confusion: 'The trappings of the past, tender and tenuous' are 'laced with the flimsy glories' of the present symbolised by 'paved/streets'; and in an attempt to resist the new formation, the Africans endeavour to remain pure and original when they sing, but find themselves spontaneously using 'snatches/from their [whites'] tunes'.

The smith's job is therefore wrong from the beginning. Indeed the word 'forging' in the poem becomes pleasantly ambiguous, for 'forgery', 'counterfeiting', 'falsifying' are all equally implied. For complete transformation would mean dehumanisation of the

African. But in the circumstances change, that is modification, is inevitable; and the poet himself concedes this. That is why he pleads for a kind of admixture, which is no synthesis, for synthesis is impossible:

> Sew the old days for us, our fathers,
> That we can wear them under our new garment,
> After we have washed ourselves in
> The Whirlpool of the many rivers' estuary.

It is significant that the two kinds of garment are to be made from different materials - the old and the new. Thus the African retains his old self but adds on to it something borrowed from the imported culture. Furthermore, it is remarkable that the 'garment' made up of the 'old days' is to be worn close to the skin, for that is nearest to his heart, and it is, as it were, protected by the borrowed garment.

The protagonist of this poem has therefore achieved a measure of success in his bid for 'cultural salvation' in the face of 'cultural turmoil'. He has not yielded to a total change of himself as the enemies of his culture aimed at in their 'forging house'; but he has not come out unscathed from it either. For it was through fire he went, and washing 'ourselves in/The Whirlpool of the many rivers' estuary' can only be a euphemism for the pangs of purification experienced in the 'whirlpool'.(Fraser, 1986)

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

With adequate elaboration, assess the images of colonialism in Awonoor's poetry.

3.4 An Analysis of "The Anvil and the Hammer" by Kofi Awonoor

The poem The Anvil and The Hammer was written by Kofi Awonoor, an acclaimed literary icon and poet from Ghana. Born George Kofi Nyidevu Awoonor-Williams in Wheta, Ghana in 1953, he studied in Ghana, England and the United States of America. He worked as a university lecturer and also represented his country on the international scene in various capacities. He authored the controversial novel, This Earth, my brother. Kofi Awonoor was among those killed by terrorists during an attack at the Westgate Shopping Mall in Nairobi in 2013.

> Caught between the anvil and the hammer
> In the forging house of a new life
> Transforming the pangs that delivered me
> Into the joy of new songs
> The trapping of the past, tender and tenuous
> Woven with fibre of sisal and
> Washed in the blood of the goat in the fetish hut
> Are laced with the flimsy glories of paved streets
> The jargon of a new dialectic comes with the
> Charisma of the perpetual search on the outlaw's hill.
> Sew the old days for us, our fathers,
> That we can wear them under our new garment,
> After we have washed ourselves in
> The whirlpool of the many rivers' estuary

We hear their songs and rumours everyday
Determined to ignore these we use snatches
From their tunes
Make ourselves new flags and anthems
While we lift high the banner of the land
And listen to the reverberation of our songs
In the splash and moan of the sea

Literally, an anvil is a tool with a hard surface used mostly by blacksmiths to work iron. The blacksmith often strikes the surface of the anvil with a hammer. The poem The Anvil and the Hammer derives its title from this activity. The poem is about the clash of cultures especially the Western and African cultures influenced mainly by the many years of colonisation by the West. The result is a cultural twist leading to a change in norms, values, ethos and the general way of life of the African people:

Caught between the anvil and the hammer/In the forging house of a new life.

Just as the anvil and the hammer work to shape a new piece of metal, the poet believes that rather than discard the African culture, Western ideas could be used to shape and refine African traditions to create a new Africa. The poet portrays the old African way of life and traditional practices in the following words: The trapping of the past, tender and tenuous/ Woven with fibre of sisal and/Washed in the blood of the goat in the fetish hut. He compares these with the Western culture foisted on Africans through religion and a new system of government. He laments that African values and traditions have been largely eroded –Are laced with the flimsy glories of paved streets/The jargon of a new dialectic comes with the/ Charisma of the perpetual search on the outlaw's hill. Note the use of the word "flimsy" which he employs to portray the attractions of the Western culture.

In the second stanza, he appeals to his ancestors to help restore the old African ways. Sew the old days for us, our fathers/That we can wear them under our new garment. While he admits that Western culture has indeed come to stay and would continuously influence African culture, he pleads for a synergy of both cultures for a better Africa: Determined to ignore these we use snatches/From their tunes/Make ourselves new flags and anthems/While we lift high the banner of the land.

Structurally, the poem has two contrasting stanzas. While the first stanza describes the conflict between African traditions and western civilisation, the second stanza offers solution to the conflict- Sew the old days for us, our fathers,/That we may wear them under our new garment. The solution lies in creating a balance of both cultures. The Anvil and the Hammer is a free verse poem. It has no consistent meter pattern or rhythm.

Mood and Tone: The mood is nostalgic- The trapping of the past, tender and tenuous/ Woven with fibre of sisal and Washed in the blood of goat in the fetish hut/. The tone reflects hope: Sew the old days for us, our fathers,/ That we can wear them under our new garment,

Themes:

1. Clash of cultures

2. Resolution of the clash through cultural synergy

3. Revival of the African culture

Poetic Devices

1. Metaphor: "Caught between the anvil and the hammer"; "the forging house of a new life" and the word "pangs" (like birth pangs) in the third line represents our cultural values.

2. Imagery: The poet uses many symbols beginning from the use of the words "anvil" and "hammer" which represent clash of cultures. The old African ways are described as follows: The trapping of the past, tender and tenuous/woven with fibre of sisal and/Washed in the blood of the goat in the fetish hut/Western civilisation is described as follows: "…flimsy glories of paved streets/The jargon of a new dialectic comes with the/Charisma of the perpetual search on the outlaw's hill".

3. Oxymoron: "flimsy glories ".

4. Antithesis: Sew the old days for us, our fathers,/That we can wear them under our new garment,

5. **Alliteration**: The trapping of the past, tender and tenuous

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

What are the most recurrent poetic devices employed by Awonoor in his poetry?

4.0 CONCLUSION

Kofi Awoonor sees the artist as a seer and he was indeed a seer. Kofi Anyidoho, Ato Quayson, and others have so eloquently spoken of Kofi Awoonor's integrity as a human being. It may be due to the fact that he saw what others were too blind to see, too preoccupied with the acquisition of power just for its sake. His life was a commitment and dedication to a country and continent to which he felt deeply attached. That he died educating others in the service of his continent reminds us all of the life we too often take for granted, and the service we too often forget to render to the continent that continues to be marginalized and exploited. Through his works and life, Awoonor bequeathed Africans a legacy to remember the past in order to forge a better future.

5.0 SUMMARY

In this unit you have learned the followings:

- The biography of Kofi Awoonor
- The features of Kofi Awoonor's poetry

- The images of colonialism potrayed in Kofi Awonoor's poetry
- An analysis of Kofi Awonoor's "The Anvil and The Hammer".

6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

Read and answer the questions below:

1) Give a brief biography of Kofi Awoonor.
2) What are the characteristic features of Kofi Awoonor's poetry?
3) Discuss the images of colonialism as potrayed in Kofi Awonoor's poetry.
4) Analyse of "The Anvil and the Hammer" by Kofi Awonoor.

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UNIT 6 THE POEMS OF LENRIE PETERS

CONTENTS

1.0 INTRODUCTION

A Gambian poet and novelist, Peters was born in Banjul and educated at the universities of Cambridge and London. He is a qualified surgeon and has practiced in England, Sierra Leone, and later in his native Gambia. Peters' poetry, first published as *Poems* (1964), owes little to the oral tradition and makes no use of indigenous mythology. He is a cosmopolitan poet whose themes are aging and death, the risks of love, and the loneliness of exile. In *Satellites* (1967), the poet's surgical detachment is a metaphor for the uprooted individual's painful existential isolation. Intellectual ideas about politics, evolution, science, and music orchestrate Peters's images in the form of debates. The new poems in *Selected Poetry* (1981) castigate the corrupt greed of tribalized leadership elites and balance nostalgia for a pastoral past with cautious assertions of hope for a future built on that past (Peters: 1981). Below are some of the objectives of this unit:

2.0 OBJECTIVES

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- Discuss the biograpgy of Lenrie Peters
- Explain the unique features of the poetry of Lenrie Peters
- Analyse "The Panic of Growing Older" by Lenrie Peters

3.0 MAIN CONTENT

3.1 Lenrie Peters

Gambian poet and novelist, Lenrie Peters was born in Bathurst (now Banjul) and educated at the universities of Cambridge and London, UK. He qualified as a surgeon in 1959 and has practiced in England, Sierra Leone, and since 1969 in his native Gambia. Peters currently works in the Westfield Clinic in Gambia, is Chairman of the Gambia Medical and Dental Association, writes for *The Gambia,* and has served as president of the Union of African Students in England.

Peters' poetry, first published as *Poems* (1964), owes little to the oral tradition and makes no use of indigenous mythology. Peters is a cosmopolitan poet whose themes are aging and death, the risks of love, and the loneliness of exile. In *Satellites* (1967), the poet-doctor's surgical detachment is a metaphor for the uprooted individual's painful existential isolation. Intellectual ideas about politics, evolution, science, and music orchestrate Peters's images in the form of debates. In his only novel, *The Second Round* (1965), a British-trained African physician, a victim of the "massacre of the soul" wrought by Westernization, returns to the capital city of his native land full of "noble ideas about progress in Africa." He ends by taking a post in a remote bush hospital, thus immersing himself deeper in the traditional experience. The new poems in *Selected Poetry* (1981) castigate the corrupt greed of tribalized leadership elites and balance nostalgia for a pastoral past with cautious assertions of hope for a future built on that past. Most recently Peters has published *The Way Through* (2005) (Peters, 1981)

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Write a detailed biography of Lenrie Peters.

3.2 The Poetry of Lenrie Peters

Poems, published by Mbari Publications of Ibadan, is a slim volume of thirty-three poems. These are early works, written for the most part when Peters was still in his twenties. Collectively they communicate an excessive youthful melancholy unrestrained, for the most part, by the irony and anger that give bite to the later collections. They are marked by expressions of grief, loneliness, suffering, hopelessness, and futility – emotions which are presented as responses to specifically African problems, the most important of which are the disconnectedness between the present and the past in Africa 1 the cultural clash between traditional Africa and the West, and the disoriented psyche of the westernized African. Those poems Peters considered the best in this initial volume were incorporated into Satellites, the first of the three major collections.

In *Satellites* Peters is the poet standing in the harsh African present reacting to nature, to history, and to the contemporary human- condition, especially in Africa. Most of the nature images are violent or decadent. For instance, the poet sees a "skyf lood of locusts." When it descends,

> A bleeding earth
> ferments in agony
> success goes up in smoke,
> returns a deluge of ruin.

Elsewhere the destructive violence below the surface of nature is revealed as "a sabre shark/lifts and plunges/cutting the emerald/sea." In the poet's response to such a world the affirmations are infrequent, and they come as a demand for faith in a faithless world. "I believe/ shout; I believe."

In this natural setting the images of human life are bleak. Futile youth "burns out its fuel"; maturation brings "the panic/ of growing older." Hands fumble and shake.

Thus as one reads through Satellites and through it again, one senses an attitude toward the human condition more akin to the despair of the existential pessimists than to the aggressively confident rhetoric of the political leaders of newly independent Africa. In Peters this attitude is made specifically African because it is linked tropologically to experience that is specifically African--to cold hearthstones and crumbling huts--and that grows out of the history of Africa.

In some of the best poems in the collection Peters portrays the African as the victim of history, bereft and adrift.

> Bartered birthrite
> Like the chaste membrane
> Is lost for good
> ……
> Early strength never returns
> to oppose the grinding artificialities.

In several densely structured ironic poems the persona is located in a shattered present from which he contemplates the past, the process of change, and the present point to which both the person and the continent have come. Speaking for all Westernised Africans, he says,

> We have come home
> From the bloodless wars
> With sunken hearts
> Our boots full of pride
> From the true massacre of the soul.

As a result of the "massacre" of Westernization, he comes back alienated to a confused moment "when the dawn falters/ Singing songs of other lands." And the Africa to which he returns is a "house without a shadow/ Lived in by new skeletons."

This is a grim picture sketched by a realist who will not blink or turn away. Near the end of the volume, in the longest poem in the collection, the realist turns satirist. Peters was one of the first Anglophone poets to use satire, and he uses it to accuse the new black leadership of perpetuating the "massacre" of the African soul and expropriating the shadowless house of the written African state. The guilty are the politicians who "came and went/ Meteors about the sky," learning "to beg in style."

Katchikali, a volume of sixty-nine poems that appeared in 1971, is one of a half dozen important collections by Anglophone West African poets to appear in the early seventies. It is not a happy or a hopeful book: its predominant theme is the painful isolation of the individual. But again Peters speaks of this isolation as an African. To the degree that one can judge these things, a great deal of the person of the author has gone into Katchikali. In different poems he writes as an artist, a parent, a physician, and an African. This last is the most important and is seen in the design of the book. He places the specifically African poems at the beginning and the end of the volume, creating a parenthesis of Africanness within which the other poems are enclosed.

He depicts the isolation of the spirit in several poems through references to the transitory character of an interracial love affair, but most of the poems focus on the uprooted mind rather than the broken heart. (Ramanu, 1978)

The mind
Is like the desert winds
Ploughing the empty spaces
Listless, fastidiously laying down the dust.

In a later poem he personalized this pain by lamenting his inability to impose meaning on experience.

There where all the opposites arrive
to plague the inner senses, but do not fuse
I hold my head.

In another poem this personal tragedy has its counterpart in nature itself

Around me
dead winter trees
wolves howling

This alternating between the internalising and generalising of the theme of isolation is important in Peters' poetry. As Edwin Thumboo points out, Peters is "mainly concerned with the dissociated sensibility as a contemporary problem" in ways that are both speculative and personal, intellectual and existential.

In "Katchikali," the title poem, Peters examines the possibility of a return to African tradition as a solution to existential isolation. He uses a sacred pond in The Gambia to symbolize an indigenous past in which crocodiles are "as tame as pumpkins." But the pond and the past are defiled by colonial intruders who force pressgangs into the labour of desecration. The result is not that the African is transformed by a return to roots but that he finds himself almost hopelessly trapped in the rubble of· the present when "all the institutions crumble." The uprooted call in vain because the pond's "wisdom is silent." But if the conclusion of the poem is pessimistic because "there are no more answers," the form of the poem is hopeful with a hope signalled by a grammatical shift. Beginning by talking descriptively about Katchikali, the poet ends by talking to Katchikali. What begins as a lament ends as an invocation. Like Christopher Okigbo, Peters is "waiting on barefoot," learning perhaps that the most hopeful thing about prayer is not that one is answered but that one can pray at all.

The remaining poems of the collection alternate between cautious expressions of hope in an African future built on an African past and cries wrung from the isolated heart and from the angry citizen. In the latter role, with what Mphahlele calls his "rejection of cant--honesty of purpose," he repudiates the political and manipulative exploitation of the African past.

Octogenarian breasts at twenty
enthroned in pools of urine

after childbirth, whose future
is not theirs to mould or flirt with mirth
There is your 'self' crushed
between the grinding wheel
of ignorance and the centuries.

In 1981 Heinemann brought out a collection of Peters' verse under the title *Selected Poetry*. Along with selections from the previous volumes, it contains fifty-eight new poems. They are not always as good as the earlier poems; they exhibit less control of the brief, clear line, and there is less use of the vivid structural metaphor. But there are still fine lines and strong poems. Here as in the past Peters writes of and out of the moment. The mood and subject shift from poem to poem, but there is a kind of weaving or pulsating of dominant concerns. The sense of discontinuity is always strong in Peters, but it is especially so in the new poems. And it is presented in terms of the African past, present, and future. The primary focus is again the present, depicted in the lives of individual s, in the clash of cultures, and in the exploitation of nee-colonialism. Juxtaposed against this is an intense nostalgia expressed in pastoral images of the African past. A third concern is the future of Africa. Especially toward the end of the volume, he considers how it will happen and what it will be like.

Among the interweaving themes the broken dream of the present prevails. It is presented as a generalized reflection on political and economic life--the greed of the elite and the poverty of the people. Often Peters is compelled to simple, sad assertions: "It has been dismal/ since the new freedom came." In one of the best of the new poems he depicts the painful present as the centre of both Africa's dilemma and his own poetic consciousness.

Sand castles on the beach
within easy reach
of the white tide's
menacing graces

I start in my dreams
calabash world in fragments
my pillow wet with tears
acid centuries of bitterness.

The first quatrain is a superb image of the vulnerability of traditional Africa. The second links the poet's consciousness to the torment of the continent through the dream of the broken "calabash world."

In a number of the new poems his response to this broken world is an intense nostalgia--a longing to return to traditional Africa as depicted by pastoral and domestic images. He speaks longingly of "messages/ from wood fires and the warm / pungency of cooking." But he, the written African, is disconnected--cut-off. This sense of separation from the healing past is expressed in one of the best poems in the collection:

Men are roasting nuts

on wood fires
their laughter like sheet lightning
in the night,
girls dancing by firelight
among green-flowing fields of rice crop.
I, always one removed
from their fun and laughter,
cannot reach them.

They know where sorrow ends,
and I, the broken bridge
across the estuary,
across worlds, cannot reach them.

The whole thrust of the new poems is an attempt to connect the traditional past to some bearable, liveable future through the shattered present. And Peters is ambivalent about the possibility of such a connection. In one poem he sees traditional Africa welcoming its lost children with singing, drumming, and dancing. In another he warns that "the nearness of nature / has not taught us self-reliance." But he is a realist as well as a humanist. In the final analysis continental self- reliance is the only message the past can communicate to the present to create a future.

the tom-toms are saying
'This is the time to know yourself.'

Self-knowledge will make possible a collective action, "a mass uprising / from the Atlas to the Cape/ to ravage the puppets /perverts, iconoclasts." But as this harsh indictment of the new African elite makes clear, Peters offers no easy answers but only a slim hope and a stern warning.

Ogun will not help us
Christ will not help us...

we hold our destiny
in rugged palm.

In Peters' poetry what we see over and over again is the interaction of a strong sense of negation and a rat her desperate hope for the future. The centre of his poetic vision is the African present with its grief, violence, oppression, loneliness, and death. From this he moves toward a past now lost and a future that may never come. From this centre of the shattered present even nature is filled with menace unless cleansed by association with an idealized past.

But there is a progression of feeling and focus from one volume to the next. Satellites contains many poems that explore the relation of the African past to the harsh present "when the dawn falters" as well as poems that record his own involvement in the written African's cyclical journey to the West and back. The two poems that begin "We have come home" and "The present reigned supreme" are among his best and most

ironic. And running through the volume, providing a kind of figurative unity, are images of the indifferent harshness of nature. Katchikali are often less specifically African. The poems in In this collection Peters writes more of the condition of written man generally and of the problems facing the world. Even the political satire tends to be more generalized. But here also it still seems that the centre from which he writes is the broken dream of the African present. This is made clear in those poems near the end of the collection in which he uses images of present suffering and future disaster to attack the rhetoric of African politicians. Although the pictures of the present in Selected Poetry are sti ll harsh and bitter, the new poems express increased nostalgia for the pastoral African past as well as a cautious assertion of hope for the future. Like the other poet s of his generation, Peters has found that the conditions of life in contemporary Africa are tragic. As a poet he depicts this tragedy while trying to reclaim the past and point the way to a viable future.

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Assess the major themes in Lenrie Peters' poetry collections, *Poems* and *Satellite.*

3.3 An analysis of The Panic of Growing Older by Lenrie Peters

The panic
of growing older
spreads fluttering winds
from year to year

At twenty
stilled by hope
of gigantic success
time and exploration

At thirty
a sudden throb of
pain. Laboratory tests
have nothing to show

Legs cribbed
in domesticity allow
no sudden leaps
at the noon now

Copybook bisected
with red ink
and failures-
nothing to show the world

Three children perhaps
the world expects
it of you. No

specialist's effort there.

But science gives hope
of twice three score
and ten. Hope
is not a grain of sand.

Inner satisfaction
dwindles in sharp
blades of expectation.
From now on the world has you. (Peters, 1967: 72)

The poem is about the different phases of human development starting from birth through adulthood and old age. The aging process is slow: spreads fluttering winds from year to year. In the second stanza, the poet describes what happens in early adulthood. This period is filled with high expectations, hopes, ambition, and adventure. One also has the advantage of time:

At twenty/stilled by hope/of gigantic success/time and exploration.

The next stanza describes age thirty as the period when one begins to experience pain that lacks medical explanation: At thirty a sudden throb of pain. Laboratory tests have nothing to show.

The fourth stanza portrays what happens in old age. As one approaches old age, weakness sets in and one loses agility: Legs cribbed/in domesticity allow/no sudden leaps/at the noon now. Often, one spends all his years on earth trying to copy others without success: Copybook bisected /with red ink and failures. In the end, he has nothing to show the world except children which the poet does not consider an achievement: Three children perhaps/ the world expects /it of you. No/ specialist's effort there.

Although science gives hope of living up to one hundred and thirty years, this is not a sure fact:

But science gives hope of/twice three score/and ten.

Hope/is not a grain of sand.

In old age, the thoughts of unfulfilled dreams and aspirations bring weakness to the mind:

Inner satisfaction dwindles in sharp blades of expectation.

With not much time left, the aged has very little control of his life and simply resigns to fate:

From now on the world has you.

Structure: This is a free verse poem with no consistent meter pattern or rhyme scheme.

It has eight stanzas written in short phrases and arranged chronologically. Each stanza describes the different phases of life.

Language: The poem's language is simple. However, the poet uses symbols to represent the aging process. Examples include: "legs cribbed", "throb of pain".

Theme: The poem's main theme is the fear of aging or growing old. Other themes are mortality of man and life's uncertainties.

Mood and Tone: The mood is passive. Though the pain associated with aging is undesirable, the poet accepts that aging is inevitable. The tone is calm.

Poetic Devices

1. Metaphor: Example- "fluttering winds" which describes the anxiety of aging.

2. Symbols: Examples- "sudden throb of pain", "legs cribbed" represent weakness associated with aging. "Hope of gigantic success/ time and exploration" represent the youthful age.

3. Repetition: The word "hope" was repeated in the seventh stanza.

4. Alliteration: Example- "from year to year"

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Provide a detail analysis of Peter's poems other than the ones discussed in this unit.

4.0 CONCLUSION

Lenrie Peters, a surgeon/poet earlier poetry owes little to the oral tradition and makes no use of indigenous mythology. He is a cosmopolitan poet whose themes are aging and death, the risks of love, and the loneliness of exile. In *Satellites* (1967), the poet-doctor's surgical detachment is a metaphor for the uprooted individual's painful existential isolation. Intellectual ideas about politics, evolution, science, and music orchestrate Peters's images in the form of debates. Peter's poem, The Panic of Growing Older' is about the different phases of human development starting from birth through adulthood and old age. The aging process is slow: spreads fluttering winds from year to year. The poem's main theme is the fear of aging or growing old.

5.0 SUMMARY

In this unit you have learned the followings:

- The biograpgy of Lenrie Peters
- The features of the poetry of Lenrie Peters
- An analysis of the "The Panic of Growing Older" by Lenrie Peters

6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

Read and answer the questions below:

1) Discuss the biograpgy of Lenrie Peters

2) Explain the unique features of the poetry of Lenrie Peters
3) Analyse “The Panic of Growing Older” by Lenrie Peters

7.0 REFERENCES/FURTHER READINGS

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MODULE 4 THEMES AND STYLE IN SELECTED AFRICAN POETRY: THE CONTEMPORARIES

Unit 1 The Poems of Kofi Ayindoho
Unit 2 The Poems of Niyi Osundare
Unit 3 The Poems of Sipho Semphala
Unit 4 The Poems of Funso Aiyejina
Unit 5 The Poems of Tenure Ojaide

UNIT 1 THE POEMS OF KOFI AYINDOHO

CONTENTS

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Kofi Anyidoho, a Ghanaian poet was born in 1947. He was educated at the University of Ghana, Legon (BA), Indiana University (MA), and the University of Texas (PhD). Anyidoho's poetry has been published in many journals and anthologies, and his five published books of poetry are *Elegy for the Revolution* (1978), *A Harvest of Our Dreams* (1985), *Earthchild* (1985), *Ancestral-Logic and Caribbean Blues* (1993), and *Praise Song for the Land* (2002). His major themes are public, political, and social concerns, and his poetry is deeply influenced by the traditions and culture of the Ewe people of Ghana. The poetry is elegiac and uncovers the connections, in a traditional African ontological context, between tragedy and comedy, life and death, and sorrow and joy. In this unit, you will be introduced to the poetry of Anyidoho with illustration from the *Eathchild* (1985) collection. (Senanu and Vincent, 2001). Below are some of the objectives of this unit:

2.0 OBJECTIVES

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- Discuss the biography of Kofi Anyidoho
- Explain the unique features of Kofi Anyidoho's poetry
- Examine the themes of exile and military dictatorship in Kofi Anyidoho's *Earthchild*
- Discuss the Techniques of presentation used by Kofi Anyidoho in his poetry

3.0 MAIN CONTENT

3.1 Biography of Kofi Anyidoho

Kofi Anyidoho was a Ghanaian poet. He was born in 1947 Wheta in the Volta Region of Ghana. Anyidoho was educated at the University of Ghana, Legon (BA), Indiana University (MA), and the University of Texas (PhD). He taught primary, middle, and secondary school in Ghana before moving into a university career. He is currently a Professor of Literature in the English Department as well as Director of the School of Performing Arts of the University of Ghana. He has received several awards for his poetry, including the Valco Fund Literary Award, the Langston Hughes Prize, the BBC Arts and Africa Poetry Award, the Fania Kruger Fellowship for Poetry of Social Vision, Poet of the Year (Ghana), and the Ghana Book Award. He was elected a Fellow of the International Academy of Poets in 1974. Some of his poems have been translated into Italian, German, Dutch, and Slavic.

Anyidoho's poetry has been published in many journals and anthologies, and his five published books of poetry are *Elegy for the Revolution* (1978), *A Harvest of Our Dreams* (1985), *Earthchild* (1985), *Ancestral-Logic and Caribbean Blues* (1993), and *Praise Song for the Land* (2002), which includes a CD with readings of the poems. Anyidoho's major themes are public, political, and social concerns, and his poetry is deeply influenced by the traditions and culture of the Ewe people of Ghana. The poetry is elegiac and uncovers the connections, in a traditional African ontological context, between tragedy and comedy, life and death, and sorrow and joy. In his poetry Anyidoho reacts to the dehumanization and torture that characterizes the European colonization of Africa and its peoples, and to the lack of moral rectitude of many postindependence African leaders. He makes his preoccupation with the plight of postindependent Africa explicit in "House- Boy" (in *A Harvest of Our Dreams*): "The dreams of Fanon's wretched of the earth/condense into storms in our mourning sky." Anyidoho is also the editor of a collection of essays titled *Beyond Survival: African Literature and the Search for New Life*, with Abena P. A. Busia and Anne V. Adams (1998). The collection has a literary focus, but also offers a thesis about the role of African-heritage writers in current crises for African peoples as a whole. Another critical work by Anyidoho is *Fontomfrom: Contemporary Ghanaian Literature, Theatre and Film,* which he co-authored with James Gibbs (2000). He has also recently published an article in *Africa Today* titled "The Back without Which There Is No Front" (Killam, 2008)

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Assess the literary biography of Kofi Anyidoho.

3.2 The Poetry of Kofi Anyidoho

In his "Oral Techniques and Commitment in The Poetry of Okot P'bitek and Kofi Anyidoho: Their Contributions to Modern African Poetry" (2013), Okon discussed the poems of Kofi Anyidoho. According to him Anyindoho is one of Ghana's new generation poets. This generation of poets can be differentiated by their masses-oriented poetry. The implication is that their poetry is "committed", committed to the ultimate

liberation of the masses from the shackles of economic and political exploitation. In other words, Anyidoho can be seen as a revolutionary of some sort. This caption fits him, as his activities fit Ngara's definition of a revolutionary, as follows:

> It is the duty of the revolutionary writer…. to produce works which awaken the masses, which fire them with enthusiasm that they unite in one single effort to transform their environment.

He, like others in his class, writes committed literature due to a deep understanding of the class struggles in Africa as the motive force of African history. He sees the working classes as the only hope for the continent and refuses to resign in the face of corruption in despair (Agye 135-6). This, therefore, informs the vision of Anyidoho, in his poetry collection, A Harvest of our Dreams. Excerpts from his earlier collection Elegy for the Revolution included in the above-mentioned collection exemplify Anyidoho's revolutionary temper. An example is his dedication in A Harvest of Our Dreams

> To the memory of
> The revolution that went astray
> And for/Those who refuse to die
> Aluta continua…

Many of the poems in A Harvest of Our Dreams may perhaps be said to deal with the defunct Acheampong/Akuffo Regimes in Ghana, between 1972 and 1978. Why this deep attachment? Angmor rationalizes Anyidoho's seeming preoccupation with the Acheampong regime thus:

> … Anyidoho belongs to the group of Ghanaian students who hailed the military coup of 1972 as a hope and an opportunity to retrieve Ghana's international image, reshape the mentality of the citizenry and restore economic security and contentment in the fortunes of the common man…. The sadness of the bitter shock of disappointment and disillusionment of the youth is the current that flows through his poems (26).

It is in this context that we observe his comments on corruption in power, in the poem "My Last Testament"

> Adonu Adokli
> Dancer - extra-ordinary
> Who threw dust into Master-Drummer's
> eyes/so you've gone the way of flesh
> danced on heels in a backwards loop
> into the narrow termite home….

In the above poem Anyidoho expresses his disillusionment with the corruption of usurping military rulers. Further in the poem, he says that the people's dreams of economic betterment have not yet been realized. He predicts another revolution:

> Now I smell thunders
> loading their cannons with

furies of storms…

and ends up reiterating his unyielding stance:

I toss these rising doubts to thunder
and stagger back into my soul, still
holding firm onto this growing confidence ….

Anyidoho stands as one who would flight on behalf of the less privileged in society. For this reason, the tone of his poems remains unyielding. Another example of this unyielding and resolute spirit is to be found in "Our Birth Cord". This poem restates the loss of the people's hopes thus:

a piece of meat lost in cabbage stew
it will be found the tongue
will feel it out.

He reflects on the sufferings of the people "Across the memory of a thousand agonies…."

While restating the loss of the people's hopes, the protagonist ends in a resolute attitude of not yielding to death threats from military rulers:

And if we must die at birth, pray
We return with –
But we were not born to be killed
by threats of lunatics

This piece re-echoes Langston Hughes' poem "If We Must Die"

In "Dance of the Hunch-back" the protagonist depicts the poverty and misery of the common man. The common man is here symbolically represented as a "hunchback".

Mine is the dance of the hunchback….
I crawl my way with strain and shame
I leave the paved streets to
Owners of the earth….

"Owners of the earth" here represents the privileged class. Here, the hunchback's brother dies and the doctor makes the following pronouncement:

"he died of innate poverty"

Ironically enough, kinsmen who never offered help while the deceased was alive, now come for the funeral, flaunting all sorts of expensive articles for their own selfish enjoyment; even the deceased is buried in a glass coffin:

Kinsmen came from distant quests
With precious things for parting gifts…
a glass coffin with rims of gold…
each kind kinsman stood tall in our hearts

In spite of this, the hunchback is disgraced because he is too poor to contribute anything towards his brother's funeral. As an outcast, he states dejectedly:

I crawl along quiet sidewalks of life
With the hedge-hog and the crab
I carry a tedious destiny….

With this poem, Anyidoho's identification with the common man is complete

In another poem entitled "Radio Revolution", Anyidoho depicts the usual "game of musical chairs" or charade of intermittent coups and counter-coups that plague not only Ghana, but almost every country in Africa in the recent past. These coups are normally characterized by dawn broadcasts by the new "saviours", as Anyidoho states:

Again this dawn our Radio
Broke off the vital end of sleep
Revolution … Devolution ….Resolution!

This is a satire on all coups. The protagonist parodies this coup announcement by going out into the streets "seeking revolution". The sarcasm is barely concealed, especially in the last three lines, when the protagonist puns on the sounds of the words "leave" and "live".

Long Leave the Revolution!!!

In the poem "Elegy for the Revolution", the poet's attitude of derogatory perception of the military rulers is personified in his warning to them about the imminence of another revolution:

The Revolution violates a devotee
Beware/Beware the wrath of
Thunderbolts/ The agonised thoughts
Of a detainee translate/our new
Blunders into nightmares of blood and sweat:

In "A Dance of Death", Anyidoho's poetry becomes not only prophetic of a coup aimed at dethroning the Acheampong/Akuffo regimes, but prophetic of the eventual elimination by firing squad, of all living former Ghanaian military Heads of State.

Besides, the poem re-iterates revolutionary ideals, endorsing violence and bloodshed as necessary means through which reconstruction can be undertaken:

Let us celebrate our
death by firing squads
to beats of martial strains
let us link our arms
on these public fields of blood
teach our feet to do the dance of death

The poet believes that to rebuild and recreate the nation, there must be sacrifice

The birth of a new nation
Calls for sacrifice of souls

and this is underscored with the dialectical paradox of destruction and creation:

The process of reconstruction
is also
A process of demolition

This signifies the cleansing of the society from corruption, by the elimination of corrupt leaders. This poem is prophetic in that when Rawlings came to power a second time, past rulers of Ghana like Afriffa, Acheampong and Akuffo, were eliminated by firing squad (Okon, 2013).

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

What are the recurrent themes in Anyidoho's poetry?

3.3 Exile and Military Dictatorship in Kofi Anyidoho's *Earthchild*

Set against the background of military dictatorship in Ghana, Anyidoho's *Earthchild* (1981) presents one with the shocking images of home and their capacity to instigate flight from annihilation, a thought that often undermines at the initial stage the harrowing tribulations of exile since what matters for the moment is to escape the immediate inconveniences of home. Schooled in the oral tradition of his Ewe people, Anyidoho taps the rich resources of this tradition for the adornment of his art. For the most part in this collection, there is an adoption of the dirge tradition of his people as an artistic means of explicating the drift-prone condition of a nation hemmed in by the tyrannical hand of military politicians.

While he adopts what Ezenwa-Ohaeto (1999:130) calls the use of personal voice, the experience however reaches far beyond the personal as it brings to focus the collective travail of a people in a society where the "Star-General is urinating peace on Capitol Hill". The difficulty of the military to cope with the self-imposed responsibility of salvaging the nation from the shackles of international debt, austerity measures and general economic mishaps (Henry Beienin 1987: 54) is worsened by the tendency of the class to treat matters of serious national magnitude with levity and disdain. This is what is metaphorically designated as the "urinating of peace". Whoever is acquainted with the corrosive acidity of urine surely knows that such act stokes no good for the nation. As expected, all this provides an alibi for people to leave in search of a greener pasture. It explains why the parting of soul-mates is what is lamented in "Song of a Twin Brother" as the persona recollects that "many, many moons ago" his "twin brother" with whom he "shared the same mat/…parted in our dreams". If in the above poem one is left to imagine the lot and fortune of the exiled brother, such elliptical frugality which tasks the imagination is forestalled in "To Ralph Crowder" which ends in the following lines:

We suffer here so much
But they say your case is worse

And you've fought with all your blood
Always fighting on the bleeding side
And you cannot go on like this …
Come Crowder Come
But I tell you all is not well at *Home.*

Again, the question of the dilemma to which the exile is tragically consigned resonates in the stanza above. The reality of exile has turned out to be far from providing succour. Ordinarily, return should be the next line of action, but the same kinsman who calls for Crowder's return cannot but alert him to the fact that "all is not well at home." The predicament of the lost twin brother and Crowder goes to demonstrate the strength of Paul Tiyambe Zeleza's (2005:12) argument that "dislocation, expatriation from home is a prosaic condition experienced by millions of people rather than an exceptional reality only for those blessed with artistic souls". The poet thus becomes a medium through which the expatriatory travails of his people are expressed (Okon, 2013).

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Discuss other themes in Anyidoho's *Earthchild.*

3.4 Techniques of Presentation Used By Kofi Anyidoho

What techniques does Anyidoho use? His major techniques include: The Use of Praise Names, which demonstrates that he has been influenced by his Ewe traditional oral poetry tradition, for example in his "My Last Testament", he makes use of praise names such as:

Adonu Adokli
… ……
Katako Gako
Old mad-one…

The Use of Repetition: Repetition is used for emphasis: an example is in the poem "Radio Revolution":

(a) I/seek Revolution
… …….
(b) I was out my dear
I was out seeking revolution

Another instance is his repetition, with slight change in emphasis, of the following:

a piece of meat lost in cabbage stew
It will be found…
And, also the phrase:

"If we must die "
in the poem "Our Birth Cord".

The Use of Symbolism is found in the images he creates in his poetry. For example, he depicts the common man as symbolised by the hunchback in "Dance of the hunchback". He also depicts the military class as "leopards", "panthers", or "lunatics"

Use of Puns and Homophones: homophones are used for example, in "Radio Revolution", thus:

Revolution… Devolution… Resolution

This play on words is done to give a different meaning to each word in spite of the similarity in sound environment. Subtle change in meaning which the undiscovering eye cannot see is what is aimed at. And above all, it is done for emphasis. There is the pun on "live" and "leave" also in the same poem.

The Language of Anyidoho is seemingly simple, full of assonance, therefore, musical. For example:

Again and again and again
You may stand on shores of memory…
("On Shores of Memory")

Anyidoho has contributed to modern African poetry in the following ways: As one of the poets of the younger generation, he has contributed in making poetry for public recital popular in Ghana (Apronti 31; cf Anyidoho 45-47)4. That is why sound and music are important in his poetry. Both the public recital, and musicality of Anyidoho's poetry underline his masses-oriented vision. He has a musical frame of poetic composition (Angmor 61); his poetry is closely modeled after traditional Ewe poetry in which he is well versed. This influence can be seen in his use of praise-names, as well as in his dirge-style. An example is his poems "A Harvest of Our Dreams" and "Fertility Game"; his compositions have a lyrical quality just like p'Bitek's. This is an index of their derivation from the oral poetry of the people, and underscores the over/all musical quality of their poetry; His unyielding vision of society has contributed to the urgency and sharpness in his poetry, and also explains his pre-occupation with death, sacrifice, revolution, and bloodshed. This vision now characterises many other writers of his generation and is portrayed in their concern for the plight of the masses; he has contributed to the political theme of military rule in Africa, just as other writers have contributed to the same theme in drama and in the novel; and, he is one among few African poets whose poetry has been prophetic to a large extent. In this regard, Nigeria's Okigbo is the first example. Therefore, Anyidoho's poetry stands out in this respect (Okon, 2013).

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Outline the presentation techniques in Anyidoho's poetry.

4.0 CONCLUSION

Kofi Anyidoho is one of Ghana's new generation poets. The can be differentiated by their masses-oriented poetry. The implication is that their poetry is "committed",

committed to the ultimate liberation of the masses from the shackles of economic and political exploitation. Anyidoho can therefore be seen as a revolutionary of some sort.

5.0 SUMMARY

In this unit you have learned the followings:

- The biography of Kofi Anyidoho
- The features of Kofi Anyidoho's poetry
- The themes of exile and military dictatorship in Kofi Anyidoho's *Earthchild*
- The techniques of presentation in Kofi Anyidoho's poetry

6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

Read and answer the questions below:

1) Outline the biography of Kofi Anyidoho
2) Explain the unique features of Kofi Anyidoho's poetry
3) Explain the themes of exile and military dictatorship in Kofi Anyidoho's *Earthchild*
4) Discuss the techniques of presentation employed by Kofi Anyidoho in his poetry

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UNIT 2 THE POEMS OF NIYI OSUNDARE

CONTENTS

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Niyi Osundare who has made a name as a linguist, a critic and an experienced journalist and teacher is a poet devoted to serve the exploited African peasantry. He appears impressive and prominent among the younger generation of Nigerian poets. His works vividly convey his concept on the relationship between the oppressed Nigerian/African and the crop of leaders there. His works address a deluge of themes which include corruption, poverty, administrative mismanagement, and to a certain extent, the lingering effects of colonialism on the African continent. Oundare played a very prominent role in the campaign against the practices of the first generation of Nigerian poets often referred to as "Euro-Modernist poets" who tended to have lingered too long on the burden of managing the imperial lords' legacy or what Inyabri, Thomas (2006) calls "domineering images". This unit will examine selected poems from Osundare's *Songs of the Market Place* to buttress how written African poetry portrays African experience. Below are some of the objectives of this unit.

2.0 OBJECTIVES

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- Give a Brief Biography of Niyi Osundare
- Review Niyi Osundare's *Songs of the Market Place*
- Analysis some poems from Osundare's *Songs of the Market Place*
- Describe the African experience in Osundare's Songs *of the Market Place*
- Discuss the theme of 'excursion' as a portrayal of Nigeria's socio-political experience in Osundare's *Songs of the Market Place*
- Discuss the theme of "Siren" as a portrayal of Africa's Leadership problem in *Songs of the Market Place*

- Explain the theme of African cultural heritages in Osundare's *Songs of the Market Place*
- Discuss Osundare's language and Style

3.0 MAIN CONTENT

3.1 A Brief Biography of Niyi Osundare

Nigerian poet, Niyi Osundare was born in Ikere-Ekiti, educated at the University of Ibadan, the University of Leeds and New York University, Toronto. He returned to Nigeria to work as a university lecturer and journalist. Since 1935 he has taken poetry to a wider audience through his regular column in the Tribune newspaper. One of the most prolific and highly regarded of Nigeria's contemporary poets, Osundare's work uses a wide range of vernacular and literary idioms to frame its lyrical and satirical concern with social justice. His principal collections of verse include *Songs of the Market Place* (1984), *Waiting Laughter* (1990), *Song of the Season* (1990) *Selected Poems* (1992) and *Midlife* (1993). The *Eye of the Earth* (1986) won both the Association of Nigerian Author's poetry prize. He is a celebrated performer of his poetry which has affinities with Nigeria's oral tradition. (Aiyejina, 1988)

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Give detailed biography of Niyi Osundare.

3.2 Osundare as a Poetic Messiah

Niyi Osundare is apparently one of the most outspoken of the new breed poets whose style marks him out as fitly messianic (Alu, 2008). This is because as a poet of substance, Osundare's attempt at addressing the problems facing critics and scholars of African poetry places him as an interesting look-alike of Bloomian "kenosis". He pioneers a campaign against obscurantism by dedicating *Songs of the Market Place* to propagate and celebrate what many critics came to believe was an over-asserted and unrealistic leap. The void, so seemingly created at kenosis in this context, gave Osundare the leverage to employ a befitting poetic medium to join the emerging new voices in poetry. The new breed poets principally sought to demystify it through the simplification of its language which Abdu Saleh affirms below:

> Osundare's poetic style marks him as a representative voice of the group. Through a studied critique and reworking of language of their predecessors, Osundare leads the group in their tacit task of liberating and demystifying the business of poetry to many readers. As language and language use lie in the essence of poetry, African poetry can only gain its distinctive voice quality by the degree to which its language-African or borrowed European-is shaped and reflected in local African experience (Alu, 2008: 49).

Maduakor, another important voice in Nigerian poetry, however, believes that the new direction in the language of poetry has to do with the Nigerian civil war. The emergent style and the themes of their poetry tended to address the new socio-political and economic realities of the nation. He asserts that "a new attitude in language – the war

revolutionized the attitude to language of Nigerian poetry- imbued it with new energy, a new direction and a new urgency". (49). Olu Obafemi's observation that the poet's deployment of words as due to his "radical revolutionary vision" is also relative and reflective.

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Critically examine Niyi Osundare as a Poetic Messiah

3.3 Niyi Osundare's *Songs of the Market Place*

Several critical works have been written on Niyi Osundare's poetry and even on the collection under study here (Alu, 2008). It therefore becomes necessary to consider one or two of these critical works. One of such critical works on Osundare's poetry is an article written by Sarah Ayang Agbor, with the title, *History, Memory and Tradition in African poetry*. According to Sarah:

> Poetry has become a means of remembering history and documenting the oral lore of a people. It is a medium of transposing the culture of the people as well as exposing the abnormalities within it through memory.

She identifies the functions of African poetry as evident in Osundare's poetry to include, education, entertainment and moralization. The writer goes further to state that Niyi Osundare alongside, Odia Ofeimum, Tanure Ojaide, Ezenwa-Ohaeto, Biodun Jeyifo and others as belonging to the third generation of Nigerian poets and their poetry is characterized by social contradictions that are resolved in favour of the masses. She defines "memory by quoting Stedman thus: retaining and recalling past experience based on the mutual processes of leaning retention, recall and recognition". Poetic memory as she further stated recollects past events or history which can be couched in orality". She quotes Maurice Vambe as noting "how the notion orality is broad and elastic including everything from allegory to tale si point possession fantasy and myth to ancestor veneration ritual, legends, proverbs, fables and jokes" (235). She emphatically notes that:

> The recourse to orality by Osundare is part of the attempt by African writers to regain aesthetic independence from Western traditions through the revitalization of traditional African cultural modes. It was perceived that the use of elements of African oral traditions could become a powerful tool in the establishment of an alternative oppositional discourse (History, Memory and Tradition in Niyi Osundare's poetry).

She finally states that because of colonialism, the indigenous people resorted to their oral culture to create a sense of belonging and identity against imposed Eurocentric traditions. Colonialism is attempt to suppress African culture has instead produced a united community with the single aim asserting the African cultural heritage.

Sarah's essay reviewed above is instrumental to the work being embarked upon here. She has been able to identify the thematic preoccupation of Niyi Osundare's poetry which is not far from the contemporary African experience. Her work

collaborates the claim that Osundare's poetry is good example of poetry that bothers on African experience. The essay has equally been able to point out that Niyi Osundare's poetry is imbued with the sense of Africa's cultural heritage. She has equally identified the major aspect of Africans cultural heritage that is portrayed Osundare's poetry. This aspect is the oral tradition which Osundare exploits in treat dimension to fashion his poetry (Alu, 2008).

Another critical work which concentrate on Niyi Osundare's poetry is Joe Ushie's detailed essay with the title, 'Cultural Crossings in Osundare's Poetry'. In this essay Ushie asserts that even though Niyi Osundare like other written African poets have chosen to express themselves in English Language because of the wider audience it offers them, the English language in their work is made to carry the weight of the African culture. According to Ushie:

> Osundare is known for his deployment of devices from his Yoruba roots into his poetry in English. Indeed so conscious and deliberate is his reliance on Yoruba culture and language that Stephen Arnold has described him as not an Anglophone African poet but a Yoruba poet who writes in English.

The writer goes further to discuss the elements of orality that can be found in Osundare's *Songs of the Market Place.* He cites the example of proverb from songs of the market. The lizard feeds on its own brood. And wonders why they say it barriers its future in its guts (Sm, 37).

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

What are the major themes in Osundare's *Songs of the Market Place?*

3.4 Analysis of Selected Poems from Osundare's *Songs of the Market Place.*

3.4.1 African Experience in Osundare's *Songs of the Market Place*

It is important to mention first and foremost that Niyi Osundare leaves a space for the oppressed masses of the society. This is what Funso Aiyejina describes as "The fulfilment of the public poet, the town crier briefly glimpsed in the Okigbo of path of Thunder" (22). Osundare's artistry hinges on the politics of revolutionizing of society. As he identifies with the people, he creates vents to satirize the politicians for their statelessness. His poetry carries the readers through different social spheres in Nigeria and Africa giving us a cinematographic account of the situation.

3.4.2 'Excursion' as a Portrayal of Nigeria's Socio-political Experience

In 'Excursion', which is the second of the thirty five (35) poem collection, Osundare through the poetic persona takes the reader on a tour or excursion round the country and the African continent. Several soul shattering experiences are portrayed in the course of the excursion. The poet therefore, takes the reader on an artistic excursion to enable us view vividly the contemporary situation in Nigeria as a country and Africa as a whole. In the first stanza of this longest poem in the collection, the poet vividly portrays the experience of poverty that has become the lot of many Nigerians. The effect

of this massive poverty, hunger and starvation which results to sickness. This is the way it is captured in the stanza one of the poem:

> We meet eyes in sunken sockets
> Teeth bereft of gum
> Skins scaly like Iguana's
> Feet swollen like watermelon.

The poet through the use of hyperbole renders a soul-rendering picture of people who have been mangled by hunger to the extent that they become unrecognisable as human beings. Hunger have made their sockets go deep inside and the resultant sickness leading to the loss of their gums and their feet becoming "swollen line watermelon". This is an experience that the poetic persona has in the course of the excursion.

In stanza two of the poem, the poet exposes the effect of this hunger and starvation resulting from poverty on the breast feeding mothers and their babies. These breast feeding mothers do not have money to eat a balance diet and as a result, there is no milk in the breast for the new born baby. This unfortunate situation is captured thus in the poem.

> We meet babies with chronic hydrocephalus
> Squeezing spongy breasts
> On mother's bony chests
> Shrivelled.

The poet goes on in stanza three to intimate us with the effect of this cancerous hunger on the young ones. As a result of malnutrition, these so called leaders of tomorrow are suffering with bloated stomachs of kwashiorkor. The poet presents this thus:

> We see village boys' kwashiorkor bellies
> Hairless heads impaled on pin necks
> And ribs baring the benevolence of the body polity.

The poet in the last two lines ironically states that all these expose the benevolence of the body polity which implies that, this shows how irresponsible in an ironical tone, the leaders are. The leaders who are supposed to see to the welfare of her citizenry have failed in their duties. And as a result of this, the citizenry are left to suffer untold hardship.

In stanza four, five, six, seven and eight of the poem, we are intimated with the struggle for survival which has become synonymous with the poor masses. These stanzas prove that Africans or Nigerians to be specific are not lazy people; they work so hard like elephants but eat little like ants. This is to show that the poverty which has befallen them is not natural but rather man-made. The head of the family as we can see in stanza four roams the whole bush, looking for daily bread. He tries to gather cocoa that will even be used to nourish other nations not himself. This is the way the poet puts it:

> The family head roams the bush

Trapping rats and insects
And cocoa bags in prosperous wait
For the trip to Liverpool.

The last two lines reminds us of the painful experience in African and Nigeria in particular where poor farmers select the best crop yields of their farm produce for sale while they eat the diseased or decaying ones. In most cases, it is even the irresponsible leaders that feed fat on these farm produce while the main producers suffer in the pang of poverty.

Pregnant women who have nothing to eat to keep body and soul together are found rummaging garbage heaps for the rotting remnants of city tables. This ugly picture of poverty is painted in stanza five of the poem. This lugubrious picture speaks volume of the fact that in the same country where many have nothing to eat, few others have much to eat and some left for the dust bins. This is so annoying because as we can see that few have much while the majority have little or nothing. Our leaders and the so called rich people are so selfish to the point that they will rather throw some of their foods to the dustbin than giving them to the poor. In Nigeria, some dogs belonging to politicians and the so called rich men, feed far better than many people in the country. This is an experience that is peculiar to Africa where the leaders are so corrupt beyond measures, to the point that what one selfish rich man has is more than enough to feed hundred persons for a year.

Further in stanza six, another soul shattering experience is recalled thus:

We see the farmer shaving earth's head
With a tiny, his back a creaking
Bow of disintegrating discs
From dawn's dew to dusk's dust
Offering futile sacrifices
To a creamless soil.

In the above stanza, it is clear that the country men are working pretty hard but with nothing to show for their hard labours. This is because; the social structures erected by the leaders have made it impossible for the labourer to enjoy the benefits accruing to their labours. In the case of the farmer, he suffers from over used soil that has lost all its nutrients. The leaders are not equally benevolent enough to help the poor farmers with subsidized fertilizers. Whenever these fertilizers are made available, they are either cornered or sold by government agents or the price for it is so exorbitant beyond what the poor farmer can afford.

In stanza six, a picture of exploitation and suffering is presented thus:

Halfnude, tough biceped labourers
Troop in tipperfuls from sweatfields
Drived by fouremen sourless like
A slave master, a few kobo greet
The miserly home coming
Of a pilgrimage of misery.

In most part of the country, in fact in every state and city of the federation, there is usually place where the labourers station themselves. They wake up very early in the morning to wait for visitors whose time of arrival is not known to them. Some of them do not even eat before leaving the house. Whenever a car or a well dressed man or woman passes by, they rush to him or her believing he or she has come to hire some labourers. This they do on daily basis. In some of these days, they may not be very lucky to get a job to do, then they will have to go home in utter disappointment and despondency. The most annoying part of this is that whenever they are lucky to be hired, the money they are paid is not commensurate with the work they have done. Sometimes, they may not even be paid. It becomes more painful when one recalls that the hirers of these labourers are our leaders and the so called rich men who feed fat on the sweats of the people. This is the picture presented in the stanza above. Most of these labourers are the country's able bodied youths who are not able to get themselves something meaningful to do. They dress in tattered rags because they have no money to buy new ones. They are equally exploited because what they are paid is nothing to compare with the amount of work they have done.

The poet goes further to relate to his readers one of the resultants of this kind of pitiable economic situation. The country becomes a breeding ground for all kinds of social vices and atrocities. One of such vices is prostitution on the part of the women. It is well known that hunger can make one indulge in an illicit act that he or she would not have ordinarily indulged in. This is the picture that the poets present in stanza eight of the "Excursion". Thus:

> On street pavements women delouse
> Each other in busy reciprocity
> Nits deficient like palm kernels,
> Explode between the nail rats and roaches compete
> In the inner room
> And lizards play
> Hide and seek in wall cracks.

The above stanza is a product of a society where the leaders have utterly failed the expectation of the masses. The ladies out of frustration and hunger have resorted to prostitution which is a social vice. This is san indication to the fact that the rate of prostitution in Nigeria is alarming. In many cities of the country, there are usually brothels where these prostitutes live. They compete for customers to keep body and soul together.

The poet in this poem does not want to leave any aspect of Nigeria's life behind just as he highlights religious exploitation which is another contemporary African experience in stanza eight of the "Excursion". The words of the poetic personae puts it thus:

> In the neighbourhood church
> The faithful song into
> Catatonic orgasms,
> Hymning and psalming are the diets

Of the soul though the body succumbs
To the buffets of hunger
Between belches the plump preacher
Extols the virtue of want,
The only ticket to the wealth beyond.

In Africa, religion has become a tool of exploitation, in which materialistic preachers make merchandise of the people through their gullibility. These so called preachers extort money from these poor masses all in the name of religion. They tell the people that there is nothing good in this world and so, and their attentions should be focused on heaven. The thematic thrust of their message is "lay up for yourself treasures in heaven, where neither termites nor moths can reach" with such messages, these wolves in sheep clothing end up collecting the whole the little that the poor masses have gathered. Religion which is supposed to bring salvation to the people has in our country become a tool of slavery in which some sardonic elements in the guise of preachers exploit others.

The poet in stanza nine, returns to the agitating issue of the irresponsibility and defiance attitudes of our leaders who have failed in their duties. These leaders are not in any way perturbed about the situation of things in the country. Most of these so called leaders pass through several Nigerian roads that are nothing better than death traps, but they do nothing concerning it. These leaders pass through streets full of dirt and rottenness but they are not disturbed. They are so myopic that cannot see the sufferings of the masses. This is aptly presented by the poet:

Several government people
Have passed through these streets
Several Mercedes tyres have drenched
Gaunt road liners in sewer water
Several sanitary inspectors have come
In formidable helmets and gas masks
But rot and tanwiji escape
The uniformed eye.

The non-challant attitudes of our leaders is thus highlighted in the above stanza. This is further corroborated in the one line stanza of stanza ten of the poem, thus:

Poverty is an invisible thing
This shows the rate of which
African leaders exhibit attitudes of irresponsibility

The question is, are the sufferings of the Nigerian masses not too obvious and conspicuous for our leaders to see? The obvious answer is that they actually see them and are very much aware of the poverty ravaging the majority of the citizens but they have obstinately decided to remain adamant to the plights of the suffering masses. This foregrounds the fact that the failure of post-colonial African leaders is an experience peculiar to Africa.

In the second part of “Excursion”, the poet captures a very prevalent experience in Nigeria. Poverty and disability have sent to many people on the street to beg. Most of these disabled people are as a result of one ailment or the other that left them perpetually handicapped. The poet goes further to note with dismay in stanza two of the second part of the Excursion that:

Some living casualties of our recent war
The war we fought
To make politicians rich
And the country poor
Some victims of a raging war battered grass in the battle
Of mindless elephants
They display angular babies
Extracting sympathy pennies
From passers-by.

The above stanza reminds us of the horrible and unforgettable historical experience of the Nigerian civil of 1967 to 1970. This war rendered many homeless, penniless and addition to the hundreds of thousands that lost their lives in the fratricidal war. The poet in the above stanza, states that this war has rendered many Nigerians perpetual beggars up till this day. Many of these beggars were former soldiers who fought the war but only escaped with one part of their body being maimed. Some of these beggars are equally unfortunate victims of nefarious government policies. Some workers who were unnecessary laid off have no other option than to beg. In Nigeria, some workers are forced to go on compulsory retirement before their time even without due pension and gratuity. Indeed, this is a typical African experience!

Still in the third part of this long poem under study, the poet focuses his poetic lens on the city life in Nigeria. He presents a picture of the day to day experience in a typical Nigeria city like Lagos. This is the way it is put:

I have been through
The push and pull
Of shopping doors
Queuing before
Red-hipped damsels
Fingering cash registers
Insolent like a January harmattan.

This vividly captures the unrespectful and insolent attitudes of the beautiful sales girls who are stationed in big shops merely to attract customers. The poet in stanza two of this part of the poem vividly portrays the daily uncivilized attitudes of some Nigerians in the city as he puts it:

I have been through
The jam and jab
Of motor parks
Molue, danfo, dagbere

And ear slaying horns
Harcher than Hitler's siren
Porters and omalanke
Scrumble under smuggled merchandise.

This is a vivid picture of life as it is lived in a typical Nigerian city. This is equally the picture that the poet further paints in stanza three:

And touts strain for a pluck
At the hawking girls' oranges
The just come country trader
Dissolves in tears
As pick-purse brawl
Over the loot
Across the street.

A close look at the above stanza, will reveal every day experience in Nigeria which the poet carefully captures. It is a common thing in Nigerian motor parks that touts always try to steal oranges from the female hawker. Pick pocketing is equally another experience that is prevalent in Nigeria that is encapsulated in the above stanza.

In stanza five, six, and seven of this part, the poet faces the nonchalant and care free attitudes of Nigerian civil servants. These civil servants as presented by the poet are nothing but play boys' who play hanky-panky games with their works. There is not a sense of commitment in them at all just as files are lost and found and lost. These civil servants are fond of taking the civil service work as no man's work and as a result behave any how they like. They come to work any day they feel like and make flimsy trickish excuses to cover them up any day they do not feel like going to work.

Osundare, in the last part of this long poem "Excursion", succinctly faces the gigantic social malaise which Nigeria has become synonymous with. This gigantic social malaise is nothing but corruption. Corruption has become a reoccurring experience in Africa that cannot be avoided in the discourse of contemporary challenges facing the African society today. In Nigeria series of military and civilian governments have come and gone but one characteristic weakness of all this administration is corruption. This corruption is mostly rampant on the part of our leaders who are self-centred and guided by wild sense of materialism. Most of these leaders have been severally indicted of money laundering. They staunch Nigerian money in foreign accounts. They equally make life investment in other countries, thereby helping in the development of other countries' economy while their own home country is greatly impoverished. This is the matter espoused by the poet in the first stanza of the part IV of this same poem:

In the streets
People whisper their rage
About a million million
Naira of our blood
Multiplying foreign fortunes

And the damnable years
Of our blind slavery.

One wonders in utter dismay, how in a country where many persons have nothing to grease their mouths, few others eat and scatter and even gather their loots in foreign reserves. The masses are aware of this, but the egocentric leaders surround themselves with all the political arsenal or weaponry that they easily clamp down any form of opposition. Even the only power the people has to determine who rules them through democratic election has been undermined just as most elections in the country today are marred by rigging and other electoral malpractices.

The corruption that has characterized governance in Nigeria has quietly crept into the highest citadel of learning in Nigeria—the university. Most universities in our country today celebrate mediocrity and not hard work. Lecturers collect money from students in the guise of sorting to pass them in their courses, thereby making such students lazy. That is not all; they sleep with the female students in order to pass them. What a calamity that has befallen the apex of learning in our country. This is the way, Osundare presents it in the second stanza of this part IV:

in university corridors
students talk about headbare gums
recycling worn traditions
dreading change like despots
yes, they talk about dons
pawning wives for chairs
then slouching into glamorized mediocrity
breeding flat minds
diplomaed with the slavish stamp
of received gospels.

The above stanza goes further to foreground the orthodox attitude of some lecturers who have continued to do the same thing for years without any change. One will find very old men in the university system as lectures that have refused to retire because they forged their working ages.

The poet in stanza three, returns to a very vivid African experience that is the despotism and tyranny of African leaders. This as we can see from this stanza and the next is both evident in the traditional and political leaders. These leaders make themselves demi-gods that should be worshipped by their subjects. They are so power drunk that they would not want to relinquish power to another person. Several leaders in civilian and military regimes in Africa have attempted to remain on the "throne" forever. This quest to hold on to power by some African leaders have resulted into several political crisis in the continent. The ineptitude of these ambitious egocentric African leaders is captured in the following lines of the poem:

In the village
people talk
about the old confusing age with wit

making grey hair excuse
for frosted folly
demanding a world prostrate
like a fossilized lizard salaaming
to the stiff orders
of hoary tyranny (13-14).

Similarly in stanza five,

in the cities
people whisper
about fortressed kings
ruling by boot and butt
sirens limiting through
the turbid squalor
of slums like the butcher's saw....(14)

The capitalistic structure of African markets is portrayed in the second to the last stanza of this long poem under study here. In the markets, few rich men and women are in charge of the distribution and manufacturing of some essential goods and have subjected the masses to their whims and caprices. The poet puts it this way:

In the markets
people talk
about bloated millionaires
hostaging us to slave markets
exporters
importers
emergency contractors...(14)

In the last stanza of the poem "Excursion" the poet seems to be optimistic that the oppressions that the people have been subjected to, can come to an end one day but that is when the people are ready to question authorities and hold their leaders to accountability.

From all the analysis and illustrations above, it can be seem that "Excursion" is indeed a long journey through the length and breadths of Nigerian experiences. It portrays the leadership problem that has become synonymous with Africa. Leaders who are so supposed to be at the vanguard of the people's welfare but as we can see in the last three lines of stanza five

"their excellences are not here"
For the begging bickering
of a faceless rural crowd.(15

This further foregrounds the fact that these leaders are not even in power because of the people's interest but rather for their own selfish interest. All these lines depicts the tyrannical nature of African leaders who took over power from the colonial masters after independence and the resultant corruption and other social vices.

3.4.3 “Siren” as a Portrayal of Africa’s Leadership Problem

In this second poem chosen for the study here, Osundare vividly portrays the defiant attitudes of our leaders. Our politicians only come very close to the masses during election seasons but after that they disappear into the thin air. Whenever they pass on the road with their flashy cars every other persons must stop for them to pass. They blow the siren to keep every other person away from the road as the poet rightly puts it:

> Siren siren siren
> police acrobats on motorbikes
> wielding whips with consummate despatch
> the road must be cleared at one
> for which worthy ruler
> ever shares the right of way?(21)

In the last line of stanza two, the speaker in the poem rightly points out in a symbolic manner “afar from the maddening crowd”. This shows that, the same way these leaders do not want to share the road with any other person, they are equally very far from the people. The same people that elected them into positions of authority have suddenly turned to nothing before their eyes.

In stanza three of the poem, we are presented with a recurrent issue in Nigeria. Any time these selfish leaders are to come to any locality, the youths, children and even cultural groups dance in frustration to welcome their Excellencies. All these are done just because of poverty, they expect that at the end of the day, the politician can give them something.

The nonchalant attitude of Nigerian leaders towards the welfare of the people is x-rayed in stanza four of the poem. The bad nature of the roads in the country, the environmental degradation, the hunger and starvation in the country has not gotten the attention of our leaders. Provided, they have enough to eat with their families, the masses are never their issue. This is the way the poet puts it:

> Siren siren siren
> even on highways where potholes
> snail the jaguar
> they manage not to see
> a land de bowelled by erosion
> confined withering
> and yam tendrils yellowing
> on tubers smaller than a palm kernel
> blind are they
> to the seeds of tomorrow famine.(22)

In stanza five, the poet laments the absence of basic social amenities in the country. He points out with dismay that the leaders are not even bothered by these problems. They do not have time for the days and dark nights, no time for hospitals and schools and

roads. All these are supposed to be the primary business of the leaders but as we can see from the poem, they have failed in their primary responsibility.

In the poem Railway one need not actually read the poem to discern the poets thematic thrust. The typographical arrangement of the poem articulates its thrust:

Dark sna
Ky str
        Tor tous
Mili
        Pede on
Legs
        Of iron
Crawl ing
Wear lly
                From Swamp Savannah (30).

The poem mirrors languid and laggard nature of the Nigerian Railway Cooperation. It shows how the railways are fractured just like the words of the poem. There is no organisation in the railway system. No railway leads to another. In fact, one can say that there is no railway in Nigeria. The poem is symbolic of the disorganisation in several aspects of Nigeria's life.

In the poem "Udoji", Osundare satirizes government's hypocrisy over the reckless waste of wealth, a travesty of the yearnings and the aspirations of the deprived masses. The voice of the masses is captured thus:

We ask for food and water
to keep our toiling frames
on the hoe
but they inundate us with udoji
now pocket burst with arrears
but market stalls are empty
gari is dearer than eyes
a naira cannot by a yam.(35)

The above poem is a clear picture of what happened in Nigeria in the year 1975 following the release of Salary Review Panel headed by Chief Jerome Udoji. Government workers and some in the private sector received inflationary salaries and arrears. It was a time of inflation in Nigeria when there was much money in circulation but the prices of commodities were sky rocketing. This was an exploitative measure introduced by the government that reveal their capitalistic tendencies. The government instead of heading to the people's request of salary increment only did that for their own selfish interest. They created a price mechanism through which the same money they paid to the workers returned to them in rapid circular flow of income.

The last poem we shall consider to show how written African poetry, African experience is "Zimbabwe". Zimbabwe is a poem in the collection, written to celebrate Zimbabwe's independence from their colonial masters. The poem recounts the struggle

leading to the independence of Zimbabwe. The poet in stanza one dedicates the poem to all the fighters of the war of independence thus:

> For josiah tongorara
> for every guerrilla who fought the war
> that turned Rhodesia into Zimbabwe.(52)

The struggle for independence especially in East and South Africa was not an easy one. It was a dogged war fought by the Mau Mau and Umkhonto we size we freedom fighters in Kenya and South Africa respectively. Freedom in these countries, were bought by the blood of patriotic legends, who laid down their lives to champion the course of independence. The poet aptly captures this in stanza eight of the poem thus:

> Not in vain
> have gun boomed
> not in vain
> are children orphans
> not in vain
> are wives widows
> before they are
> five and twenty.(52)

The above stanza portrays the experience of the war of independence in Zimbabwe. During the war, some children lost their parents; some wives lost their husbands, and some parents lost their children. All these are the ruins of the war but the poet is happy that all these have not happened in vain, just as the people have their independence to show for it. So, independence was worth fighting for.

It can be seen from the analysis and illustrations above that, Osundare in *Songs of the Market Place* vividly portray African experience. The raw material from which the whole poems were composed is the daily realities in Africa. Osundare is not a poet who pursues aesthetic to the detriment of the social functions of art. He is committed to depicting the social, political and economic realities in Africa. All these are the experiences that underlie his poetic art. In other words, Osundare does not write in a vacuum. The realities of life in Africa and in his country home necessitate his poems. All these have been extensively discussed using selected poems from Osundare's *Songs of the Market Place.* Now having direct much on portrayal of African experience in Osundare's *Songs of the Market Place*, this work shall now go into discussing how African cultural heritages are portrayed in the poetry collection under discussion.

3.4.4 African Cultural Heritages in Osundare's *Songs of the Market Place*

It is important to point out first and foremost that Osundare is a poet who draws heavily from his Yoruba culture. Even though he uses the English language, there is a level of domestication of the English language. Osundare incorporate elements of the oral tradition into his poems. So, an attempt to discuss Osundare's *Songs of the Market Place* in view of the cultural heritage it portrays, the major things that are going to be highlighted are:

1. The incorporation of the oral tradition into Osundare's *Songs of the Market Place* and
2. The promotion of African language through the use of some Yoruba words.

Osundare is known for his deployment of devices from his Yoruba root into his poetry in English. Indeed, so conscious and deliberate is his reliance on Yoruba culture and language that Stephen Arnold has described him as not an Anglophone African poet but a Yoruba poet who writes in English. The dominant features of African orality in the poetry collection include the presence of repetition the use of the refrain, the proverb, the pronoun and the vocative. Proverbs is an integral aspect of the oral tradition. Proverbs are wittical saying that reveal the philosophy and wisdom of the African man. Achebe has often been quoted as defining proverbs as the oil with which words are eaten. Osundare employs proverbs in his poems to show that Africa is rich in the use of proverbs and they equally authenticate the Africanness of his poetry.

From the poem 'Reflections', Osundare uses proverbs to advance his argument that the problem of Nigeria and in fact Africa is caused by themselves. The poverty and sufferings in the country are caused by the leaders. The instance of the proverb from the above poem is given below:

> The lizard feeds on its own brood
> And wonders why they say it buries
> Its futures in its guts (37).

Another instance of proverb can equally be found on the last stanza of the above poem:

> The world is like Solel Boneh's steam-shovel
> It scoops earth from one place to fill another.(38)

Osundare equally employ a Yoruba proverb that was not translated in the poem, "On Seing a Benin Mask in British Museum".

> Iya jajeji l' Egbe
> Ile eni l' eso ye' ni (40)

Meaning: suffering afflicts the stranger in an alien land/your treasure is in your home.

We can equally see another use of proverb in the poem "To the Dinosaur" on page:

> The whip that carved weals
> On the first wife
> will descend from the rafter someday
> to give the new bride a stroke of history.(41)

This deployment by Osundare of these typical Yoruba proverbs in his poetry is a conscious act to preserve the Yoruba speech culture even in the foreign tongue. Support for this position comes from his poem, "Who is Afraid of the Proverb?" in which footnote, he offers this English translation of the significance the Yorubas attach to the proverb:

The proverb is the horse of the word
The word is the horse of the proverb
When the word is lost
It is the proverb we use for finding it (101).

In one of the stanzas of the above poem, he presents this definition of the proverb which reminisces physicist's definition of a straight line:

Who is afraid of the proverb
Of the shortest distance
Between many truths (110).

In *Songs of the Market Place*, Osundare uses several Yoruba words of which some were translated in the text while some are left untranslated. By so doing, he promotes his Yoruba language and identifies with the culture of his people. Proverbs as used in the poems above, apart from adding local favour to the poems also contribute to the meaning of the poems. Proverbs in the poems are used to further prove the truth in the words of the poet

As with the proverb, the poet also uses the pronoun in a manner characteristic of a traditional African singer. Instances of this manipulation abound in songs of the market place. In the collection, they are found on pages 11-12 for instance "I have been through ---; and the use of "we" of most of the lines of the poem, "Excursions". Again, the transfer of this use of the pronoun from its African oral rhetorical setting to print and in an alien tongue is consciously executed by Osundare, who in his article, "From oral to written: Aspects of the socio-stylistic Repercussions of Transition", explains:

The closeness between the oral performer and his audience is reflected in his choice of lexical items --- in terms of personal deitics, he may employ "I" for himself, "you" for his audience, "we" to envelope both parties, and "they" and "them" for those who do not belong (11)

Another contemporary of Osundare, Tanure Ojaide, also explains that "The frequent use of "we" shows that the poet's role is the public one of defending communal values" (Poetic Imagination, 27). Besises,the has a motif for these pronouns based on his disposition towards his audience as foregrounded by the title of the collection "Songs of the Market Place".

Apart from the use of the proverb and the pronoun, there is also the deliberate movement into the written poetry of features that characterize performance in African oral literature. There are the specific provision for the use of musical instruments to accompany the rendition of many poems; the prevalence of repetition which enhances the musicality of the texts, the presence of the refrain, which anticipates audience participation in the realization of the poems; and the use of the vocative, which is a feature of orality.

This again confirms that the presence of African cultural features in the poetry of Osundare, and hence, of this era, has been a conscious effort to ensure the survival

of these elements as flowing from an identifiable African tributary into the sea of world literature and culture.

Another strategy adopted by the poet to keep his craft close to his African cultural roots is the employment of the vocative, which is a feature of the oratory. An instance of his is “Oh my people” (29).

The features of orality and performance which have been examined here seem to validate the observation by Tanure Ojaide that “Written African Literature is in a way written oral literature” (The Guardian, 203). In a bid to portray African culture and world view, Osundare deploys some lexical items from Yoruba language in the collection. Some of the Yoruba words are translated in the text while some are not. Examples are

(a) tanwiji (9)
Mosquito larvae (translated in the text)
(b) Omalanke (II) (translated in the text)
hand pushed cart
(c) Olee barawooooo Onye Oshiii (16)
Thief
(c) Ekan (18) (translated in the text)
Elephant grass
(d) babalawo (37)
Medicine man, herbalist, voodoo priest or diviner. Not translated in the text, possibly assumed to have entered the English lexicon?

(e) egigun (71)
Siva cotton tree (translated in the text)
(f) afemoju (78)
Dawn (translated in the text).
There are equally some of other Yoruba words which are used in the collection without translation. Examples are:

(a) molue, danfo, dagbere (11)
Names of passenger vehicles
(b) gari (35)
a Nigerian/African staple, commonly known and needing no translation to an African audience.
(c) Langbalangba (40)
Undignifying; gracelessly
Ideophonic/onomatopoeic. Translation would murder the musicality and hence the meaning suggested/represented by sound.
(d) Esua (72)
Memory aid. Perhaps, no equivalent referent in the English speaking world.

Some of the words considered untranslatable are those without English equivalents, as characteristic of any language that has to function in a non-native environment. Also there are some elements brought into the poems just for their musical values, apart from their semantic meanings in their original contexts. In oral

performance, these form an important part of the aesthetics of the text. These two categories of transfers which run the poems in *Songs of the Market Place* reveal that Osundare is a poet who is primarily concerned about meaning and musicality of his texts, and who believes that Yoruba, rather than English is better able to achieve these goals for him. A combination of these instances of direct transfers with the elements of orality and performance which abound in the text, confirms Osundare's linguistic ideology as African writer who is more inclined to his Yoruba and African roots than to the English language. This, thus validates Stephen Arnold's description of Osundare as "not an Anglophone African poet but a Yoruba poet who write in English" (Anglophonia, 27). His work therefore, offers us an example of a successful transfer of African oral heritage into print and in an alien tongue in such a manner that its identity as an African product is guaranteed and insured.

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Examine other poems in Niyi Osundare's *Songs of the Market Place* that were not discussed here, bringing out their major contents.

3.5 Osundare's Language and Style

The poet's interest in innovative style is conveyed in his ardent interest in the use of language. The avalanche of critical responses to Osundare's style, and the diverse conflicting stances, as well as the influencing factors of its brilliance, relevance and success in part necessitated this discourse (Alu, 2008). Osundare sets out in Songs of the Marketplace to redefine poetry as "a life spring/which gathers timbre/the more throats it plucks/harbingers of action /the more minds it stirs". The poet rejects the earlier preconceived exclusive and obscure nature of African poetry. The poet quickly reworks the equation that amounts to African poetry, restating its nature, its dimension and acceptable medium as he emphasizes accessibility to its target audience. Apparently more reassuring and comforting to an erstwhile estranged audience, the poem poetry is illustrating this new posture:

> Poetry is
> No oracles kernel
> For sole philosopher's stone
> Poetry
> Is
> Man
> Meaning
> To
> Man (1-2).

However, Osundare says his readers seem to have misunderstood his poem "poetry is". So he warns against oversimplifying the poem and ends up making it a yardstick of measuring the rest of his poems. He explains more succinctly that poetry is a "hawkers ditty/the eloquence of the gong/it is what the soft wind/music to the listening muse". To ward-off some misconceptions Osundare explains that what the wind whispers could still be difficult after all:

> I want you to distinguish between obscurity and difficulties, --- want you to distinguish between difficulties, obscurity and obscurantism. Anybody who expects that all poems should not be difficult does not understand what poetry is. Now anybody who expects all poems to be obscure doesn't understand what poetry is either… Alu (1998:99).

Although he admits saying poetry is "not the esoteric whispers of an excluding tongue," he opines that it does not mean, "Poetry is just out there---that you pluck a poem, put it on paper without working on it". The controversy could either contradict Osundare's stance, suggest a digression or both. The uncertainty of whether the advocated paradigm of the new breed poets is that transparent intellectual development, snobbery or truly bordering on Bloomian rivalry, establishes the relevance of Anna Balakian's (1985) submission that;

> … the influences of authors of the same nationality and language upon each other are negative influences, the result of reactions, for generations often tend to rivals of each other and in the name of individualism reject in the work of their elders what they consider to be conventions of the past.

The triumph of Osundare's poetry and his new breed compatriots are most likely borne out of necessity rather than envy contrary to what Bloom's study reveals. The usual appellation poured on his use of domesticated language brings him close to the masses. It also makes his poems assume …a distinct anti-imperialist tone. This observation is subsequently crystallized in the famous essay by Funsho Aiyejina who asserts that Osundare being the most prolific of the lot, his poetry epitomizes the distinctiveness of the group's new style (Abdu 2003).

In the course of writing he has come to produce a blend of poetry that speaks for itself and that is quite independent and distinct from others poets even in the same category with him. The assertive differences of Songs of the Marketplace and Moonsongs give credence to this assertion. In the light of which he offers the following explanation in an earlier cited interview with Shaffa:

> A poet who writes poems which don't require any energy, any spiritual and mental exercise to understand is not a poet, is a writer of doggerels. At the same time a poet who writes such poems that cannot be understood except by himself and one or two others is not a poet. He is a juggler, a magician. Alu (1998:100).

In the face of such ambiguity and contradiction some critics attribute it to struggle or Voice search which they feel has been found in The Eye of the Earth where he carries along into further experimental grounds as he seeks to transform his society. He has shifted from his initial political messages to emphasize poetic technique and formal experimentation:

> The poet has abandoned the style of individual lyrics for a form of poetry in which a whole body of poems is organized around one or two motifs the poems evolving as stages of a single poem. The form has dominated the poems in Moonsongs and Waiting Laughters.

In his poetry, we are confronted with many forces of oppression in the varying operative arenas. Most importantly, the feature of his poetry is his defense of the speechless and oppressed citizens of the land. He appears involved and sympathetic to their unfortunate condition, be it in the rural or urban area. The theme runs through all his collections, cutting across various fields of human endeavour. Affirming thus that he is essentially a politician, since a genuine poet has always been interested in politics which is a means of eradicating poverty, he opines:

> And so when you have a country and a continent and a world where instead of that happening, politics is being used to entrench poverty and enrich a few, then problems are bound to rise. Poetry has become a tool for setting things right, for praising virtue… Genuine poetry raises political songs; political songs directly and indirectly. It tells kings about the corpses which line their way to the throne. It tells the rich ones the skulls in their cupboards.

In Songs of the Marketplace, the poet dramatically depicts his concern with the socio-economic matters in contemporary Nigerian society, using fairly strong imagery which still leaves room for commitment, accessibility and expressiveness. Based partially on the said obsession with the plight of the underdogs, some critics associate him with socialist inclinations. This could be explained by the fact that he takes up the Marxian metaphor in describing the unnatural relationship between the rich and the poor; "the rich were not born so the poor need not die so…" Here are pictures of a society where the minorities live in affluence while the majorities swim in the pond of poverty.

Village Voices exposes the simplistic life style of the village dwellers juxtaposed to what obtains in modern urban civilization. The peasants who are the producers of food are diversely presented as witty- singers, jesters and satirists. Like Songs of the Marketplace, the central theme in both Village Voices and A Nib in the pond are the predicaments of the societal underdogs.

The Eye of the Earth is very special, fashioned on his perception of man in nature. The image of the poet here is more than an interpreter of a complex and rich tradition of his people who share a collective philosophy. He celebrates the work culture of his people with special emphasis on their reverence for nature, defending the traditional myth on which the community lives together resisting collision. The volume is seen as one of the fiercest indictments of modern economic culture of the people and alien destructive forces. It takes a pictorial account of aggression on man and the earth which is the author's personal contribution to the problems of erosion and desertification.

In Moonsongs, Osundare exhibits his commitment to socio-economic and political issues. He talks on the social malaise in the society. Phase XXII poem particularly handles the social disparity between the rich and the poor, reasoning that the seasons, just like life, always fluctuate, confirming in many of the poems in Moonsongs that life is transient. He addresses the mutability of seasons and the uncertainties of human conditions in Moonsongs reading meanings into life mainly from Yoruba oral folksongs. The lessons sink in as one begins to appreciate the medium of its actualization which is performance. The strength of the book as observed by most

of its reviews lies more in its form than content, mainly because of the oral nature of its structure.

In *Songs of the Marketplace*, there are visible elements of genuine concern for this unfortunate part of the country's population, especially in poems like 'Excursion', 'Sule chase', 'Siren', 'At a University Congregation' and 'Reflection' to mention but a few. 'Excursion' is a fairly long poem which is a poetic irony for the journey he undertakes through different public places around, where life means different things to different people. Here, however, we are confronted with images of disease, poverty, deprivation and want which are symbolic pictorial portrayal of all facets of the Nigerian society.

In explicating thematic aspect of any work of art, the form of its existence is apparently of paramount importance; we are now ready to address his battle for a new poetic revolution in African poetry. This is why his poems exhibit features of African oral poetic style. The influences of various Yoruba oral genres such as the Oriki chant and Ijala hunter's song are very strong in collections like The Eye of the Earth and Moonsongs. Adebayo Babalola confirms the abundance of "Praise songs" in Yoruba tradition called "rara" Alu (1998). Perhaps for the purpose of musicality, the poet intentionally refuses to give the English versions of some of these direct borrowings from Yoruba language; "The moon, this night, is a rugged master. The moon, this night, is a rugged master/teregungun maja gungun tere … (Emphasis added).

Direct address and dialogue are common features of oral styles extensively used in Osundare's works. In 'Publish and Perish', he is didactic and direct, with beautiful rhyming lines:

> Tell me
> Do you think they will accept this,
> The A & P
> Do you think they will?
> Just see
> There are only a dozen references
> footnotes don't wind across pages
> …

"Tell me" and "just see" are both investigative and deductive in the way they are used in this poem. Looking bare of images, it is written in ordinary everyday English and very communicative. This looks more like newspaper captions or the traditional town crier's early morning message in times of war:

> "South Africa police
> Murders seven hundred blacks in Soweto"
> "The U.N. condemns the action"
> "South Africa occupies Southern Angola
> murdering women and children
> burning barns and farms"
> …

The O.A.U. craves sanctions
Prays the Western con-trat- group
To do their jobs."
Songs…(49).

Investigative/direct address as a literary device is also used by the poet as used in Moonsongs:

Tell me, moon,
Where are your wrecks
Where are your wrinkles
Where, the creases left
On your wondrous robe … (18).

Similarly, dramatic dialogue is effectively used by the poet as shown in Waiting Laughters:

Okerebu kerebu
Kerebu kerebu
And the snake says to the toad
"I have not had a meal
for a good one week;
Any time my stomach yearns
For your juicy meat"
Suppose I turn into a mountain?
Asks the toad
"I will level you up in the valley
of my belly"…(63).

The much desired flavour of African authenticity in the works of the new poets is abundantly exploited by Osundare in Moonsongs. Perhaps that is why some scholars are of the view that to fully appreciate his wonderful craftsmanship in the book, one has to share, or at least have an insight into his Yoruba people's world view. The impact of Yoruba folk-song is very imminent revealing that the poet did compose with the native influence taking the upper hand.

Moonsongs is a collection of songs which Odugbemi observes "… is riveting lunacy of song… (Where) verses lap gently at the base of your soul… " (Word in bracket added) In a down to earth comment Odugbemi was quoted as saying:

> The poet belts out his songs as though in a joy trance. He sweeps you from moonrise to moonset. Imagine yourself by the magic seas of a moonlit night lying on a carpet of songs, floating whimsically in the "soft windiness" of this night of the gods. Muyide, (39).

The opening song/poem which is performed to the accompaniment of war drumming, has its chorus interspersed with Yoruba. He is deeply rooted in his Yoruba oral tradition which, Saleh Abdu says, have formed the backbone of the poet's aesthetic-poetics:

Let the cricket slit night's silence
with the scapel of its throat
Let nightbirds coo and cuddle
In the swinging Eden of their nests;
But when down finally climbs down
Through the leering rafters,
I will be a promise
Eternal like your seasonless sky
kiriji kiriji papelupe
Moonsongs (2).

He has exhibited and developed interest in oral performance poetry, which has thus emphasized public recitations, as well as written poetry with instruments for its orchestration. The rain songs, in the Eye of the Earth are highly lyrical and played in accompaniment of flute and rain drum:

Let it rain it today
    That parched throats may heal her silence
Let it rain
    The earth may heal her silence
Let it rain today
    that corn leave may clothe the hills
Let it rain … The Eye … (28).

The poem also illustrates the use of repetitions of phrases, lines and structures to reinforce the lyrical tone of the songs employed in Waiting Laughters and Moonsongs:

And laughing heels so fugitive
In the just of fleeting truths
…
Truth of the sole
Truth of the palm
…
Truth of the liar
Truth of the lair (37).

The use of more than one literary device at a time is typical of Osundare as exhibited in these graphlogically deviant structures and repetitions. This type of literary device is used for emphasis to enhance meaning. I proscribe the snail/I proscribe the shell/I proscribe the frog/I proscribe the tadpole/I proscribe the sea/I proscribe the sky/I proscribe the tale/I proscribe truth. His punning devices are unique compound words used in Moonsongs as in "moonmares", "moonfire", "Moongrass", "Moonsweat", "Moonharvest", "mooncantations", "Mangoes", "hen hood" "our glass" "tale/tail" "toll/tale" and "seasun" which functions to enhance meaning as well as musicality.

The use of breath-space pauses, common in oral performances, is employed in Songs of the Marketplace; Moonsongs and Waiting laughters. This device takes care of punctuations in written English by the use of spacing in print as in 'Nightfall', 'Back to the future' and 'Phase XIII' poems. The structures of these breathing spaces usually

result in some structural changes in the form of graph-logical deviations as shown below:

Some say
You moon
Are the
Ash es
Of the
Sun bath
Ing limpid
Night in
The grey
Ing of
Your silence (23)

More radical use of this device is clearly demonstrated in Waiting Laughters where he uses a letter of the alphabet as a line:

Long
er
than
the
y
a
w
n
Moonsongs… (84)

Rhetorical questions are some of the devices used by the poet to produce the tempo in a number of poems especially as used below:

> On moon oh moon where is your horse where, your hast Who reaped your gallop in the furrows of the sky.
> Oh moon oh moon where is your wardrobe, where, your ward
> Who spread your silk in the loom of the sun.
> Oh moon oh moon where is your udder, where, your pitcher
> Who mothered the milk that bathes your limbs.
> …
> Oh moon oh moon where is your sage, where, your song
> Who carved the wood of your towering tree.
> Moonsongs (39)

In phase IX poem, he further employs the device. This usage however is usually to build up pressure to buttress an idea. In this case to descend heavily on the selfish attitude of African leaders and the changing seasons respectively:

> How many hours will make a minute
> How many oceans total one drop
> Of elusive water
> How many forests will make one tree
> In regions of meticulous showers
> How many…? (17)

Other important elements of oral literature visibly utilized here includes, rhetoric's, proverbs, praise names, axioms and idiomatic expressions. This is the most popular device employed by African elders and community heads. This rich resource is illustrated in the following lines:

> Ah! The peacock cannot count
> Her century of feathers,
> The parrot cannot count the chimes
> Which cat the bell of her restless beak.
> Moonsongs (17)

Praise names are typical to African address system to elders or spiritual figures or gods. It is important to note here that there are traditional registers as there are the various English registers. Many African communities also share the use of wise sayings especially by community elders. The use of a cluster of wise sayings here are to buttress an idea of wasted labour:

> Olosunta spoke first
> The eloquent one
> Whose mouth is the talking house of ivory
> Olosunta spoke first
> The riddling one whose belly is wrestling ground
> For god and gold. The Eye… (13)

More interesting oral devices are employed on pages eighteen and nineteen:

> …
> this is Iyanfoworogi
> where yams, ripe and randy
> waged a noisy war against the knife; (18).
> ...and this Oke Eniju
> where coy cobs rocked lustily
> in the loin of swaying stalks. (19)

Osundare freely draws his embossed metaphor on the earth from the Yoruba Oriki and Ijala chants in which he applies an extended praise- name to the Earth. This simply proves the fact that praise-name epithets are relevant and necessary features of public performance. These lines are illustrative of such special descriptions of the earth;

> Temporary basement
> And lasting roof
> First clayey coyness
> And last alluvial joy
> Breadbasket
> And compost bed
> Rocks and rivers
> Muds and mountains
> …
> Ogeere Omokoyeri… The Eye (1)

After the African traditional usage, the poet weaves names to describe the nature and character of the earth. We also have praise- chants fashioned after Oriki praise chants of the Yoruba. In 'forest Echoes' the forest trees are given their praises according to their strength namely: the tough Iroko, "Oganwo" and feather weight "Ayunre". Oganwo, he declares;

> … wears the surrogate crown
> of heights and depths;
> wounded by wanton matchets,
> bled by the curing cutlass of the babalawo
> the homing sun closes your weeping wounds
> even as your doctor juice simmers,
> in the portions at dusk. (6)

Such copious absorption of praise epithets by the poet are intended to make his poetry appeal to his local African audience. However, allusions are made to other literary devices that are commonly shared by the two literary traditions. Osundare has persistently made references to places, gods, persons and remarkable events in Africa in the creative process. In The Eye of the Earth for one, there are allusions to a rock in Ikere which the people of the town are said worship annually during "Olosunta festivals." He alludes to Olosunta a rock in the poem, 'The rocks rose to meet me', in which he personifies the rock and in five movements shower praises on it/him. He also does the same to Oroole, a pyramid shaped rock in Ikere which the poet describes as the 'pyramid of the brood' from where, the poet says, he could clearly see Amoye Grammar School.

In 'harvestcall' he celebrates the fertility of Iyanfoworogi, Oke-Eniju and Ogbese-Ode describing their life sustaining features. He likewise alludes to Okeruku" in 'meet me at Okeruku' as red earth district (33). These allusions highlight the poet's interest in his localized audience. The advantage of these physical landscapes in situating his audience in time and space enhances great sense of belonging and credibility.

Other features of oral traditions are grammatical parallelisms, similes, metaphors and noun/pronoun variations. Parallelisms can be either in the structure (syntax), or sound. In The Eye of the Earth, poems like 'Let earth's pain be soothed' 'Excursion' and 'What the Earth said', are illustrative of this device, which are variously structural, syntactical, rhythmical and repetitive such as:

> let it rain today
> that roots may swell the womb of lying plains
> let it rain today
> the stomachs may shun the rumble of thunder
> let it rain
> that children may bath and bawl and brawl (28)

In waiting laughters, parallelisms are extensively used, which critics opine is very important if the poet's experimental orchestration were anything to go by at all. He also needed refrains, preceding case or cases of structural and musical repetitions:

Waiting
for the heifer which bides its horns
in the womb of the calf
Waiting
for the nail which springs an ivory wonder
in the spotted arena of reading eyes
Waiting…
Waiting
For fists which find their aim. (10).

In this type of parallelism, the lexical overlapping is apparent due to the repetition of phrases with their attendant grammatical variations. While these could sometimes be monotonous, particularly in written poetry, it is aesthetically strategic, especially when poems are read aloud. Other variations in style that could be placed between parallelism and juxtapositions are the effective employment of allusions which could be either situational or topical among others. Brilliant employment of socio-political incidents are recorded in Songs of the Marketplace where the poem 'Udoji' illustrates the use of topical allusions to the pay-hike Nigerian workers enjoyed in 1975 which is believed to have sparked off the raging inflation in the country. Similarly, Osundare's richest collection, The Eye of the Earth adeptly renders this rare employment of similes and metaphors in 'eyeful glances'. The remarkable thing about the employment of this subject is the manner of its delivery which is apparently grandiloquent:

The desert caller
Comes on a camel
Of clouds,
Undulates through the dunes
Of hazy shadows
&
gliding through the open welcome
of January's door
whispers urgent tidings
in the ears of my skin. (23)

Poetic Epithets are literary devices usually indicative of formulaic language of oral poetry which help in the proper handling of the oral thought-process, 'forest Echoes' is illustrative of this poetic epithet:

Palm-bound, scalpel-toothed,
The squirrel pierces the tasty iris
Of stubborn nuts;
Adze man of the forest,
Those who marvel the canine fire
In your mouth
Let them seek refuge in the fluffy grace
Of your restless tail. (8)

Musicality across monotonous rhythm is another prominent identifying feature of African poetic compositions which Sedar Senghor (as cited by Ojaide) says "is like

inhaling and exhaling air". This musicality informs the poetic features of verbal, structural repetitions and parallelisms. Osundare has in his own special way imbibed what some critics called the "Agisymban" stylistic feature which is a characteristic of sound and drums, dancing feet and melody of tones as aptly employed in Waiting Laughters and Moonsongs hence reducing their complexity. It makes them more accessible to a larger audience of listeners and readers as in oral traditional performance. However, some of Osundare's texts, particularly Moonsongs, Eye of the Earth, and Waiting Laughters have come to prove that even though African oral devices are used, complexity is never really eliminated. This only leads to another stage of the debate on simplicity and complexity of the poetic language (Alu, 2008). The anatomy of these poems would reveal architectural manipulation of his medium as Saleh Abdu (2003) rightly observes:

> …all the lexical, morphological and syntactic formations he employs to embody his impressions and assimilations of local-mostly oral-repertoire of the communication culture which he translates, transliterates or transposes into the English language.

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Provide a detailed analysis of at least five poems from Osundare's *Songs of Market Place* bringing out their major themes as well as the poetice devices employed in them.

4.0 CONCLUSION

Niyi Osundare's works vividly convey his concept on the relationship between the oppressed Nigerian/African and the crop of leaders there. They works address a deluge of themes which include corruption, poverty, administrative mismanagement, and to a certain extent, the lingering effects of colonialism on the African continent. Osundare played a very prominent role in the campaign against the practices of the first generation of Nigerian poets often referred to as "Euro-Modernist poets" who tended to have lingered too long on the burden of managing the imperial lords' legacy or what Inyabri, Thomas (2006) calls "domineering images". He also pioneered the team of critics who redefined and re-oriented a new trend in modern African poetry popularly tagged "Alter-Native Tradition in African Poetry."

5.0 SUMMARY

In this unit you have learned the followings:

- The Biography of Niyi Osundare
- A Review Niyi Osundare's *Songs of the Market Place*
- An Analysis of some poems from Osundare's *Songs of the Market Place*
- The theme of African experience in Osundare's Songs *of the Market Place*
- The theme of 'excursion' as a portrayal of Nigeria's socio-political experience in Osundare's *Songs of the Market Place*
- The theme of "Siren" as a portrayal of Africa's Leadership problem in *Songs of the Market Place*

- The theme of African cultural heritages in Osundare's *Songs of the Market Place*
- Osundare's language and Style

6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

Read and answer the questions below:

1) What kind of poet is Osundare and what are those things that make him unique?
2) As a Marxist poet, what makes Osundare stand on?
3) What is Osundare's relevance to the present day Africa?
4) Is Osundare's use of style language unique?
5) Describe the African experience in Osundare's Songs *of the Market Place*
6) Discuss the theme of 'excursion' as a portrayal of Nigeria's socio-political experience in Osundare's *Songs of the Market Place*
7) Discuss the theme of "Siren" as a portrayal of Africa's Leadership problem in *Songs of the Market Place*
8) Explain the theme of African cultural heritages in Osundare's *Songs of the Market Place*

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UNIT 3 THE POEMS OF SIPHO SEMPHALA

CONTENTS

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The South African Sydney Sepamla was born in 1932 must be ranked along with Oswald Mtshali and Wally Mongane Serote among what might be called the poets of the new cities. In his anthology of Black South African verse, the first and best introduction to the new city poets, which takes its title from Sepamla's fine satirical poem 'To Whom It May Concern', Robert Royston remarked that the new poetry was 'a form of self-preservation'. It presented less of a target to censors, priests and police who had sunk, literally without trace, an entire raft of black prose writers in the fifties and sixties. Sepamla's poetry tends to be directed more towards the reforming views of white liberals than towards raising the consciousness of black workers. His main talent lies in his ability to exploit language for humorous effects. He combines a style of broken English with "township Xhosa" and "tsotsi-taal" to induce a linguistic interplay which underlines his point. (Sipho, 1982: 198). This unit will introduce you to Sepamla's poetry. Below are some of the objectives of this unit.

2.0 OBJECTIVES

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- Give a brief biography of Sipho Sepamla
- Describe the characteristic features of Sepamla's poetry
- Discuss Sepamla's protest poetry citing relevant examples from his various poems

3.0 MAIN CONTENT

3.1 Brief Biography of Sipho Sepamla

Sydney Sipho Sepamla was born in 1932 and has lived most of his life in Soweto, the giant township southwest of Johannesburg, so recently notorious. Soweto, with an unofficial population perhaps upward of a million (so much in Soweto has been unofficial always, even the people are thought of as temporary sojourners) living in a vast dormitory of jerry-built houses stretching for astonishing miles over the flat, bleak veld, existing in the minds of the planners and ideologues as merely a place to sleep the thousands who service the white city next door by day. Sepamla must be ranked along

with Oswald Mtshali and Wally Mongane Serote among what might be called the poets of the new cities. This refers not Johannesburg, Cape Town and Durban, but to their black satellites, Soweto, Langa and Kwa Mashu, cities of night attending the cities of the sun. Such mirror images and inverted relationships are characteristic in South Africa.

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Give a brief description of Sepamla's literary biography.

3.2 Sepamla and His Poetry

In his anthology of Black South African verse, which takes its title from Sepamla's fine satirical poem 'To Whom It May Concern', Robert Royston remarked that the new poetry was 'a form of self-preservation'. However angry and expressive it might be, it presented less of a target to censors, priests and police who had sunk, literally without trace, an entire raft of black prose writers in the fifties and sixties. Understandably, some of the new city verse is assertive, angry and confused - but in South African poetry there has been nothing so invigorating for years. What sets Sepamla apart from the others has been a certain wariness of political rhetoric, a most un-South African subtlety. There is nothing unusual about using the big stick in South Africa; everybody has one. But in a country of brutal distinctions what is truly rare is the ability to distinguish. Sepamla's is a nervy, urban sensibility, perfectly suited to finding the chinks in the regime's fibrous armour and thrusting in his spear. He is at his steely best in 'the deadpan, factual, throwaway line' which Douglas Livingstone has pointed to, splendidly instanced in this poem, 'The Will':

> The burglar-proofing and the gate
> will go to my elder son
> so will the bicycle
> and a pair of bracelets

His strength is double-edged; not only does he recount the pains of the blacks under apartheid, but articulates, too, the white nightmare of dispossession, often imagined, always expected, forever abjured.

Sepamla's books include Hurry Up To It! (1975) and The Blues Is You In Me (1976), both published in Johannesburg. With the publication of The Soweto I Love his work is for the first time available abroad. He edits the review New Classic (named for the dry-cleaning business in the room above which the magazine was founded), now in its latest metamorphosis and always amongst the most worthwhile South African little magazines open to the work of black writers. He edits, too, the drama magazine, Sketsh! (Sipho, 1982).

3.3 Sepamla's Protest Poetry

According to Holland (1987), Sepamla addresses the fading memory of an exiled friend in his poem "The Exile". From the little information he gains from newspapers, he learns of his friend's progress in the new world. Exploiting the parable of the prodigal son, Sepamla closes the poem with the promised return:

Teach at that University of Life while I prepare
the fatted cow for a son exiled
for growing too big for his boots!

Sepamla's humorous tone neither undercuts his triumphant prediction, nor seems as unrealistic as Pieterse's dream reunion. He promises a healing of the gap between exiled poets and the poets at home without appearing impractical. He also offers the exiles an enthusiastic audience and a reason to keep writing while they are separated by space and time from the object of their discourse.

Although Sipho Sepamla has lived all his life in Soweto, and although he has edited *New Classic* and *Sketch*, periods. He has never been exiled or imprisoned for long Instead, he seems to write protest poetry which the state will tolerate. Sepamla's poetry tends to be directed more towards the reforming views of white liberals than towards raising the consciousness of black workers. For example, in "Measure for Measure", Sepamla addresses himself to white officials and in an ironic tone seems to comply with white policy:

count me enough wages to make certain that i
grovel in the mud for more food

teach me just so much of the world that i
can fit into certain types of labour

…and when all that is done
let me tell you this
you'll never know how far i stand from you

The dignity of Sepamla's speaker is founded in a strong sense of self-worth despite the poor economic and social position his low wages and lack of education dictate. The inability of the white official to understand the black speaker is a weapon of resistance. In "Chi1dren of the Earth" the poet varies his choice of stanza patterns and language to contrast the official social policies of the Nationalist government with the real poverty and social problems they create. Sepam1a isolates socialinesses and combats the white-washed rhetoric of the state with direct language which translates the double-speak into what "that is" in actuality. (Holland, 1987)

Sepamla's main talent lies in his ability to exploit language for humorous effects. He combines a style of broken English with "township Xhosa" and "tsotsi-taal" to induce a linguistic interplay which underlines his point. For instance, in "The Bookshop" the speaker's good-natured banter is strengthened by his broken grammar and his assertions of literacy and ironically undercut by the speaker's apologetic tone:

Here I is
Too literate to reads comics and the Bible
I walks into a bookshop a newspapers in one armpit
…..
The likes of me can be excused for being literate
Besides a good sight is a literate me

The pun on "a literate" reveals the speaker's ability to create sophisticated linguistic play while at the same time pleading ignorance. Moreover, the speaker's love of English-language magazines while at the same time rejecting childish comics and white

religion indicates a selectivity of cultural stimuli. The beginning of cultural awareness comes with the beginning of literary judgement.

Other poems, like "To Whom It May Concern", parody the language of official documents such as passes. The bearer of the pass is allowed to travel "Subject to these particulars/He lives/Subject to the provisions/Of the Urban Natives Act of 1925/Amended often". Sepamla's love for Soweto and his pride in the vitality of township culture enables him to mock Passes, to criticize apartheid sharply and to use sophisticated language. Even more than Gwala and Jensma, Sepamla is conscious of the musicality of words. In such poems as "The Blues is You in Me" and "The Soweto Blues," blues beats are used to slow down lines and to reveal the dreary depression or to create a fast tempo in line with the upbeat anger or the poet. Sepamla's "use or irony [is) more powerful and more varied than Mtshali's. He does not have Serote's forcefulness.... "Certainly, Sepamla's sense of humour celebrates the cultural variety and endurance of Soweto as much as it criticizes social problems.

The explosion of poetry in Soweto and Alexandra in the seventies, both in defiance of oppression and in celebration of life, has its roots in jazz and the blues, as well as in traditional oral poetry (Holland, 1987). Moreover it touches on all aspects of township daily life as well as on various crises in the struggle to end apartheid. Township poetry is both angry and encouraging; it is both hopeful and desperate for change. Although it is dominated by the ideology of Black Consciousness, and although it records black experience, it is not exclusively written by blacks, nor are its messages confined to Soweto. It exposes stereotyped behaviour and tries to speak for the victims of oppression everywhere in South Africa while at the same time speaking to them. Above all, township poetry is a balancing of tensions to produce a vital culture which is one of the few things... most urban South Africans have left to lose and which is perhaps the one thing that keeps poets like Sipho Sepamla going:

I will hay'e to ask for my slum location again
L feel a lot went wrong when I was moved from it
a lot died in the process
I lost my stance for standing up straight
I lost the rhythm of walking right
I lost my sense of humour
I lost the feel for loving
I lost my sense of smell
... I know I don't just want fresh air
I need the smell of sweaty life
oh yes I want to live colourfully once more

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Examine the style employed by Sepamla in his poetry.

4.0 CONCLUSION

Sepamla's main poetic talent lies in his ability to exploit language for humorous effects in his poetry. He combines a style of broken English with "township Xhosa" and "tsotsi-taal" to induce a linguistic interplay which underlines his point. Sepamla's love for Soweto and his pride in the vitality of township culture enables him to mock Passes,

to criticize apartheid sharply and to use sophisticated language. Even more than Gwala and Jensma, Sepamla is conscious of the musicality of words. In such poems as "The Blues is You in Me" and "The Soweto Blues," blues beats are used to slow down lines and to reveal the dreary depression or to create a fast tempo in line with the upbeat anger or the poet. Sepamla's "use or irony [is) more powerful and more varied than Mtshali's. He does not have Serote's forcefulness.... "Certainly, Sepamla's sense of humour celebrates the cultural variety and endurance of Soweto as much as it criticizes social problems.

5.0 SUMMARY

In this unit you have learned the followings:

- The biography of Sipho Sepamla
- The major features of Sepamla's poetry
- Sepamla's protest poetry

6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

Read and answer the questions below:

- Discuss the biography of Sipho Sepamla.
- What are the characteristic features of Sepamla's poetry?
- Discuss Sepamla's protest poetry with relevant examples from his poems.

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UNIT 4 THE POEMS OF FUNSO AIYEJINA

CONTENTS

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Funso Aiyejina books demonstrate a concentrated interest with the historical, culture and political life of Africa, particularly his native Nigeria. His writing manifests a blossoming black diasporic poetics. His first collection of poems *A Letter to Lynda and Other Poems* (1989), for instance, considers the historical plight, the shared experiences of suffering and the immense possibilities of Africa and her descendants. This collection is anchored in a trans-Atlantic love relationship that has produced two sons who intimately seal a connection between the Old and New Worlds, and thereby secure the promise of a "[g]olden harvest of interlocking histories". This unit will take you through the poems of Funso Aiyejina will particular reference to his poetic collection of *I, The Supreme and Other Poems.* Below are some of the objectives of this unit.

2.0 OBJECTIVES

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- Outline Funso Aiyejina's biography
- Discuss Funso Aiyejina's poetry with particular reference from his *I, The Supreme and Other Poems*
- Discuss the scope and themes in Aiyejina's *I, The Supreme and Other Poems*
- Examine the language and style in Aiyejina's *I, The Supreme and Other Poems*

3.0 MAIN CONTENT

3.1 Funso Aiyejina's Biography

Poet and short-story writer, born in Ososo, Edo State, Nigeria, and holds a bachelor's degree from the University of Ife, a master's from Acadia University, Nova Scotia, Canada, and a doctorate from the University of the West Indies, Trinidad. He taught at the University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University) and since 1990 has taught at the University of the West Indies in Trinidad. In 1995–96, he was Fulbright Lecturer in Creative Writing at Lincoln University in Jefferson City, Missouri. Short fiction by Aiyejina has appeared in *Okike;* his poetry has been published in many journals, including *Opon Ifa, Okike, West Africa, Greenfield Review,* and *Trinidad and*

Tobago Review; his stories and plays have been broadcast over the radio in Nigeria and England; and his work appears in a number of anthologies. Aiyejina's first book of poems, *A Letter to Lynda* (1988), explores indigenous idioms and images and won the Association of Nigerian Authors Prize in 1989. *The Legend of the Rockhills and Other Stories* (1999) won Best First Book, Africa, for the Commonwealth Writers Prize in 2000, and A iyejina has also published a second anthology of poems under the title of *I, The Supreme* (2005).

Aiyejina's award-winning *The Legend of the Rockhills and Other Stories* (1999) is a collection of Nigerian-based short stories, told in the entertaining and insightful ironic voice that is fast becoming his trademark. Many of the stories such as "The Governor's Tree," "His Excellency's Visit," "The Brand New Chair" and "The Tax Collectors" satirize corrupt governments, their power-maddened leaders and self-important public officials, while gleefully reveling in their unmasking by the perceptive gaze and anancy-like survivalist strategies of ordinary folk. These and others intersect with the tales of abused power that feature in his second poetry collection *I, The Supreme and Other Poems* (2004). This book demonstrates the maturing of Aiyejina's poetic style. The reader encounters the poet as spokesman for the community and the chronicler of its experiences. He is prophet, social critic and moral vigilante whose speech is couched in the community's collective wisdom and tradition, drawing on proverb, parable, and on a firm faith in the benevolent attendance of ancestors and their gods. The text's richness lies in its intricate weaving of many thematic concerns. Its maturity is most evident in a confident control of voice that can be public and personal, satirical and reflective. The collection laments the betrayal of innocence and the failure of nationhood due to political corruption. It celebrates the resilience of the small and their stubborn will to survive and oppose injustice. It explores the capacity of the human person for unspeakable evil and redemptive good. The book condemns deceit and violence, and satirizes folly. It is about the pain of loss and the certitude of rejuvenation. *I, The Supreme and Other Poems* is also deeply concerned with African cultural survival and interconnections. Above all, these poems are about love of people, nations, and the earth that instructs and sustains us. The spiritual and philosophical orientation of this text speaks of an investment, against all odds, in the hope of a "future continuous", for the people of Nigeria, the continent Africa and her diaspora, indeed for all the earth's peoples. (Aiyejina, 1988)

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Asses the literary biograpgy of Funso Aiyejina.

3.2 Funso Aiyejina's Poetry

3.2.1 Aiyejina's *I, The Supreme and Other Poems*

Jennifer Rahim examined Aiyejina's poems in her "Aiyejina, Funso. *I, The Supreme and Other Poems*." (2006). According to her, it is of particular interest for Caribbean readers in *I, The Supreme and Other Poems* is the rooting of a transnational, intercultural sensibility, one that began in his first, *A Letter to Lynda and Other Poems.* We make this dimension of his work as opposed to Aiyejina's gently confessed resistance to an imaginative engagement with the Caribbean, primarily from the

conviction that his creative formation and political concerns are elsewhere, that is, the Africa of his origins. This is true; most of the poems contained in the collection have this focus, particularly the opening sections, "Of Generals and Kings, Priests and Poets" and "Victorious Victims." Yet, it is also believed that we are privileged to witness the evolution of what may well be a new trajectory in the literature of the African diaspora. It can be suspected that as he keeps on writing, as he continues to be entangled in the life of his current dwelling, a Caribbean focus will escape his censorship. Imagination can be understood as the servant of love, which implies that imagination is its own government. Derek Walcott reminds us in *The Antilles* (1992) that "love is stasis and travel is motion". So, as Aiyejina has chosen to stay with us, so too has he also chosen to love us, and perhaps will one day agree to write about us with the same passion with which he writes Africa.

In this regard, it is highly significant that what Aiyejina calls the book's "Pro/Epi/Logue" comprises a single poem entitled, "A Birthday Oriki for Iyalorisa Melvina Rodney," the poet's Trinidadian, Orisa spiritual mother. As a wordsmith conscious of the layered life of language, Aiyejina evokes the multiple streams of word and text. As "prologue," he ends the book where it logically begins or pre-starts; as epilogue he signals where the book ends, but transcends its natural closure. As "logue," the author intimates that the text is a compilation of experience, a history of sorts, public and personal, national and transnational—catalogue of a considered life. As logue, the collection is a discourse, that is, a conversation across space and time, across worlds: temporal and spiritual, there and here. The book is also a writer's logue, an artefact of memory, that catalyst of creativity, the transforming light of experience and agent of continuity. "Memory," he writes in the poem, "Dear Brother," "is the master of death: the beginning in the end …".

"A Birthday Oriki for Iyalorisa Melvina Rodney" is written in eight parts and opens with a lamentation for the histories of betrayals, old and new, that attempt to make Africa's descendants into "blind strangers" robbed of their place in the world. It quickly moves to the resistance mode as self-pity and recrimination are rejected as dead-ends in favor of the life offered in the counter-discourse of transformative "tales," those repositories of truths engineered by the wise that traverse time and place with their "vast masts." The ship, Paul Gilroy points out in The Black Atlantic (1993), is the centric trope of traveling cultures, suggested here in Aiyejina's image of those "vast masts" that connect continents ((Rahim, 2006).

The establishment of this ancestral mooring, which is strengthened by the figure of Iya Rodney as a New World living ancestor, fuels the poem's acceleration into praise. She is honoured and celebrated as "Matriarch of the crossroads" for Africa's scattered tribes. Rodney manifests the indestructible line of continuity between spiritual and temporal worlds, across generations living and dead and yet to come. In short, the Atlantic crossing of this contemporary traveller is no "amnesiac" surrender to irretrievable loss. Arguably, one's historical positioning is what makes the difference between the first forced migration to the Caribbean as loss and later immigrations as reconnection. As a contemporary African traveller to the Caribbean, Aiyejina's experiences of its cultural spaces and sensibilities cast no shadow of ambivalence about

the African presence and its role as what Sylvia Wynter called, with reference to Jamaica, the "syncretic mixing force of the society" in her 1967 review of "Lady Nugent's Journal", a definition one can easily extend to this society—this Caribbean.

In Aiyejina, therefore, we witness the evolution of an imagination formed by journeys, one that necessarily moves from here to there to encompass the fullness of experience, and so forge links with geographic and socio-cultural territories, where collective and personal histories overlap to generate fresh metaphors of recognition and reconnection, such as the startling image of flamboyant trees of his adopted Trinidad landscape that "bloom/Into a procession of possessed Sango priests" in the poem "Memories of the future". This transplanted African has literally found a second motherland in the New World, hybrid and changed, but not displaced or placeless; ravaged by a brutal history, but sprouting a new "style," new tales spun with the "wondrous metaphors of rockhills & islands". In fact, the opening lines of the title poem of his first collection, A Letter to Lynda and Other Poems echoes as one reads I, The Supreme: "What is incalculably far from us/in point of distance can be near us./Short distance is not itself nearness./Nor is great distance remoteness …".

Evidence that the collection is occupied with charting a meeting point of worlds surfaces in the section "Memorials." There, in the poem entitled "Elroy Quamina," Aiyejina honours the memory of his father-in-law, whose prophetic prediction of the birth of Ararimeh is recorded in his gift of a silver dollar for the "yet-to-be-conceived second child". At the heart of this section, is the desire to immortalize in verse the significant persons who influenced the poet's personal life, and who now form his ever-widening community of ancestors that close the chasm between the worlds. There are memorials, for instance, to close family members, writers and guides in poems such as "Mariatu," "Asetu," "Father never said much," "Dear Brother" and so on.

The bridging of the Atlantic divide and the interdependence of the future, present and past which form the unifying logic of the collection is signalled most strongly in the section, "The Future Continuous." Many of the poems focus on the birth and growth of his two sons, Abuenameh and Ararimeh, the children of his enduring love for Lynda. This love builds a stable, renewing bridge across the Atlantic, the sea of time and distance, suffering and renewal that the poetic imagination grapples to reconcile. Several of the poems to his sons, written in the turbulent 1980s during the period of the murder of the journalist Dele Giwa and the reign of General Babangida, are carry-covers from the first collection, a choice that reinforces the sons' role as signs of hope for a different future for Africa and its diaspora. Therefore, the paternal blessing he bestows on them is extended to all the "children of the wind", fruits of the communion of Old and New Worlds and the promise of cultural, spiritual and generational continuity.

With this almost Lammingesque "glance backward" in which one "rises full speed forward" ("Asetu"), the collection's non-defeatist confrontation with the sorry state of African post-independence politics finds continuity, or perhaps identifies the origins of its philosophy. Narratives such as the title poem "I, The Supreme," "The general on the swing," "The power & the glory," "Darkness may conceal" are potent critiques of the betrayals of military regimes and corrupt dictators. The evil of perverted leadership is most evident in the mercenary silencing of political detractors, captured in

poems like “Re: Jack Mapanje - poet,” “The innocent spider,” “Gani Fawehinmi.” These figures and others are honoured as the courageous gatekeepers of truth, skillful “peddlers of parables”, visionaries who “dream,” the people’s future, artisans of the “the metaphors in our streams”.

In deference to Aiyejina’s loaded disclaimer: “No true character where none is intended/No true incident where none is created/No true location where none is identified,” we can also choose to remain mum, in spite of the earlier slip, about the possible names of the long succession of dictators and the litany of crimes they oversee against the innocent. Rather, we can surrender to walk the vanishing horizon the poet skilfully navigates between fact and fiction, actuality and invention. Specific knowledge and particular histories are not beyond one’s grasp, even as they are most times playfully shrouded in the folktale’s anonymity. Aiyejina proves he is most adept at playing the proverb’s best game of accusation without name-calling, and the choice of ironic double entendre signals a submission to satire’s highest service in offering correction to human error without ascending the throne of a reverse arrogance and violence. Indeed, these are localized tales of the dark conspiracies wrought by expert “spinners of webs”, “butchers” who “prepare knives” for the slaughter of sheep. They tell of “Generals,” immovable elephants, usurpers of the seat of justice that concoct schemes, sometimes “stranger than fiction,” that perhaps only fiction can best tell; but they are imbued with the representational currency to speak to all of humanity of the shared problem of misused power.

A strong didactic intent weaves through this collection, which appeals to a timeless belief in the ultimate triumph of truth and justice over lies and injustice. The text is a philosophy of survival that charts, even as it performs, a rite of passage into the future. At its core, I, The Supreme is a spiritual handbook about crossing over. It recognizes that the battle royal of human persons in the societies to which they belong involves the necessary confrontation with injustice, betrayal, disappointment—challenges of myriad sorts that test the mettle of the individual and collective spirit. This poet may be an idealist but he is no romantic. Social activism against injustice is therefore a collective responsibility, as it is the responsibility of art to speak out. His mediation on the matters of the living is an heroic surge to gather from the deep recesses of self, family, community and tradition, the spiritual weaponry with which mere mortals can stand firm against the tyrannous supremacy of the false “I”s that seek to deny life and imprison freedom. In essence, the book is about the inevitable, almost anancy-like overthrow of dictatorial, murderous, deceitful and indulgent selves by placing them in confrontation with the ordinary masses of people who are dispossessed of everything but the wisdom of the community, and faith in a Divine might, preserved in proverb, sanctified in ritual and lived in action, even if that is the act of waiting (Rahim, 2006).

3.2.2 Language and Style in Aiyejina’s *I, The Supreme and Other Poems*

According to Rahim (2006), for the sceptics who believe that language or “poetry makes nothing happen,” Aiyejina unleashes the potency of the people’s poetry: those proverbial and parabolic, the “horses of speech” that can move “full-bodied elephants”, and “if reason goes astray/”retrieve & return it home to stay”. He too takes command

of his culture's gift of words by crafting his own arsenal of parables and proverbs, adding, like a dutiful elder, to the store of the community's collective wisdom such as his innovations in "On becoming the wisest man in the world". Language is not that unreliable post-written chameleon, shape-shifting, escaping the intention to make words mean. It is rather the powerful vehicle of communication loaded with the firepower to unveil deception, to effect change by speaking unchanging truths to those with ears to hear and eyes to see the sad temporality of those who enthrone themselves on falsity of various kinds. For this postcolonial, diasporic African, at least, the veneration of a spineless, slippery language denuded of its potential to mean is not an option. Language, like "Sango's thunderstones," is the purposeful weapon of righteous anger, charged with the authority of experience and fortified with the confidence of an ancestral grounding that make words the able, fecund seeds of renewal and transformation.

Finally, the ironic vision of I, The Supreme and Other Poems is the light that provides the text's counter-discourse with corruption. In contradistinction to the false "I" of egotistical kings, prophets and gods whose time on the deceptive "swing" of glory is but a temporary night, there is the true sovereignty of the wise, whose perceptive I/eye, like the dawn, will dethrone tyrants. Many of the folk tales and narratives in this collection such as "The goat & the head butcher," "On becoming the wisest man in the world," "The power & the glory," and "Termites dwell underground" affirm the organic wisdom of the community on which the disempowered and victimized rely. This is a book about the timeless battle between history's Goliaths and Davids that will ultimately prove laughable the tyrant leader's litany of empty boasts with which the title poem "I, The Supreme" opens:

> They labour in vain: termites aspiring to devour rocks!
> Futile are their lots to surprise the crab in a trance.
> The back of the cat is not for the ground to embrace.

The ready challenge that undermines the authority of the General's blind arrogance comes from the battery of contesting responses in the poems that follow this pseudo "Prologue" to the story of the community. The subtle revolutionary power of the collective voice of people is best represented in the poem written for the judicially murdered poet, Ken Saro-Wiwa, "Termites dwell underground". Revolution from the bottom up is therefore the strategy reinforced in the text. It is with this understanding that truth triumphs that Aiyejina writes the poem "Elegy for my land," which is really a song of hope, a refusal to mourn, and the antithesis of the section entitled "Epilogue," since the future has only just begun.

Diasporic literature, we know, has developed the worrying reputation as the literature of "homelessness." In a real sense, the problem of home, cultural loss and hyphenated ambivalences are very visible aspects of the postcolonial saga of lamentation over the cultural "erasure" and "dissociation" wrought by Imperialism and its aftermath. Aiyejina's gaze, however, offers a refreshing leap from that discourse of loss and anguished recuperation. Although his body of work so far represents an early stage of writing in between spaces of dwelling, he is not in doubt about his belonging, nor is Africa an imagined space that slips from reality (Rahim, 2006).

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Explain the themes and poetic language of Funso Aiyejina, citing relevant examples from his *The Supreme and Other Poems*.

4.0 CONCLUSION

As outsider/insider to the Caribbean landscape and culture, Aiyejina is awed by the miracle of African cultural survival and transformation. His cultural experience and vision as a second wave, this time willing, immigrant to the Caribbean, updates and remedies, in a certain sense, the discursive strains that attempt to institutionalise displacement as typical markers of the postcolonial condition, or celebrate the "pleasures" of in-betweenity that may indicate the uncommitted, "stateless" globality of the nomad, that depoliticised transculturality of Fanon's forewarned "rootless," "race of angels" in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1967). He stands on firm ground, imaginatively moving between worlds that are as real to him as the love that calls him to craft them whole.

5.0 SUMMARY

In this unit you have learned the followings:

- The biography Funso Aiyejina
- The unique features of Funso Aiyejina's poetry with illustration from his *I, The Supreme and Other Poems*
- The scope and themes in Aiyejina's *I, The Supreme and Other Poems*
- The language and style employed by Aiyejina's in his *I, The Supreme and Other Poems*

6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

Read and answer the questions below:

1) Outline Funso Aiyejina's biography
2) Discuss Funso Aiyejina's poetry with particular reference from his *I, The Supreme and Other Poems*
3) Discuss the scope and themes in Aiyejina's *I, The Supreme and Other Poems*
4) Examine the language and style in Aiyejina's *I, The Supreme and Other Poems*

7.0 REFERENCES/FURTHER READINGS

Aiyejina Funso (1988), "Recent Nigerian Poetry in English: An Alter/Native Tradition", Yemi Ogunbiyi (Ed.), *Perspectives on Nigerian Literature*, Vol. 1, Guardian Books, Lagos.

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UNIT 5 THE POEMS OF TENURE OJAIDE

CONTENTS

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Of the new generation of African poets and their poetry, there are only a few that one would read and return to. Nigeria's Tanure Ojaide belongs to those few. What makes Ojaide's poetry appealing is not only its technical qualities but its cultural integrity. Ojaide is not the type of poet one remembers only by one good work; he is prolific, and his writings are consistently rich and deeply rooted in the Delta region of Nigeria. He has published more than five books of poetry, including Children of Iroko and Other Poems, Labyrinths of the Delta, The Eagle's Vision, The Endless Song, and The Fate of Vultures and Other Poems. If there is a persistent and unifying theme in most of his works, it is a single-minded detestation of tyrants combined with an obsessive commitment to social justice. This essay recognizes the impossibility of a deep exploration of this rising poetic star's work in a single foray and therefore settles only for a brief, but ambitious survey of the artistry and social concerns of a poet who may very well be one of the finest, if not the finest, among Nigeria's harvest of poets of the post-Okigbo/post-Soyinka generation. The selection and treatment here of poems across many of the poet's several collections is ad hoc and sporadic-the choice of poems largely motivated by a concern for representative demonstration. The treatment of Ojaide's work is undertaken within a meaningful triadic framework, rotating around three themes: his life, artistry, and social vision. Below are some of the objectives of this unit.

2.0 OBJECTIVES

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- Give an outline of Tenure Ojaide's biography
- Discuss Tanure Ojaide's poetry
- Examine the theme of town-crier's resistance and mediation in Tanure Ojaide's Delta Blues and Home Songs and Fate of the Vultures & Other Poems
- Discuss the Niger Delta's environmental sustainability in Ojaide's poetry

- Examine postnationallity in the poetry of Ojaide

3.0 MAIN CONTENT

3.1 Tenure Ojaide's Biography

Born on April 24, 1948, in Okpara Inland, Bendel State, Delta Region of Nigeria, Ojaide thus grew up in this riverine forest area, largely brought up by his mater- nal grandmother, Amreghe, to whom he pays tribute in "For Granny." Ojaide was educated at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria (BA) and at Syracuse University (MA, PhD). Ojaide is currently a Professor of African American and African Studies at the University of North Carolina and is a former Fellow in Writing of the University of Iowa. He is a productive poet and has won several awards, including a commendation by the Commonwealth Writers Prize 2005 for his first novel *Sovereign Body,* and 2003 Association of Nigerian Authors Prize for Poetry. Ojaide's collections include *Children of Iroko* (1973), *Labyrinths of the Delta* (1986), which won a Commonwealth Poetry Prize, and *The Eagle's Vision* (1987), which won the Christopher Okigbo Prize. *The Endless Song* (1989) was specially mentioned by the Noma Award committee; *The Fate of Vultures and Other Poems* (1990) won the Association of Nigerian Authors' (ANA) Poetry Award; and the title poem of the latter volume received a BBC Arts and Africa Poetry Award.

Other collections are *The Blood of Peace* (1991), *Cannons for the Brave* (1995), *Invoking the Warrior God* (1995), which won the ANA 's Poetry Award, *Daydream of Ants* (1995), *Invoking the Warrior Spirit: New and Selected Poems* (1999), *The New African Poetry: An Anthology* (1999), *In the Kingdom of Songs: A Trilogy of Poems, 1995–2000* (2001), *Delta Blues and Other Home Songs* (1998, 2002), and *I Want to Dance and Other Poems* (2003). He has also published a book of short stories titled *God's Medicine-Men and Other Stories* (2004), and Ojaide's poetry is also included in such anthologies as *Ubangiji: The Conscience of Eternity* (2000), *The Palm of Time* (2002), and *Winging Words* (2004). The use of traditional African imagery, rhythm, and music and Nigerian English to express Nigerian/African experience characterize Ojaide's poetry.

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Provide a detailed biography of Tenure Ojaide, giving more emphasis on his poetic compositions.

3.2 Tenure Ojaide and His Poetry

According to Awuzie, (2017), Tanure Ojaide's poetry, like the poetry of his contemporaries is preoccupied with the themes of political and environmental degradation. According to Charles Bodunde, Ojaide's poetry is an "aesthetic in which images are deployed to emphasize the idea that human right struggle is imperative in seeking to restore the people's well-being" (2002). However, in his essay entitled "New Trends in Modern African Poetry", Ojaide sees this aesthetic as a dominant trend in contemporary African poetry and this emerges from the context in which "the generality of the populace had become economically and politically marginalized" (Ojaide, 1995).

In his book of essays, Ojaide makes it clear that his poetry revolves around the Niger Delta politics and its environmental problem:

> To me as a poet, Childhood is vital, because it is the repository of memory. [...] My Delta years have become the touch-stone with which I measure the rest of my life. The streams, the fauna, and the flora are symbols I continually tap. [...] Home remains for me the Delta, where I continue to anchor myself. (1995)

Uzoechi Nwagbara (2009) argues in his essay entitled "Aesthetic of Resistance and Sustainability: Tanure Ojaide and the Niger Delta Question" that ecocriticism is central in the poetry of Tanure Ojaide and that Ojaide's poetry negates ecological imperialism. He goes further to argue that since Ojaide's poetry intersects with the realities of ecological imperialism, it is therefore a dependable barometer to measure "Nigeria's environmental/ecological dissonance for sustainable development" (Awuzie, 2017).

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

With adequate citations from from his different poems, explore the thematic concerns of Osundare's poetry.

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

According to Aito (2014), 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. Sallah (1995) 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. 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, 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 (Aito, 2014).

When 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" . 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".

In the same mood of protesting the devouring nature of the nation, "Witchcraft" becomes a metaphor for describing the socio-political and economic condition 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. Ojaide's lamentation is significance in its poetic concerns for the sanity of the human environment and dignity of human identity. Ojaide's *The Fate of Vultures & Other Poems* are traditional expressions of lamentations on the environmental destruction, pollution and wastefulness that characterise postcolonial Nigeria (Aito, 2014).

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Discuss the themes in Ojaide's *Delta Blues and Home Songs* and *Fate of the Vultures & Other Poems.*

3.4 Ojaide's Poetry and the Environmental Sustainability in the Niger Delta

The interest and inheritance of Tanure Ojaide environmental sustainability in the Niger Delta is clearly expressed in his *Delta Blues & Home Songs* which tells of the horrors and tragedies of multinational corporations' presence and activities in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria:

The inheritance I sat on for centuries
Now crushes my body and soul …
My nativity gives immortal pain
Masked in barrels of oil –
Breaking the peace of centuries
And tainting not only a thousand rivers,
My lifeblood from the beginning,
But scorching their sacred soil was debauched
By prospectors, money-mongers?

My birds take flight to the sea,

The animals grope in the burning bush … (21).

The poem above tells of the horrors and tragedies of multinational corporations' presence and activities in the Niger delta region of Nigeria and 'The AT & P, Sapele':

When I first entered the AT & P
On excursion from St. George's,
It was next to the largest sawmill
On earth…
The planks smelt fresh,
Sardine-packed for export;
They came in raft by water…
When decades later I went home
To the delta of hardwood,
A big clearing welcome me … (30).

Also in his collection *When It No Longer Matters Where You Live* and *Daydream of Ants and Other Poems* Ojaide called forth pictures of the socio-physical disaster, the deplorable condition of man and the fauna:

Choking from the season's flagellation,
Droves of wailers comb the breath of the
Land…

Wild fires consumed barks and herbs
What are the chances of catching the lion
Alive…? (77).

Dogs will never shed enough tears
To tell their sorrows,
Goats will never sweat enough in a rack
To show the world their desperation.
Babies suffocate from the game
Of loveless elders of state … (70).

These poems paint a gory picture of the state and condition of the local and flora, fauna and man by the 'elders of state': the polluted atmosphere, the choking in the air and the battered environment; 'the gnarled barks of trees', 'babies' and 'goats' all point to the

perils of deforestation and the evil of imperialism wrought via gas flaring and oil leaks in the Niger Delta and Nigeria by extension. It tells of the horrors and tragedies of multinational corporations' presence and activities in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Ojaide considers the eco-critical art of poetry as a kind of public duty, which he owes to the Nigeria people, to expose, reconstruct, and negate the actualities of environmental degradation in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Above all Ojaide uses literature for environmental purposes. He places premium on the biotic community – its sustainability and preservation. He is a poetic blueprint that is environmentally conscious and ecologically sensitive to the plights of the people and their environment.

Glissant E, the Caribbean writer, offered a statement to corroborate this literary pattern: that Ojaide is committed to "aesthetic of the earth" (Glissant, 1997). In the same light also, Aldo Leopold, the American ecologists, in his *A Sand County Almanac* said that "a thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community (Leopold, 1966: 262). Today, the destructive effect of man's activities on the environment has shifted from Africa and the developing world to the industrialized world like Britain. Unlike the attempt to domesticate the African mind and its natural environment for the West, Industrialization now attempts to domesticate the earth – its space, lands and seas and the consequences of this are the destruction of the world eco-system. This universal concern is expressed by Ross Parmanterin in the last quarter of the 20th century, that "In remaking the world in the likeness of a steam-heated, air conditioned metropolis of apartment buildings, we have violated our kinship with nature. The recent Gulf oil spill on the Pacific Ocean, though far from African shores, it is human induced disaster against global aquatic system.

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Explore the theme of ecocriticism in Ojaide's poetry.

3.5 Exploding the Ballon of Postnationallity in the Poetry of Tanure Ojaide

According to Olaoluwa (2007), Ojaide's narration of the nation is essentially from the viewpoint of the Niger Delta crisis and by so doing, he interrogates the basis for the invention and sustenance of the nation. This takes us back to how exile connects globalization in this discussion. The feverish race towards planetization otherwise known as globalization has generated and will continue to generate all manner of debates. In the observation of Angus Cameron and Ronen Palan (2004), these debates and arguments are bound to elicit responses across institutional strata. Tanure Ojaide's *When it no Longer Matters where you Live* is one of such responses. The planetary innuendoes of the title coupled with the spatio-temporal suggestiveness of the para-textual illustration of the cover page – a juxtaposition, yet contiguous placement of both ruralscape, represented by a diminutive hut, and urbanscape, represented by an imposing skyscraper with satellite dish installation – all foreshadow the cynicism which is obvious in the collection. It is first and foremost a response to Marshal McLuhan's (1964) enthusiastic prognosis about the capacity of information technology to transform and possibly homogenize the world. The indispensability of this technology is at the core of most of the various definitions of globalization. David Held (1998: 13) for instance views globalization as the:

> Stretching and deepening of social relations and institutions across space and time such that, on the one hand-day-to-day activities are increasingly influenced by events happening on the other side of the globe and, on the other, the practices and decisions of local groups and communities can have significant global reverberations.

As innocuous and progressive as this appears to be, the duo of Cameron and Palan (2004) further remind one that "metaphors and other linguistic devices used to describe social and spatial forms are never so innocent." This compels a critical look at globalization from the angle of the binarism between the First World and the Third World nations. By taking as crucially instructive the position of the former and its bias in the pontification on the morality and operation of globalization, there is no doubt that, even at its best, the justification for the practice of the conceptual agenda, despite its apparent prospects, remains suspect. Its compression of all forms of social structures into a single mould (Murphet 2005:128), reveals that it is nothing but the consequence of the global epoch of imperialism which is a reconstruction of Empire political maps. The substance of this fallout especially in the Third World is evident in the fact that "in place of firm notions of identity has come an era of mass migrations, exile and transition' (Mirzoeff 2001). This is what Olu Oguibe (2002) refers to as the dialectic of "connectivity and the fate of the unconnected". It is this fag-end status of the Third World and the frenetic efforts of its citizens to escape "unconnectivity" that has become the greatest catalyst to the experience of dislocation in the postmodern time, which is what is the preoccupation of *When it no Longer…* Beyond its perception as a commentary on the national image of Nigeria as home, the collection, like most other collections of Ojaide, lays out in a manner that deconstructs national culture as it articulates more resonantly the ethnic aspirations of the Niger-Delta region of the country whose unconnectivity despite its oil wealth has become world knowledge. But first the capitalist and exploitative presence of the multinationals like Shell in this part of the country must be understood in terms of the their capacity to undermine national sovereignty, making it subservient to them (Ahmad 1992; Murphet 2005), in order that the dispossession of an ethnic or regional entity can be easily accomplished. So the nation, not infrequently embroidered in political crisis with exponential causes traceable to the western originating countries of the multinationals, cannot live up to her citizens' expectations. This is the implication of the argument that runs in "Home Song II."

While this goes on at the national level primarily because of the oil-wealth of the Niger- Delta, the same region is engulfed in abject poverty explicable only in terms of the postulation of "resource curse".2 This is the import of "In Search of a Fresh Song" in which the poet finds that "fecal trash" with "toxic blast" has created the "afflicted neighborhood" of Igbudu Market. The natural consequence is disillusionment which induces deracination:

> The eyes blurred from exhaustion
>
> see no further than the next half-meal
>
> next week fresh exiles will take flight
>
> to distances without roots (51)

The vulnerability to dispersion toward the west, which verges on the susceptibility to Foucault's terminology of "hyperreality" of the western world, is not discovered until victims of capitalist dispossession end up in the world capital only to be faced with the harrowing realities of exclusion in "distances without roots". In "Immigrant Voice", one of the migrants testifies in Pidgin:

Wetin my eye don see for here pass pepper I have been witness to peppery persecution

Make me de prepare to go sweet home A homeward return is my salvation

If God de, make e punish them If God exists, let Him deal with them

Wen drive me from Africa come hell Who sanctioned my dislocation from Africa into hell. (106)

The grandeur that is expressed in the lines above mocks the superciliousness of "elitist" critics like Harry Garuba (1988) who assign only facetious values to the use of Pidgin in literary practice. In fact, it is for this that Ezenwa-Ohaeto (1994), echoing Achebe in a positional criticism, warns that such critics of western critical bias against Pidgin must "cultivate the habit of humility appropriate to their limited knowledge of pidgin". The appropriateness of the choice of pidgin in this context comes to the fore on account of the fact that "merging vernacular languages, folk arts, European avant-garde forms, and secular concerns" has become a defining feature of postcolonial literature (May Joseph 1999); besides, it must be understood as the necessity of taking serious the Lyotardian injunction to "wage war on totality" (Olaoluwa, 2007).

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Examine the themes of Postcolonialism in Ojaide's poetry.

4.0 CONCLUSION

Ojaide's writings have received several well-deserved praises from renowned poets and critics such as Hayden Carruth, who describes him as "may be one of the most important Nigerian poets of his generation" (Labyrinths of the Delta blurb). He was a regional winner of the Commonwealth Poetry Prize in 1987, and has won other awards for his poetry, including the Soyinka-endowed All-Africa Okigbo Prize for Poetry in 1988 and the BBC Arts and Africa Poetry Award also in the same year. His poetry points "assegais" at tyrants-the poem is simultaneously an "art form" and a "weapon" through which the "warrior-poet" confronts, criticizes, and condemns the political charlatanism and often deleterious role of African dictators. He is uncomfortable, as is evident in his poetics, with the retrogressive character of African leadership, who are often greedy, ruthless, and lacking in any coherent social vision and who, far from being benevolent, exploit the coercive authority of the state for often pernicious ends. His poems resemble what Soyinka, citing the poet Ted Joans, calls "shot-gun" poems-they are meant to be detonated immediately on the complacent bottoms of enemies (Imfeld). Ojaide's "Shot-gun" poems are aimed at a target-in Ojaide's case "Africa's or Nigeria's malevolent dictators"-and they have a reason. This consuming theme of rebellion

against tyranny and injustice, recurrent in much of his poetry, he has made inimitably his own. The message of the town-crier from across the Niger 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 poet creates awareness about an ensuing conflict; provides options of resolution; reconciles "differences" through poetic use of language and ensures development through peaceful relations.

5.0 SUMMARY

In this unit you have learned the followings:

- The biography of Tenure Ojaide
- The unique features Tanure Ojaide's poetry
- An analysis of the theme of town-crier's resistance and mediation in Tanure Ojaide's Delta Blues and Home Songs and Fate of the Vultures & Other Poems
- A discussion of the Niger Delta's environmental sustainability in Ojaide's poetry
- The concept of postnationallity in the poetry of Ojaide

6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

Read and answer the questions below:

- Give an outline of Tenure Ojaide's biography
- Discuss Tanure Ojaide's poetry
- Examine the theme of town-crier's resistance and mediation in Tanure Ojaide's Delta Blues and Home Songs and Fate of the Vultures & Other Poems
- Discuss the Niger Delta's environmental sustainability in Ojaide's poetry
- Examine postnationallity in the poetry of Ojaide

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