

Niger Delta and the Poetics of Power: Ibiwari Ikiriko, G.'Ebinyo Ogbowei and Obari Gomba

By

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Abstract

The poetry of Ikiriko, Ogbowei and Gomba in various ways versifies the socio-economic, political and environmental concerns bedeviling Nigeria's Niger Delta. These poets belong to a third generation of writers involved in capturing, through poetry, the changing fortunes of the crude-oil rich region—a geopolitical space that has greatly inspired recent Nigerian literature in all genres. A close reading of their poetry reveals that the issues the listed poets are preoccupied with have also been the subject of a variety of non-literary writing as well. Given the view that a writer draws much of his materials from society, the study deploys the close reading ethnographic technique of the New Historicism to examine the common themes which underpin the poems under study. In addition, part of the study's methodology involves the juxtaposition of literary and non-literary texts to give appropriate cultural context to the analysis. Thus, the study demonstrates that the selected poems form aspects of discourses on the Niger Delta, in the wake of petroleum exploration and the impact on the people's way of life.

1.0. Introduction: The Niger Delta Question

In the aftermath of the 2003 general elections in Nigeria, the crude-oil rich Niger Delta region witnessed a sudden upsurge of violence among youth groups with sympathies for certain political interests. In Nigeria politically-motivated violence is not new, however the dimension this particular one assumed took most Nigerians by surprise because, besides the fact that it was

totally unexpected it snowballed into a threat to the economic survival of the country vis-à-vis Nigeria's existence as a sovereign nation. In the course of the crisis, Dokubo Asari—hitherto unknown on a national scale—emerged as the head of a rebel group, the Niger Delta Volunteer Force, fashioned after the one previously led by the foremost Ijaw revolutionary Isaac Jasper Adaka Boro in the 1960s. The grievances which forced Boro and his band of Ijaw militants to take up arms and fight the Nigerian state for twelve days, leading to the declaration of an aborted “The Niger Delta Peoples Republic” (Boro119-21), were no different from what propelled the new conflict in the region. Like Boro, Asari became the new face and voice of the region's age-long concerns over inequitable distribution of oil revenues and environmental degradation. In the many interviews he granted the news media, local and international, Asari echoed Boro in many ways, drawing attention to the plight of the Niger Delta people, particularly the ethnic Ijaws, who have suffered greatly for reasons of institutionalized marginalization and oppression as well as the dispossession of the people from their God-given oil-mineral resources. In addition, Asari voiced other economic-cum-political grievances like resource control for the Niger Delta people, the abrogation of obnoxious military decrees institutionalized land and resources alienation, the militarization of the region, and the renegotiation of the Nigerian Question

through a Sovereign National Conference for equity and justice. For these unresolved concerns, Asari calls for “[t]he disintegration of the entity called Nigeria” because “it is a dubious entity” (*Tell* 17), given that “the very foundation of Nigeria is illegal” (*Newswatch* 17). He argued that Nigeria was a contraption foisted on the people by the powers that be and therefore the struggle is about “self-actualization for the Ijaw people. [And] the control of their own resources” (*Tell* 18).

The Ijaw-inspired Niger Delta agitation, as Asari has framed it, is double pronged: the one is to “continue to fight the Nigerian state, until they accept what is right and moral, what is justifiable” (*Newswatch*16); and the other is to “take it [Niger Delta oil resource] by any means necessary” (*Tell* 17). The agenda canvassed by Asari is a crystallization of the views he shared with fellow youths while he presided over the Ijaw Youths Council in 2001, the pan-Ijaw youth organization which issued the Kaiama Declaration of 11 December 1998. That document, besides encapsulating the core ideas which continue to drive the Ijaw struggle, remains a valuable reference point in the events that metamorphosed into a full-blown militancy in the region in the 1990s and beyond. Divided into two sections, the first covers a gamut of impediments to development in the Niger Delta, while the second addresses the resolutions to right the wrongs done the region. Two items, one from each section, are

worth quoting in full to contextualize the issues. First, is the seventh observation in the Declaration:

That the degradation of the environment of Ijawland by multinational oil companies and the Nigerian state arises mainly because Ijaw people have been robbed of their natural rights to ownership and control of their land and resources through the instrumentality of undemocratic Nigerian State legislation such as the Land Use Decree of 1978, the Petroleum Decrees of 1969 and 1991, the Lands (Title Vesting etc.) Decree No. 52 of 1993 (Osborne Land Decree), the National Inland Waterways Authority Decree No. 13 of 1997 etc.

The military-imposed decrees, to the Ijaws, pose a serious threat to the survival of their land and heritage as a people, hence the resolve to take action. Consequently, the fourth resolution of the Declaration, voices the determination of the people to survive:

Ijaw youths in all the communities in all Ijaw clans in the Niger Delta will take steps to implement these resolutions beginning from the 30th December 1998, as a step toward reclaiming the control of our lives. We, therefore, demand that all oil companies stop all exploration and exploitation activities in the Ijaw area. We are tired of gas flaring: oil spillage, blowouts and being labelled saboteurs and

terrorists. It is a case of preparing the noose for our hanging. We reject this labelling. Hence, we advise [. . .] all oil companies [sic] staff and contractors to withdraw from the Ijaw territories by the 30th December 1998 pending the resolution of the issue of resource ownership and control in the Ijaw area of the Niger Delta. (qtd. in Tamuno 328, 329)

Implicit in the above excerpt is the idea that past efforts to address the Niger Delta Question not only failed but also complicated things for the region, as manifested in the hanging of Ken Saro-Wiwa whose peaceful activism did not ameliorate the plight of his ethnic Ogonis. In other words, prior to the Asari/Ijaw Youths Council era, Saro-Wiwa's non-violent struggle for environmental reparation in the Niger Delta was met with maximum force. The failure of Saro-Wiwa's intellectual activism no doubt inaugurated a new phase of militant agitation by youth groups in the region.

The demands of the Niger Delta people sum up as a desire for true fiscal federalism wherein the federating units will have the right to explore the natural resources found in their domain and deploy the proceeds for human and infrastructural development, and pay appropriate taxes to the central government. This implies a repel of all obnoxious laws that dispossess the oil-rich minorities of their God-given resources;

the devolution of power; the re-negotiation of the continued existence of Nigeria as a political entity; a revert to the pre-independence 50% derivation principle to accelerate development in oil-bearing states; and, resource control. Although these issues transcend the Niger Delta, however they constitute some, if not the most intractable problems at the heart of the Niger Delta Question, and so by extension the larger national question. Ironically, the deprivations suffered by the resource-rich ethnic minorities translate into benefits for the majority tribes. Therefore, there is a perception that to give in to the demands of the people of the Niger Delta would mean the majority tribes giving up the economic and political privileges the present arrangement confer on them. This perhaps explains the reason why the Niger Delta Question has remained the single most critical unresolved impasse in Nigeria since independence. It is no wonder then that like the civil war, the conflict in the Niger Delta has become a rich source of material for recent Nigerian literature.

The failure to reach a national consensus on the Niger Delta Question has created a chasm between the federal government/transnational oil corporations and the people of the oil-rich region. The consequence is that violence, destruction of oil facilities, kidnapping/hostage-taking, and militarization of the region have taken centre stage, further worsening an already

degraded ecosphere, creating widespread poverty and misery. It is difficult for writers to ignore these issues which ostensibly affect the human condition. It is only natural then that the Niger Delta Question has become the subject of a variety of writing, from the literary to the non-literary. For the non-literary, we have revealing narratives in Ken Saro-Wiwa's 1995 autobiographical *A Month and a Day: A Detention Diary*, which chronicles his harrowing experience in different detention centres across Nigeria in the wake of his mobilization of ethnic Ogonis to campaign for political and environmental justice; Michael Peel's topical *A Swamp Full of Dollars: Pipelines and Paramilitaries at Nigeria's Oil Frontier* (2009), which offers an investigative account of the conflicting interests of gangsters, politicians and oil magnates who compete for a share in Nigeria's oil resources; Tekena Tamuno's *Oil Wars in the Niger Delta: 1849-2009* (2011), whose holistic view of the crisis in the region shows the continuation of a trend that dates back to colonial times when trade in oil palm fuelled similar crisis; Nnimmo Bassey's *To Cook a Continent: Destructive Extraction and the Climate Crisis in Africa* (2013)—an exposé on the ecological carnage engendered by the mindless exploration and exploitation of crude-oil in Nigeria; and, G. G. Darah's *The Niger Delta: Resource Control and the Quest for Justice* (2014), which offers a concise survey of the Niger Delta people's sustained demand

for greater share of oil revenues from their land. In various ways, these books take us on an excursion into the heart of the politics, intrigues and multi-faceted conflicts at the core of the Niger Delta Question. Given the new historicist purview of the study, in places, excerpts would be drawn from the above non-literary discourses to give a touch of the real to the study.

On the literary side, we have continued to witness a steady release of works on the Niger Delta. Writers from the region and other parts of the country have made happenings in the region the subject of serious imaginative literature. A few examples will serve to illustrate this point. In prose, Isidore Okpewho's epistolary *Tides* (1993), Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist* (2006), Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* (2006), and Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* (2010) readily come to mind. It is interesting to note that besides the subject matter that connects these narratives, each novel comes through as some quest story in which the protagonist embarks on a search to unravel the real situation of things in the Niger Delta. For drama, Ahmed Yerima's *Hard Ground* (2005) with its focus on kidnapping, gunrunning and militancy in the Niger Delta brings the deadly dimension of the conflict to the fore, while J. P. Clark-Bekederemo's *The Wives' Revolt* (2009) dramatizes an aspect of the conflict concerned with the destabilization of families and communities occasioned by the discriminatory sharing of damages paid by oil companies to

communities whose property and environment have been impacted by oil slick. Of the three genres, poetry has clearly recorded the richest literary harvest regarding the Niger Delta Question. Scattered poems and poetry collections versifying the crisis proliferate, and are too many to be listed here. Therefore, the present study focuses on the works of the selected poets. Even so, not all the poems in the focal collections would be analyzed, as some deal with other issues. Consequently, topical poems would be examined from Ibiwari Ikiriko's *Oily Tears of the Delta* (1999), G.'Ebinyo Ogbowei's *Song of a Dying River* (2009) and *Marsh Boy and Other Poems* (2013), and Obari Gomba's *Pearls of the Mangrove* (1999) and *Canticle of a Broken Glass* (2009). But first, let us flesh out the study's conceptual framework.

2.0. The New Historicism and Literary Analysis

The New Historicism, as a critical tool in which literary interpretation and historical explanation converge, came into reckoning in the 1980s with the emergence of foremost practitioners like Stephen Greenblatt, Louis Montrose and Catherine Gallagher among others. The new interpretive method was first applied to the interpretation of Renaissance texts when Greenblatt in one of his books announced his "desire to speak with the dead" (*Shakespearean* 1). Since that declaration, the New Historicist method which started with the study of canonical

texts has since been applied to modern literary texts as well. It would seem that literary scholars are drawn to this mode of literary criticism because of its stated goal of bringing literature closer to its cultural-cum-historical underpinnings. Montrose makes this point quite clearly when he describes the new historicist practice as “a new sociohistorical criticism” (21), which attempts to reveal literary texts as “inscriptions of history” (24). Ultimately, the new historicist approach is “concern[ed] with the historicity of texts and the textuality of history” (20).

Montrose’s formulation, as other new historicists have demonstrated, are deeply influenced on the one hand by Michel Foucault’s idea that the discursive practices of society are usually made manifest in a society’s textual practices, and on the other hand by Jacques Derrida’s assertion that there is nothing outside the text. Consequently, new historicists believe that all modes of writing embed the social and are therefore culturally specific. In other words, according to new historicists, to access a society’s lived material existence would require turning to the textual traces of that society in order to come to terms with, not just the past but the present as well. In this regard, every text—literary and non-literary—is given equal consideration as none is privileged over the other. This is what underlies Gallagher’s description of the new historicist practice of “reading literary and non-literary texts as constituents of historical discourses” (37).

There is therefore a conscious attempt to avoid problematizing the relationship between literature and history as well as text and context. Montrose considers this a key aspect of new historicism compared to old historicism which uses historical data as background to illuminate literary texts (18). To frame it differently, new historicists view texts and the co-texts as expressions of the same historical “moment” and so interpret both with the same level of scrupulous scrutiny (Barry 174). Thus, in the analysis, literary and non-literary texts would be juxtaposed to demonstrate that the poems under study, together with the some non-literary texts, are discursive manifestations of a particular historical period in Nigeria with regard to the Niger Delta Question.

Greenblatt, foremost new historicist credited with originating the term “The New Historicism,” has in many ways demonstrated the reciprocal relationship between literary and non-literary texts as valuable resources in cultural criticism. And because of this notion, Greenblatt has since re-christened new historicism a poetics of culture, to reaffirm that new historicist practice is in the main an interpretation of culture. Let us quote Greenblatt in considerable length to shed more light on this critical procedure:

Literary criticism has a familiar set of terms for the relationship between a work of art and the historical events to

which it refers: we speak of allusion, symbolication, allegorization, representation, and above all mimesis. Each of these terms has a rich history and is virtually indispensable, and yet they all seem curiously inadequate. . . . And their inadequacy extends to aspects not only of contemporary culture but of culture of the past. We need to develop terms to describe the ways in which material—here official documents, private papers, newspaper clippings, and so forth—is transferred from one discursive sphere to another and becomes aesthetic property. It would . . . be a mistake to regard this process as uni-directional—from social discourse to aesthetic discourse . . . because the social is already charged with aesthetic energies. (“Towards” 11)

Montrose concurs:

In effect, this project re-orientes the axis of inter-textuality, substituting for the diachronic text of an autonomous literary history the synchronic text of a cultural system. As the conjunction of terms in its title suggests, the interests and analytical techniques of ‘Cultural Poetics’ are at once historicist and formalist; implicit in its project . . . is a conviction that formal and historical concerns are not opposed but rather are inseparable. (17)

In methodology therefore, Greenblatt and other new historicists adopt Clifford Geertz's thick description ethnography in the analysis of cultural forms, taking a cue from the latter's assertion that "culture is an assemblage of texts" and the idea that cultural forms are "imaginative works built out of social materials" (448, 449). For Geertz, "sorting out the structures of signification" in cultural forms like social events, behaviours, institutions, artefacts, and so forth is a key analytical technique in thick description ethnography (9); and, of particular attraction to new historicists is the close reading of cultural texts which Geertz says, draws "large conclusions from small, but very densely textured facts" (27). Greenblatt has referred to this as "ethnographic realism" because it provides glimpses of the real ("Touch" 28). Through the use of close reading method in ethnographic analysis, Geertz finds a common ground between anthropological research and literary criticism (9), which is why new historicists are convinced that cultural analysis is the bedrock of literary interpretation. Indeed, Greenblatt has stressed that the created worlds in literary texts are "beyond themselves," because such "texts have absorbed social values and contexts." The core principle in new historicist procedure then, is "an internal formal analysis of works of art," as opposed to an extrinsic analysis which maps a "rigid distinction between that which is within a text and that which lies outside" ("Culture"

227). Now, as already noted, the social feeds into the aesthetic and vice versa; hence, Greenblatt's formulation that, "the work of art is the product of a negotiation between a creator or a class of creators, equipped with a complex, communally shared repertoire of conventions, and the institutions and practices of society" ("Towards" 12). This point is critical to a new historicist literary analysis.

Besides close textual analysis associated with thick description ethnography, the use of the anecdote to deepen literary interpretation is another key new historicist technique adapted from Geertz, and to a lesser extent Eric Auerbach whose book, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, has short excerpts from canonical texts introducing various chapters. Joel Fineman has described the anecdote "as the smallest minimal unit of the historiographic fact" which (57), when deployed in literary analysis, gives the interpretation a "pointed, referential access to the real" (56), such that it "lets history happen" (62). The historicizing function of the anecdote is in sync with the desire of new historicists to add a sense of reality to literary analysis. In new historicism, stories really matter because—according to Jan R. Veenstra—they actualize the "referential realities" of a text (176).

In terms of focus, new historicists pursue related but slightly different objectives. Among new historicists, as we have

been discussing, there is a common understanding that literary texts are culturally constructed and influenced by social and/or ideological discourses and therefore manifest certain relations of power. Following Foucault's poststructuralist ideas, new historicists "trace the connections among texts, discourses, power, and the construction of subjectivity" (Gallagher 37). One of the key ideas popularized by Foucault is the notion that a society's discursive practices are a powerful mechanism for the enthrone, consolidation or destabilization of power (*Power* 93). However, while mainstream new historicist criticism influenced by the American Greenblatt focuses on bringing to light the mechanisms of power in suppressing parallel or marginal discourses, the cultural materialism variety inspired by Raymond Williams and championed by Gallagher goes a step further to privilege dissent and subversion. Consequently, though cultural materialism and new historicism are quite often discussed in the same breath, because of what Barry describes as "a considerable overlap between them" (186), the former's interest in subversive politics marks the key point of divergence—a difference described as "a contrast between political optimism and political pessimism" (185). The other important point is that the new historicist approach intersects with gender and postcolonial criticism respectively. On the first, a new historicist analysis is interested in how patriarchal

structures are constituted and maintained; while in the second, there is an attempt to critically examine the ideas behind colonialism and the attendant impact. As an examination of recent Nigerian poetry on the Niger Delta, the study examines the power relations between the centre and the region in the wake of crude-oil exploration in Nigeria. Of particular concern here is the evocation of the past as well as the focus on the present by the focal poets in discursively interrogating hegemonic power, and voicing the ethics of counter-violence and self-preservation.

3.0. Ikiriko, Ogbowei, Gomba: Poetics of Memory, Power, and Survival

Our focal poets have certain things in common: all three are from the Niger Delta; studied at the University of Port Harcourt at some point; and are considerably influenced by first generation Niger Delta/Nigerian poets like J. P. Clark-Bekederemo and Gabriel Okara. In thematic thrust and discursive focus, the writings of Ikiriko, Ogbowei and Gomba - in places - are in intertextual dialogue with poets of the first generation. For instance, while early poems like Clark-Bekederemo's "Night Rain" and Okara's "The Call of the River Nun," capture with nostalgia aspects of the rustic charm of the hitherto pristine and idyllic Niger Delta ecosphere, the same cannot be said of the depiction of the region in the works of contemporary poets. The

change is linked to the negative impact of the petroleum industry on the environment and the people. And it is in the contest of this that we can understand why the present generation of poets have had to engage in a critical assessment of the situation as it plays out in the present time vis-à-vis their own personal encounters and reading of Clark-Bekederemo and Okara. There is a sense in the writings of the poets under study that the crude-oil induced change poses an existential threat to the geocultural heritage of the Niger Delta. We can tell from the poeticization of the calamitous impact of the exploration activities of transnational oil conglomerates in the region that these poets - Ikiriko, Ogbowei and Gomba - are concerned about the indifference of the oil companies and their government backers to the stridentcries of the people to their plight. As people from the region, the poets feel something of the personal, given the immediacy of the problem on them as natives of that part of the country. This explains why their poems are figured as shuttling between past memories and present realities, to unravel what has gone wrong. This is a defining aspect of this new poetry with its focus on the Niger Delta.

Ikiriko, though with just one book of poetry to his name following his sudden demise, is seen as an inaugural voice of the post-Ojaide generation in the new school of poetry—a poetics of engagement charged with explosive politics that speaks directly

to the festering, unmitigated environmental, economic and political problems bedeviling the Niger Delta. His *Oily Tears of the Delta* for instance, is something of an agenda-setting collection replete with poems whose titles seem to have been taken out of what may be called the Niger Delta playbook: “Oily Rivers” (19), “Okara’s nun” (25-26), “Oloibiri” (30), “Delta Tears” (33-37), “Remembering Saro-Wiwa (39), “Ompadec” (45), “Under Pressure” (51), and “Odi” (63). These titles are revelatory of the region’s chequered history, evoking memories of martyred activists, victimized communities, hazardous living conditions, and ineffectual interventionist agencies among others. Beyond proclaiming his status as witness, Ikiriko’s attitude to the unfolding crisis is hinged on a three-pronged agenda, namely: bemoaning the situation of the ravaged environment, educating the people on the immanent dangers of crude-oil exploration in the region, and mobilizing the people for an inevitable confrontation with the perpetrators. This is the program of action Ikiriko espouses in “Delta Tears,” the longest poem in the collection. Sounding folkloric and speaking metaphorically to the people, the poet-persona says: “I bear heavy words to you from the spirits / Great burden I must now off-load” (Stanza 8, lines 1-2); and, he does “off-load” his message but not before revealing that he is speaking from personal experience which the refrain serves to reinforce: “I utter not what I hear with ears / But what I

see with eyes” (9, 1-2). The question therefore is what has he seen—what message does he bear? He tells the Niger Delta people about a fast-disappearing “. . . flora and fauna / Pale plains of sand and mud, burrowed and gaunt” (32, 1-2), testifying to the way things are “tossed up and down up and down / Like dogs do with filthy old rags” (33, 1-2). Ikiriko links the problem to the fact that “[t]he coated seascape smells / [of] Oil and tar and gas” (34, 1-2). It is, therefore, evident that the oil slicks plus related hazardous effluents discharged into the rivers in the wake of oil exploration are killing the Niger Delta slowly. This is the tragedy, hence Ikiriko’s prodding to all concerned to respond to the environmental carnage capable of causing the extinction of all life forms:

The mudflats destitute of mudskeepers,
Ubiquitous guards of the shores
witness it;

The sandflats bereft of children,
Sportive searchers of clams
bemoan it;

The mangrove floors fleeced of *akanga*,
Tide-keeper crab of the scape
proclaim it;

The creeks arid of tilapia tail clatter,

Festal sign of fish-fairs for the
Kingfisher relate it.
(37-48).

Crude-oil extraction has made the region, especially the countryside where the machinery of production is based, virtually uninhabitable so that the concerns go beyond anthropocentrism. Apparently, as the excerpt above reveals, the environment is losing its capacity to support and sustain the continued existence of fishes and other aquatic creatures. In a situation where—witness the image of death, “. . . fishes grope and gasp / For way and life, belly-up” (36, 1-2), Ikiriko’s proffered solution is confrontation with the enemy whom he has variously described as “poacher,” “profit-mongers,” and “predators,” which is why the poet-persona declares: “. . . it is time for / The furry pounce” (49, 1-2), to not only “. . . shame profit-mongers” (51.2) but also “. . . constrict, crush / And grind insatiate bones and all” (53, 1-2). Elsewhere, the painful transformation of the Niger Delta into something of a wasteland is captured most vividly in “Okara’s nun,” a poem in intertextual dialogue with Gabriel Okara’s “The Call of the River Nun” (*The Fisherman’s Invocation* 16-17). While Okara is euphoric in celebrating the beauty and splendor of the River Nun in all its magical trappings, in Ikiriko’s “Okara’s nun” the mood is somber and the tone laden with regret. The poem opens on an

allusive note, harking back to the river's glorious past: "Okara's / Silver-surfaced / Nun / Is no more" (1, 1-4) we are told. Here, the persona implies that the river is no longer clean and shiny, having lately become "Effluent-effete, sludge-silvered / It slop-lumbers to the sea / Rendering brackish / Zones barren / Like poisoned ditch-water" (12, 2-6).

The river as a source of life to the people of the region and therefore hugely symbolic cannot be overemphasized. The people's social, economic and spiritual life depends on and/or associated with rivers. Thus, anything that affects the natural state of the rivers of the Niger Delta constitutes a potential threat to the people. It is for this reason that the experience of having the region's topography crisscrossed by high pressure oil and gas pipelines and dotted with Christmas trees seriously hampers the regular flow of life. This is the imagery created in Ikiriko's "Under pressure" and, to a lesser extent Ogbowei's titular poem "song of a dying river" (*Song* 17). To better appreciate the concerns raised by Ikiriko, we would quote the five-stanza poem in full:

DANGER!
High pressure oil pipe line — keep off!
Don't anchor!

DEATH!
High tension gas pipe line — keep away!

No fishing!

WARNING!

High pressure pipes — keep away!

No berthing!

Tresspassers will be compressed.

Roasted.Melted.

O what a full tide of pressure

Brim they over our land and persons. (51)

Indeed, the poem clearly suggest that the people live under pressure, and negotiating the activities of everyday life is increasingly tricky as, wherever they turn, they are literally confronted by oil facilities which constrict life the way they had lived it in times past. Now, it seems death always lurks around the corner, reminiscent of Doctor Dagogo-Mark's assessment of the region as a dystopia, "a place for dying" in Helon Habila's novel *Oil on Water* (142-43). In Ikiriko's poem, the idea that life in the Niger Delta is precarious is brought home in the allusion implied in the fourth stanza regarding tragic deaths occasioned by contacts with pipelines. In his book, Darah gives a graphic account of one such incident which has become part of the discourse on the Niger Delta:

[A] pipeline fire holocaust occurred in Idjerhe (Jesse) area near Sapele in Delta State in October 1998. A burst portion of the Warri-Kaduna trunk-line

conveying refined products flooded farmlands near the community. There was an acute scarcity of petrol and kerosene at the time and hapless citizens besieged the site to fetch fuel. Like an atomic bomb blast, an explosion happened and an inferno engulfed the scene. Within a few days, about 1000 persons perished, the majority being women and children. (32)

To informed commentators like Nnimmo Bassey, “Jesse is important in the tragic history of the Niger Delta” (3).

Ogbowei—whose verses are bereft of punctuation marks and capitalization except for the mandatory apostrophe—in “song of a dying river,” the title poem of his fourth collection, also draws attention to the dangers posed by oil facilities like oil-wellheads which proliferate the landscape. While the poem’s title underscores the symbolism of the river as the region’s livewire, it also allegorically portrays the region as a place of death. The theme comes through in the imagery of “dolphins” and “cormorants,” here representing all life forms, gasping for breath against debilitating conditions:

two disoriented dolphins
squeezed out of our dying river
by a burning christmas tree
grown monstrous hot and bright

two cold cormorants

drowning in our oil-clad creek (2.7-10;
3.2-3)

In fact, Ogbowei's versification of the disastrous imprints of oil exploration in the Niger Delta is as poignant as Ikiriko's. In another poem "vultures" (41-42) from the same collection, Ogbowei, in the manner of Ikiriko, describes the region as "the sorrowing shore" (3.6), "the moaning marshland" (5.4), "[the] slick-spoilt shores" (5.5), and "the demonized delta" (6.5) where survival has become a matter of life-and-death. For instance, as we journey around the rivers with the persona, we see "a dead gull / a dead turtle / fish washed up shore" (4, 1-3) as well as witness "a motorboat strike / a maimed manatee" (4, 5-6). And then, in the poem "dancing cats" (35), Ogbowei moves from the general to the specific; here, the persona refers to polluted creeks and water ways in Amadi Ama and Bonny Town [host community of Nigeria's Liquefied Natural Gas Company] in Rivers State, a key oil-producing state in the Niger Delta. Referring to the hypocrisy, corruption and nonchalance characteristic of the oil industry, the persona reveals the inherent contradiction between oil extraction and environmental protection/preservation. In a tone laden with irony, the persona laments: "they seek a repertoire / fluid as profit multiplying effluent / snaking down amadi creek / fouls up bonny river / . . . a dazzling display of dreams drowned / buried in the mud" (3, 1-4;

7-8). That which is profit to the oil companies is a loss to the people of the Niger Delta; it is a skewed relationship that benefits the oil companies together with their government backers more. Let us turn to Michael Peel's illuminating book for some context:

In the Niger Delta, oil is even more of an overbearing force. It is there in the waterside signboards that remind fishermen and other creek users to watch out for underwater pipelines. It is there at the export terminals like Bonny Island, where the multinationals' squat cylindrical storage facilities sit alongside each other like outsize cans of tuna. Most strikingly, it is there in the oil slicks stifling the delicate mangrove habitat, and in the towering orange flares of waste gas that bathe large parts of this electricity-starved region in a ghastly night-time half-light. (27)

Ikiriko and Ogbowei are not the only poets crying out over the despoliation of the Niger Delta environment; Gomba is the other Nigerian poet whose voice is no less strident. In fact, in the poem "Elegy of the River" (9) from his 1999 collection *Pearls of the Mangrove* devoted to the Niger Delta Question, Gomba laments the changing fortunes of the region. Of course, the elegiac strain in the title is not lost on the reader as we move from one line to the other. Written in couplets, a forte of this poet, the poem opens on the far-reaching implications of the degraded Niger

Delta environment metaphorically represented by the river: “The long horn booms out the voice of the river / The dirge is a long horn beyond the banks” (1, 1-2). And, what is the threnody for? Here are the reasons:

The river wails the swirling fog
over the waters
And the nebulous gestation in the
guts of fractured days.

The river wails the branded-ones
without limbs
Who are acrobats on the steeples of
holy places.

The river wails the lost
housekeepers
Who let howling tramps to the
rooftops. (5-10)

In the above excerpt, the river is personified to underscore the gravity of the looming danger. The persona speaks of the difficulty, the uncertainty, the helplessness, and the incapacitation associated with life in the Niger Delta, following the invasion by oil conglomerates and their activities. The poem then, besides bemoaning the deteriorating environment, gives notice of sorts to the Niger Delta people that it is not only the environment that is at risk but the people as well. As the persona

puts it, “The horn is for the children caught in the cave of thorns / . . . warriors bereft of the amulets of light” (7, 1-2).

The environmental crisis in the Niger Delta has serious economic and political ramifications. Therefore, this has meant that the focal poets bring to the fore the political intricacies as well as economic realities that have helped to create and sustain the unfortunate situation in the first place. On this basis, some of the political poems by the poets read like a diagnosis of the multi-faceted problems facing the region. They begin with the idea that the Niger Delta is peopled by ethnic minorities, who find it hard to get their due through the democratic process. As pointed out earlier, the laws and policies that have dispossessed—and therefore disempowered the resource-rich minorities over time—of the resources in their land were mainly the handiwork of military dictatorship. And unfortunately for the minorities, those laws have remained firmly entrenched even in democratic dispensations. However much they try, the voice of the minority is often drowned by the voice of the majority, such that the struggle for equity remains untenable. This is the problem which constitutes the overarching theme encoded in Ikiriko’s “The minority man” (43) and two short poems by Ogbowei, namely, “a failed federation” (42) and “a gated country” (43) in the collection *the heedless ballot box*.

Witness how Ikiriko frames his argument on the constricted possibilities of Nigeria's ethnic minorities, particularly those of the Niger Delta:

Minor Minority Man
Impotent in bedrooms
Bound to fewness
Manacled by the tyranny of numbers
Out-numbered and outmanoeuvred.

Mini Minor Minority Man
Impotent in boardrooms
Having neither say nor way
Marginal in things.

Easily moved like a decimal point
Insignificant in equations
Without factor, without connection,
weightless. (8-19)

And for Ogbowei, the 20 November, 1999 massacre in the town of Odi in Bayelsa State by the Obasanjo administration, serves to further reinforce the feeling of marginalization by the Niger Delta people. This is because, according to the speaking voice in the poem "a failed federation": "odi's the sector / that killed our faith / in a failed federation / where contentious constituents / disdainful of minorities / mired in the maligned marshland / hurry south spreading / the language of hell" (1-8). Ogbowei is not done; in the next poem "a gated country," he lampoons the

disharmonies among Nigeria's tribal/ethnic nationalities that work against the interest of the minorities. The persona tells us:

ours is a gated country
dissolving its rich tapestry of tribes
into a patchwork of disconnected
nationalities

paranoid majorities
cacophonous in sitting rooms and
bedrooms
exile to boys quarters
fractious minorities
too weak to call out
bullies barricaded
in boardrooms and treasure houses
(1-10)

The reference to Odi in Ogbowei's "a failed federation" is a concrete instantiation of how the insensitivity of the federal government helps to stoke up anger in the region. All three poets have a poem or two devoted to highlighting the tragic massacre at Odi. Ikiriko's "Odi" (63-64), Ogbowei's "hero's day" (*heedless* 69-70), Gomba's "We Shall Look the Hunter in the Eyes" (*Canticle* 63-76) in various ways, not only bemoan the sad fate of Odi but also prefigure the present militancy and militarization in the region. Reading the poems, we realize that the government's use of force to maintain its stranglehold on the region and ensure the continued expropriation of oil resources is the single most important harbinger of armed conflict in the

Niger Delta. It is no wonder then that a pattern is already emerging of what is clearly a poetics of resistance. It is observed that these poets, evoking the sad memories of those communities and places that have suffered the most in the on-going struggle for equity and justice—Umuechem, Ogoni, Odi—present personas that are revolutionary and determined to confront the enemy. In this instance, the enemy is the government represented by the forces of coercion. This poetry then echoes the region's social and political history such that, as Oyeniyi Okunoye has said it is a unique poetry that blends “a sense of history with an awareness of the human condition” (14). Thus, drawing from the people's history and experience, the poets seem to suggest that for the Niger Delta to break the circle of criminal neglect, underdevelopment and dispossession, armed struggle is the inevitable option. It is an option informed by the tragedies of Isaac Boro and Saro-Wiwa, particularly the latter whose peaceful activism was met with violent death through juridical hanging. These are the ideas which suffuse Gomba's Niger Delta poems like: “We Shall Look the Hunter in the Eyes” (*Canticle* 63-76), “In the Face of a Gun” and “Journal of a Militant” (*Pearls* 16-17; 25-47).

In the first part of “We Shall Look the Hunter in the Face,” Gomba, speaking through the persona, evokes memories of past sufferings and tragedies from Kaiama and Umuechem

through Ogoni and Jesse to Odi, and urges the Niger Delta people to fight back. The opening stanzas read in part:

Let this song reach forth to Kaiama
Where Boro has started a fire

Let this song reach out to
Umuechem
A decimal-point in the freedom-count

Let this song reach forth to Ogoni
Saro-Wiwa's blood has sealed a
testament

Let this song reach out to Jesse
The Inferno cannot kill the song

Let this song reach forth to Odi
The sun does not die
[...]
This land is ours
The waters are ours

And we shall look the hunters
In the eyes

UNTIL THEY RUN
UNTIL THEY RUN (65)

According to the persona, "The bees of memory sting us on the waters / . . . Sting us on the land" (31, 1-2; 32.2) and therefore, ". . . we cannot / Forget our land" (36, 1-2). As for those laws which deny the people of their rights and heritage, disobedience is advocated in the rhetorical question: "Why should we obey

any law / That promotes the plunder of our land?" (61, 1-2). Ultimately, rather than suffer and die in silence and inaction, the persona encourages the people to fight back, because it is, "Better to die in war / Than to die on our knees" (84, 1-2); or, better still, "Better is freedom in death / Than a life of slavery" (85, 1-2). It is indeed no surprise that Gomba invests his persona with such militant, if revolutionary spirit. The poet himself has as much revealed the revolutionary tenor in his poetry in a 2013 interview. This is what Gomba had to say:

I believe it is right for us to keep asking questions. It is a matter of life and death. The oil industry is killing us. Soldiers kill us when we protest. Oil thieves and explorers destroy communities with fire. Fauna and flora are dying off. Aquatic life is destroyed. The entire ecosystem is a disaster. Traditional means of livelihood have eroded. Crime is on the rise. Strange diseases have come upon us. There are no modern facilities to mitigate the effects of industrial nihilism. Poverty is rife. . . . Governance is a charade [. . .] even a band of circus clowns would have been better. . . . If the least I can do is to write the Poetry of Redress, I will write it. ("Interview")

Apparently, the resolve is backed by action as we witness the poet-persona in "In the Face of a Gun" (*Pearls* 16-17), haunted by the nightmarish memories of "The bloodfields in Gbaramatu. . ." (1.1), he tells us: "Last night, I bought a gun / on

the bank of a river” (7, 1-2), not just for self-defence but more importantly to fight the enemy. This is borne out of the knowledge that “when up against a foe / that loves the gun / the first thing to find / is a GUN” (31-34). The foregoing lines obviously echo the Fanonian dictum that counter-violence is the ultimate strategy to check acts of violence. In “Journal of a Militant” (25-47), Gomba has come full circle in his support for armed confrontation. Written in six movements, the poem explores the workings of the mind of the militant, on a typical day in the camp “[i]n the middle of nowhere” (32). Holed up with a band of agitators in “Crocodile Camp,” the militant lets us in on the planning and successful execution of a counter offensive against the military. And the militant boasts, “We take death to them / We now know the song of the gun / We take death to oil-thieves” (40). The bravura of the militants to stand up to the military, in the persona’s reckoning, forces the government to opt for a negotiated settlement through an offer of amnesty to the militants. But the agitators consider amnesty a ploy to lull them into submission; for he asks: “What beasts lurk / In the shadow of peacetalks?” (43). There is doubt that real peace is attainable. The big question according to the persona is: “Will there truly be no more cause for arms / And trenches in the days ahead / In a country of shopworm politics?” (43). It seems unlikely and therefore, the persona counsels that amnesty or not,

the people of the Niger Delta should be on their guard. He says: “. . . woe to all who fall asleep / In a country fathered by a gun” (47).

It is perhaps no exaggeration to suggest that these poets do not envisage an end to the circle of violence coming out of the region. If anything, there is a sense that the Niger Delta crisis will result in the disintegration of Nigeria. Of the three poets under consideration, Ogbowei is possibly the most pessimistic in his prophetic projections. With the militants digging in and resolved to defend their land and heritage through arms, Ogbowei thinks Nigeria is on the brink of collapse. In 2014, after the publication of his fifth collection *marsh boy and other poems*, Ogbowei tells an interviewer:

[M]ine is poetry that embodies the dreams of our people for freedom and a happy life; poetry that demonstrates to the people of the Niger Delta that they would gain their freedom not through endless appeals for compassion . . . but through a bloody struggle. And we are, indeed, at the threshold of a full blown civil war. This is the truth my poetry reveals. (“On Empires”)

In fact, Ogbowei sees Nigeria as an “empire of greed” that has sown “the seeds of its [own] destruction” especially in the handling of the Niger Delta Question, which is why the revolutionary temper in his poetry serves to forewarn his

“compatriots of the dangers ahead, of the fast approaching storm that may splinter and sink our ship of state.” The warning is encoded in poems like “fear is put to flight” (*heedless* 57), in which the persona refers to the Niger Delta as “a pillaged province / pushed into rebellion” (4, 1-2); “curving winds of hate” (*song* 26-27), where we witness “a raging tornado / shreds the testy city / curving winds of hate / tear the gloom / off starving shanties / down nepa [National Electric Power Authority] cables / fuse for petrol bombs” (4, 1-7); and in “avoid them” (*marsh* 42), Nigeria, the metaphoric “. . . city by the sea is broken / the city of strife is taken / in her midst groaning and grieving” (6, 1-3). These poems, individually and collectively speak to the cataclysmic upheaval and impending doom that Nigeria is gradually slipping into, if issues concerning the Niger Delta are not properly addressed. Indeed, the titular poem in the last collection actually pulsates with anger, intrigues and the ousting of the only Nigerian government headed by a minority from the Niger Delta. Though the poem predicts a violent ouster, however the fact that Goodluck Jonathan was ease out of office through the ballot box speaks to Ogbowei’s uncanny ability to prophesy about Nigeria’s fate and demonstrate the link between literature and society. In the poem, Ogbowei, in extended allusions, likens the emergence of a Southern minority as Nigeria’s President to Flavius Stilicho’s bonds of loyalty

expressed through marriage to the Roman Emperor Theodosius I. It is a metaphor that describes the relationship between the Niger Delta and Nigeria, a relationship of convenience that is bound to fail. Here is how the persona states it:

angry waves pummelling the mutinous marshes
serena securing his loyalty
stilicho shall serve the emperor
strongman from the servile south
he'll hold together the torn realm (marsh 22-23)

However, before long, “. . . out of friendly places intrigues / out of shadowy hills and baking sands / vengeful cutlasses and foxy axes / hack off the grabbing hands of a dying dominion” (9, 3-6). A close reading of the poem clearly suggests that nothing will pacify the Niger Delta or assuage the desire of the people for freedom, except the twin ideals of equity and justice are attained.

4.0. Conclusion

Our reading of the poetry of Ikiriko, Ogbowei and Gomba has shown that the new Nigerian poetry which addresses the Niger Delta Question is mainly produced by writers from the region. And because of their proximity to the events and an understanding of the twists and turns of the struggle as well as the movement of history, the poems analyzed, in the main, versify the troubled relationship between the people of the region and the government at the centre in terms of the obnoxious laws

that dispossess oil-bearing communities of their natural resources; marginalization and alienation of the region resulting in poverty, anger, agitation and armed struggle; the militarization of the region by the government to counter militancy; and the seeming escalation of violence and gradual descent into anarchy and disintegration. Though Ikiriko had as much predicted the rise of militant agitation while he was alive, it is the duo of Ogbowei and Gomba who have picked up the gauntlet to memorably poeticize the goings-on in the Niger Delta. It needs noting that the poetry of Ogbowei and Gomba are probably the most revolutionary in tenor and thematic projection. From the perspective of new historicism, we can tell that the poems analyzed form aspects of discursive manifestations on the Niger Delta. For some time to come there is no doubt that the region will continue to supply material for compelling literature.

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