


# Versifying History and National Trauma in Tanure Ojaide's *The Endless Song*

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## Abstract

The symbiotic relationship between literature and history is most visible in the writer's deployment of his or her art to document experiences of the past and their impacts on the feelings and well-being of his or her people in the periods represented in the work(s). This article explores the historical content and significance of Tanure Ojaide's *The Endless Song* from a new historical perspective. Most studies on Ojaide's poetry often focus on his critique of bad leadership and his denunciation of exploitation and pillaging of Nigeria's Niger Delta region with little attention paid to his poems as history in verse form. This article therefore contributes to criticism on the interface between literature and history. This study further highlights significant motifs in Nigeria's history in the periods documented in *The Endless Song* and analyses the traumatic impacts of the events on the well-being of Nigeria and her people. These are aimed at showing that Ojaide's *The Endless Song* is more than an outcry against the plundering of the Niger Delta region; it represents the spatiotemporal record of Nigeria's turbulent history.

## Keywords

Tanure Ojaide, Nigerian poetry, history, national trauma, literary criticism

## Introduction

In contemporary criticism on Nigerian literature, Ojaide is often categorized as a Niger Delta poet and activist in the mold of Ken Saro-Wiwa,<sup>1</sup> and his poetry nearly always appraised from the perspective of his advocacy for the Niger Delta struggle and social reforms in society at large. Consequently, critics have praised his vocalization of the tension engendered by the exploitation and neglect of his immediate Niger Delta community and commended his poetry for its capacity to gauge the pulse of the region and that of Nigerians altogether. However, this overconcentration on his poetry's censure of social ills and political rascality on the part of Nigeria's leaders has resulted in neglect of a bigger and more vital achievement: his use of verse to document the turbulence of Nigeria's sociopolitical history since the country's political independence. In other words, many of these researches have barely explored the connections between literature, history and society which have been expounded by many scholars as interconnected academic endeavours from classical times to the present (see Onwuka, 2010 for detailed discourse on links between literature, history and society). Thus, this article advances the view that Ojaide is a historical poet whose works, using the example of his poetry collection, *The Endless Song* (Ojaide, 1989), capture succinctly Nigeria's sociopolitical and cultural history and the national trauma it has engendered. This is an aspect

of his art that has received at best tangential attention from critics. Ojaide chronicles historical events in his poems to interrogate and reinterpret their significance for the well-being of Nigerian society. This could explain his deliberate elevation of the historical over the esthetic in many of his poems. This article therefore highlights this facet of his poetics in *The Endless Song* to demonstrate that his poetry is relevant to Nigerian society for not only its esthetic value but also fundamentally its historical contents. Thus, one of the most important conclusions we draw in this study is that *The Endless Song* is a historical document in verse form.

*Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* defines history as "all the things that happened in the past, especially the political, social or economic development of a nation." It is also defined as "acts, ideas, or events that will or can shape the course of the future" (Dictionary.com). The term is used in this article in a slightly broader sense to mean past sociopolitical, economic, and cultural events in Nigeria and the reactions they elicited from Nigerians during and after the events. Trauma, on the contrary, is a more complex concept

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as its definitions range, according to *Dictionary.com*, from the field of pathology as “body wound or shock produced by sudden physical injury,” to psychiatry as “experience that produces psychological injury or pain.” Its use in this study is closer to the meaning indicated in the latter. However, Humphrey (2012) explication of the notion contextualizes most effectively the sense in which it is deployed in this study. First, he states that “trauma relates to the experience of violence [which] can quickly shift from being an existential experience to an identity, to victimhood [as] people are made conscious of their victimhood through identification with other victims” (p. 39). Then taking the concept beyond its medical and psychological scopes, he extends it to the sociological and semiotic terrains declaring that

Trauma is no longer simply a medical condition recognized by professionals and clinicians but an expression of our humanity, able to be recognized by the public. The victim is seen to embody our humanity. . . . The traumatic event becomes culturally emblematic as collective memory, framing what values are important and what is politically and morally at stake. (p. 39)

Deploying the perspectives in the foregoing to the literary domain, we project “National trauma” in this study as all forms of physical torture, mental anguish, or psychological agony or any form of suffering borne by Nigerians as a result of unpleasant politically motivated events in the country in the periods explored in the poems. “Versifying history and national trauma” means, therefore, the recording of Nigeria’s history and the suffering of Nigerians in poetry.

Tanure Ojaide’s poetry has been studied from several perspectives. A major area frequently explored is its concern for the Niger Delta environment and the ecosystem (studies by Sallah, 1995; Ojaruega, 2014; Akingbe, 2014; Aito, 2014; Sadek, 2013; Alu, 2012; Okon, 2013; Nwagbara, 2010a; and Bodunde, 2002, are examples). These discourses explore Ojaide’s reactions to the despoliation of the Niger Delta fauna and flora by multinational companies exploiting the huge oil reserves in the area. The poems are studied as resistance poetics and the object of analyses in them are their protest content. Little attention directed at the poems as records of Nigeria’s history and the peoples’ suffering in the periods captured in them in these efforts is grossly inadequate. Akingbe (2014) comes close to addressing this aspect when he draws a parallel between indigenous precolonial exploiters of the Niger Delta people and their postcolonial successors. His observation that Ojaide’s *The Endless Song* portrays the poet as “a communal raconteur who is abreast of the social and political happenings of his society” (p. 4) is a tacit acknowledgment of the historical ingredient in his poetry; however, he does not explore that aspect further to focus on his primary concern of analyzing dispossession in the poems.

A second major area of Ojaide’s poetry is its concern for the social and living conditions of Nigerians which validates Achebe (2012) argument that “it is impossible to write about

anything in Africa without some kind of commitment, some kind of message, [and] some kind of protest” (p. 58). Thus, Ojaide’s critique of decadent sociopolitical conditions, leadership crises, corruption, social reforms, dispossession of the masses, and poverty-related issues in Nigeria have been a very active area of scholarship (studies by Bassey, 2011; Okuyade, 2012; Eke 2011; and Besong, 2005, are good examples). The poet’s roles as watchdog of societal values and defender of the masses are the focus of these studies, not his documentation of history and suffering. Bassey’s (2011) study of *The Endless Song*, for example, is a discourse on politics, the abuse of power, and exploitation. His observation that the volume “bristles with indignation at the ineptitude and selfishness of the political leaders . . . [and] therefore one finds that the poet-persona shows political consciousness as a revolutionary, a teacher, and a prophet/seer” (pp. 171-173), reveals the main thrust of his study.

A third area of Ojaide’s poetry that has elicited serious interest is his deployment of the oral culture from the Urhobo folklore and customs, especially the Udje songs and culture in his works (examples include studies by Olafoye, 2000; Ojaruega, 2015; Okuyade, 2012; and Bodunde, 2001). These studies explore the poet’s use of the myths and legends of the Urhobo and their pantheon of gods and heroes. They do not analyze Ojaide’s poems as vehicles of preserving history; rather, they seek in the folklores answers to existential problems confronting man in society. Myths, legends, and archetypes in Urhobo folklore are searched out and analyzed to find answers to inexplicable realities, such as modern man’s tendency to commit great evil against society and the ecosystem. Parallels are often drawn in these studies between mythical and legendary personages such as “Ogidigbo,” ‘Aminogbe,’ “Arhwaran,” and “Ogiso” and postcolonial Nigerian leaders at local and national levels. The objective of such studies is either to explicate the themes in the poems and draw connections between them and the present state of affairs in the country; or to investigate how the oral culture (such as folk songs, idioms, and nuances of the Urhobo language and culture) influences structure, texture, or language in Ojaide’s poetry.

Notions of home, exile, cultural identity, postcoloniality, migration, and globalization all constitute a fourth area of Ojaide’s poetry frequently explored by scholars (examples include Sadek, 2013; Nwagbara, 2010b; Shija, 2009; and Olaoluwa, 2007). These studies focus on the constructions of exile and migration and images of frustration, alienation, and home in Ojaide’s works. They explore in the poems harrowing experiences of the exiles in foreign lands who after escaping tough sociopolitical conditions at home become victims of exploitation struggling to survive under the double yoke of poverty and denial of rights. In summation, the examination of Ojaide’s poetry in *The Endless Song* as history in verse form has barely been explored. This is the gap that this study aims to fill to show that the poems in the collection are bearers of history for posterity.

## New Historicism

The new historical theoretical perspective is deployed in this discourse. Stephen Greenblatt, one of its chief advocates, describes it as a textual practice or method tilted toward “a more cultural or anthropological criticism [similar to] interpretative studies of culture” by a number of culture scholars which include Clifford Geertz, Jean Duvignaud, Victor Turner, and Mary Douglas, among others (Greenblatt, 1980, p. 4). He designates it a critical approach that is “conscious of its own status as interpretation and intent upon understanding literature as a part of the system of signs that constitutes a given culture; its proper goal [being the attainment of] *a poetics of culture*” (Greenblatt, 1980, pp. 4-5). He explains further elsewhere that New Historicism is “a shift from a criticism centred on ‘verbal icons’ toward a criticism centred on cultural artifacts” (Greenblatt, 1990, p. 3). Significantly influenced by the works of Michel Foucault, New Historicism is eclectic in approach as it borrows a lot from other literary theories before it. Weimann (1977) explains that the critical approach is diverse because it is “fragmentary, spontaneous, and unstable because none of [the] contributions to it has developed a comprehensive consciousness, let alone a methodology, of the full correlative connections between literature and history” (p. 263). The textual practice of New Historicism is popular among critics of Romanticism such as Jerome McGann, Marjorie Levinson, Marilyn Butler, and David Simpson, and critics of Renaissance Studies like Stephen Greenblatt, Jonathan Goldberg, and Louis Montrose, among others (Rice & Waugh, 1992, p. 259). However, it is the perspective of Jerome McGann (1988) that is deployed in this article. Though he notes that

Poetry and poems are . . . trans-historical, [and] acquire this perpetuity by virtue of the particular historical adventures which their texts undergo from their first appearance before their author’s eyes through all their subsequent constitutions; [he states that] New historical criticism tries to define what is most peculiar and distinctive in specific poetical works, [and] in specifying these unique features and sets of relationships, it transcends the concept of the-poem-as-verbal-object to reveal the poem as a special sort of communication event. (p. 131)

*The Endless Song* is viewed in this article as a poetry collection that is more than a verbal object that the poet deploys to protest against the state of affairs in Nigeria; it is a cocktail of various human experiences which constitute historical moments etched in rhyme and the poet’s interpretation of the events. The implication of this for this study is that the question of objectivity on the part of the poet does not arise as the New Historical critic regards all histories as subjective narratives influenced by circumstances of the period including writers’ ideologies and

cultural prejudices. We read Ojaide’s poems as his reaction to the power structures in society in the past which are considered significant areas of literary discourses in new historical studies.

## Reflections of History and Trauma on Poetic Canvas in *The Endless Song*

*The Endless Song* is structured into five parts labeled in line with the concerns the poet explores in each. Part 1 sets the template for the poet’s mission to confront societal challenges. It presents the reader with the poet’s preparations for the task he sets up for himself. In Part 2—*Looking Out*—he surveys and weighs the challenges ahead; and in Part 3 called *The Encounter*, he engages the challenges. Part 4—*Lessons*—is an assessment of the situation after he has appraised the sociopolitical and historical conditions in Nigeria, and Part 5—*Clearing*—highlights the lessons to be learnt and draws analogies between the present and the past to chart a more auspicious path for the future.

### Part I: The Proclamation

In the poem, “Endless Song,” which opens the volume, Ojaide proclaims his manifesto. Although the poem appears personal and innocuous, it presents a chaotic society where fear and insecurity thrive and the artist is forced to leave his comfort zone to assume his roles of watchman and conscience of society. There is a subdued sense of trepidation in the poet’s tone, even though he appears to celebrate his craft and his dogged determination to succeed against great odds. The aspect of national life documented in this poem is the insecurity that pervaded the country in the late 1980s, especially under the military dispensation of Ibrahim Babangida.<sup>2</sup> It was a period when the military junta went to great pains to create a facade of well-being and happiness among the people with many inauspicious projects aimed at placating a deeply depressed populace drifting around in political limbo and difficult living conditions (examples of such projects include creations of the “Peoples Bank of Nigeria,” to provide loans to poor Nigerians; and the “Better Life for Rural Women” program purportedly aimed at improving the living conditions of Nigerian women residing in rural areas). It was the tension engendered by the regime that made the poet restless enough to realize that the time is ripe to engage with the oppressive forces in society. He rises and becomes a wanderer “on the long, long road through frontiers. / Like the boa entering the stream / to journey to the sea, / or the cat, vexed with domesticity, / breaking into the bush . . .” when it became unbearable to remain silent (“Endless Song,” lines 13-17). The poet’s mood reflects the palpable tension resulting from the political uncertainties of that period, etching on his poetic canvas the insecurity of the era and the people’s struggles and pains while it lasted.

## Part 2: Looking Out

In “The Vision” which opens the second part of the volume, Ojaide directs his criticism at African tyrants and prophesizes on the present and future of Nigeria. Written on the period of military regimes in Africa (such as those of Ibrahim Babangida in Nigeria, Blaise Compaore in Burkina Faso, Muammar Gaddafi in Libya, and Mobutu Sese Seko in Zaire), the poem indicts the leadership of the day in Nigeria as “the leopard that haunts us” (“The Vision,” line 1). Ojaide warns that history has shown that time brings down political tyrants just as he condemns the brutality of African leaders who procure foreign loans to stockpile weapons and arms to silence those clamoring for social reforms. He further criticizes African leaders engaged in senseless and endless civil wars to hold on to power. Subsequently, he proclaims the downfall of despots holding Nigeria hostage and advocates that the people should be mentally and morally alert, avoiding destructive habits like drunkenness so that they can confront their political oppressors when they least expect it. The valiant among the people therefore—like the poets—should act as vigilant “hunter[s]” in search of game and strike at villainous leaders to restore the rule of law and respect for human dignity. The poem ends on a prophetic note that “the leopard that haunts us . . . / . . . will surely die, the ambush taut” (“The Vision,” lines 23-24). Hope is the central message in “The Vision,” a conviction that Nigeria is greater than her oppressors and would eventually turn out better in spite of the suffering of the period. These events are woven into the poetic canvas of *The Endless Song* to inform and guide the present and future generations of Nigerians on what happened in the past and what needs to be done to survive the hardships caused by selfish leaders in power. More importantly, that these events are graphically reflected in the poem elevates its value to society because great poetry has often proven to be a window to view historical events or at worse, a reliable complement to other historical documents. We posit therefore that Ojaide’s poetry fairly compares to Homer’s *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* and Shakespeare’s plays that are widely accepted as sources of sociocultural histories of classical Greece and Elizabethan England, respectively.

“We Keep Watch Over Them” versifies the endless trauma of Nigerians under insensitive leaders since they gained independence from Britain. The poet celebrates the people whose patience has held out despite the suffering, hunger, and misery brought upon them by leaders who have failed them up to the period in which he writes. From “the scaffold of pain,” “the precipice of misery,” “the exposed post of lowliness,” and “the slums of existence,” the deprived and exploited people looked up to their oppressors, the political, economic, religious, and psychological tyrants who lorded it over them, waiting for salvation to come from them to no avail. Ojaide argues in this poem that memory is an antidote to oppression and bondage because the people will always remember their oppressors of yesteryear who they have

outlived. These were leaders of a past so distressing that presently the psyche of the common man that endured it all has become immune to intimidations, threats, or pain. It is the realization that memory/history could heal or offer some therapeutic relief from the agony of living that Ojaide celebrates in documenting the period of deprivation and its attendant suffering for posterity. Assuming the persona of the oppressed, the poet declares the people’s defiance:

There’s metal in our will, it shows

when we meet hardship—

we do not break down before torturers,

we do not surrender our hope to robbers,

we do not groan despite the daily stabs of hunger,

we do not give in to those who live on the blood

of the poor or the sweat of the strong. (“We Keep Watch Over Them,” lines 19-25)

Ojaide’s concerns for the masses are most pronounced in this poem as he highlights issues of suffering, oppression, and endurance in words like “groan,” “hunger,” and “sweat” and the determination of Nigerians to survive against overwhelming odds in words like “metal” and “will.” The people’s willpower is celebrated and documented in the poem. Coming from a past full of bitterness and vexing experiences, oppressed Nigerians are well equipped to survive deprivation and want, especially as the poet assures that the people would definitely see the last days of their oppressors. He decrees their inevitable demise and declares that the people should eagerly await the event well ahead of time. The historical content of this poem is a balm for the ailing hopes of Nigerian youth gradually losing faith in the idea of nationhood. The awareness that similar evil days had been in the past and people had survived them could be potent tonic to will them to endure further in their hardships. Documenting these sociopolitical realities of past years in his poems such as this makes Ojaide’s poetry a purveyor of history.

“The Uncovered Grave” documents the inordinate ambitions of many a Nigerian politician to grab power at any cost and the bloodshed that has been unleashed on the nation in the past. Ojaide uses the analogy of succession struggles among princes in ancient kingdoms even while the reigning kings lived to explore the unhealthy desires of political rivals to take over governments from incumbents. The uncertainty of the future for both incumbents and their prospective successors is worsened by the frequent political massacres in Africa, especially by the military determined to rule the continent no matter what it costs in human and material resources.<sup>3</sup> “The Uncovered Grave” is therefore a permanent

indictment of Nigerian political elite's unbridled desire for power with the complicity of the military. Consequently, in a manner reminiscent of Christopher Okigbo's warning to successors to a fallen government in *Path of Thunder* (1971), Ojaide cautions that

He wins, who survives the savagery

in victory let him not forget

to cleanse blood from his cloak

before sitting on the throne.

There, blood seeks blood. ("The Uncovered Grave," lines 13-17)

The record of these events in Ojaide's poetry is not for their aesthetic value; rather, it is their historical relevance that makes them a subject matter of the poet's interest and by extension, his conviction that etching the dastardly acts on poetic canvas would keep their memory in the consciousness of Nigerians so they do not forget the heinous crimes their leaders have committed in the past.

"For My Love" chronicles Nigeria's inability to progress like other nations that have achieved great developmental strides within a short time. Ojaide recalls the Bastille mob that ignited the French Revolution and Fidel Castro who led the Cuban Revolution and wonders why the miracles that worked for France and Cuba have not manifested in Nigeria. To him, Nigeria seems to be permanently submerged in economic woes and the only thing that gives us hope is the promises of aid from international organizations like the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF), or richer nations like France, the United States, and United Kingdom. Ojaide reflects on this sorry situation in the line "we grow stronger with the news of rain from afar" ("For My Love," line 8). More disheartening is that Nigerians seem not to learn from the mistakes of the past—that is, periods when "our spendthrift lives" were explained away by our destructive leaders with "excuses and affidavits." The poem ends with the poet castigating leaders who impede human freedom and abuse the goodwill of the people while in power. Themes of mismanagement, wastage of resources, misery, and hopelessness are highlighted in the poem for posterity to know what tendencies defined Nigeria's leaders from the immediate postindependence years to the period in which he documented the events.

"Beyond This Day" dwells on the motif of national trauma; however, the poet appears to extend the blame of Nigeria's condition on the people of the country themselves. To him, our national desires often lead us from one blunder to another. The poem opens on an accusatory note: "O the shadows of the tyrant we raise in our blood / jostle us in daily walks out of our senses" ("Beyond This Day," lines 1-2). It documents the consequences of our disastrous decisions in

the past, choices that make Nigerians vulnerable to corrupt opportunists who subject them to suffering and deprivation from which they often find very difficult to extricate themselves. Ojaide describes our despondent disposition as "the orphaned hope of a failed struggle" because we spend all our time and effort talking without taking any concrete action as Ola Rotimi dramatized in his famous play, *Holding Talks* (1979). In addition to the hopelessness carried over from "For My Love," "Beyond This Day" adds helplessness to the psychological burden of Nigerians. A close reading of this poem clearly shows that entertainment is not the concern of the poet; rather, his interest is to record the hardships that have been the lot of Nigerians to guide future generations to avoid the laxity of the people in a regrettable past that left them unbearably impoverished.

### Part 3: The Encounter

"In the Beginning" opens the third section of the volume with a deep sense of nostalgia for the years of plenty in Nigeria. It is a poem where art aligns with history to educate society for posterity. For instance, many Nigerian youth born from the 1990s might not know that there had been a period of plenty in Nigeria, especially with the endemic economic hardship that seems to worsen each year. Even for some older people, the period is gradually becoming a distant memory they can hardly remember. Ojaide records and bemoans the mismanagement and wastage of resources in the past and the failure to translate Nigeria's fortuitous wealth into a more enduring legacy that could have sustained it until now. Pensively, he recalls that

In the beginning

the land bloomed with bounties, so much

to make a contented heritage:

rivers to swim in a drought-prone world,

a landmass of comfort to our number,

forests to provide our daily needs. ("In the Beginning," lines 1-6)

Nothing, it appears, was lacking in Nigeria then. Ojaide's intent is not to present an idyllic past of the precolonial, colonial, and immediate postcolonial eras; rather, he merely wonders in perplexity how it is that Nigerians presently live in near-penury just a few years after they basked in so much wealth, living in the most promising postcolonial country in Africa. He advances three reasons for Nigeria's present predicament. First, the population became too large and the country too famous in the international community for her own good. To him, "the land of our birth wounded us with its

size, / the forests haunted our lives with demons; /we trampled upon each other in assemblies / and our height blinded us to the earth” (“In the Beginning,” lines 13-16). A second factor was that Nigerians became too complacent in their newfound oil wealth and stopped working. With easy life came reckless living as Nigerians indulged in much partying and unending celebrations with no thought for the future. The poet denounces that lifestyle that degenerated into negligence of the earth, the source of life’s sustenance: “. . . our heights blinded us to the earth / we ought to libate with sweat” (“In the Beginning,” lines 16-17). Pride is the third factor identified by the poet. He asserts that Nigerians became so filled with national pride that they turned a blind eye to the possibility of a bleak future. Worse still, stubbornness blinded Nigeria’s political leaders from doing the right things when they mattered most—Their failure to act has led to the country’s current plight. Ojaide’s indictment of Nigeria’s past leaders in this poem is a warning that an imprudent leader is a menace to society and should be resisted to secure the nation’s future. Such leaders failed the Nigerian people when foresight and common sense required that they act differently. Ironically, many of these past leaders responsible for the nation’s present predicament are still in positions of power, proclaiming themselves Messiahs that can take Nigeria to greatness, believing the people have forgotten their role in bringing everybody in the country to where they are today. The relevance of recording a nation’s history in its literature is therefore validated by the fact that this poem is an exposé of Nigeria’s past, and we argue that its documentary and educational significance outweighs its aesthetic aspect.

“Superstitions!” explores motifs of mismanagement, suffering, pain, misery, and other negative consequences of wastage of national resources. Addressing the root causes of Nigeria’s economic challenges today, Ojaide expresses his belief that the dire economic straits where the country finds itself have made the citizens very superstitious. This satiric poem goes beyond mere protest and criticism against past political leaders to indict the citizenry for the sorry state of the polity. Using the traditional African motif of gods visiting hardships on communities that defy them or commit sacrilege in their shrines, the poet deftly deploys the refrain “must have touched forbidden things” throughout the poem to explain the nation’s predicament. To him, someone

Must have touched forbidden things:

stolen offerings from the community god’s shrine,

taken alone what should be shared with others

or given out, [and] applauded roguery. (“Superstitions,” lines 1-4)

This indictment of past leaders is not peculiar to this poem; it is a popular theme in many works exploring postcolonial

leadership in Africa. What is different about these particular leaders, as Ojaide documents here, is their looting of the national treasury which is likened to stealing from the gods, the worst kind of treachery possible in precolonial Africa. More worrisome is that the citizenry have nobody to turn to for redress, because unlike the past when they could invoke their ancestors who had lived and died with their integrity intact, things have changed for worse. The poet laments that in the present generation, “there are only a few ancestors to invoke / to overturn the terrible plight; / [because] most left here with hands full of scandals” (“Superstitions,” lines 10-12). The strident message documented in the poem is that Nigeria’s problem started with its nationalist leaders who were themselves corrupt. As fruits are to trees, so are our present leaders to their predecessors. In their greed, our past leaders, especially those of the second republic, did the unthinkable in piling up foreign debts without considering the consequences. Unfortunately, many of them are still in power today and this tendency remains the norm among Nigeria’s current political elite. Ojaide’s historical poetry is therefore a signpost to warn Nigerians to guide against repeating the mistakes of their past leaders or remain in their hardship and unending debts.

“Superstitions!” also satirizes Nigeria’s lame attempts to cure her national maladies in the 1980s. The poet mocks the past leaders of the 1960s and 1970s and their successors in the 1980s for their unbelief in home-grown professionals and consequently condemns their desperation to accept uncritically solutions offered by foreign countries and international agencies like the IMF and the World Bank. He therefore lampoons all the political leaders in the country who had irrationally “Swallowed every imaginable concoction / cared nothing for blurred labels / [as] the quacks capitalized on desperation / to administer placebos for every complaint” (“Superstitions,” lines 4-8). However, more worrying to the poet is that Nigeria’s leaders of the late 1980s, like their predecessors, “maintain their high life without loss of face” (“Superstitions,” 2, line 9), an attitude he condemns as callous and wicked. The somber tone of the poem is deliberate as Ojaide warns Nigerian leaders of the day not to be complacent with the temporary relief in the nation’s socioeconomic condition. In other words, relief provided through foreign aid and loans is like an oasis in a desert. It is a stop-gap measure which most postcolonial countries deploy to stabilize their struggling economies; it is not a destination. So he cautions that “The problem is not fully solved / that the fever is gone does not preclude / further discomfort, we are prone to living with pain” (“Superstitions,” 3, lines 1-3). The state of the future, Ojaide seems to suggest, is often determined by past and present actions and inactions which is why he advises Nigerians to watch out and play safe where there are “promises” and “flatteries” about our slight progress. Thus, with poetic candor he cautions,

The disease thrives where promises are made,  
 thrives in flatteries, in our bowels and hands;  
 it approaches softpawed, then strikes.

A relapse is always possible  
 if we do not scrub the mind daily, mop  
 the dust-laden psyche with germicide.

The problem is far from fully solved, and

lest we forget, fear is an evil card in our lives. ("Superstitions,"  
 3, lines 10-17)

All these events are undoubtedly recorded in Ojaide's poetry for their historical significance, not for any entertainment value.

#### Part 4: Lessons

"Song for Ita III" is explicitly historical in content. It chronicles the story of Nigeria from how independence was secured without much struggle to how the selfish desires of Nigerians have blinded them to the country's national goals. Ojaide declares that the nation is politically and economically adrift, and stumbles about like many other postcolonial nations with little developmental strides. It is a poem that laments Nigerians' overreliance and irrational dependence on religious faith and prayers, rather than hard work, to achieve political stability and economic advancement. He lambasts the proclivity of Nigerians to make resolutions in their public and private spheres, proclamations usually left to God to fulfill. His message to the present and future generations is that Nigeria cannot attain greatness "with only prayers and resolutions" ("Song for Ita III," line 3), and that the major obstacle to the country's advancement is "the army within us," by which he means the ambitions of different ethnic groups in Nigeria to dominate one another. Nigeria is a multiethnic country with various nationalities striving to dominate the political space or at least grab a significant portion of the "national cake." Though it is natural for man to compete for scarce resources, Ojaide cautions that each ethnic group in Nigeria should exorcize its inordinate desire to dominate the others politically and economically so that the country can make some progress. A strong view advanced in the poem is that Nigeria is where she is now because she got her Independence almost cost-free. Ojaide describes it as "freedom [found] on the road," not acquired through armed struggle like countries such as Kenya, Zimbabwe, and South Africa, among others. Consequently, Nigeria's postcolonial leaders have allowed desire and naked ambition to blind them as cupidity and selfishness have shaped their thinking and actions. For

instance, the inability of these leaders to manage the sensitive crisis of ethnicity in the country resulted in the misadventure of the very costly Nigerian Civil War of 1967-1970. The far-reaching consequences of that war still threaten Nigeria's unity and plague its development today. The historical element in the poem is clear as the messages it bears are too serious to be considered subjects of entertainment. They are events deliberately documented using verse as mere vehicle to convey them.

#### Part 5: Clearing

"Oba Ovoramwen" is a historically significant poem. It compares the attitudes of contemporary Nigerian political leaders to that of Oba Ovoramwen of the ancient Benin Kingdom. Using the character of the 19th-century Benin monarch, Ojaide testifies against the pride and stubbornness of present-day leaders in Nigeria. Ovoramwen's refusal to listen to his advisers at critical moments is similar to our leaders' disregard of sound advice and warnings from our poets. Like Ovoramwen, these political leaders are hostages to the flatteries of political schemers who merely pay them lip service to get what they can from them. The poem explores themes of pride, abuse of power and tyranny which are all connected in one way or another to Nigeria's underdevelopment. Ovoramwen is tyrannical in killing Ominigbo, the diviner, just as political leaders eliminate their critics (for instance, as General Ibrahim Babangida was alleged to have killed Dele Giwa in 1986, a veteran investigative journalist at the time). This poem thus reveals that the tendencies that brought about the demise of many ancient African civilizations are still with us today and could lead to the disintegration of Nigeria. It is a warning message to both contemporary and future generations of Nigerians who would care to turn to history to learn from the mistakes of the past.

The poem, "Future Gods," assesses and documents Africa's developmental journey so far. It is an invocation calling on past heroes of Africa to resurrect and rescue the continent from her tormentors. It contends that though colonialism is over, the postcolonial era seems to offer Africa harder choices when things ought to be better. The heroes invoked in the poem to come to the rescue of Africa from the quagmire of underdevelopment include Ogidigbo of the Ijo race, Ogiso and Essi of the Itsekiri, and Shaka the Zulu of South Africa. Ojaide summons them to "fight [their] way back / to help us in these desperate days" ("Future Gods," lines 28-29), and concludes the poem on a bitter note, taunting the spirits of past nationalists who might choose not to heed his cry: "Shame on the gods who look on, bemused/ as lightning strikes their devotees / in their own groves" ("Future Gods," lines 30-32). This is a call to contemporary leaders to return to the past and learn the virtues of the leaders who built and sustained Africa's ancient civilizations. The poem celebrates precolonial

African leaders who left a glorious past as legacies to prove that Africans can achieve greatness without depending on forces outside the continent. It is a poem to inspire upcoming leaders that they could recreate and rebrand Nigeria and Africa in general by imbibing virtues that defined the African leaders of the past who shone brightly by their achievements; not by looting and impoverishing the country and the continent.

## Conclusion

This study has established a strong connection between Tanure Ojaide's poetry and history. Using *The Endless Song* as material text, it deployed New Historicism in the analysis of the subject matter of the poems, to highlight historical events and their significance for society. This study has also reinforced the view that literature in Africa is not merely an aesthetic phenomenon: It is art committed to serving society, especially a society which faces myriad challenges of political and economic instability, and underdevelopment. We conclude that for Ojaide, social commitment is engaged by documenting in verse-form sociopolitical and cultural events and their impacts on the people to act as signposts for the present and the future to avoid the mistakes of the past. This study has also highlighted major themes connected with the misadventures of Nigeria's past leaders and the trauma they inflicted on the Nigerian people. Consequently, Ojaide's *The Endless Song* is not just a critique of sociopolitical conditions in Nigeria's past: It is a tapestry of Nigeria's sociopolitical and cultural history and the conditions of existence of Nigerians under past erratic leaders.

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## Notes

1. Ken Saro-Wiwa was a Niger Delta activist arrested, tried, and executed in 1995 by the infamous regime of General Sanni Abacha. His killing elicited wide-spread condemnation nationally and internationally.
2. Ibrahim Babangida was a self-proclaimed military president of Nigeria. He was in power from 1985 to 1993.
3. There were many bloody coups and countercoups in Zaire and Togo in the 1960s; in Nigeria and Ghana in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s; and in Liberia and Burkina Faso in the 1980s and 1990s, among others.

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