



The new historicist practice and the conception of the *Dibia* as the poet persona in African poetry in English expression: Nze James Chinonyerem's *The changing songs* and *The shattered pot and other poems*

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ABSTRACT

The paper begins by positing that African poetry in English expression has produced four generations of poets and then emphasises that the study is focused on the postmodernist generation, which is the latest generation of African poets in English expression. In the postmodernist generation, there are different kinds of poetic practices, but the one that is of interest in the paper is called a new historicist practice. This is explained as having to do with 'the shifting and contradictory representations' of ideas, issues or histories between one generation and another. This practice dominates the works of most poets of the postmodernist generations. This is further demonstrated using Nze James Chinonyerem's *The changing songs* and *The shattered pot and other poems*. In these works there is a shift from the usual poetic traditions of the generations before them. Unlike other poets of the postmodernist generation, whose poetry falls in line with the pattern of the new historicist practice, we see a new kind of shift that is radically different. The poet contradicts the ideology behind the poet persona as a town crier as made popular by Christopher Okigbo—the famous poet of the modernist generation—and in place of it he creates a relatively new poet persona, the *Dibia*.

Keywords:

Introduction

African poetry in English expression has come a long way, having produced four generations of poets: the pioneer generation, the modernist generation, the ideological generation and the postmodernist generation. Each of these generations has, in its own right, added value to the growth of African poetry in English expression, but of interest in this study is the postmodernist generation and its idea of 'the shifting and contradictory representations' of ideas, issues or histories compared with generations before it. Unlike the poetry

of previous generations, ideas, issues or histories can be poetically constructed by bringing in a ‘dialectical relationship of past and present concerns’ (Rice and Waugh, 2001, p. 252). A poet of the postmodernist generation, whose poetry is patterned to shift or contradict certain representative ideas or histories, can be called ‘neither a transcendent commentator nor an objective chronicler’ because he/she is ‘always implicated in the discourses which help to construct the object of knowledge’ (Rice and Waugh 2001, p. 252). However, this practice, which was first described by Marilyn Butler in her essay, ‘Repossessing the past: the case for an open literary history’ published in *Representations* in 1987 (hence calling for a new historicist practice), was named by Stephen Greenblatt as ‘new historicism’. This is also evident in another of his essays, when he writes (Greenblatt 2001, p. 308):

Several years ago, intending to signal a turn away from the formal decontextualized analysis that dominates new criticism, I used the term, new historicism to describe an interest in the kinds of issues I have been raising—in the embeddedness of culture objects in the contingencies of history—and the term has achieved a certain currency.

Though ‘Stephen Greenblatt named the new historicism in 1988 ... the practice had been developing throughout the 1980s’ (Rice and Waugh, 2001, p. 253) Bakhtin’s essay can also be said to be of important influence on new historicisms, in that it is in his essay that the practice of new historicism first came alive. For instance, it is in his essay that the social condition of language use and a variety of temporal provisional and contested attempts to fix meaning are looked at as a ‘way in which power seems to produce its own subversion in order finally to better control subversion’ (Rice and Waugh 2001, p. 254). This practice is also traceable to Hayden Whites’s essay, which also predates Greenblatt’s naming of the practice. Like Bakhtin’s essay, Whites’s essay suggests that all narratives, which include those of history, are structures of desire and of moral impositions—a manifestation of what G.E. Moore called the ‘naturalistic fallacy’: the belief that we might derive ‘ought’ from ‘is’. Another theorist to whom this practice is traceable is Paul de Man. In his essay entitled ‘Semiology and Rhetoric’, De Man (1986) reveals how rhetoric inevitably subverts logic. In his other essay, ‘Resistance to Theory’ (2001), he sees objections to theory as displaced symptoms of a resistance which is inherent in the theoretical enterprise itself.

Having seen the contributions of different scholars to the growth of the practice, it is important that we have a working explanation of the term. According to Rice and Waugh (2001, pp. 252–253):

The new historicist is more concerned to focus attention on the multiple and contradictory material practices which embed each historical event or expressive act as context of production and reception.

Rice and Waugh (2001, p. 323) explain further:

‘The new historicists and cultural materialists,’ one typical summary puts it, represent, and by representing, reproduce in their new history of ideas, a world which is hierarchical, authoritarian, hegemonic, unsubvertable ...

This practice, which now seems to be dominating the poetic tradition of the postmodernist generation of the African poets in English expression, did not also originate with it. Rather, it is traceable to or can be contemplated as one of the products of the influence

of Chinweizu, Jamie Onwuchekwa and Ihechukwu Madubuike's work entitled, *Towards the decolonization of African literature* of 1980. It is in this book of essays, formerly published in the 1970s, that the new historicist practice first appeared in African critical discourse. This is evident in their subversive argument, that African literature should refrain from Eurocentric models of poetic construction and should make their works originally African. Later in the year, Chinweizu demonstrates the practice in his collection of poetry, *Energy crisis and other poems*. Since then most African poets in English expression have written poetry that either shifts from the recognised norms of poetic tradition or contradicts some poetic conventions and concepts established by the modernist African poets in English expression. This practice surfaced again in the ideological generation; we see it in Femi Osofisan's *Ire and other poems for performance* and in his *Dream seeker on divining chain*. In these collections of poems, Osofisan shifts from the conventional ways of writing poetry, and hence can be said to have patterned his poetry in line with the propositions of Chinweizu and his fellow critics. Writing about this, in their book, *Students encyclopedia of African literature*, Douglas Killam and Alicia Kerfoot (2008, p. 238) have noted:

Osofisan writes from the ideological left, and his work has generated controversy not only because he asserts that his work departs from the literary traditions of his contemporaries ... who, he claims, are too rooted in the past and to a celebration of imitative classical models, but because, unlike them, he primarily seeks new aesthetic forms.

After Osofisan in the ideological generation are many other poets in the postmodernist generation. Among these poets of the postmodernist generation where these new historicist practices can be seen in their works are Hyginus Ekwuazi, Ifediora Okiche and Nze James Chinonyerem, to mention but a few. In Ekwuazi's trilogy, *Love apart*, *Dawn into moonlight: all around me dawning*, and *The monkey's eye* there is a shift from the popular practice and belief that collections of poetry are compilations of poems written at different times, perhaps with little or no connectedness with other poems. The shift is towards establishing a new poetic practice—where a new and unpopular kind of storytelling in poetry is established and made to run through the three collections. In Okiche's *Cosmic cycle* there is also a shift from the conventional poetry, especially in the section of the collection where the poems contained in it are called 'minus poetry'. This new kind of poetry, according to its originators, has a pattern. As they have rightly explained on their website, Poets Palace, the poetry is a kind of poetry that '... must have a one word title, three words in a line, alternate rhyme scheme, no conjunction but the conjunctions are allowed to be replaced by punctuation marks. It must feature at least five different punctuation marks. The poetry form features include twenty lines and five stanzas that run after one another. Each stanza is connected to another by the flow of the issues in the poem. Dedication should thereon be written in the space between the title and the body of the poem'. Chinonyerem's *The changing songs* does not only demonstrate a shift from the usual poetic traditions of the generations before it, but the kind of shift is radically different from the ones we have seen in the poetry of some other African poets in English expression, whose poetry can be said to have fallen in line with the pattern of the new historicist practice. Like the trilogy of Ekwuazi, for instance, Chinonyerem's *The chang-*

ing songs tells stories. Unlike in Ekwuazi's trilogy, in Chinonyerem's *The changing songs* the stories are told in the form of incantatory songs.

Despite how important these are, this study is particularly interested in the shift of the popular poetic persona in African poetry in English expression. Hence, it contradicts the ideology behind the poet persona as made popular by Christopher Okigbo. In the collection, the poet persona is conceived as a *Dibia*.² This contradicts the popular conception of the poet persona as a town crier. Although this is very new in African poetry in English expression, it seems to represent the personality of the poet persona even better. We have become accustomed to the conception of the poet persona as a town crier, perhaps because this first featured in the poetry of Okigbo, a famous poet of the modernist generation of African poetry in English expression. However, both the idea of the poet persona as a *Dibia* and the poet persona as a town crier suggest that the poetic individuals relate messages that are not their own—even though this means that the poetic individuals get their poetic inspirations from different sources and, by extension, that not all poetic inspirations come from the same source. While the source of the *Dibia's* inspiration is the spirit forces, the town crier's source could be humans. In traditional African society, the town crier's sources of message (or inspiration) are humans, such as the king of a community, the chief of a clan or even the *Dibia* of the community. It is only on rare occasions that the town crier gets his inspiration from the spirits. These are usually occasions where the town crier is possessed and doubles the functions of the *Dibia* with those of the town crier. A town crier that does not double the functions of the *Dibia* can, in the course of announcing a message whose source is human, be possessed by the kindred spirits and then be driven to say things that are revealing or, better still, that prophesy a people's (or his own) doom. Okigbo demonstrates these in every part of his collection *Labyrinths*. In *Heavensgate*, for instance, Okigbo (2008, p. 1) demonstrates why he contemplated the personality of the poet persona as a town crier when he noted in one of his interviews:

I was influenced by everything and everybody. ... it is surprising how many lines of the *Limits* I am not sure are mine and yet do not know whose lines they were originally. But does it matter?

Through this assertion Okigbo insinuates that, as a town crier, the poet persona announces the message he got from humans. It is in his *Path of Thunder* that he suggested that the poet persona, having been possessed by the kindred spirits, prophesied a disastrous civil war and his own doom.

Unlike Okigbo, a poet of the modernist generation of African poetry in English expression, Chinonyerem, a poet of the postmodernist generation of African poetry in English expression is of the opinion that for a poet to be able to express a view that is not indoctrinated with falsehood in this generation, the poet persona's source of inspiration must be directly from the kindred spirits. He seems to be insinuating that in this generation the message of the town crier is no longer the message of truth as it used to be in Okigbo's time. Now the message is full of deceit and falsehood since the town crier would depend all the time on his human superiors for his message and since these persons to whom the town crier bears his message are postmodern individuals who are characteristically full of deceit and selfish inclinations. The situation is so bad that no town crier who aims

at telling the truth would survive or even be in business. Hence, in *The changing songs*, Chinonyerem posits that every poet that must tell the truth in this generation would take the personality of the *Dibia* and must hear directly from the spirits. This is because it is through the help of the spirits that hidden poetic truth and the exact poetic images, which draw inferences from the consequences of the communal experiences, are related in poetic forms. In Chinonyerem's *The changing songs*, the poet persona, the *Dibia*, is not just concerned with relating to his readers his past experiences, as are prevalent in the poetry of other generations or some poets of the postmodern generation. Rather, he also '... plays the role of the mediator between man and the gods and ensures that there is a cordial relationship between the two. The *Dibia* also calls back the people whenever they depart from the part of sanity and unity' (Chinonyerem 2004, p. 3). In attempts at striking a balance between the act of reading poetry and the act of visiting the *Dibia*, Chinonyerem writes (ibid.):

With all the socio-economic and political problems facing the country today, which manifest in the series of ethno-religious crisis and pogroms across the country, there is no doubt that the time is riped [sic] for another visit to the Dibia. A people faced by these problems always seek the face of the gods—to do this, they must change their song.

The Changing Song is thus, the clarion call on the people to go back to the part of Sanity and Unity. It is the great Dibia's testament—make no mistake about it, this is not my voice, it is that of the Dibia, listen to it.

Reading through the collection, it is assumed that one has paid a visit to the *Dibia* and interestingly, the collection contains some messages that would interest every individual that attempts a visit. Hence, the collection is divided into five sections, namely Section A: The Song of the *Dibia*, Section B: A Song for the New Warriors, Section C: Songs at Market Square, Section D: A Gathering of Other Songs and finally the Epilogue: The Dibia Departs. In the poem entitled *The Dibia Calls*, which begins the first section of the collection, the poet persona introduces himself to the reader as the *Dibia* (and he conceives of the reader as his visitor), saying (ibid., p. 8):

I am the great Dibia
 The eyes and voice of the gods.
 The carrier of their messages.
 Take heed to my calls.
 I see what you can't see and
 Hear what you can't hear
 No matter how thick the feather of the hen is,
 When the strong wind blows, it's rumps are [sic]
 Always exposed.

Having introduced himself, the poet persona calls our minds to the fact that ‘we are at war’. The war as used in the collection is not literal, but symbolic. ‘War’ in the collection is used to mean that things are not normal. For instance, the poet persona makes us realise that we are at war because people are hungry. ‘Hunger’ in the collection becomes a kind of war. This is evident in the poem when the poet writes: ‘We know the pains of war/ through the bites of hunger in the stomach’ (ibid., p. 14). Hatred between friends and brothers is also treated as a form of war in the collection. This is also evident in the poem when it is written: ‘War has broken out/Even if the dane gun refuses to fire’ (ibid.). Ethnic and religious unrest is demonstrated as another kind of war in these lines: ‘War is war-/ Even when fought at one corner of the market/ As in Odi, Lagos, Kaduna, Kano or Yelwa/ War is war’ (ibid., p. 15). In the poem entitled *The Smell of Ashes*, the poet posits that ‘The smell of ashes is back,/kites are hovering./ Ashes are like memories,/ They tell where there was life yesterday/ Ashes are remnants of dead dreams’ (ibid., p. 30). Through the poem, the poet persona creates in us the aura of war. Indeed, in places where the people are hungry, brothers are fighting against brothers, and where there is ethnic and religious unrest, there is always some form of destruction. ‘Ashes’ are another symbol of destruction in the collection and the symbol is used to mean both the destruction of lives and property—most particularly, human lives; hence, in another line of the poem, ‘Ashes are remnants of dead dreams’ (ibid.). It seems that even though the ‘war’ is on, the people are not aware of it, because they have been busy dancing to ballads. Irritated by their ignorance and foolishness, the poet persona urges: ‘Stop the ballad song/ Start the war song’ (ibid., p. 14). In the poem, the poet persona goes further to urge the visitor to ‘take heed to [his] call’ because, according to him, the situation is already at its peak—‘we’ve come to the crossroads’ (ibid., p. 9) and every means to calm the situation has failed (ibid., pp. 10-11):

We worry about the snake’s bites
 Still the lizard comes to me to sharpen his teeth
 Amadioha has said it,
 ‘There will be thunder storm.’
 Ala has said it,
 ‘The earth will be barrier’
 Even the great mother of the river has joined them
 ‘The rivers will dry’
 The people (have) shouted;
 ‘Olololo-o!’
 ‘Sacrifice?’
 The gods (have) said No.

The poet persona writes that though he has ‘... raised the war song’, it is meant for those who ‘... have waist’. In this poem, both the act of raising ‘the war song’ and the act of having ‘waist’ to dance to the song are symbolic. By raising ‘the war song’, the poet persona has made it known that there is a problem in the land and when he says it is for those who ‘have waist’ to dance, he is saying that the information would be useful to those who have the wits to avoid the problem. As a *Dibia*, it is his duty to make some hidden truth known to his visitor. Hence the poet persona claims that by letting the marginalised but ignorant individuals know that there is war or by telling two warring individuals to stop pretending and make a public show of the fact that there is war, he has done his job. To further explain this, he writes (*ibid.*, p. 19):

Today, it is the west and north

And the east again.

But was the Dibia wrong?

The hawk in pursuit of

The hen

Went to the Dibia

The hen

In escape from the hawk,

Went to the Dibia.

What did the Dibia tell both?

To the hawk-

‘Go to the palm tree.’

To the hen-

‘Avoid the palm tree.’

‘Let him that has ears hear.’

In the poem *A Chant for the Ancestors*, the poet persona reverences the African Nationalists. He goes on to posit that though Africa is now at ‘war’, let not the ancestors and their struggles to save Africa from the oppressive colonial grasp be forgotten. His reason is later revealed in another part of the poem, especially when he calls them ‘men of wisdom/ men of valour, /who gave their yesterday because of / our today’ (*ibid.*, p. 21). The poet persona’s decision to call the visitor’s attention to the wisdom of the ancestors is, according to him, because they ‘... gave their yesterday because of /our today’ and because it is ‘only the ungrateful fool [who] forgets/ the one who kindles fire for him/ in rainy season’ (*ibid.*). In Section B: Song for the New Warriors, the poet persona no longer addresses his visitors, but some personages. In this section, he seems to be saying that although Africa faces problems, there are Africans who are doing as much as the Nationalists to

offer solutions to the problems. He seems to be saying that though there is ‘war’ going on, there are many Africans who are resisting it through their different professions. The section begins with an extract from Ezenwa Ohaeto’s *The voice of the night masquerade*, which states that ‘Our treasure is not lost’ because ‘there are people/ who remember/ who recollect’ (ibid., p. 23). In the poem, *The Song Must Go On*, the poet persona calls to mind the contributions of Ohaeto in the resistance struggle, even though he is now dead. In eulogising Ohaeto, the poet persona writes that even though he is dead, ‘the song must go on’ (ibid., p. 24) and that the spirit of resistance which Ohaeto kindled through his collection of poems should not be allowed to ‘... descend into the ground’ (ibid.). In the following poem entitled *The Flute is Calling*, the poet persona, like a typical *Dibia*, turns away from the visitor to salute Ohaeto (ibid., p. 26):

Now I’ve raised the song for you,
 The echoes of your flute are everywhere.
 The night masquerade will dance at the
 Market square by moonlight.
 But the flute calls
 Only those who have the waist to dance.

In another poem, *The Flutist of the Gods*, the poet persona addresses Ohaeto as the flutist of the God and speaks to him, as the *Dibia* communicates with the spirits of dead warriors of his community: ‘Since that dark day/ when the night became a dance, / I’ve followed the echoes of your flutes’ (ibid., p. 28). In the latter part of the poem, the poet persona is overwhelmed by the personality of Ohaeto; hence he sings (ibid.):

Across the plain, Over the mountain
 In search of you.
 I bow before you
 The great flutist
 Who set the forest of skeleton on fire
 With the echoes of his flute.

In another poem, *Our Voices Scream*, the poet persona reverences Chris Egharevba. He feels that Egharevba is one other personage whose voice has joined other voices to shout down those behind the raging war. As early as the first part of the poem, he writes that even ‘The cricket at night/ Reminds me of the song you sang yesterday’ (ibid., p. 29). The yesterday that the poet persona refers to in no way suggests a distant time. Rather, it refers to a very recent time—a time that is of the same generation as the poet persona. This could be why he sees Egharevba as a recent voice, and notes it in the poem (ibid.):

The song of the newbreed.
The song of new vision, new hope.
The song that moved the sheep to
Assert his humanity from the lion
After centuries of violation.

In the latter part of the section, he writes that the same kindred spirit that drove Ohaeto, Egharevba and Isidore Diala to write has also come upon him and has taken away his sleep. In the poem entitled *They Too Can Sing*, he notes that these poets together with the famous late Nigerian lawyer, Gani Fawehimi, sang vigorously for ‘Those whose songs were forcefully taken away’ (ibid., p. 33) and yet the problem continues. He notes in *Our Voices Scream* that (ibid., p. 29):

The rodent stole my sleep at night-
Echoes of the old song are back
Like the long awaited moon to herald the new yam
festival.
I’ve joined the chorus of the
New singers
Rehearsing the songs you taught me
During my baptism of fire in Uyo.

He then proceeds to make it known that all those suffering in Africa, all ‘those whom the termite/ Ate their only treasure’, ‘those whose laughter’ were ‘broken by the oppressors’ and all ‘Those whose homesteads/ Were desecrated, and burnt, / By the heat of oppression/ They too can sing’ (ibid., p. 33). He gives the condition under which this can be done: ‘They too can sing-/Only if the sun will melt/ The hearts of the vipers/ That stole the song of the/ people’ and in emphasis, he notes further that ‘they too can still sing-/ if their song is returned’. In Section C: Songs at the Market Square, the poet persona claims that all hope is not lost, since the gods who, as at the first section of the collection, rejected human sacrifices for appeasement have decided to show mercy. This is evident in the lines ‘Amadioha, the great god / those who rightly come to you for justice/Go home satisfied’ (ibid., p. 35). Later in the same poem, he presents his case before Amadioha, when he says, ‘I’ve seen injustice walked round the town/ Adored by the guilty’. In the subsequent line he writes, ‘I (now) take the case to Amadioha’ (ibid., p. 36). Having appeased the gods in the poem *A Song to Amadioha*, the poet persona now speaks without fear. In *A Basket for the Crown*, he urges the people to openly condemn sycophancy. He concludes the section by raising our hope with the poems that end the section. For instance, in the poem *The Song of the Season* he says (ibid., p. 44):

Our songs are not all lost
Our hopes are not all shattered
No matter how the lion emaciates,
It's [sic] heart is always there.
One million years begin in a day and
A gathering of days make one million years.

In another poem of the section, especially in *After the Rage*, he reiterates what he insinuated in *The Song of the Season* (ibid., p. 48):

After the raging storm,
After the whirlwind,
Comes the gentle flow of the sea
And soft passage of the breeze

But unlike the lines quoted in *The Song of the Season*, the lines from *After the Rage* make a stronger promise of hope to the reader (the visitor). In Section D: A Gathering of Other Songs, the poet persona wonders. Having hoped that everything would be alright in the previous section and having appeased the gods, he wonders why nothing has changed. In one of poems of the section, *The Canon Fires Again*, he makes it known that, 'For long every canon fire has/ Been a call for harvest of tears' (ibid., p. 50). In the second stanza of the poem, he tells us that the canon fire is nothing but the '... fires/ of waste', in that 'Every fire recalls the lost [sic] of / A soul'. Explaining further, he writes (ibid., p. 50):

Each time a soul is lost,
Each time a canon fires,
The tribe is decimated.
Her hopes deferred

Still wondering, he contemplates in another poem, *A Call for the Living and the Dead*, if the dead are not better off than the living since we are at their mercy. The fact that the living are at the mercy of the dead is evident in another part of the poem (ibid., pp. 51–52):

But when a strange disease
Walks into town,
The living seeks for the Dead.
Kolanuts are broken,
Libation is poured and
Incantation chanted

Invoking the presence of the dead Ancestors

The section ends with another wondering poem, *When Will It All End*. As the poem begins, he tells his visitor: 'After the passage of centuries, / I still stand naked. Confused. Waiting/ For the confirmation of my patience' (ibid., p. 57). After this comes his wondering proper (ibid.):

I'm still waiting
 Worried. When will my
 Ever-ending dirge unfolds a new ballad:
 When will the lion learn
 That life beats in the breast of the Lamb?
 When will the tortoise stop seeing
 The world from within its shell?

Finally, in the epilogue and the only poem that it contains, *The Dibia Departs*, the poet persona offers a solution to the problem. To him, one of the ways to solve the problem is that all personages, those who have been resisting the problem through their writings and professions, should gather together. When they are gathered, 'Let them be with one mind' (ibid., p. 59) because 'The strength of the ants lies in their numbers'. He urges them all the more, saying, 'Let the warriors not be afraid' (ibid.) and 'Snake without legs/ Climbs trees, what of man with/ Legs and hands?' (ibid., p. 61). Finally, when the gods speak through the poet persona's voice, after he enquires of them about the long '... great journey/ Across the seven seas and seven hills' (ibid., p. 62), the gods merely say: 'The tribe has lost her soul' (ibid.). Since this is the situation, everybody including 'The assembled tribe and her warriors/ Should not lose heart'; they should learn to 'dance to the sound of/ The new song' (ibid., p. 63).

In Chinonyerem's other collection, *The shattered pot and other poems*, the *Dibia* starts asking many questions. Among such questions is: 'Why do oil and water/ refuse to mix even when/ both are in the same pot?' and: 'Why do the goat and leopard/ refuse to greet each other even when/ both walk with the same four legs?' (Chinonyerem 2011, p. 2). In the collection, the *Dibia* continues with the same wondering in which he engages in *The changing songs*, especially in Section D of the collection. As we see in the same section of *The changing songs*, in the first section of *The shattered pot and other poems*, the poet persona consults with the gods. However, in contrast to what they say in the changing songs, they say (ibid., p. 3):

The will is in the pot,
 The wealth is in the pot.
 When the pot is shattered
 The oil in it spilled,

No matter how crafty you are,

You cannot collect it back.

Like a typical *Dibia*, the poet persona speaks in symbols. The pot and the oil in this collection are symbolic and they are very important in the interpretation of the entire collection of poems. The symbol of the pot in the collection is Africa and the symbol of the oil is the resources, the treasures in it. In part IV of the poem entitled *The Shattered Pot*, the poet persona makes these symbols very clear to the reader: ‘preserve the pot, preserve the land, / shatter the pot, scatter the land’ (ibid., p. 5), and in the following lines: ‘The pot is not strong, but it/ Withstands the raging flame. / The land is not strong, but it/ Carries the weight of our anger’ (ibid.). The poem ends with a reassurance of a better future Africa (ibid., p. 11):

It is time to restore lost hopes

It is time to re-call the straying children

It is time to scavenge clay of unity

to mend our shattered pot.

Surprisingly in the subsequent poem, the poet persona wails that even the hope that he expects is a wasted one. In *The Wasted Hopes*, he tells us: ‘We dreamt of a rosy land. / With our sweat, we set out/ to live our dreams’ (ibid., p. 12), but surprisingly ‘The sojourners are at home/ singing the old sad song. / Their dreams are shattered/ by their leader’s greed’ (ibid., p. 13). Seeing what his once anticipated hope has become, the poet persona notes in another poem, *My Heart Thinks* that his ‘... heart really aches at the turn of our lives’ (ibid., p. 22). In the following section, the poet persona recounts the dead, very important, Africans. Among these dead Africans are UBC Ogbe and Ohaeto. He ends the section with the poem, *We Celebrate Only the Dead* and with a very important remark (ibid., p. 32):

In our land

Men of honour are always

despised and deprived.

We await their death

before we see the good in them

In another section of the collection, the poet persona says he is ‘a poet of anger’. He says he is ‘angry at all that clap/ while we cry’ (ibid., p. 35) and because of his anger, he posits (ibid.):

I have sharpened my words.

my words are like the venom of the cobra

I have breathed life into them

they will break the backbone of
the oppressors.

We see this anger being demonstrated in all the poems that make up the section. Fortunately, the collection ends in his finding hope in some individuals. Like the hope he raised in the early section of the collection, especially in the poems where hopes are connected with some personages, we know that this hope may soon be shattered.

Notes

- ⁱ Many scholars prefer reference to three generations because they feel that the pioneer poets should not be grouped as a generation, since they did not write serious poetry.
- ⁱⁱ *Dibia* is an Igbo word, which means ‘a native doctor’ in the traditional Igbo community.

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