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Nation and Poetics: Reading Uche Nduka's "Early" Poetry

Abstract

*This essay reads Uche Nduka's poetry, especially the poems collected in *Flower Child* and *Second Act* in order to foregrounding the social tenor in the work of a poet who has increasingly established a strong voice in artistic individualism. The reading is based on the contention that Nduka's oeuvre can be divided into his early, pre-exile poetry and his latter, exile poetry. The two seem to deal with different thematic spaces, though it is argued here that they are linked to each other. While the early poetry concerns itself with the fate of his nation, and the latter with the condition of exile and other intense personal themes, it is evident in his latter poetry that Nduka does not totally turn his back to the discourse of nationhood. He constantly represents the nation-space through memory and nostalgia, although his poetics radically changes as his poetry inclines to certain formalism.*

Key words: Uche Nduka, Nation, War, Exile, Poetics.

Introduction

With eight volumes, Uche Nduka is not only one of the most prolific Nigerian poets writing today, he is also one of the most passionate about form, articulating his poetic imagination in stylistic bravura. This is what prompts the scholar Wumi Raji to conclude that Nduka "remains the most energetic, the most prolific and the most technically innovative of all the poets of his generation" (2005: 74). The generation Raji writes of here is what some have seen as the third generation of modern Nigerian poets writing in English, with other notable names such as Toyin Adewale, Chiedu Ezeanah, Abubakar Othman, and Lola Shoneyin. Given what some see as Nduka's extreme individualism, an overwhelming concern with the condition of exile and split subjectivity (a thematic sphere that hardly gets the attention of the poets mentioned above), it is often forgotten that Nduka, at least in what I call his early poetry, demonstrates a deep concern with the welfare of his nation, Nigeria. By reading the early poetry, this essay attempts to foreground, first, the political poetics that bodies forth in the anguished tenors of Nduka's post-war poetry; and, second, to locate the very condition of dispersal inherent in Nduka's latter poetry in the frustration with his nation that presumably resulted in his self-exile in the 1990s.

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The progression of Nduka's writing from *Flower Child*, his first volume, to his latest volume, *Tracers*, bears the mark of a poet with a fervent desire to evolve his own artistic horizon, to consciously deviate from the dominant poetic tradition in Nigeria, to free himself of any limiting, indeed limited, generational classification hinged on thematics and stylistics. Although *Flower Child* contains the signs of Nduka's urge to pursue a personal voice, and although he in the early nineties wrote (mostly newspaper) essays to rail against the hegemonic weight of the Alter-Native tradition, it is when Nduka went into exile – having possibly come in contact with more poetry outside Nigeria – that his distinctive voice, a kind of personal formalism, materialised.¹ Thus exile for Nduka goes beyond dis(re)placement to embrace what Obododimma Oha calls “stylistic exile” (2005: 17).

It becomes pertinent, even imperative, to talk of Nduka's poetry in two phases: his pre-exile poetry and his exile poetry. The two can be differentiated in theme and style. His pre-exile poetry, collected under the titles *Flower Child* and *Second Act*, locate themselves in the prevailing social vision of Nigerian writing (in spite of Nduka's deviant view), one that favours, really privileges a literary work with a strong social message. The pre-exile poetry is therefore characterised by its strong outward referentiality; it speaks not about the poet, or itself, but about pressing socio-political issues that inevitably invade the domain of art in Nigeria. It is in fact part of the dissident dirge of his generation. On the other hand, Nduka's exile poetry, from the suggestively titled *The Bremen Poems*, to his latest collection, increasingly inclines to inward referentiality in both senses of the poem's disposition to objectivise the poet-persona, and to be self-reflexive. The distinction here between the pre-exile and the exile poetry is not, let us admit, watertight, although it is in a way telling. It can be argued that even while in Nigeria at the time he wrote poetry, Nduka, like most of his contemporaries, did already feel alienated and the exilic dimension can be discerned in his poetry insofar as exile is taken to be a forced- or self-alienation, or a state of mind. Exile is essentially, in David Bevan's words, “a form of estrangement” (1990:3), whether mental or physical. A mental form of estrangement is evident in Nduka's early poetry, as it is in the poetry of his contemporaries writing in a repressed society. But this does not undermine the two broad spectrums of thematics that come through in Nduka's poetry namely the question of nationhood; and the predicament, the excruciating nostalgia, the prevailing uncertainties, of living in a country far away from one's own. With this broad thematic division the suggestion is tenable that Nduka's early poetry conceptualises blood and waste as idiom, while his latter poetry rests its idiomatic strength on love (eroticism), absence, and memory.

Analysis

Flower Child is a powerful introit to Nduka's career in poetry, but it is also one that seems today to stand diametrically opposed to the liminal lore of Nduka's latter collections. The tension here is that the Nduka of *Heart's Field* or *Tracers* has exonerated himself, as it were, from that compulsive urge, or demand on Nigerian writer to *write* her/his nation out of despair, that is to say, to thematise the never-ending state of anomie.

Nduka's latter poetry is not unengaged, but its critical perception rejects any strong hold on the plight of a nation the way, for instance, Chiedu Ezeanah's *The Twilight Trilogy* (2005) does. Of interest, however, is that *Flower Child*, in its debut capacity, announces Nduka as a poet concerned, even obsessed, with the nationalist imagination. To locate Nduka among his contemporaries or to situate his poetry in that stormy artistic wail that broke out in the late 1980s against the cruel militarisation of Nigeria is to concentrate on his pre-exile poetry. One of the observations made by the Ghana-born American writer-scholar Kwame Dawes in his introduction to Nduka's *Eel on Reef* is, "[it] must be said that in Nduka we have an African writer who is willing to defy the sometimes intense pressure to assume the role of griot – a kind of community poet who must write proverb-filled epics rooted in the culture" (2007: 18). This can only be true of the latter Nduka, not the Nduka of *Flower Child* and *Second Act*. But, as Dawes says, Nduka could not have written "proverb-filled", orality-deriving poetry. Nduka, from the beginning of his career as a poet, has consciously orientated his poetry away from the poetic doctrines of the Alter-Native tradition in Nigeria. It is in fact contestable when Oha writes that "in *Flower Child*...one could find traces of influences from African (Igbo) traditions of poetry and from Igbo poets...like Pol Ndu" (2005: 14). Nduka thinks of the Alter-Native poetics as a hegemonic ideology that seeks to restrict the otherwise free space of artistic expression. It is thus perhaps to respond to Chinweizu et al (1980) (a major influence on the Alter-Native poetics), and to Osundare's manifesto orchestrated in "Poetry Is" (1983), that Nduka wrote in 1989 an essay entitled "Ideology, Individual, Poetry: Observations". Nduka's essay centres on the freedom of artistic expression, and the unlimited range of thematics available to poet, indeed any kind of artist. Nduka argues for the demolition of any ideology that institutes itself with the purpose of controlling a writer's thoughts, styles, or thematic engagement. In his words,

I subscribe to a poetry of experience which objectifies itself freely, stylistically and thematically on the page....I hold steadfastly to the belief that any art work, be it poem, a play, a novel, a painting or a piece of music that is overtly and overridingly [sic] subservient to ideology is trite, fake, a fraud, a worthless straw without an honest backbone or framework. (1989: 10)

With such a strong position – especially of what could have been dismissed as art for art's sake – during what one may consider the heyday of Marxism (Omafume F. Onoge, Beyodun Jeyifo, Chidi Amuta) in Nigeria, Nduka alienates himself from the dominant literary tradition in Nigeria, although it is hard for him to escape the thematic sphere.²

Flower Child is therefore not free from what he considers the existing ideology on the Nigerian literary scene, especially if ideology is seen beyond the parochial sense in which Nduka describes it. Or, as he himself says, if "[i]deology is...an occasional handmaiden among many for the definition of art" (1989: 10), then it is no doubt his "handmaiden" in *Flower Child*. In *Flower Child* are poems about the Nigerian civil war (1967-1970), its agonies, and the brutal corruptions that fed from it. At one level, the poems are intense feelings of a young poet who has witnessed the destruction of his society under the conspiracy of the ruthless elite; at another level, the poems constitute an

engaging discourse on the socio-political landscape of Nigeria. The poems are relatively short, as is the case always with Nduka's poems. In their shortness and powerfully referential gestures, they offer themselves, through familiar images, as highly suggestive metonyms of the disenchantment that set in after the civil war in the decades between the 1970s and the 1980s. The opening poem "Muddy monologue" – the conceit of this title runs through the entire volume – sets off the gloomy tone that characterises Nduka's poetic thoughts on the fate of Nigeria as a nation. Written in the third person, the poem presents a persona caught in the route of self-alienation. The first sentence of the poem is as short as the four-stanza poem, resoundingly evocative: "He is startled" (1). The picture the poem paints here is that of a young man who wakes up one day to realise that his society is almost crushed under the weight of damaging contradictions:

Stories clap through his ears. He does
Not see the story-tellers. He does not
Hear the whispering rains. Thick mud
Spatters his feet. Cares needle his breast. He
Calls out to the world. Won't the world step in? (18-22)

If this is the situation of a man who finds himself in a ravaged community, heartbroken, sunk into a mud (in the literal and the literary senses), crying for help, then it is one that typifies the Nigerian civil war, especially those in the ill-fated Biafra where Nduka, being native of Igbo, probably found himself during the war. The metaphor however stretches beyond the war; it has come to encompass the prison-like situation Nigeria was thrown into just after the civil war by mindless leaders.

Like "Muddy monologue", every other poem in *Flower Child* presents a fresh scene of oppression, of the cries of the oppressed, of the anguish of writers/artists, of the unbroken wails of a crushed nation. "Routes and Bridges" is a poem with a series of acute images of the post-war wastes. Always, the main concern is with the plight of the underprivileged – and herein is Nduka's tie with the very ideology he criticises. Although, as we have pointed out earlier, Nduka would not root his aesthetics in cultural tradition, he does not avoid, possibly would not have avoided, the plight of the masses. One possibility is that at that time he was also among the suffering people. Poems such as "Casualties" by J. P. Clark-Bedekeremo have demonstrated that even the elite, aside from those politicians who profited from contracts during the war, suffered the consequences of the war. Nduka's "Routes and Bridges" contain images that present the wounds inflicted by the war, wounds that seem to linger far into the future – a future beclouded by the uncertainties that one can predict from the present sense of abandonment. The choice of diction in this poem is carefully made to provoke our consciences:

Since the war, the perennial
limping land have not given us
another tale, another colour.
Little by little dies the flesh.

Voices of progress grown hoarse.

Wastage crowns the crusty workmen.
Our gazes remain static, would not
fall, starved of a home to rest in.

And we sink, doubtless,
into the serpentine estate
of muscled executioners, lamp-quenchers,
crumbling before their manly strides.

Our roads reek of terrors, shames,
rusts, sores, scars, dooms, scourges
and burdens of a raucous gentry.

We must repave the routes and the bridges. (5-20)

If the call to “repave the routes and the bridges” is a call to the people to take their fate in their hands, in any form of socialist action, then it is one that even the persona herself/himself knows it is likely to be unheeded, not because the people do not need emancipation but because they are too battered to even gather themselves for any such action. But the note of optimism in the call is one that is rare in Nduka’s thoughts on Nigeria of this period. Those the persona calls “muscled executioners, lamp-quenchers” still hold their destructive power over the people; the crisis of leadership which in Nigeria began from the dawn of independence continues till today, and with its continuation the outputs of poets, especially Nduka’s contemporaries, have continued to engage it. Thus, the horrible situation of “rusts, sores, scars, dooms, scourges” we see in this poem about the aftermath of the war is still the situation, as demonstrated in recent collections.³

The poem “Wreckages” announces itself with that biting conceit characteristic of the poems in *Flower Child*: “A dishevelled song impeaches on my day” (1). It is not just the day, but also the entire society that the song impeaches on, to continue with Nduka’s metaphor. This poem’s penetrating message is that the war, no matter how it was drummed up, in spite of the pleasant and pleasing rhetoric that constituted its battle cry, in spite of the exciting nationalism that foreran it, disrupts, upsets, dislocate, and disorders the life of the society, especially of those who are less privileged. Very suggestive words in this poem that brings out vividly this phenomenon include: “tear up”, “scatter”, “shatter”, “beheads”, “shipwrecks”, and “Darken”. The nation, the community of people, is reduced, according to the poet, to a “creek whose names / Are nightmare and hatred” (24-25). The poem ultimately regrets the war, and decries its colossal consequences on the entire society – a society led astray by the interests of a privileged few. The following poem, “The Ecstasy”, reiterates this theme of waste by noting that there is “no home / To come back to” (11-12); there is in fact only the debris of destructions, and the humans can only but engage themselves in another ecstasy which is another rhapsody of nationalism – this time the building and strengthening of one Nigeria, especially with the very clever slogan of no victor, no vanquished that ended the war in the early 1970s.⁴

With a poem such as the ironically titled “Revolution”, it is safe to assume that Nduka conspicuously follows the steps of his precursors such as Wole Soyinka and Odia Ofeimun. Soyinka’s outright, purportedly detribalised condemnation of the war earned him a prison term that beget the acerbic *The Man Died* (1985), besides creative works such as the collection *A Shuttle in the Crypt* that attempts to unveil what was seen as the bare stupidity of the war on both sides. Ofeimun’s *The Poet Lied* (1989) pushes this further as it not only denounces the establishment on both sides, but also disparages and vilifies artists and writers, as its title suggests, who, in Ofeimun’s view, chose not to be on the side of humanity during the Nigerian civil war. For Ofeimun and Soyinka, and for fiction writers such as Isidore Okpewho (*The Last Duty*), and Festus Iyayi (*Heroes*), any artistic engagement with the war must desire to form what Iyayi calls “the people’s army”, cultural, communal, ideological, against the ruling elite on both sides. In a sense, this notion of a people’s army did awaken Nigerian writers, perhaps irrespective of ethnicities, to the Marxian appropriation of literature to the struggle for, on behalf of, the victims of the irrationalities of the war (Amuta, 1988; Obafemi, 1992). It does not matter from whose (Biafran or Nigerian) perspective Nduka versifies, but his poems deal with what Ogaga Okuyade calls “the viability of the nation’s collective destiny during and after the war” (2008: 135-6).

The poem “Revolution”, thus, sets as its target the condemnation of war leaders, singularised in the pronoun “he”, one that the poem regards with a lot of sarcasm. The poem begins:

It was a time of drought
And it was a time of doubt
When he bobbed up and explored
The riverbed for store houses. (1-4)

What we notice here first is the insensitivity of this war figure. It does not matter that it is a time of “drought”, a time in which every good leader should rather be engaged in ventures that would bring food to his subjects. It also does not matter that it is a time of “doubt” – what the people need is assurance about their lives, their properties, their posterity. But, as the poem makes it clear, these times also provide the war leader with an opportunity to preach his gospel of war. It is easy, for instance, to tell the people that the drought in their land is caused by those against whom they must fight war. By doing so, attentions are diverted away from the realities on the ground such as described by the poet here:

The greenery looked afar
A hand gripped an empty basket
Earth’s music was unseated
Shrivelled was the day, a trampled leaf.

And it was a time of drought
And complaints filled the baggages [sic]
Filled the cans, filled the side streets
And each breath he drew.

No one heeded the agony
 Of the dying goat
 No one saw the tree
 Drying into a stump. (5-16)

The inability of anyone to heed and see is, of course, the effect of the achieved success of the leaders in bamboozling the people with rhetoric and battle cries. The idea of a revolution, especially embedded in ideology, is one that appeals to a people in a particular stage of their development. But it is one that, as numerous histories of revolution show, or as dissidents of revolutions have pointed out, also leads the people astray, as Nduka's poem here attempts to demonstrate. Interestingly, this poem reveals that ideologies behind such pseudo-revolutions are birthed "in hotel rooms [where] the kinglets laze / With whores of the moment / Polishing manifestoes for / Their faithful constituencies" (17-20). Nestled in hotel rooms with whores, concerned with their "faithful constituencies" which are nothing other than their perceived personal gains, the war leader and his cohorts set machinery into motion to set the society ablaze.

But *Flower Child*, as a collection, is not a direct attack on the leaders; it is an image-filled description of what we may call the scenes and sounds of the Nigerian civil war. It does seem that Nduka's aim in this volume is to bring before us terrible consequences of the war, and to let us make our judgement about those who have engineered the war, although in a poem entitled "Nationscape" the persona declares that "I will rebel / against the canons of putrefaction" (30-31). Disturbing images of *Flower Child* are therefore those of women and children struggling to find food, places of sleep, and to regain their lives. The collection swings between optimism and pessimism, with the last poems charting a course that is rather exilic. Apart from "Wreckages", one other poem that captures the central thrust of this volume is "Looking at Debris", a poem in which the poet speaks of "Forsaken creatures. / Half-closed eyes, sunken cheeks / Bent backs, diseased skins" (9-11). This poem lists the stages of anguish and nightmare that the people are still going through; the poem pities a people condemned to a perilous society, for it is such a society that people lack the kind of a leader that should come to their rescue:

To indifferent leaders they cried,
 Toiling for a right to the broken shanties
 They call a home. Earth tillers. Forsaken creatures.
 Under the whip I found them,
 Impoverished owners of burnt fingers.
 Receptacles of violence and cruelty
 Broods feasted with lies and ugliness.
 Dung receivers. Sweat merchants.
 O land, your dusty roads disown
 Your destitutes [sic]: Mothers, children.
 Agonies flap in graveyards.
 Agonies gnaw at the tropical day.
 Jailers of twisted faces.
 Wielders of mouldy woes. (14-27)

This is graphic enough. Most of the words here are not even cast in a metaphoric mould; their literal meanings stare us in the face, provoking sympathy from us. Notice that the poet's emphasis is on women (mothers) and children, those who are naturally, humanly, weak and vulnerable in a time of war. It is on images of weakness and vulnerability that *Flower Child* largely locates its dissident dirge.

But "Looking at Debris" would seem the last poem of Nduka that so graphically captures the oppressed people in a society. In other words, coming on page thirty-six of the fifty-four-page *Flower Child*, this poem serves as a kind of epilogue to Nduka's preoccupation with openly political engagement in poetry. To explain further, perhaps we should reiterate that there has been no volume like *Flower Child* in Nduka's oeuvre that tackles human conditions with such penetrating images, insistent tone, abiding intensity, and critical concentration. This is not to say after *Flower Child*, Nduka abandons humanism; the point is rather that Nduka, as he says in the essay we earlier quoted, decides to seek another handmaiden, less ideological, less socially demanding, more stylistically and thematically introspective. His poetry after *Flower Child* seeks, embraces, a different vision – one that valorises individual anguish, mystification, disenchantment, epiphanic exploration. In many ways *Flower Child* is foundational: we can discern the latter Nduka in this volume, in the poems that come towards the end of the volume, such as "Forever", "The Reply", "When the Sails Have Come", and the title poem "Flower Child". These poems, in different ways, suggest the direction that the poet Nduka would take having lent his voice to the national dirge on human suffering during the war that might have burdened him all the while. The poet-persona declares in "Forever" that "...I have to go" (4) – the poet Nduka gives his farewell here as he prepares to take leave of not only the war-torn, hopeless country, but also the tradition of poetry begotten of the atmosphere of the war. "I have to go" is repeated five times in the short poem, with emphasis that sounds ominous, and with a finality that comes with these lines:

I have to go
 Not minding the milk of mother's breast
 Not bending to the lure of picketing youths
 Not squinting to the heights of Falling moon. (Capital in the original, 17-

20)

The poet-persona sets his vision abroad. The "milk of mother's breast", a rather metaphorical reference to the blood-like connection between an artist and his nation (in the sense Oguibe considers himself bound to his country by blood), is not worth staying for.⁵ The milk of mother's breast may also refer to the wealth, to the so-called national cake, to use a common parlance in Nigeria, which people aspire to feed from, even if in a corrupt way. But the poet-persona has seen that in spite of the milk from mother's breast the moon has fallen, a strong symbol that calls our attention to the collapse of the Nigerian dream just as soon as the colonial masters left. The poet decides to leave. This is telling in the sense that among the new Nigerian poets among whom we have located Nduka, he is the most, to use Harry Garuba's word, "footloose" (67). He exemplifies the bohemian writer/artist who gets outraged with his nation and decides to go abroad; and he

has distinguished himself by producing volumes of poetry that speak volume of a different kind of anguish, the type that self-exiled writers encounter.

But before Nduka went abroad he published *Second Act*, a volume that does not totally vacate the images of the poor and the brutalised in *Flower Child*, but steadfastly cuts itself out as a prelude to Nduka's nuanced individualism. Very turgid and complex like Soyika's verse, *Second Act*, a very slim volume, contains long poems, which ramble on through conceits, paradoxes, personifications, occasional witticisms, metalepses, and periphrases. The poems have some sense of being grand, being Europeanistic (aspiring to neo-classicism), although they contain certain catachreses that betray a certain *learning* stage in Nduka's writing, especially if these poems are placed side by side with his latter poems that show a maturity in handling metaphors. The city of Lagos, both as a place for Nduka in his last years before going on self-exile and as a symbol of cultural struggle against military oppression, surfaces now and then in this volume. Lagos emerges as a city of post-war trauma for the persona, and for the ordinary people of Nigeria. As would become increasingly clear in Nduka's subsequent exile volumes, personal anguish and public concerns are mingled and poeticised through the same body of idioms to the extent that it is sometimes difficult to differentiate them. The lengthy title poem "Second Act" is exemplary. In this poem are contained diverse issues, personal, national, cultural, and universal. Stylistically barren of the punctuation mark full stop, the poem flows like a stream, with a riotous rhythm, indicating the state of chaos the society finds itself. The persona leads us through this maze of chaos as s/he narrates happenings and describes the society: "After the hate of state its pleasure to wound / its mortifying invasion its arrogant confession / I need once again to see..." (1-3). The state here is the nation, that country torn by war because of the greed of a few persons. The persona asks, without a question mark:

...do you note the
rapes and murders beyond the window sill even
after a war is ended, my sound cannot wait
again where stones hit bells; to no avail do I
separate the cityache and mediaache,
a voice says to you let's halve the rising sun
and leave this ladder of birds to itself. (47-53)

This poem, here, attempts to capture one of the traumatic moments of the post-war life. It would be seen, through a careful reading of his subsequent volumes, that Nduka never really departs the theme of the war, a crisis condition that may have first shaped his poetic vision. And without being loud about it, his poems also indict the leaders, those who did not only benefit from the war situation, but also continue to ruin the country. The poem "In the Bullring" rails against those who in the persona's view have held the nation captive. To show the extent of oppression in the land, the persona declares:

I am afraid to wail
What if my screams get jailed?
I am afraid to run
From the burning stakes within the ropes
Soon the broken mace

Will stand and skip back to life. (13-18)

This fear is shared by all genuine artists and writers in Nigeria under the military regimes. It is such fears that compels artist and writers such as Nduka to go on self-exile. To wail is to express a dirge for what the wailer perceives as a misfortune befalling someone; if the poet is not free to wail for his nation, then he cannot even stand up to face those responsible for putting the nation in that condition of misfortune. But the persona here, like the persona of *Flower Child*, is stubborn, and will persist. S/he declares: “Against the unpardonable outrage / I will rage and never yield” (59-60). This is because “Horrors of slaughter / Blur the range of song / Sorrows of blood / Return woes with ease...” (74-76). Her/his determination culminates in a resounding optimism, one that occasionally penetrates through the dour pictures of Nigeria in Nduka’s poetry:

One day
 Before the inevitable nightfall
 Before the return of storm and thunder
 And beyond the reproaches and beyond the warnings
 The irate stone will visit
 The kings and the palaces. (109-114)

What this poem foresees here is a revolution, as unlikely as it seems, given the extensive portrayal of the brutally weakened people; given the persona’s resolve to leave the nation. If the persona who foresees a revolution takes leave of the society that badly needs this revolution, who then will lead the revolution? The “irate stone” can only be thrown by poets, writers, artists, and social activists, the select few who can muster the courage to confront despotism.

With *The Bremen Poems*, the poet Nduka has escaped despotism but not abandoned his beloved country – and the nation as a site of memory and nostalgia will acutely inform Nduka’s lyricism in exile. The title of this slim volume suggests that Nduka might have found a home in Bremen, a city in Germany. The poems therein, however, explicitly dramatise the tension between home and exile, the intrusive aura of nostalgia, and the doubt that attends a life in a foreign land. There is an obvious shift in style in Nduka’s poetry beginning with *The Bremen Poems* (see Oha 2005). The poems become shorter, the lines shorter; and the metaphors, growing purer, organise themselves with sparks of intensity. Since *The Bremen Poems*, Nduka’s poems have assumed a riddling level of brevity, weighty with paradoxes, and oxymoronic witticisms. They grow farther away from referential exigencies, foregrounding their images and sonic essences rather than directing our attention to any semantic mapping. Perhaps the other quality of this poetry is its tendency to become universal, a quality that we may attribute to Nduka’s contact with poetry from other societies, and his desire to reach people of other societies. With this stylistic direction comes a thematic expansiveness or re-prioritisation, all playing around questions of identity. Although latent in *Flower Child*, and *Second Act*, it is in *The Bremen Poems*, and subsequent volumes, that Nduka turns his attention to erotic themes, very individualistic, which are capable of revealing the personal odyssey an artist. The first poem in *The Bremen Poems* betrays this shift in thematic focus:

Even in so divine a time
she screams and dreams

She walks on the freeway
where everyone walks

Everywhere in the ballroom
of the mind you find her

But where nights void
her legtraps, no man comes.

This, even for the persona, sounds strange and it reveals the freedom and its concomitant loneliness in a society so different from hers/his. This is a sharp contrast from the society where a woman cannot dream, cannot even scream, and is not free to walk where “everyone walks”; and for a woman to be found in “ballroom” of the mind amounts to immorality. The case is different here, and in this collection Nduka crafts poems to dramatise this primal disparity. For instance, in the poem “To Your Cigarette”, Nduka demonstrates that the European woman with her cigarette seems to wall herself against the worries of the world; he says of her “no pain bloodies your lips” (3), a phenomenon that is common in his own society. While I agree with readings such as Oha’s that poets’ attachments to places are often expressed through erotic images; and that for Nduka, “imagining the space as female becomes particularly a revelation of the desire to possess and be possessed by the exile space” (8), I find it more useful to see the referent of Nduka’s body of amorous images not as the physical place or space of exile (so that the love is imagined as existing between the poet and the city), but as a collective of experiences which the poet has had with different individuals. For Nduka experience has no boundary. His erotic images, such as we encounter in the volume *Heart’s Field* (with a photo of a naked Nduka as front cover), undermine the claim that his love trope stops at the level of his attachment to a city or exile space.

Beyond the open surprise at the different life that the poet now has to live, there is a deep sense of nostalgia articulated in such poems as “I Speak of River”, “Note to a Season”, “Far from this Sadness”, and others in *The Bremen Poems*. In “Like the Dark Sky”, we encounter this nostalgia:

Like the dark sky
hungering for stars,
my lips long for
the flute of wine’s fire;

for a sun
to disrobe desire on the wire.

This nostalgic longing has become a strong theme running through Nduka’s poetry volumes written in exile. The sense of nostalgia and memory, especially as powerfully articulated in *Chiaroscuro*, and *If Only the Night*, implies that the link between Nduka

and his nation is not severed, and in his growing poetic dexterity he seems to even better versify the agony of his nation more than some openly political poets. The second poem in *Chiaroscuro*, for instance, is an example of Nduka's continual reflection on the question of nationhood in Nigeria:

And Lord Lugard named the Virginland.
 This babel of a Virgin. Oh what knowledge,
 what imagination from his sweetheart's letter
 roused his heart and bade him blend
 the streams, the roads and forests into one.
 A feat. A marvellous feat. Clinched with
 gatling guns, stony codes, deceitful treaties.
 And so Lurgard paused here shimmering
 in Her Majesty's badge of authority,
 summoned the kings and regents of the land
 to a dinner they dared not refuse.

And served them a dish of broken cowries. Broken land.

This evocative piece of satirical critique reveals Nduka's political theme carefully interwoven with his diverse individualistic thematic thrusts. Nduka's historicism here gives us the impression that the poet has his sense of history about his nation, and he is as much concerned with what it has become today as any poet writing in Nigeria. This comes through as a natural condition for Nduka because he left the country in the 1990s when he believed the country was a pack of "broken cowries"; the country is still, for him and others, whether inside or outside Nigeria, a broken land. It is hard for the luxury of exile, if there is any, to divert the poet's attention from this situation of brokenness.

Concluding Remarks

The concern in this essay has been to point out, through close reading, the discourse of nationhood evident in Nduka's poetry, especially in the earlier collections. *Flower Child* and *Second Act*, as we hope to have demonstrated, bear the mark of a poet who raises a dissident voice against what he considers the cruelty unleashed on the common people during the Nigeria-Biafra civil war. Nduka's personas in these early poems consistently use the pronoun "we" to collectivise the feelings of those who suffer in the war, both from the Biafran and from the Nigerian sides. Beyond that, the poet-persona also takes an unmistakable stand in which he claims to "rebel" against the establishment. This is precisely where his poetics embraces the nation as a concrete space, despoiled, in need of rebirth. But as we have also pointed out, even in exile, and while growing remotely from the dominant thematic space of Nigerian writing, his poetry uses memory and nostalgia to interrogate the Nigerian nation-state.

Notes

1. Alter-Native tradition is used here, following Funso Aiyejina (1988), to refer to the post-Okigbo generation of poets whose major voices are Niyi Osundare, Odia Ofeimun and Tanure Ojaide. Their poetry, emerging after the Nigerian civil war, is typified by a concern with the plight of the ordinary people and a poetics that favours orality.
2. Nduka may not be alone, because this deviance, so articulated in his essay, is latent in the poetry of, among others, Maik Nwosu, Obi Nwankama, and Toyin Adewale.
3. See, for instance, recent volumes such as Musa Idris Okphanachi's *The Eaters of the Living* (2009).
4. To pursue what it deemed an all-inclusive policy of reconstruction, the General Yakubu Gowon regime declared that the Nigeria-Biafra war produced no victor, nor vanquished.
5. See Olu Oguibe's poetry collection, *A Gathering Fear* (1992).

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