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Recommended Citation

Azuonye, Chukwuma, "'The Monstrous Anger of the Guns': Critical Commentary on the War Poems of Gabriel Okara" (2011). *Africana Studies Faculty Publication Series*. 10.

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‘The Monstrous Anger of the Guns’: Critical Commentary on the War Poems of Gabriel Okara

[Work in Progress]

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*What passing-bells for those who die as cattle
Only the monstrous anger of the guns.
Only the stuttering rifles's rapid rattle
Can patter out their hasty orisons.
No mockeries now for them; no prayers nor bells.
Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs.—
The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;
The bugles calling them from sad shires.*

[Wilfred Owen, “Anthem for Doomed Youth,” 1920]

Introduction

The year, 1966, was the *annus horribilis* of postcolonial Nigerian politics. The first *coup d'état* which overthrew in the country's First Republic on January 15, 1966, was at first hailed as a “miracle of thunder.”¹ But it soon turned sour when the flames of dissention were fanned by conspiracy theories (fomented by a powerful, Northern, Hausa-Fulani, Islamic group known as the Kaduna Mafia) which suggested that the coup was nothing more than an Igbo ethnic coup. The coup was in fact championed by five young majors led by the ebullient Igbo Major, Patrick Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu (1937-1967) with three fellow Igbo officers² as his key accomplices. Only one member of the group, Major Adewale Ademoyega (1935-2007), was a non-Igbo of Yoruba ethnicity. Nevertheless, the coup was immensely popular and everywhere in the country. The disillusionment and despair brought about by the graft, corruption and violence by which the country was plagued from the moment of its independence from Britain on October 1, 1960, was quickly replaced by a new spirit of optimism, confidence and national pride ushered in by the revolution. But with strong support from the former colonial ruler (the British), the Kaduna Mafia, felt empowered by the semblance of partiality in the lopsided killing of national leaders in the coup in favor of the Igbo leadership, and persisted in their dissention. While the Prime Minister of the federation, Alhaji Abubakar Tafawa Balewa (a Hausa),³ the Premier of Northern Nigeria, Alhaji Ahmadu Bello, (a Fulani),⁴ and the Premier of Western Nigeria, Chief S. L. Akintola (a Yoruba)⁵ were killed in the coup, the Igbo Premiers of Eastern and Mid-Western Nigeria, Dr. Michael Okpara⁶ and Dr. Dennis Osababay⁷ respectively, and the Igbo Ceremonial President of Nigeria, Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe⁸ (who was conveniently on a Caribbean cruise at the time), were left unscathed. The growing feeling that the coup was deliberated master-minded to enthrone Igbo ethnic domination of the country was heightened by the emergence, albeit by default (as the most senior officer in the armed forces), of an Igbo, Major-General J. T. U. Aguiyi-Ironsi,⁹ as the Head of the Federal Military Government and Commander-in-Chief of the Nigerian Armed Forces. The scenario was further exacerbated, in May 1966, when Ironsi, against all rationality and advice, promulgated an infamous decree, known as “Decree 34,” abolishing the three regions of the country (the foundation of Nigerian federalism), instantly turning Nigeria into a unitary state in which the erstwhile autonomous regions were brusquely renamed “groups of provinces.” The alarm signals raised by the proclamation led to a counter-coup, on July 29, in which Ironsi himself was assassinated along with over two hundred and fifty other officers of Eastern—mainly Igbo—origins, who happened at the time to have dominated the officer cadre of the army by reason of their higher Western education and training. Between July and October 1966, several cycles of massacres in the North and West, of Igbo officers and men took place and by the end of the year the blood bath resulted in over

30,000 civilians dead and over 2 million displaced or maimed. This bloodbath triggered off an irreversible populist movement against the idea of Nigeria. Students, teachers, workers, intellectuals, traders, market women, and other groups across the Eastern Nigeria demonstrated endlessly for secession for Nigeria. Attempts to resolve the impasse, which led to a summit between Gowon and Ojukwu, under the chairmanship of the Ghanaian Head of State, General Ankrah, at Aburi, near Accra, failed. As popular pressure mounted, Eastern Nigeria was declared the Republic of Biafra, on May 30, 1967, under the leadership of the Oxford-educated historian from a rich business family, Lt-Col. Emeka Odumegwu Ojukwu.¹⁰ On July 6, 1967, the Nigerian Federal Government under Lt-Col. Yakubu Gowon¹¹ ordered a “police action” to return Biafra to the Nigerian federation. But this action was soon to blow up into a three year shooting war that ended with the surrender of Biafra on January 12, 1970, after a sad and senseless war that took several more lives in battle and by way of starvation and famine.

A member of the Ijo-speaking minority from the Niger Delta, many of whose members denounced secession, Okara was under pressure to denounce Biafra as well as and to creep for solace into a welcoming ethnic snug-hole. But his sense of outrage over the pogrom of 1966 and the unjust war of July 1967 against fellow embattled and blockaded Easterners would not allow him to do so. A pacifist to the bones, he was staunchly opposed to the federal use of force against defenseless Biafrans whose kith and kin had been hounded and butchered with wreckless abandon in the pogrom of July-October, 1966. This outrage is expressed in his first war poem, “Leave us Alone,” published under the Imprint of the East Regional Government Press, Enugu, in December 1967:

Though our women children born unborn
 Done to death by inhuman hands
 Bespattered with blood of praying men
 In rooms and worshipping in church
 And chapel are crying for human vengeance,
 There's no vengeance in our heart.

Leave us alone

Leave us also in our home, our land
 To heal our wounds and tend orphans
 Widows the maimed and let time erase
 Your blind hate and reveal
 To you the terrible deed of your hands;
 But this, you say will not be
 For, in the silence of the aftermath,
 You dared not face the thirty-thousand cries, the cries
 Of the children you did to death in your madness!

And so like one who drinks, drinks, and drinks
 To-deaden truth he cannot face,
 You brushed aside pleading sanity
 With hands red with blood to still kill
 And plunder in our homes, in our land
 To mute pleas of your conscience.
 Yet this deed, this war you wage, you say
 Is in the name of unity
 What unity, what unity?
 Is it that you've so defiled, profaned?

Or unity with our bones in crossless graves?

Throughout the Biafran War of Independence from Nigeria (1967-1970), Gabriel Okara remained a committed Biafran. But he was neither an iconoclastic secessionist (determined to wantonly wreck any well-founded order, including the subaltern state of Nigeria) nor a romantic revolutionary (dreaming of

a postcolonial African utopia rising like a phoenix from the ashes of the failed postcolonial state of Nigeria), he was a Biafran at a higher level of philosophical and humanist reasoning as eloquently argued throughout his poem, "Leave us Alone." "Leave us Alone" is also about violence, militarism and the death of the human conscience; and it sets the tone for several other themes and modes of expression covered in the present article, among them: commitment, nationalism and pacifism as they pertain to his Biafran experience; modern warfare and the deleterious effects of weapons of mass destruction; death and human suffering in time of war; displacement, separation and exile; hunger, starvation and disease of malnutrition; the social and psychological wounds of war; the interface between religious faith and existentialist anguish; bystander apathy and the indifference of the global community; and the toll of questionable international humanitarianism, dehumanizing interventions and neo-colonialist conspiracies. On each of these, and many other subjects, Okara composed scores and presumably more poems at various phases of the war which he routinely shared in various poetry reading events over chicken, ugba, beer or palmwine, at Aba, Umuahia and Ogwa, with those of us of the younger generation who were lucky enough to count him as a friend and father figure in the Oduke Community of Artists (see Azuonye, 1992).

As Michael Echeruo (b. 1937), a fellow first generation, post-independence Nigerian poet and retiring William Safire Professor of Modern Letters at Syracuse, recalls in his Seventieth Birthday tribute to Okara (Echeruo, 1992), among "the many fine poems he had written during and about that war" was one "poem that would have served as the Biafran National anthem, had Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe's offer of Claude McKay's "If We Must Die," set to a tune of Jean Sibelius, not been imposed at midnight." Okara's submission begins with the lines, "O fatherland, we raise our hands/To hail thee," combines conventional patriotic tropes befitting a national anthem and the heart-felt humanist celebration of the human spirit, qualities which would have made the Biafran anthem as enduring as poetry and as a testament to the unconquerable soul of humankind as the two national anthems authored by fellow lyricist, Rabindranath Tagore,¹² for both India and Bangladesh.

Like Wilfred Owen,¹³ Siegfried Sassoon,¹⁴ and many other great lyrical poets of the First and Second World Wars, Okara's war poems are the testaments of a humanist and pacifist caught in the horrendous disruptions of the normal routine of human existence by "the pity of war" and "the war's disgrace" on the dignity of humankind.

1. Violence and Its Ethnic Cleansing Roots: 'Leave Us Alone'

The first major theme of Okara's war poetry is violence. The lyrics mirror various the vectors of violence in modern warfare, especially in relation to war as a species of communal madness (both in the sense of rash or thoughtless behavior and of severe psychiatric disorder) which is invariably betokened of the death of the human conscience. Accordingly, war poetry is often a record of the directions, magnitude and consequences of senseless violence. In many ways the Nigeria-Biafra war epitomizes the vectors of violence in modern warfare in all its lunatic and unconscionable forms. Its characteristic genocidal pattern is rooted in the political crises of 1966 which gave birth to the war, as mirrored in Okara first war poem, "Leave Us Alone" (1967), written in direct response to the massacre of Eastern Nigerians in Northern and Western Nigeria in 1966 and the case for secession that inheres from this ethnic cleansing holocaust:

Leave us alone in our home, our land
 To heal our wounds and tend orphans
 Widows the maimed and let time erase
 Your blind hate and reveal
 To you the terrible deed of your hands;
 But this, you say will not be
 For, in the silence of the aftermath,
 You dared not face the thirty-thousand cries, the cries
 Of the children you did to death in your madness!

The “the thirty-thousand cries” heard in the lyric are those of the estimated number of lives claimed by the genocide. The Biafra-Nigeria war has often been described as “a sad and senseless war.” Rooted in “blind hate” between supposed African brothers and sisters bound by fate to share the same geographical space as compatriots in a new nation, the war is portrayed throughout “Leave Us Alone” as a severe communal disorder that combines features of psychiatric breakdown and drunkenness with a deleterious effect, either way, on the ability of the moral sense (the “conscience”) to distinguish right from wrong:

And so like one who drinks, drinks, and drinks
 To deaden truth he cannot face,
 You brushed aside pleading sanity
 With hands red with blood to still kill
 And plunder in our homes, in our land
 To mute pleas of your conscience.

Because war is, for Okara, understandable solely in terms of “madness” and the muting of the pleas of the “conscience,” its distance from the “truth” cannot be understood in terms of any epistemology or any system that engages in the rational study of the nature of knowledge, in particular its foundations, scope, and validity. War is totally lacking in rationality. To that extent, the slogan of Nigerian Federal troops (“to keep Nigeria one is a task that must be done”)—echoed in the lines that follows—is absolutely devoid of meaning:

Yet this deed, this war you wage, you say
 Is in the name of unity
 What unity, what unity?
 Is it that you've so defiled, profaned?

Or unity with our bones in crossless graves?

In the closing line of the above extract, Okara sneaks in an important allusion to “crossless graves”—graves not marked by the Christian symbol of the cross. This points to Islamic Jihadic fundamentalism of the Northern Nigerian elite (the Kaduna Mafia) as the anti-Christian enemy hell-bent on butchering Christian Biafrans as part of its well-known agenda “to dip the Koran in the sea”! Though the angst is implied rather than stated, not even Okara the pacifist can contain his emotions in the face of crass irrationality of this kind. He thus finds himself exploding with uncompromising expletives (“No!”) and militantly (albeit uncharacteristically) relishing in “violent” revenge:

No! not when virile blood still flows
 In our veins. And so we've dealt out blows for blow
 And violent deaths for death of each of our kin.

But the revenge envisioned would be heroic rather than militaristic. It would be an instrument of retributive justice in keeping with “Heaven’s/Design design in creation” (a hope in which Okara deftly fuses the moral tenets of two religious faiths—Christian science and traditional African—that seem hybridized in his spiritual unconscious):

And now you feel chilling hands of death
 Creeping slowly, but steadily,
 Up your spine of clay. Now you hear weeping, moaning and
 wailing.
 But this has no remorse brought to your heart.
 It instead has increased your craze
 And you scour the world with sedative falsehood
 For accomplices in your hideous crimes, crimes

Which have numbed the conscience of even those
We admired most into impotence and shameless servitude.

But falsehood never endures, never
Stands immortal truth. There lies our strength,
Though we fight alone as those who've fought
Before for freedom which burned and ever
Will burn in the yearning hearts of those deprived
Of this sacred right. And we will surely win
As those before had won. It's Heaven's
Divine design in creation; it's a law sublime.
Know therefore, you who the world suborned,

Throwing up a montage of images of illusion and delusion from postcolonial global politics and mythology (“rainbow bridge” and “Tantalus”), Okara appeals to the Federal Military Government of Nigeria to “stop this war” which, by all accounts, it “cannot sustain” even with its “Borrowed men and arms by palsied/Conscience lent” (a reference to the mercenaries and other agencies of British and other neocolonialist powers believed to be behind the attack on Biafra):

Know you that your venture is one
You cannot sustain even with your
Borrowed men and arms by palsied
Conscience lent, and not withstanding your daily
Illusions of victory
Victory illusory as rainbow bridge.
It's beyond your reach as water was to Tantalus.

Okara’s “rainbow bridge” (1967) is too early to have been inspired by the apocryphal 1980-1992 poetic prose composition with that title which refers to a fantasy land, close to heaven and similar to the Bifröst bridge in Norse Mythology, where dead pets can romp and play and be reunited with their owners. But its association with “illusory victory” may suggest a colorful and magnificent mirage, probably from the author’s native Ijo mythology, that lures the romantic quester into an endless journey to unattainable boon. More readily tractable is the meaning of the allusion to Tantalus. In Greek mythology, Tantalus (Gk. Τάνταλος, *Tántalos*) is a hero with parallels in several mythologies across the world, best known for his cruel punishment by the gods in Tartarus or the land of the dead, “to stand in a pool of water beneath a fruit tree with low branches, with the fruit always eluding his grasp, and the water always receding before he could take a drink.” In this appropriation of one the classical tropes of the European imperium, Okara attacks both the rationality and dependence mentality behind Nigeria’s hope for victory over Biafra—a hope that (from his perspective) underestimates the strength of Biafran nationalism and resolve. Declaring the war against Biafra an “unholy war,” he asserts that it can only result in the vain squandering of the blood of “youth we knew by name and loved as kins” and nothing else but self-destruction:

So stop this war, this unholy war
Which serves naught but vanity,
Your consuming vanity, vanity
That battens on fresh blood of youth
You send to death by our reluctant hands;
Youth we knew by name and loved as kins.
Each such youth that dies is a bloody shroud
You are winding round your bewildered self,
You will be your own assassin

“Leave us Alone” concludes with a final appeal (“That's all we ask of you and of the world”) that turns on the poet’s nationalist and pacifist commitment to post-independence nation-building (to “built the land—/The land of our dreams, and of freedom,Justice, Hope, Opportunity”):

We have no vengeance, no hatred, in our hearts,
 Though you harried us out of land we built and loved.
 All we ask now is leave us alone in our home.

But if this war you do not cease.
 A war which has the sanctity of
 Truth defiled and with vanity
 You soar high with soldered wings,
 Closing your ears to sanity's plaintive call,
 O modem Icarus!
 By the sun, the Rising Sun of Biafra
 You will, like your mentor, come to ignominious fall!

Leave us alone in our Fatherland
 Leave us alone to built the land—
 The land of our dreams, and of freedom,
 Justice, Hope, Opportunity—
 Where no one will ever be oppressed, suborned;
 Leave us alone to build our homes
 And raise our families in peace and plenty
 Leave us alone

That's all we ask of you and of the world.

Only a very thin line of lyricism divides Okara's verse and the Biafran propaganda of the day as ably articulated in daily newstalks ably read by Okokon Ndem over Voice of Biafra from July 1967 to January 1970. One would have expected the African intelligentsia of the day to pay heed and give some serious consideration to his delicately crafted plea, especially in the light of the high and excellent seriousness of his postcolonial nationalist commitment as expressed in his much-admired earlier lyrics. But the plea was completely ignored not only by the militaristic Federal Government of Nigeria in its lunatic pursuit of the invidious agenda of the neocolonialist forces under whose shadow it waged the war. Okara's second collection of verse, *The Dreamer, His Vision* (2004), written over thirty-four years after the defeat of Biafra, is an attestation of the tragic verity of his 1967 prophecy in "Leave Us Alone." Today, Nigeria remains stymied in a triumph of disorder directly arising from its "unholy war" against Biafra.. Not only did the Nigerian state become its "own assassin," it also, at the same time, succeeded in suppressing the revolutionary emergence of what would have become the first and only truly independent postcolonial African state of the twentieth-century!

2. Sudden Death and Human Suffering: 'Suddenly the Air Cracks'

One of the most invidious features of modern warfare is the enormity of the arsenals of weapons of mass destruction accumulated, mobilized and unleashed not only against the armies of opponents but against defenseless and unarmed populations. In this regard, the Nigerian war against Biafra is among one of the most brutal of modern wars. Particularly invidious is Okara's personification of "Planes", in his first poem about the air bombardment of civilians, "The Silent Voice," as venomous monsters

spitting bombs and bullets at Truth—
 Leaving mangled bones and homes (a mission completed)!

In "Suddenly the Air Cracks," these images of death from the sky become more pervasive, intense and ominous:

Suddenly the air cracks
 with striking cracking rockets
 guffaw of bofors stuttering LMGs

jets diving shooting glasses dropping
breaking from lips people diving
under beds nothing bullets flashing fire
striking writhing bodies and walls—

Suddenly there's silence—
And a thick black smoke
rises sadly into the sky as the jets
flyaway in gruesome glee—

I personally witnessed the birth of this poem. I was visiting Gabriel Okara's bungalow—an unfinished house in the middle of Umuahia, which became the capital of Biafra after the fall of Aba in 1968. That dreary December afternoon, fleets of Soviet MiG jets flown by Egyptian pilots, sometimes so low that you could see their faces, came in rhythmic relays that made you feel that it would certainly be your turn next round to join become one of the piles of mangled flesh and bones. Okara seemed oblivious of my presence, yet his humanity encompassed my presence as he focused on the rhythm of violence and its toll on human hopes and aspirations:

Then a babel of emotions, voices
mothers fathers calling children
and others joking shouting 'where's your bunker?'
laughing teasing across streets
and then they gaze in groups without sadness
at the sad smoke curling skywards—

The emergent oscillation between violent “ack ack flacks” of diving jet and intermediate moments of silence

Again suddenly, the air cracks
above rooftops cracking striking
rockets guffawing bofors stuttering LMGs
ack ack flacks diving jets
diving men women dragging children
seeking shelter not there breathless
hugging gutters walls houses
crumbling rumbling thunder
bombs hearts thumping heads low
under beds moving wordless lips—

Then suddenly there's silence—
and the town heaves a deep sigh
as the jets again flyaway and the guns
one by one fall silent and the gunners
dazed gaze at the empty sky, helpless—

And then voices shouting calling
voices, admiring jet's dive
pilots' bravery blaming gunners
praising gunners laughing people
wiping sweat and dust from hair
neck and shirt with trembling hands.
Things soon simmer to normal
hum and rhythm as danger passes
and the streets are peopled
with strolling men and women
boys and girls on various errands
walking talking laughing smiling and

children running with arms
 stretched out in front playing
 at diving jets zoom past
 unsmiling bombing rocketing shooting
 with mouths between startled feet.

This also passes as dusk descends
 and a friendly crescent moon
 appears where the jets were.
 Then simmering silence—the day passes—
 And the curling black smoke,
 the sadless hearts and the mangled
 bodies stacked in the morgue
 become memorials of this day.

3. War as ‘Cancerous Growth’

With the intensification of the wanton destruction of human life by means of the weapons of mass destruction represented by the bombs and bullets unleashed from the now inclement sky, Okara wrote in despair a brief telling lyric, “Cancerous Growth” (on December 13, 1968), after the series of raids that provoked “Suddenly the Air Cracks”):

The noon sun
 shrivels tender buds
 today's wanton massacre
 burns up tender words
 and from the ashes
 hate is growing, forcing its way
 like mushroom through yielding soil
 But it's an alien growth
 a cancer that destroys its host.

True indeed, the Nigerian Federal war against Biafra metastasized as an “alien growth” of “wanton massacre” born of un-African hate “forcing its way” out of the “yielding soil” like “a cancer that destroys its host. The toll of death and human suffering arising from the unleashing of weapons of mass destruction is one of the recurrent tragedies of modern warfare. Not surprisingly Okara’s war poetry is dominated by vividly sensory images of death and human suffering.

4. Displacement and Separation: ‘I Am Only A Name’ (Originally ‘Expendable Name’)

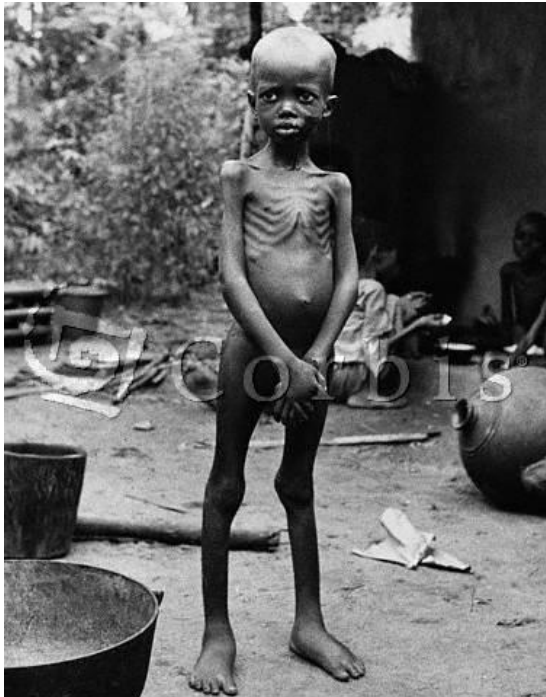
The displacement and separation of members of various communities and families and the break-up of bonds of friendship, love and marriage in the wake of the advance of enemy troops and their war machines are among the recurrent themes of modern war poetry. Often, the displaced and separated pale into oblivion or percolate, as hapless exiles at the mercy of relief and rehabilitation charities from their disturbed homes in refugee camps.

Like similar camps in several other war zones such as Somalia, Eritrea, Rwanda, etc., Biafran refugee camps are pictures of indescribable toll of hunger, starvation and disease. From the onset of the war on July 6, 1967, the secessionist Republic of Biafra was subjected to a land, sea and air blockade which insured that neither food nor medicine entered the territory. For a while civilians and soldiers thrived on the vast reserve of agricultural products from the great markets of Igboland and the productive farm settlements set up the East Regional Government of Nigeria’s First Republic under the dynamic leadership of its Premier, Dr. Michael Iheonukara Okpara. But by the end of the first year of warfare, around July 1968, nothing remained of this reserve of food and goods and Biafra was forced to become completely dependent on relief from international humanitarian agencies such as the Catholic Caritas International, the Protestant World Council of Churches Relief Agency and the British Oxfam.

But, with one of the highest densities of population in the world, no amount of humanitarian relief from any of these sources proved sufficient to stave off the toll of hunger, starvation and the disease of malnutrition Kwashiorkor, glossed in some dictionaries as "a serious disease that mainly affects children in Africa and is caused by a lack of protein in the food that they eat." Among the symptoms of the disease, which are graphically recaptured in Okara's imagery, are swollen or club feet, etiolated or yellowish skin, hollow and sunken eyes, and unnaturally frizzy hair. Gripping pictures of refugee children afflicted with this disease is evoked in several poems, such as "I am Only a Name" (originally published as "Expendable Name" in *The Fisherman's Invocation*):

I am only a name
an expendable name
not of the human fold;
and while collapsing children
gasp their last breath
by waysides and mothers'
saltless tears form streams
on my face; and while
I am drenched with stench
of blood and rotting flesh

I am only an expendable name
thrown back and forth
in ritual jokes in corridors
of sacrificial shrines
and not for your ears
for that would break the spell
which makes me only a name
as we stagger, my young and I
with nothing between skin and bone
into the gathering darkness.



Starving Biafran Boy

Beyond the physical waste of starved bodies afflicted with Kwashiorkor, Okara's war poetry offers vivid images of other kinds of wanton physical waste arising from the reckless deployment of weapons of mass destruction.

5. Immorality and Corruption: 'Lady and Her Wig'

The wounds of the war were not only physical but social. Beyond the modalities of displacement, separation and exile already discussed above, the social wounds of the war include various forms and manifestations of *corruption* (both in the sense of extreme immorality or depravity and of dishonest exploitation of power for personal gain) which set in as the toll of economic blockade mounted with growing scarcity of goods and services and sky-rocketing inflation) turning the optimism with which the war began into pessimism. The typical ironies of the situation are aptly recaptured in Chinua Achebe's short story, "Girls at War":

With the incipience of corruption, the Biafran war of independence which began as a war of national survival was rapidly transformed into a war of personal survival in which both civilians and soldiers abandoned the common course and even elementary sympathies for the suffering of fellow Biafrans in a perverse competition for mere acquisitiveness—of relief meant for the poor, displaced, sick and old and of material goods from overseas, no matter the cost in morality and ethics, a thoroughgoing corruption which turned many erstwhile idealistic young women committed to revolutionary change into whores (called win-the-war-girls) who, like the heroine of Achebe's short story, "Girls at War," stood ready at a beckon to sleep with any man with even the promise of access to the desired material goods.

In "Lady and Her Wig" (written in 1969), Okara recaptures the depth of spiritual and moral nullity created by the entrenched obsession in corrupted Biafran mentality with material goods (symbolized by "wig", "shoes" and "dress" from Paris, Abidjan, Gabon, Lisbon—Biafran main links with the outside world):

She talked of Paris
Abidjan, Gabon, Lisbon,—
This lady of the black wig,
With the latest in shoes and gown!

"You are well turned out, lady."
Thank you,"she said and then
"The wig is from Paris."
I said yes.
"The shoes from Gabon."
"The dress from Lisbon."
I said yes
"You are not looking!" she screamed,
Seeing my eyes turned elsewhere at thighs,
A boy's thighs with skin hanging
And hands dangling palsied by Kwashiorkor
Slowly lifting his swollen feet
To move a step, by a painful, weary step,
Into a path in the forest!

"Lady and Her Wig" is a fine lyrical vignette that can be interpreted from a wide diversity of perspectives, each revealing its complexity. It is first and foremost a dramatic poem spotlighting the corrupt insensitivity of some materialistic people to the wartime suffering of others. Using the technique of witty character contrast based on innuendo, it unveils venality by dint of an indirect remark or description of a gesture that carries a suggestion of impropriety. It can also be analyzed as a narrative poem, spotlighting the corrupt insensitivity of some materialistic people to the wartime suffering of

others, using the technique of witty character contrast based on litotes (a figure of speech comprising a deliberate understatement, often expressed negatively, as in "I am not unmindful of your devotion"). Thirdly, it can be analyzed as a humorous poem, spotlighting the corrupt insensitivity of some materialistic people to the wartime suffering of others, using the technique of witty character contrast highlighted by anticlimax (i.e. an unsatisfying event that follows an exciting, dramatic, or unusual series of events).

6. Post-Traumatic Stress: 'Metaphor For a War'

Of the psychological wounds of the war, perhaps by far the most palpable in Okara's war poetry is Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome (PTSS) or Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (a severe anxiety disorder that can develop after exposure to any event that results in psychological trauma). This syndrome is vividly evoked and contextualized in "Metaphor for a War" (written ten years after the cessation of the shooting war) In Okara's "Metaphor for a War," the frail female character who is struggling to eke out a living by cracking palm kernels (a traditional Ijo and Igbo expression for extreme poverty and suffering) finds herself suddenly re-living the painful memories of war depicted in the above lines. These memories are reminiscent of the war-time poem ("Suddenly the Air Cracks") about a prolonged air raid.:

There she sat
 In the dust of a field,
 Head drooping like limp leaves,
 And lifts a little stone
 With little fingers,
 Skin shrunken to the bones,
 To break a palm fruit nut
 To stay malignant hunger
 While others of her kind
 A short distance away, weakly
 Played but with not a smile,
 Not a sound, from sagging lips
 As they tottered ungainly
 With the weight of their heads'
 And swollen stomachs—
 Sound was dead in a field of children!

The central character of the poem is a poor woman (with "head drooping like limp leaves", "little fingers" and "skin shrunken to the bones"), who, several years after the war is still struggling to pick up and put together the broken pieces of her life—a struggle symbolized by her stressful lifting of "a little stone" to "break a palm fruit nut" to "stay malignant hunger." Her penury is exacerbated by the presence "short distance away" of "others of her kind" (fellow ex-Biafrans) still tottering "ungainly/With the weight of their heads/And swollen stomachs" (the unrelieved physical wounds of the war). Rekindling traumatic memories of human suffering in Biafra, she "suddenly" slips in Stanza 2 into an emotional illness or anxiety disorder of the kind that is classified PTSD in which the sufferer re-experiences a traumatic event, in this case of the ubiquitous air raids by which human survival was constantly threatened throughout the war:

Then suddenly—screams!
 Screams clinging to bursting
 Rockets and bombs
 As MIGS whistled gaily away
 Cutting a path of death—gloating death!

But there she still sat—

Shaken only by spasms
 Of a whimper, a two broken
 Streams of tears rolled
 On to her distended stomach
 As she slowly rolled on her side
 Over the widening pool
 Of her blood and her tears,
 With not a sound as if in quiet sleep—

Although this condition has likely existed since human beings have endured trauma, PTSD has only been recognized as a formal diagnosis since 1980. However, it was called by different names as early as the American Civil War, when combat veterans were referred to as suffering from "soldier's heart." In World War I, symptoms that were generally consistent with this syndrome were referred to as "combat fatigue." Soldiers who developed such symptoms in World War II were said to be suffering from "gross stress reaction," and many troops in Vietnam who had symptoms of what is now called PTSD were assessed as having "post-Vietnam syndrome." PTSD has also been called "battle fatigue" and "shell shock."

7. Healing the Social Wounds of War: 'Waiting For Her Son'

In "Waiting for Her Son" (written in September 31, 1993, twenty-three years after the end of the war), Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder appears to go into reserve gear when a mother from the poet's own Ijo minority ethnicity, filled with hate for the Igbo on account of the death of her son in the Biafran war, is liberated by an epiphany—a sudden intuitive leap of understanding, especially through an ordinary but striking occurrence, in this case a wish-fulfillment fantasy dream of the return of her son:

She's been waiting for her son,
 These twenty years she's been waiting,
 Sitting on sand, at the waterside,
 Since the drowning of the fleeting rising sun!

He went to war, jubilant,
 To fight the Biafran 'rebels' he said
 Who had pillaged his riverside village!

He swore he would be brave and vigilant;
 But twenty years have gone, wearily gone,
 And tides have ebbed and flowed,
 Making her wrapper wet and dry
 Where she sits waiting to welcome her son,

The phrase "Biafran 'rebels'—is from the description of Biafran troops in Federal Nigerian aide of the conflict and in the international media as "rebels." Members of the riverian Ijo nation bore enormous animosity against the Biafrans, often for imaginary crimes against their peoples and property such as the present mother's imaginary recollection of her "brave and valiant" dead son sauntering forth heroically "to fight the Biafran rebels /who had pillage his riverside village." But, after twenty years of nursing her imaginary animosity against the Biafrans, the reality of her true situation in post-war Nigeria dawns on her. tides have ebbed and flowed/ Making her wrapper wet and dry. Where she sits waiting to welcome her son." Nothing has changed. In fact, "twenty years/ Since the drowning of the Rising Sun!" (the Rising Sun, being the symbol of the Biafran revolution and a metonymy for Biafra) the self-sacrifice of her son has brought no palpable improvement to her circumstances:

She's been waiting for twenty years
 Since the drowning of the Rising Sun!
 Today she's lying on her back
 Half awash in the river

And wavelets moving up and down her feet.
 A smile of joy lightens her face,
 And a look of recognition fixed on sightless eyes
 With arms resting on her bosom!

She has, at last, seen her 'boy'

A thorough understanding of the sub-text of this epiphany is necessary for a proper understanding of the traumatized woman's epiphany. First of all, the woman is "lying on her back/ Half awash in the river" with "wavelets moving up and down her feet" (a common idiom derived from Ijo for existentialist vicissitudes of life as dramatized in Okara's poem, *The Fisherman's Invocation*, and John Pepper Clark's play, *The Raft*). Secondly, she is now blind, as the reference to her "sightless eyes" clearly indicate. Taken together with the earlier imagery of abject penury and neglect by Nigeria, the hopes invested in the self-sacrifice of her son and animosity against Biafra has been misplaced. He disappointment is shared in common with many a Niger delta people who sided with the Federal Military Government of Nigeria against Biafra only to discover that, like the exploitative multinational corporation drilling for abundant oil and gas resources of the region, the Federal Government does not have their interest at heart. Poet and playwright, Ken Saro-Wiwa (1941-1995), who defected from Biafra to serve the Federal Military Government as the Administrator of Bonny after that city was overrun by Federal Forces, was hanged on November 10, 1995, for engaging, in his capacity as the president of the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP), in nationalist advocacy of minority rights in the context of radical opposition to neo-colonialist, multinational exploitation of the petroleum resources of the Niger Delta without any compensation for the inhabitants whose ecology has been ravaged since the first oil rig in the area was opened in 1957.¹⁵ Against this background, the epiphany or sudden burst of understanding experienced by the blind woman of the poem turns on the oxymoron of this victim's "look of recognition fixed on sightless eyes." Part of the significance of the image as an oxymoron (a figure of speech in which two words of contradictory meaning are used together for special effect) lies in its startling ambiguity. For some readers, the line would suggest that the woman—despite her "sightless eyes"—is looking with a fixed gaze at her son feared lost in the Biafran war ("She has, at last, seen her 'boy'"). But for other more perceptive readers, the line clearly suggest that the woman—despite her "sightless eyes"—is now able to look with a fixed gaze at her son feared lost in the Biafran war ("She has, at last, seen her 'boy'" in her imagination). From the later we can she has now see a beatific and transcendental image of her son of a self-sacrificing hero driven by the highest altruistic ideals. His idealism may have been misplaced, like casting pearls to the unappreciated swine of an anomic postcolonial Nigeria engaged in an unjust war against Biafra (as Okara sees the war in "Leave Us Alone"); but, for her in the end, the better understanding of the futility of partisanship in the complex Biafran debacle has at last freed her heart from misplaced aggression and untoward hate.

8. Faith vs. Existentialist Anguish: 'The Silence Voice'

Readers of Okara's early lyrics would be aware of the interplay of deep religious faith rooted both in the poets naturalism and Christian science persuasion and existentialist anguish reflecting an intuitive outlook on life akin to the worldview of the French school of philosophy which began in the 19th century and which holds that human life is basically meaningless with the suggestion that if God exists he is indifferent to the fate of humanity who seem doomed to absurd and meaningless labors that seem to lead nowhere. In "I am Only a Name" ("Expendable Name" in *The Fisherman's Invocation*), Okara perceives the fabulous darkness ("this darkness") of the existentialist circuit; but unlike the "no-exit" terrain represented in the pessimistic theater of Jean-Paul Satre and other existentialists of the French School, Okara's faith in God fills his heart with optimistic songs overriding the strictures of the overarching "darkness":

Yet my heart sings of the day,
 the day bursting with song

and the smile of my young
 yes, my heart sings in this darkness
 of the moaning, dying
 dying because the spell
 makes me only a name
 an .expendable name

Yet my heart sings
 as I weakly genuflect
 to the calling Angelus bells
 which reach out to me like
 hands out of the gathering darkness

In "The Silent Voice," we can see the same light of faith illuminating the darkness of a world made terribly insecure by the constant of fear air raids that had become part of the ritual of everyday life. As recalled in my "Reminiscences of the Odunke Community of Artist" (Azuonye, 1991: 22), "After the fall of Enugu, we found ourselves converging at Ogbor Hill, Aba, the new location of the Biafran Information and Propaganda complex. At our first poetry reading meeting at the Seagull Hotel, over chicken and beer, most of the poems presented smelt heavily of Okara. But, there in our midst, in flesh and blood, was Gabriel Okara, an intensely introspective and lyrical poet with a kind of Zen delight in the paradox of direct-pointing in the attempt at describing the indescribable. His first war poem, "The Silent Voice" and the propaganda piece, "Leave Us Alone" which he read to us at Seagull changed all that. We quickly returned to his earlier masterpieces—'Piano and Drums'; 'The Mystic Drum'; 'Spirit of the Wind'; "One Night at Victoria Beach"; 'The Snowflakes Sail Gently Down,' 'The Fisherman's Invocation—etc. The charm was inexorable; it left deep marks on the rhythm and idiom of Odunke art and you will see the mystical and lyrical strains of Okara in Udechukwu are *What the Madman Said*." "The Silent Voice" itself is remarkable for its envelope structure. The images in each stanza and in the poem as a whole are packaged in a structure that begins and ends with the metaphoric representation of "The moon's rays" at night as a loving mother that offers solace, protection and comfort after the distress of the daily air bombardment that have turned daylight into an object of horror:

The moon's rays whispering low and soft
 Like a mother calming her child in nightmare,
 Shed troubled heart and mind of yesterday's fears
 In the mystery of sleep as the hours, hand
 Over hand draw near tomorrow's dawn.
 And as I stand listening in the moon
 And the silence of the street, I hear
 Scurrying feet of fear muffled by the moon
 And the youthful laugh of hope ringing from dawn
 Though tomorrow each hour will be moving hour of lips
 In prayer like fingers groping over Rosary beads,
 Counting hours for nightfall and moon fall—
 And when shadows darken and the day passes
 As yesterday with its dead into memory of the living
 I wait with bated breath for the moon's whispers....

I wait for the moon's whispers
 From heaven's beneficence to rehabilitate
 Limbs, mind, and heart and turn the spirit
 Of liberty skywards to face planes at dawn.
 Planes spitting bombs and bullets at Truth—
 Leaving mangled bones and homes (a mission completed)!
 Then silver winged death fearing death flies away
 In white-speckled blue sky, darting from cloud to cloud
 As defiant guns and deathless spirits

Reach behind the clouds to pluck it down in anger—
 But it flies away, and tearless eyes turn downwards
 To carry limbs, heads, limbless headless bodies
 In solemn silence to nameless graves....
 And when shadows darken and the day passes
 As yesterday with its dead into memory of the living
 I wait with bated breath for the moon's whispers....

I wait for the moon's whispers
 From above like the ailing for the healer;
 I listen continually with my heart for the whisper
 Which comes from beyond the moon too gentle for the ear
 To restore to bleeding will and gasping hope
 Yesterday's strength and to staunch inward wounds
 Daytime wounds of alienating words and deeds
 Of the living, I listen continually—
 I listen to the silent voice from whence comes
 The whisper like morning breeze from river unseen,
 To lean my battered hopes battered by battles within
 And wait for night in labor to bear forth the birth cry at dawn
 And dedication to derivations of peace in honor
 Of our maimed, our dead, and for posterity....

These contrasts are reinforced by the repetition of the same lines at the end of stanza's one and two:

And when shadows darken and the day passes
 As yesterday with its dead into memory of the living
 I wait with bated breath for the moon's whispers....

The same lines are repeated at the end of the poem but in a developmental and transformational form that blossoms with an optimistic outlook deeply rooted in faith:

I listen to the silent voice from whence comes
 The whisper like morning breeze from river unseen,
 To lean my battered hopes battered by battles within
 And wait for night in labor to bear forth the birth cry at dawn
 And dedication to derivations of peace in honor
 Of our maimed, our dead, and for posterity....

9. Bystander Apathy: 'I am Only a Name'

The term "bystander apathy" (otherwise "bystander effect") refers to the socio-psychological theory that in the event of an accident or a tragic event, the greater the number of eyewitnesses to the event, the less likely the victims are to receive help. In an emergency situation, observers are more likely to take action if there are few or no other witnesses." In contemporary global cultural studies, this theory can be aptly extrapolated to describe the indifference of the global community to the anguish of isolated human communities traumatized by the ravages of war, political turmoil and other forms of social upheaval. Although the subject of sensational international media reports, with pictures of starving babies and tired refugee mothers breastfeeding dying or dead babies, the Biafran war was notoriously the victim of global bystander effect, as Okara's persona laments in "I am Only a Name" (originally published as "Expendable Name" in *The Fisherman's Invocation*):

I am only a name
 a name in the air
 intruding into your peace
 like an unpleasant noise

and not of flesh and blood—flesh
and blood clinging
to your bones and running
in your veins.

I am only an episode
in the morning papers
which you put aside
or throw into waste paper baskets
and turn to your bacon and egg
and milk for your young
while I whom you have
drained of flesh and blood
tread with bare feet on thorns
in bushes searching, searching
for tiny snails and insects
for my young with swollen feet.



Biafran Children Bloated with Kwashiorkor

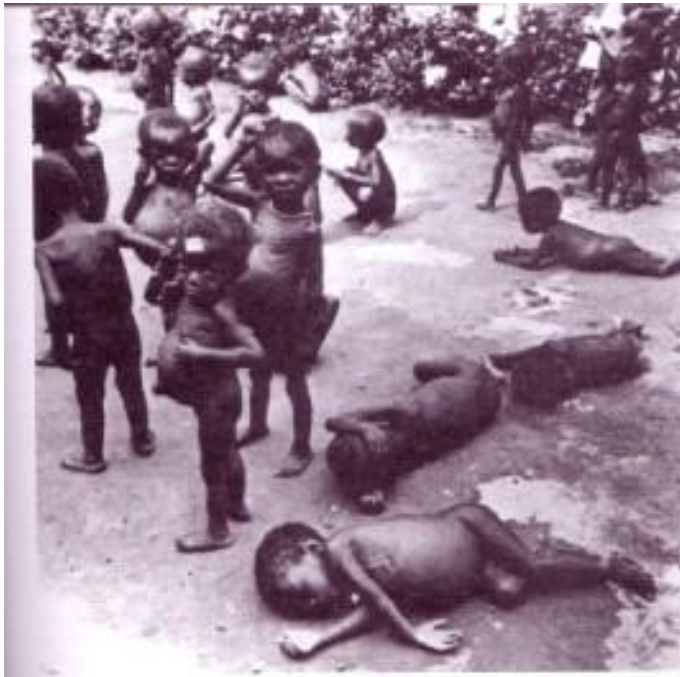
The apathy of global bystanders is not only condemned as manifestation of untoward ethnocentrism and racism (because Biafrans are “not of” their “flesh and blood”) but with reference to the fact that the problem of mass starvation in Biafra was caused by the silent complicity of the world to the economic blockade against Biafra that succeeded in reducing the livelihood of Biafrans to a primitive state of hunting and gathering (of the once ebullient people of Eastern Nigeria now treading “tread with bare feet on thorns/ in bushes searching, searching/ for tiny snails and insects/ for my young with swollen feet). See section for commentary and notes on the toll of hunger, starvation and the disease of malnutrition alluded to through the phrase “swollen feet.”

At the root and heart of all wars are various forms and manifestations of violence or physical and destructive force. Often, violence is both the *agent provocateur* of wars and their end results, and the

In Okara’s “I am Only a Name,” in which the poetic persona accuses the global community of bystander apathy to the suffering of the starving masses in Biafra (section x above), the charges of ethnocentric and racist bias are amplified by the suggestion that this suffering was caused by the perversity and cruelty of the economic blockade against the young secessionist republic, a measure

which is repeatedly attributed to neocolonialist conspiracies and the cruelty of the ex-colonial nations of the world:

I am only an expendable name
 thrown back and forth
 in ritual jokes in corridors
 of sacrificial shrines
 and not for your ears
 for that would break the spell
 which makes me only a name
 as we stagger, my young and I
 with nothing between skin and bone
 into the gathering darkness.



Starving Biafran Children, Dead and Dying

Neocolonialism is the continued control of the economic resources of ostensibly independent states by their former colonial rulers through the manipulation of structures (such as artificial national boundaries and constitutions) established during the colonial era. The keywords in this stanza (“expendable name”; “thrown back and forth/ in ritual jokes”; “corridors of sacrificial shrines”; “not for your ears”; and “the spell /which makes me only a name”) are carefully chosen and deployed by Okara as signifiers for the maximum condemnation of the Neocolonialist powers, not only of Western Europe and its Diaspora (the ex-colonial powers) but also of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union (the ostensible allies with African against colonialism), for the perversity of their heartless gang-up against Biafra. The attempted secession of Eastern Nigeria from the former British territory of Nigeria took place in the heyday of the Cold War (1967-70), a period during which the West and the Soviet Bloc invariably took diametrically opposite positions, especially in their relationships with the newly independent nation states of Africa, Asia and Latin America. But Biafra was unusual. In response to the economic blockade mounted against her, she quickly mobilized the expertise and ingenuity of her scientists under an agency called the Research and Production Directorate (RAP) which quickly counteracted the pressures of the blockade by its emergency manufacture of arms and a wide diversity of goods. This outburst of African ingenuity and creativity in science and technology was perceived by the Neocolonial powers as a ominous notice of the emergence of a truly independent African nation

come to thwart their design of continued exploitation of the vast mineral and other natural resources of the continent. The otherwise unlikely alliance of the West and the Soviet Bloc thus emerged to preempt such a development by ensuring that the Biafran nation did not survive.

For these neocolonialist powers, Biafra was an "expendable name" (not worth preserving or saving) because it was not part of the colonial calculation which goes back to the partition of Africa among European powers at the Berlin Conference of 1885 hosted by the then German Chancellor Bismarck, following decades of the scramble for Africa by colonizing trading companies from Britain, France, Germany, Belgium, Spain, Portugal and the Netherlands. The partition of Africa was followed by the arbitrary creation of territorial boundaries and the naming of these territories on terms determined by the commercial and other economic designs of each colonial power. It was out of this state of affairs that the colony and protectorate of Nigeria (the precursor of the Federal Republic of Nigeria) was created and named. The name, Nigeria, was proposed by a British journalist, Flora Shaw (who later became the wife of the Governor of Nigeria, Lord Frederick Lugard), in a letter the Editor of *The Times* of London. Following the amalgamation of Nigeria in 1900, Nigeria emerged as zone of conflict between British colonialist designs and nationalist struggle for independence. While committed to the unity of Nigeria, Nigerian nationalists remained keenly aware of the artificiality of Nigerian territorial boundaries. As Chief Obafemi Awolowo (the first Premier of Western Nigeria and founding leader of both one of Nigeria's major national political parties, Action Group, and the Yoruba ethnic organization, Egbe Omo Oduduwa) famously put it in his *Path to Nigerian Freedom* (1947: 47-48),

Nigeria is not a nation. It is a mere geographical expression. There are no "Nigerians" in the same sense as there are "English", "Welsh", or "French". The word "Nigerian" is merely a distinctive appellation to distinguish those who live within the boundaries of Nigeria from those who do not.

Most Nigerian nationalist leaders knew that the federation of Nigeria was a marriage of convenience and the goal of the most visionary Nigerian nationalists was not for the preservation of the boundaries and name of the new postcolonial nationhoods created for the purposes of neocolonialist exploitation by the British, but for the creation of the ultimate pan-African panacea of the United States of Africa. Yet, when the Biafran secession of May 30, 1967 offered an opportunity to challenge the British design for Nigeria and the challenge of rethinking the colonial boundaries, Nigerian (including Chief Obafemi Awolowo, who accepted the position of Deputy Leader of the Military Government of Yakubu Gowon and Finance Minister) rallied lethal military forces against Biafra under the slogan "To keep Nigeria one is a task that must be done!" To this, the British Government of the day added its staunch support with hypocritical statements such as the one notoriously made by Michael Stewart (later Lord Stewart of Fulham) on behalf of Harold Wilson's Labour government, failure to support the crushing Biafran independence was tantamount to "encouraging, in Africa, the principle of tribal secession—with all the misery that could bring to Africa in the future." It is against this hypocritical stance that the myth of Biafra as "an expendable name" (a name not worth preserving or saving) was perpetuated and bought by dint of colonial mentality by Nigerian leaders and other African countries except Gabon, Tanzania, Ivory Coast and Zambia who saw through the ruse and recognized Biafra.

Inevitably, between 1967 and 1970, the name Biafra was "thrown back and forth/ ritual jokes" not only in the West but in Africa. In the image of "corridors of sacrificial shrines," Okara combines the common English idiom for the seats of political power ("corridors of power") with the idea of "sacrificial lamb." In the phrase, "not for your ears," the total refusal of the Western powers to heed the Biafran cause is honed. The final phrase, "the spell /which makes me only a name," takes us back to magic circle of colonialist enchantment that holds the colonized trapped in the foolish defense of the vested self-interest of the colonizing powers.

10. Visions of Peace: 'Moon in the Bucket,' 'Kindly Sprite' and 'Come, Come and Listen'

Throughout the war Okara remained steadfast in his fervent hope for peace. So deep is this pacifist, vision that, in the short lyric, "Moon in the Bucket," the reflection of the moon in muddied and unclean

water in a bucket (symbolizing “the murk and dirt” of war), provokes in his unyieldingly optimistic mind, a lurid vision of peace:

Look!
 Look out there
 in the bucket
 the rusty bucket
 with water unclean

Look!
 A luminous plate is floating—
 the Moon, dancing to the gentle night wind
 Look! all you who shout across the wall
 with a million hates. Look at the dancing moon
 It is peace unsoiled by the murk
 and dirt of this bucket war.

It is out of the same desperate quest for peace that he addresses a tender ode entitled “Kindly Sprite” (dated 18th June, 1968) , in a tone of pathetic fallacy and with a kind of Hindu temperament, to an insect hovering before him in the dim light of the palm-oil Biafran lamp of the day:

Gentle mould of my mould
 Hovering in a ray of light;
 Kindly spirited Sprite
 Dances out of pleading hold!

Fly not away, O Sprite!
 I'll not bruise your lips of rose
 With lacquered pose
 nor be-dim your wings of light!

Come clinging tendrils close
 And whisper tales yet untold
 Of your heart's ventures old
 I will mine, in sweet repose.

Gentle mould of my mould
 Do not fail my feeble sight
 For in the darkest night
 My fingers will grope for loving hold.

It was with the same passion for peaceful resolution of conflict that Okara served, in 1969, as an ambassador at large for Biafra along with novelists Chinua Achebe (b. 1930) and Cyprian Ekwensi (1921–2007). Later, as the Director of the Biafran Cultural Affairs Directorate located in the isolated rural community of Ogwa—far from the alarums of war—he led a vibrant community of artists and writers in keeping alive the fire of cultural development. As Echeruo (1992) recalls in his tribute to the poet on his 70th birthday,

I remember taking a photograph with Gabriel Okara at the University of Port Harcourt on the occasion of the conferment on him of an honorary Doctor of Letters degree. Nothing unusual, except that for me (and, I believe, for Okara also) the meeting brought back memories of dire comradeship at Ogwa during the last days of Biafra. Okara, I recall, was at that point a doubly defeated man. He had fought and lost the war against a formidable army; he was then about to lose a war against metaphysical injustice. After our surrender, we were all asked to report to our former stations. For Okara, that should have meant returning to his previous posting at Enugu, the capital of the Old Eastern Region. No, Okara was told. He had to report to Port Harcourt, where he had been declared a saboteur and traitor to the cause of the Rivers State;

and there he did go, exhausted, clutching a few scraps of innocuous papers and hardly any of the many fine poems he had written during and about that war

But his sense of loss and loyalty to Biafra did not deter him from becoming personally reintegrated into the post-war Nigerian nationhood with all its problems arising from the triumph of disorder rooted in entrenched military dictatorship that was to last for two more decades beyond. After the end of the war on January 12, 1970, he served successively as Director of the Rivers State Newspaper Corporation, Commissioner for Information, before retiring to where he has been living in productive retirement since 1975.

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Notes

¹Thunder and Lightning and the deities associated with them, such as Amadioha among the Igbo and Sango among the Yoruba, are the instruments of divine intervention across several Nigerian mythologies. In "Thunder Can Break," the first lyric of his last complete sequence of poems, *Path of Thunder* (1965-1966), Nigeria's, and indeed Africa's, leading transnational modernist poet, Christopher Okigbo (1930-1967), hails the day of the coup in the following words: "This day belongs to a miracle of thunder;/ Iron has carried the forum;/ With token gestures. Thunder has spoken,/Left no signatures: broken/ Barbicans alone tell one tale the winds scatter." This phrase "miracle of thunder" probably alludes to Odili Samalu's prayer in Chinua Achebe's novel, *A Man of the People*, as he watches the ordinary people's macabre dance of folly orchestrated by corrupt politicians: "I wished for a miracle, for a voice of Thunder, to hush this ridiculous festival and tell the poor contemptible people one or two truths" (p.2).

At the end of the novel, Samalu's prayer is answered when the corrupt leadership of the day is swept away in a coup which has been described as "a terrifying accurate prophecy" of the events of January 15 1966.

² The list varies in the available counts, but usually includes Majors Emmanuel Arinze Ifeajuna, Christian Anuforo, Humphrey Chukwuka, Donatus Okafor, and Timothy Onwuatuogwu; and Captains Ben Gbulie, Emmanuel Nwobosi and Oji (<http://www.author-me.com/nonfiction/shot.html>).

³ Alhaji Sir Ibrahim Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, KBE (December 1912 – January 15, 1966).

⁴ Alhaji Sir Ahmadu Bello ((June 12, 1910–January 15, 1966)), the Sardauna of Sokoto and crown-prince of the powerful Islamic Caliphate of Sokoto, with a long history of domination in Northern Nigeria, following the Islamic jihad of the turn of the 19th century, led by his great forbear, Shaihu Usman dan Fodio, born Usman bin Fodiye, (also referred to as Shaikh Usman Ibn Fodio, Shehu Uthman Dan Fuduye, or Shehu Usman dan Fodio, 1754–1817), which swept Hausa (Habe) kings out of their thrones and established a powerful Islamic oligarchy with an as yet unfulfilled ambition of "dipping the Koran into the sea" (a metaphor the ultimate Islamization of southern Nigeria).

⁵ Chief Samuel Ládòkè Akínt lá or "S.L.A." (July 6, 1910–January 15, 1966), controversial successor of Chief Obafemi Awolowo as Premier of Western Nigeria, with the disputed honorific title, *Oloye Aare Ona Kakanfo XIII* of the Yoruba.

⁶ Dr. Michael Iheonukara Okpara (d. December 17, 1984), a physician who also served as the Leader of the National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC), the successor to Nigeria's first major political party, the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC), founded by Herbert Samuel Heelas Macaulay (November 14, 1864—May 7, 1946) and later led by Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe (see Note 8 below).

⁷ Chief Dennis Chukude Osadebay (June 29, 1911—December 26, 1994) who was also a poet and journalist.

⁸ Dr. Benjamin Nnamdi Azikiwe (November 16, 1904 – May 11, 1996), one of the leading figures of modern Nigerian nationalism, popularly known as "Zik of Africa" on account of his tireless advocacy of the forging of a United States of Africa.

⁹ Johnson Thomas Umannakwe Aguiyi-Ironsi, alias "Ironsides" (1924–1966).

¹⁰ Lt-Col. (later General) Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu (b. November 4, 1933), an Orford educated historian and first son of the first Igbo millionaire, Sir Odumegwu Ojukwu, he is currently blind and holds the traditional honorific title, Ikemba of Nnewi.

¹¹ Lt-Col. (later General) Yakubu Gowon, alias Jack Gown (b. October 19, 1934).

¹² Alias Gurudev (7 May 1861–7 August 1941).

¹³ Wilfred Edward Salter Owen MC, 1893–1918.

¹⁴ Siegfried Loraine Sassoon CBE MC (1886–1967).

¹⁵ The hanging of Ken Saro-Wiwa inspired Gabriel Okara's late lyric, "Self-Preservation (To Ken Saro Wiwa)" (*Collected Poems*, p. 125) and such collections of poetry as Tanure Ojaide's *Delta Blues and Homesongs*, Adiyi Bestman's *Textures of Dawn*, Ibiwari Ikiriko's *Oily Tears of the Delta*, Nnimmo Bassey's *We Thought it Was Oil But it Was Blood*, Ogaga Ifowodo's *The Oil Lamp* and an anthology edited by E. C. Nwosu entitled *For Ken, For Nigeria*.