Vol. 17, No. 1, 2022
DOI: 10.2478/jgp-2022-0007

Okwudiri Anasiudu
University of Port Harcourt (Nigeria)

Historical Remembrance as a Strategy for the Re-Invention of Africa in Odia Ofeimun's *A Feast of Return* and *Under African Skies*

ABSTRACT. This paper explores Odia Ofeimun's two poetry collections: A Feast of Return and Under African Skies. The aim is to underscore Ofeimun's deployment of the folkloric tradition, invocative poetry and mytho-historicity as aesthetic designs in the re-invention of modern Africa. The objective is to demonstrate how the foregoing aesthetic designs foreground Ofeimun's African gaze and poetic imagination with which he locates Africa in glorious and heroic moments of the past, just like the Negritude poets did, yet, in his poetic imagination of Africa of the past, Ofeimun shows how the issues of the moment in Africa draw from a complicated past event in Africa. This paper adopts Edward Said's notion of contrapuntal reading as a hermeneutic practise and a qualitative descriptive, analytic method. In the findings, this paper notes that Ofeimun does not offer a superficial or exaggerated romanticisation of Africa's past; instead, by showing a connection between Africa's past with Africa's present, Ofeimun deepens the conversation and debate on Africa's history, epistemology, identity and the subject of euro-western colonialism, particularly in Southern Africa. This paper concludes that Ofeimun's poetic imagination of the past speaks of historical remembrance configured as trance and memory. This historical remembrance is a strategy of re-invention and a panacea for charting a new course for modern Africa today in terms of self-re-conceptualisation.

KEYWORDS: history, remembrance, re-invention Africa, Odia Ofeimun

Introduction

There is a paucity of critical appraisal on Odia Ofeimun's two poetry collections *Under African Skies* (Hereafter *UAS*) and *A Feast of Return* (hereafter *AFOR*). Available literature such as Nonyelum Chibuzo Mba's essay, explored the theme of "Masterminding the Return and Politics of Gender in Ofeimun's *Under African Skies* and *A Feast of Return*". In the literature, Mba argues that, "*A Feast of Return* is basically proverbial and has a lot to do with the recollection of memory, masterminding the return and

JGP 17(1), 2022: 105–122 © The Author(s), Adam Mickiewicz University Press, 2022.

the relationship between the dead, the living, and even the unborn. It is a sequel to Ofeimun's *Under African Skies*" (p. 40). Mba stresses further that *UAS* is a "clamour for significant change [in Africa] characterised by gender equity" (p. 4).

Cecilia Kato in another essay titled "The Poet's Dance Steps: An Analysis of Performance as Actual Poetry in Odia Ofeimun's *A Feast of Return* and *Under African Skies*" stresses that *UAS* is a historical document that "(testifies) to centuries of repression and resistance that came to an end with the release of Nelson Mandela" (Kato, p. 153). Kato stresses further that *AFOR* is "Africa's journey through history presented in a dance drama" (p. 156). Kato contends further that *AFOR* "draws attention to the need to nurture high artistic standards as well as create the right political and economic setting for national creativity" (p. 156). The views of Mba and Kato are quite germane, but there are crucial issues they overlooked, such as how history constitutes memory or a form of remembrance necessary for the re-invention of Africa.

Methodology

This paper adopts Edward Said's notion of "contrapuntal reading" (see *Culture and Imperialism*, 66) as a critical framework within a qualitative, descriptive and analytic research method in the exploration of these poems. It offers deeper insight into the two texts by its argument that every text bears some relation to the common discourse of its society. The process by which every text bears this relation is through its formal devices.

Formal devices establish a structural and semantic relation between a poem and ideology. The formal devices constitute the surface structures of a poem, and within these surfaces, structures are underlying social meaning and ideology, which are the deep structures. Importantly, formal devices allow a poem reader, through a contrapuntal reading, to perceive and uncover the underlying contours of the unsaid ideas from which poetic structures emerge.

Thus, a contrapuntal reading for this essay is crucial as it offers us an opportunity to interrogate Ofeimun's two poems beyond their obvious or surface level meaning. It permits us to extend our critical query to issues that might have imbricated the poetic formation yet not obviously stated; to question the "truths" within the poems, unearth the veiled messages,

and bring them to the illumination of light. This form of reading unearths "what was once forcibly excluded" (Eagleton, 1976, p. 66–67).

A contrapuntal reading does not overlook lexical disjunctions or word entries, instead, it seeks to show how disjunctions, words entries offer clarity to the theme of a text. For instance, from the collection *UAS*, in the poem "ANTHEM OF THE OAK", words like "forest" and "alone" as we can find in the excerpt, "we make a forest/even when we stand alone" (Ofeimun, p. 4) are disjunctive, and antithetical. Other disjunctives in *UAS*, are evident in "MOTHERSONG I", such as "hunters to the hunted", "…The perceived to the perceiver" (Ofeimun, p. 9), and from the poem "ISIKUTI" in *UAS*, there is "…the bitter leaf that sweetens life" (Ofeimun, p. 17).

From such antithesis we see a pattern which foregrounds ideologies which are not obviously stated but are reproduced in the texts and naturalised through the encoding power of Ofeimun's poetic language use. Thus, to read the surface meaning of words in the poem alone is to ignore veiled ideologies and histories. The histories are veiled. They constitute the real ideological "foldings", and they are the "real history alongside [texts]" (Eagleton, 1976, p. 74). A contrapuntal reading provides a reader with the critical tool and ability to see these histories. It prevents a reader from being blind and critically docile. It alerts the reader to be conscious of a text's social commitment and political undertones, such as Ofeimun's poetic production in *UAS* and *AFOR*.

Findings and Discussion

UAS and *AFOR* offer a unique form of African gaze to the discourse on Africa, African identity and modern Africa. The poems in the two collections incarnate a vanishing tradition of oral poetry in Africa similar to Okot p'Bitek *Songs of Lawino*. The poems are crafted in the dithyrambic-elegiac mode, and they also draw extensively from the African ethnophilosophical worldview and contemporary history of South Africa.

There are layers of meaning underneath the structures of the two poems. For instance, *UAS* and *AFOR* speak of memory (history), poetry (imagination or trance) and African philosophy (afro-logic). They also speak of the ability of a people (South Africans) to thrive amidst a history filled with sad memories. The poems invoke the past and speak to the present experiences of African nations, as evident in the poem "ANTHEM OF OAK" in the collection *UAS*. In "ANTHEM OF OAK" Africa's experiences are described as

"a dance on a crossroad" (Ofeimun, p. 3). Yet, at this crossroad, and amidst the inherent travails within it, Africans are encouraged to celebrate their roots, "We dance at the crossroads/Celebrating our roots/In the unity of nations" (Ofeimun, p. 3). Ofeimun projects an optimistic vision of a united Pan-African continent in the poems. This is amidst the current sad state of Africa, a far cry from this optimistic vision. For Ofeimun, Africa today is still at its potentiality; it is like a continent on a wilderness journey of reconciliation with itself and towards the quest for unity and the harmonization of its diversity. This is evident in the poem, "ANTHEM OF THE OAK" which fabricates a conceptual metaphor of a united Africa. This idea of unity is seen in terms of the continent's unity-in-diversity, emanating from the many cultural and geographical nodes though homogeneous, from which all African nationalities stand and draw strength.

Importantly, Ofeimun offers a solution to how this unity and harmonisation of Africa's diversity can be achieved. This is through the awakening of historical consciousness and the need to evolve a new sense of African identity. For Ofeimun, Africa's history and identity were truncated by euro-western interruption through agencies of colonisation such as advanced military firepower, commerce, education, and religion. But through trance and memory, Ofeimun takes Africa through a self-re-conceptualisation process. This is a mechanism to re-awaken the historical consciousness and appreciation of Africa's identity. Hence, Ofeimun's aesthetic designs in *UAS* and *AFOR* are informed by a social commitment to bring back to life through oral performance a reinvention of Africa, using myth, legend and history as poetic repertoire.

Versification of History, Myth and Legend

Some of the sources Ofeimun draws inspiration from in crafting his poem include: the legend of Dingiswayo, Mzilikazi, Shaka Zulu, Nelson Mandela, Moshwheshwe, Manthatisi, and Nkrumah of Ghana; the myth of Mazugawa and historical events like the Mfecane/Difaquane war, the Boer war, the Great Trek, the scourge of Apartheid. To a large extent, these sources informed the emergence of South Africa as a Rainbow Nation. They also provided Ofeimun with poetic insight into his craft.

On the premise of these sources, the poems can be seen as myth, legend and history in verse form, recalling Africa of the past to connect to an Africa of the present and future. A great part of the poems is in met-

aphorical codes and allusions which serve as clues and props. This calls for alertness to fully appreciate how these clues and props—the aesthetic design—construe the search for a new philosophy of identity necessary for the re-invention of Africa.

We intend to excavate the top layer of meaning of the texts in order to embrace the "truths" within the poems. These "truths" are cloaked, implied or disguised in words. They are the "latent content in disguised form" of the text (Eagleton, 1976, p. 90). For instance, while we may not be concerned with the idea of dance (as a form of movement or choreography) and trance (clairvoyance), we are interested in how they conjure meaning not obviously stated within the texts. For instance in the poem "TIGARI", in the collection *UAS*, dance is suggestive of a strategy of harnessing trance, "We dance/To harness the trance/ As the Maguzawa of Gao/ Harnessed it (Ofeimun, p. 7). Dance is also a purifier, "the Tigari dance/ to purge with fire/ and renew the earth" (Ofeimun, p. 7). This dance is informed by the trances which connects with memories of our great civilisation, and root, as evident in some poems in *UAS*, such as "ANTHEM OF OAK", "We dance at the crossroad/ Celebrating our roots/ In the unity of our nations" (Ofeimun, p. 3), in "SECOND VOICE", "We dance to defend memory/ Against the winds of chance/ We dance the dance of the Great Oaks (Ofeimun, p. 5), and in "TIGARI", "To harness the trance/ As the Maguzawa of Gao Harnessed it" (Ofeimun, p. 7). The mention of the Maguzawa of Gao, the Priest of the Agadi, and the Ga of Ghana within the Tigari dance calls attention to strategies Ofeimun engages to re-invent histories of a people, culture and ecology truncated by colonial presence.

The Maguzawas, as mentioned in the excerpt, are humans with clairvoyant power and the capacity for vision in the Ancient Hausa Kingdom. They were quite popular until the religious colonisation of Hausa land by the Fulani, which brought about the fall of the Sefewa dynasty in the 11th century (A.D.). The signification of dance is thus beyond the body's movement to the rhythm of the music. Instead, it is a strategy of connecting and reclaiming the past. This reawakening brings a sense of awareness. This is why the process is described as "awaken in a trance" (Ofeimun, p. 7).

Other histories which the "dance" allows the dancers to connect with, are captured in the poem "WARRIOR" in the collection *UAS*. In this poem, Ofeimun mentions Toussaint François. His full name was Dominique Toussaint Louverture and he was the Haitian general and leader of the Haitian Revolution. He was a leader of the growing resistance during his time against colonial incursion. Ofeimun also mentions names like W.E.B Du-

bois, Marcus Garvey, Kwame Nkrumah, and Nelson Mandela (Ofeimun, p. 38). These names share a historical affinity with Africa is terms of their participation in the anti/post-colonial liberation struggle for the soul of Africa and Africans.

Ofeimun's engagement with history in the poem is construed as an act of tracing the stories of the sun as shown in this excerpt, "trace the unblinking lore of the sun" (Ofeimun, p. 2). The sun as used in the stretch of utterance is suggestive of Africa while the lore is a story of Africa's past.

In tracing history, one should be alert to the various perspectives or sides to the histories and lore of Africa. There is more than one historical narrative of Africa's past. There is the history of Africa from the perspective of the colonizers and the history of Africa as told by Africans is evident in oral tradition. We must stress that every history produces its own knowledge, narrative and accepted form of truth. This is crucial, especially for peripheral spaces—third world countries and former colonial areas—struggling to regain selfhood and re-articulate their essence. The process of retelling histories is a strategy of offering another truth to extant truths.

Mytho-Historicity, Politics and the Re-invention of Africa in *UAS* and *AFOR*

Ofeimun notes that *UAS* was "brought to fruition as an experiment between the fusion of poetry and dance in order to project an African mood in an event which marked the fifth centennial of Columbus' discovery of the "New World" (viii). The foregoing is also evident in the preliminary pages of *AFOR* (ix). There are thirteen poems which are intricately connected in *UAS* while in *AFOR* there are fifteen poems. The poems intersect present day society with memories of the pristine pastoral village-life, untouched by euro-western modernity. In four poems from *UAS*—"MOTHERSONG I", "ATSIA-MOTHERSONG II", "ISIKUTI I" and "ISIKUTI II"—we are shown the African worldview of nature, and the serenity and peace which characterised moments in Africa prior to euro-western incursion. In *UAS*, Ofeimun valorises the African earth, and calls attention to the fact that we can learn a lot from our traditional past in the handling of present day issues. This occurs through an understanding of the African ontology of life on earth as bound by a symbiotic ritual. This ritual includes both physical and spiritual actors (ancestors, the living, the living dead and the unborn).

This is a ritual of earth worship as we see in the poem "MOTHERSONG I", where the earth is venerated:

> We owe our poise
> To mother earth
> Who trapped storms in sea shells
> To forestall blood sacrifice
> So that we may not be sacrificed (p. 9).

In *AFOR* the poem "BANTU POEM I" resonates this same view, as evident in the excerpt, "Because we do not want to offend/The earth on which we must lie,/We return as pure lyric" (5). The ecological undertone in "BANTU POEM I" has great significance for us today in Africa, as it speaks to an Africa's ecological imagination. It also points to the earth as one of the witnesses to events on earth. And humans can always look upon the earth as a source for memory, the retrieval of the past and reclamation of the present. In the poem "ISIKUTI I", in *UAS*, the earth is imagined as "the cradle of our paddles and our hoes" it is the source where "We reach for bitter leaf that sweetens life" (Ofeimun, p. 17). Pay attention to the Oxymoron and metaphorisation of the earth, both as the portal which birth the beginning of mankind ironically this portal brings bitter and sweet experiences. While in *AFOR*, in the poem "LIBATION II" the earth is construed as a procreative force "let our roots deepens/ to green the earth with fruit" (Ofeimun, p. 3).

Ofeimun is alert in his engagement with myth in his re-construction of the African primordial past as evident in his mythic imagination. His alertness foregrounds ecological issues such as climate change and drought induced migration which have become testaments of our modern tragedy in Africa, as seen in the poem, "SOHU/HUSAGO", in *UAS*:

> In the days of famine
> When forests succumbed
> To drought in wet seasons
> And the soil hardened its nerves
> To the plea of sweat (Ofeimun, p. 23)

The excerpt above speaks to an abnormality. It is supposed to be the wet season, instead there is drought; a severe dryness when it ought to be raining. This depiction can be construed as speaking to a present challenge humanity faces due to geologic transformation accelerated by industrial-

isation, and the emission of carbon, sulphur, deforestation and urbanisation. This ecological consciousness is also reflected in the poem "BATA", in *UAS* in the subjunctive "so that our earth/may not be taken by surprise" ("Bata", p. 1–2). Interestingly, the line in the poem "BATA" invokes the myth of Sango, to make a suggestion on how the climate change tragedy can be averted.

> We welcome Sango's dance
> The roll of Bata drums cavorting
> So that our earth may not be startled
> So that our earth may not be ruined (Ofeimun, p. 23–24)

Even though the poem shares an intertextual affinity with Wole Soyinka's *Idanre and Other Poems*. It also reminds us of Soyinka's exposition on the myth of Ogun, in his essay the "Fourth Stage: Through the Mysteries of Ogun to the Origin of Yoruba Tragedy". In this work, Soyinka articulated the tragic consequences when the harmony between nature and human existences is violated. It is important to also stress here that Ogun as depicted in the poem "BATA", in *UAS* is synonymous to the Gaia force in Greek mythology and Ani/Ala in Igbo cosmic universe. The ecological changes described in "BATA" are consequences of humans violating the earth/human symbiotic relation in line with the norms of Sango described in "BATA" as "Sango dance" (Ofeimun, p. 23). The poem "BATA" also speaks of the four cycles of existence articulated by Wole Soyinka. This is the relationship between the living, the living dead, the unborn and the ancestors ("Fourth Stage", p. 366). Though the earth does not belong to the four levels of existence, it is a realm a dimension of habitation different from the ethereal realm of spirits and ancestors. The ancestors mentioned, refers to those Ofeimun calls our fathers and the need for African not to forget their father, as their legacies speak. This is evident in the poem, "LISZOMBE", in *UAS*, "No we never forget our fathers/ Alive or when they die/ They are buried deep in the cranium" (Ofeimun, p. 27).

The performances in *UAS* are permeated with musical pulse sustained by choruses as we see in the repetition of "we dance" in the poem "ANTHEM OF THE OAK", "FIRST VOICE", "TIGARI", "ATSIA:MOTHERSONG II", among others (Ofeimun, pp. 3, 5, 7, 15). The movements in the poems are distinctive, and also shares both stylistic and thematic coherence with other parts of the collection. The central pre-occupation of Ofeimun is the notion that myth making is a strategy of reclamation of Africa's identity. It

also engenders historical consciousness among present day Africans. This is because most of what is recorded in *UAS*, points to the past. The purpose of such engagement is to help us resolve the conflict of identity Africans experience today. It also helps modern Africans come to terms with present day reality. In the light of postcolonial studies, myth making is very important as a strategy for self-reclamation. It is important because what has become known as euro-western modernity and narrative about Africa was that Africa as a people has no real history and civilisation and whose physiological attributes are in the similitude of wild beasts. This engendered a false identity and left the people at a liminal space (see *Home and Exile*, p. 27).

The foregoing narrative denigrates the African person and physiology, projects him/her as an Other, and justifies Africans' enslavement as a form of accepted truth. For the re-invention, reclamation and recovery of an identity to be possible, the African needs to come to terms with his/her history, philosophy, and civilisation. The notion of an African without history and civilisation became the Doxa in western epistemology, such that it was impossible to tell an African story outside the emergence of the European to Africa and their notion of modernity. This false truth negatively invented an Africa that is most times treated as an exotic or demonic other that Ofeimun sets out to correct through mytho-historicity as a strategy for reinventing Africa.

And on the nature of truth, Satya P. Mohanty sheds light on the limitation of represented truth due to its contextual, social or discursive nature. Mohanty argues that "…truth…[is] socially and discursively constructed and their validity and applicability are necessarily limited to their particular contexts or situation" (p. xi). In the various presentations of truth, in new media, magazines, critical works, public opinion, CNN, BBC, the European notion of truth is presented as the main or real doxa. However, we must be wary of truth projected as absolute since it may be coloured with bias, as stressed further by Mohanty, particularly in its formation or creation. This is because in the words of Mohanty, "meanings [truth] do not exist as such but are produced; what we thought we knew was an illusion of meaning[truth] is an effect of our own subjective desires or our political positioning" (p. 29).

The use of metaphor by Ofeimun provides a geophysical mapping of Africa as we can see in the opening poem "FIRST VOICE", in *UAS*. There are mentions of "Deep South, Cape to Lakes/ The Fouta Djallo to the Nile" (Ofeimun, p. 2). The depiction of Africa's geography and landscape is im-

portant for the African imagination as it projects a positive ecological self. The geographical areas mentioned in "FIRST VOICE" in *UAS*, point to the north, east, west and south of Africa, with its deltas, mountains, plateau, rain forest belt, veld and savannah (Ofeimun, p. 2). In the poem "SECOND VOICE", in *UAS*, it is also referred to as "… the four wind" (Ofeimun, p. 5). Ofeimun aims at such geographic imagination as the re-fabrication of knowledge, identity about Africa, the image and worldview of Africa against the Conradian heart of darkness, and the imagination of Africa in Daniel Defoe Robinson Crusoe.

In the poem "SECOND VOICE", in *UAS*, Ofeimun makes reference to memory, "We Dance to defend Memory" (Ofeimun, p. 5). Memory here refers to incidence of the past, which are numerous. The question now becomes, which of the memory? We see this as speaking to Africa's collective history and memory, to the traumatic encounters between Africans and Africans, Africans and Boers, and Africans and British. Ofeimun's use of memory is archaeological. It offers us a chance to interrogate ideas, and knowledge in Africa before the present, culture, civilisation, invention, geography, people, ecology, art, inventions through retrospect. For instance, there are mentions of Africa's centres of great learning and civilisation in "SECOND VOICE", in the collection *UAS*, names like Meroe, Mali, Sidamo, Kumbi-Saleh, Djenne, Sankore, and Zimbabwe are mentioned (Ofeimun, pp. 5–7). Ofeimun's reconstruction of such memories is a form of Afrocentric leaning. His strategy is ahistorical and anti-colonial to western epistemology. It also provides an innovative way of questioning how history has been told to legitimise western supremacy to undermine Africa's essence.

Ofeimun offers ways of reinvention. The first is through myth and history portrayed through dance, memory and trance. These media provide Africans an opportunity to revisit their past and rewrite it. The second way is a geographical reinvention. What this suggests is that Africans need to rename, their geographical spaces; while geographically displaced people who were pushed out of their nations such as the English speaking part of Cameroun, the Yoruba speaking part of the Republic of Benin, the Fulani herdsmen scattered all over West Africa are cases in point and should be given a sense of belonging. The third way is epistemological. What this implies is that Africans need to rewrite and tell their own stories, themselves, for themselves and for the rest of the world. In producing this knowledge, Ofeimun offers an epistemology rooted in the idea that civilisation is not strictly domiciled in one particular region like Europe. A good example is what has been described as Pablo Picasso's ingenuity in terms of his mod-

ernist art form: cubism, which was informed by the civilisation of African art as underscored in the following essays: Chinua Achebe's "The Truth of Fiction", Leopold Sedar Senghor's Negritude: A Humanism of the Twentieth Century", and Abiola Irele's "In Practice of Alienation", among others.

By engaging history, Ofeimun debunks what Mbembe calls a "universal grammar" with which Africa has been narrativised in western discourse (p. 9). Ofeimun's position is contrapuntal to the Doxa and established orthodoxy of the geopolitical space (Western Europe). European discourse erases the possibility of a knowledge distribution that emanates from other local histories (Ghana, Yoruba, Mali, Zimbabwe, Djenne). Conversely, it has engendered the emergence of counter discourses like Edward Said's Orientalism, N. Y. Mudimbe's The Invention of Africa.

Ofeimun's poetry continues in the project of decolonisation embarked on by the likes of Franz Fanon, Kwame Nkrumah, Nelson Mandela, Marcus Garvey, and W. E. B. Dubois. These are scholars who debunk the master narrative or historicity that favours or privileges Europe. There is a pedagogic undertone in Ofeimun's *UAS*, as it also intervenes in the nature of education we provide for the African child. The school should encourage their memory (history) of self and philosophy (logic). In the poem "Warrior", in *UAS*, the full articulation of the resistance struggle for the decolonisation of Africa is shown. Warriors here refer to Africans who stood against the marauding force of colonisation from Europe from Asia.

> We know more than blood rivers
> The rivers that Toussaint swam
> When the morning of the struggle took to open seas
> Rivers that Dubious saw
> When our century opened its eyes to the sun
> Rivers that Garvey sought to dam
> With two hundred million gone
> In the shipwreck of our sky (Ofeimun, p. 38)

In other stanzas of the foregoing poem, the name Nkrumah, Mandela are also mentioned. The purpose of such mention is to call attention to the struggle for the emancipation of Africa from the shackles of both external and internal colonisation.

A way of decolonisation suggested in the poem is evident in part one of *AFOR*; the poems "LIBATION I" and "LIBATION II", offer us an opportunity as readers to understand the custom of ancestor worship—that is, giving homage to ancestors—common within various part of Africa. In Africa, an-

cestors are venerated and also summoned via libation. The libation usually begins with a prayer by an elderly person in a community, using water or wine or liquor. It is a call or summons for ancestors to participate in community protection and other public functions. In the poems "LIBATION I" and "LIBATION II", the prayer is offered to the priestess of memory.

> We have to you, Priestess of memory
> On dream-tracks seeking the measure of a new day
> We have come to awaken our dead
> Because we love the unborn (Ofeimun, p. 2)

The purpose of this libation is borne by the need to re-invent a new self or to decolonize oneself. We must be alert to using the first person pronoun in the plural sense, "We". This refers to a collective voice. The libation is made because the present moment appears blurred and blind as the personae are, "in the shrines that blind history has nourished" (2). The blind history here refers to history of Africa as told by the likes of Trevor Roper. Blind also suggests that Africans lack true knowledge of their history. This has kept Africa at the liminal state, thereby denying Africans true selfhood. Thus, as a form of looking back to look forward, libation has a semiotic function transcending mere pouring of wine to include going back to one's root and source of knowledge to draw meaning. This enables the personae—"we"—to understand the past as "we are plodding back in time / because we love the unborn" (Ofeimun, p. 2).

The collection *AFOR* reminds the reader of the poem "Idoto" in *Labyrinth and Paths of Thunder* by the late African poet-activist Christopher Okigbo. The group of Africans offering this libation include cultural exiles, prisoners, as we see in the poem "BANTU POEM I", in *AFOR*, "we have come from exile/ diverse prisons and location" (Ofeimun, p. 4). In the third stanza of "BANTU POEM I", in *AFOR*, the ritual of libation and the feast in which it is carried out (the feast of return) is for the purpose of remembrance, "it is our feast of remembrance" (Ofeimun, p. 4) for the living, the dead and the unborn.

These exiles are culturally illiterate and unaware of the mighty deeds of Dingiswayo, of Shaka, or of Moshwheshwe as we see in *AFOR*, in the poem "Dingiswayo". We see a reference to history, of greatness and honour of the legendary Zulu chieftain—Dingiswayo—who mentored Shaka Zulu. This is crucial for Africa, since it provides proof of an African history replete with statesmen and nation builders, with glory and honour prior to the era of slavery and the infiltration of Africa by colonialists. In *AFOR*, the motive of

the colonisers is described in "DINGISWAYO", as "Powered by greed and impatience/A cannibal rash breaking the hymen of peace" (Ofeimun, p. 6). The colonialists are described as breaking that which holds peace in Africa, that is, the culture, norms, and taboos. The colonialists came and broke the bond of unity in Africa.

> From the Kalahari
> to the Tugela River and Delagoa Bay
> Strange drums and rattles descended
> As the white swallows fell
> Upon the beauty and bounty of our land
> seeking cattle to pillage
> They coiled like adders of the night
> In search of slaves (Ofeimun, p. 6)

While the poem "DISGISWAYO" narrates the incursion of colonialist "SHAKA I", in *AFOR* points to how Dingiswayo was vanquished and how Shaka takes over the fight against the colonisers:

> They took the lion, they forgot the cub
> They took Dingiswayo, they forgot Shaka
> Now the time is ripe to make the earth heave
> time to play for enemies to pay (Ofeimun, p. 9)

Still on the poem "SHAKA I", we are shown how Shaka strived to unite his people and nation, under the slogan that "we must build a strong nation" (Ofeimun, p. 9). In "Shaka II", from the poem *AFOR*, we see the eulogy to Shaka as a statesman, for "he was the chief /to whom all chiefs had to bow" (Ofeimun, p. 11). The drive for nation building in *AFOR* continues in the poem "A COMMONER'S CHANT", and in the poem "DIFAQUANE" the praise and eulogy move from Shaka Zulu to Mzilikazi, "Like Mzilikazi, the greatest General of them all/Fiercer than Shaka, from whom he plucked his nerve/He could tame buffalos and hold the guts of python" (Ofeimun, p. 14). A greater part of *AFOR* is committed to the oral tradition of southern African people. It explains the family feud and political manoeuvre of Mzilikazi, the son of the Kumalo chieftain Mashobane, whose territory later becomes the Zulu kingdom. Ofeimun also captured a violent upheaval inspired by Mzilikazi among the South African chiefdoms of the interior, which produced political consolidation in certain areas but left much of the central plateau practically uninhabited. This is captured in the poem "DIFANQUANE", in *AFOR* as evident in the excerpt, "He took to the open

velds, our Master-builder/Carrying many migrant nations on his back" (Ofeimun, p. 14). The line "he stood up to the white men roaming our land" (Ofeimun, p. 14) refers to immigrant Boers, or Afrikaners from the Cape seeking lands beyond the area of British control. The reference to Manthatisi refers to the great South African female leader of the Tiokwa people, the daughter of a chief. She became popular during the Mfecane and Difawuane wars.

In *AFOR*, The poem "MOSHWHESHWE" is an oral narrative on Moshweshwe (ca. 1787–1868). He was a South African king and founder of the Basotho nation. He is generally regarded as the doyen of southern Africa's diplomacy and champion for peace in the 19th century. Moshwheshwe is a leader driven by the need for the good of his people:

> All I want is for my people to sing
> The songs that never heard of war
> Songs beyond the pain of war
> Songs that will not divide our people
> Songs at home to strangers as to kin (Ofeimun, p. 19)

The idea of peace, continues in the poem "Lobengula". While in the poem "APARTHIED" we see one of the most horrendous forms of internal colonisation, which appeared in Africa known as Apartheid in 1948. This was after the Afrikaner Nationalist Party came to power in South Africa. The poems "APARTHEID: DEMOLITION DAY" and "APARTHIED: MOTHER AND CHILD" capture the travails of Africans in southern Africa at such moments. These two poems offer us a peep into the scourge of Apartheid. The black populations were subjected to various forms of government control and segregation stage by stage. This manifests in form of the racial discrimination against the blacks, in "the slum clearance Act" (Ofeimun, "APARTHIED: MOTHER AND CHILD", p. 25), the raids and demolition of black areas, "Bulldozer droning like monstrous insects/ ready to pound our hovels down to dust" (Ofeimun, p. 25), in areas like Sophiatown, Grahamstown, Sebokeng and Kwamashu (Ofeimun, "APARTHIED: MOTHER AND CHILD", p. 25). There is also in "APARTHEID: MOTHER AND CHILD", strategies the Apartheid regime in South Africa legislated sex, and racial breeding through the "Immorality Act" (Ofeimun, p. 27) which prevented sexual interaction between blacks and whites. From the poems "LIBERATION STRUGGLE", and "THE ROUND TABLE", in *AFOR*, we see the poetic construal of the activism and protest in South Africa in a bid to curb the monster called Apartheid:

We have been chosen by an age of struggle
To testify, to testify, to testify
We have learnt to join voice to voice
To stop our hearts from weakening
I and my acolytes of memory
Bound by a common backcloth of resistance
We testify…we testify (Ofeimun, p. 29)

Martin Meredith provides an interesting account of the struggles against Apartheid which the poem portrays as evident below:

> As the tide of African nationalism swept through Africa, white-minority government in southern Africa tightened their control, determined to bring it to a halt and to keep political power and wealth in white hands. To the white populations of South Africa, South West Africa, Rhodesia and the Portuguese colonies of Angola and Mozambique, the notion of African rule spelt disaster (p. 116).

It is important we place the emergence of Apartheid in historical perspective in spite of the evil it unleashed in South Africa. The Afrikaners who came into political power introduced Apartheid as a strategy of survival considering the challenges they have faced as migrants in Africa. According to *Merriam-Webster Collegiate Encyclopedia* the Afrikaner are South Africans of:

> Dutch origin or Huguenot settlers of old Cape Colony (founded in 1652)… they established self-sufficient patriarchal communities, developed their own language and subculture…they fought a bitter war with the British over right to govern frontier territories. Though defeated, they retained their old language and culture and eventually attained politically the power they had failed to win militarily. Having dominated S. African politics for most of the century, they were obliged to give up national power. Much of the country's economic wealth remains in Afrikaner hands. Today they number about 6.4 million (p. 21).

During the era of Apartheid, the Africans and the British teamed up to protest against it. The poem "LIBERATION STRUGGLE" in *AFOR*, shows that the protesters include children "who held the sun in bare hands" (Ofeimun, p. 31), students "who had no choice but to fight" and "set the township ablaze/ to light the path of peace" (Ofeimun, p. 30), women, men, white sympathisers who "had to fight in solidarity" (Ofeimun, p. 30). The

unifying and rallying word of the protesters and activists were "Amandla" and "awethu". "Amandla" means power and "awethu" means to us. Thus, for each time "Amandla" is mentioned, the people scream "Ngawethu" which means to us, or power belongs to us the people of South Africa, and not to the government whether white supremacists or their black conspirators. The poem "ROUND TABLE" talks about the process of dialogue initiated after it was obvious that the blacks in South Africa were adamant for a new South Africa for all South Africans, whether white or black. We see this in "We want liberation as a round table/ Where the wrongs done shall be righted" (Ofeimun, p. 36). This is based on a painful understanding that no one racial identity can offer full expression to what South Africa has become, a rainbow nation represented by the flag colour of red, gold, green and black colours. And that is why in the poem "THE ROUND TABLE" we see:

> We carry
> Our red, gold, green and black colours
> To turn arguments in conversations
> To go beyond the scorched harvest
> Bleeding millet and stolen gold (Ofeimun, p. 37)

"BANTU POEM II" offers a conclusion for a narrative which began in *UAS*, and continued in *AFOR*. It is presented as a journey into the history of Africa, and her experiences as a continent. A travel into the history of South Africa as a nation:

> We have journeyed far
> In the belly of time
> With feet of a million years
> Renew our eyes in fresh legends (Ofeimun, p. 38)

Ofeimun's engagement with the history and lore of Africa particularly that of South Africa, points Africa to the glorious moments of the past, just like the Negritude poets did, yet, in his engagement, he seeks to remind us of who we are for the purpose of living for today. Who we are as a continent emanating from:

> pride of the uBantu-from the Guinea Coast
> And the many-rivered debts
> To the Futa Jallon and the Kilimanjaro,

We who have braced the great floods of the ages—
The Nile and the Niger,
The Zambezi, Mfolozi and the Congo
We who have followed the ancient knowers (Ofeimun, p. 38)

Conclusion

This essay shows how Ofeimun engaged the resource of myth and history to recreate an African identity. The two poems are related. *UAS* begins and ends in *AFOR*. They both share similarity in tempo, yet *AFOR* is more musical than *UAS*. While history myth and politics are common in both collections, *AFOR* provides a musical tempo fitting as a great end for a story which began in *UAS*. It is important we note that our reading transcends mere looking at history to include identifying those events in history that informed the emergence of the texts. Thus, our method of reading could be said to be historicist in nature. And what has it got to say to the present state of Africa? It speaks of reinvention, of trans-modernity and also of charting a new course, not by an exaggerated romanticization of the past per say, but drawing inspiration from a past to chart a new course for the present. Apartheid has been dismantled, but there are still ethnographic conflicts in Southern Africa; this poem reminds us how such conflicts began, right under African skies.

REFERENCES

ACHEBE, CH. (2003) *Home and Exile*. United Kingdom: Canongate Books.

EAGLETON, T. (1976) *Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Literary Theory*. Lowe & Brydone Limited.

KATO, C. (2012) The Poet's Dance Steps: An Analysis of Performance as Actual Poetry in Odia Ofeimun's *A Feast of Return* and *Under African Skies*. In: Sylvester V. M. (ed.) *Critical Perspectives on Odia Ofeimun*. Nigeria: Malthouse Press Limited. Pp. 149–161.

MBA, N. Ch. (2012) Masterminding the Return and Politics of Gender in Ofeimun's *Under African Skies and A Feast of Return*. In: Sylvester V. M. (ed.) *Critical Perspectives on Odia Ofeimun*, Nigeria: Malthouse Press Limited. Pp. 39–49.

MBEMBE, A. (2001) *On the Postcolony*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

MEREDITH, M. (2005) *The State of Africa: A History of the Continent Since Independence*. London: Simon & Schuster UK Ltd.

MOHANTY, S. P. (1997) *Literary Theory and the Claims of History: Postmodernism, Objectivity, Multicultural Politics*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

OFEIMUN, O. (2010) *A Feast of Return: Poems for Dance Drama*. Lagos: Hornbill House of the Art, 2010.

OFEIMUN, O. (2010) *Under African Skies: Poems for Dance Drama*. Lagos: Hornbill House of the Arts.

SAID, E. W. (2012) *Culture and imperialism*. New York: Vintage.

SOYINKA, W. (2007) The Fourth Stage: (Through the Mysteries of Ogun to the Origin of Yoruba Tragedy. In: Olaniyan T., Quayson A., (eds.) *African Literature: An Anthology and Theory.* Oxford: Blackwell Publishing. Pp. 364–374.

STEVENS, A. M. (2000) *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Encyclopedia*. Brand: Merriam--Webster, Incorporated.