

Trends in Modern African Poetic Composition: Identifying the Canons

Mathias Irero Orhero

+2348130890991

literarymathy@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper examines the various canons of modern African poetry. It is predicated on the background that periodisation in African poetry has attracted arguments over the years. The study assesses some of these views on periodisation and harmonises them using representative works for analysis. The concepts of literary canon and modern African poetry are briefly highlighted before periodisation is considered. The study identifies eight broad canons of modern African poetry: pioneer poetry, modernist poetry, disillusionment poetry, civil war poetry, alter/native poetry, apartheid poetry, Niger delta/eco poetry and contemporary poetry, a recent tradition. The distinctive features of these traditions have been examined from the thematic and stylistic levels using representative works for analysis. It has been observed that every tradition possesses features that mark it out from other traditions. Findings also show that modern African poets fall into many canons because of the continuity of their writings and the fluidity of themes and techniques.

Introduction

This paper examines the fluidity of modern African poetry, in terms of themes and techniques, which has given rise to various canons within the artistic manifestation now referred to as modern African poetry. These canons have produced works with varied thematic interests. The trends keep changing and canonisation becomes a very difficult task to accomplish. The problem this study seeks to address is that African poetry

scholarship on the issue of canonisation is yet to proffer and agree on a standard and acceptable delineation of trends. This has led to contradictory and polemical categorisations of African poetic compositions. However, this paper attempts a comprehensive canonisation of modern African poetic output from its earliest inceptions till date. Before the trends are identified, it is important to clarify important concepts with which this paper is concerned.

Literary Canon/Trend and Generations

The concept of literary canon is tied together with the concept of literary periods and trends. Other terms used to refer to this concept include phases and generations. The use of generations comes handy mainly when the poets are concerned. The concept of a literary canon is not easy to define because so many factors come to play. Wilczek believes that the term canon has “come to signify authors and works that either used to be included in literature syllabi or textbooks, or those works that repeatedly appear in standard volumes of the history of literature, bibliographies, and literary criticism” (1687). This view assumes that canon is based on what appears in books as the literature of the period. It is apt to fault this view by saying that not every work produced in a period may be anthologised. However, to Ojaide, a canon constitutes a “people’s overall experience and aesthetic values” (4). He further asserts that a canon possesses “strong cultural and historical underpinnings” (4). Ojaide’s opinion is hinged on socio-historical and cultural grounds. He believes that a canon is a product of a people’s culture and history as made manifest in works of art. This view leads to another problem. What about works that may not necessarily reflect a people’s culture and history?

Harold Bloom lends his voice to the issue of a literary canon by asserting that literature “breaks into the canon only by aesthetic strength, which is constituted primarily by an amalgam: mastery of figurative language, originality, cognitive power, knowledge, exuberance of diction” (29). This view rests mainly upon literary style as the indicators of a

literary canon. Kaplan and Cronan attempt a definition of literary canon from the pedagogical perspective. According to them, a literary canon is “the list of authors and works included in basic literature courses because they are deemed to comprise our cultural heritage-from a unique angle” (xvii). Kaplan and Cronan simply believe that literary canons are conceived in the study of literature itself. Other critics and scholars generally base their arguments on the concept of literary canon on theme, history, culture and style. For instance, Guillory believes that a canon is formed by “unique historical conditions” (85) and Meadows believes that a canon is simply formed by “the beauty of literature” and that it documents “the values of the culture” (18).

From the foregoing, it is quite easy to understand the concept of a literary canon as a collection of literary works, written in a particular historical period/time, and connected by similar themes and techniques which are mainly developed by the writers as a reaction to socio-political realities. This view of a canon surmises the earlier views of critics. However, the question of who determines a canon or what are the yardsticks in determining a canon is still left unanswered. The answer is quite simple. Writers write from their own impulses and experiences. However, it is the job of the critic to bring together these varied works and establish connections. The connections that are established, over time, metamorphose into a literary canon/trend/period. Meadows asserts that the first critic to identify literary canons in scholarly terms is Samuel Johnson whose work, *The Lives of the Poets* (1781), set the pace. From that point, other critics and scholars have published books, anthologies, monographs, articles, etc, to document literary works in an attempt to separate great works from myopic works. A literary canon is formed by connections in themes and techniques. Critics often find out that writers of a particular period echo themselves one way or another and this constant echoing or intertextualisation forms the bedrock for the formation of a literary canon. It is also possible that there may be diverse themes and styles in a period.

It, therefore, becomes the job of the critic/scholar to categorise and subcategorise these in line with the dominant themes and styles in order for a literary canon to evolve from them. Canons are formed at the continental level, i.e. African poetry, at the sub-continental level, i.e. West African poetry, at the national level, i.e. Nigerian poetry, at the thematic level, i.e. protest poetry, at the stylistic level, i.e. Metaphysical poetry, at the level of periodisation, i.e. Postmodernist poetry, and even at the philosophical/artistic level, i.e. Existentialist poetry.

Modern African Poetry

Modern African poetry is a hard concept to define. Attempts have been made over the years by a myriad of critics to ascertain the true nature of modern African poetry. The difficulty in generating an acceptable definition is anchored on such issues as: language, form, theme, technique, socio-political and economic realities, etc. These issues manifest in various forms in African countries and therefore, cases of poetic works not resembling others in the mainstream of the African poetic canon comes to play. This paper attempts to formulate a wholesome concept of modern African poetry.

By modern, we simply mean written and contemporary as opposed to traditional and oral. By African, we mean produced by an African, for Africans and sharing the African experience. By poetry, we simply mean a genre of literature written in verse form using grand and figurative language in order to express feelings and emotions. If these terms are harmonised, modern African poetry can simply be said to mean written poetry emanating from the African continent, written by Africans, for the African audience and authentically portraying the African experience. The concept of modern African poetry above excludes the medium of composition. Language is a factor that must be watched when defining African poetry. This issue has sparked up polemical scholarship by Obi Wali, Ngugi wa Thiong’O and others who believe that African literature must be written in African language, and Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe

and others who believe that European languages can be bent and mastered in order to convey the complex African experience. This debate continues. However, for the sake of this paper, modern African poetry includes works written in European languages, African languages and African works in translated forms. On the nature of African poetry, Oniyitan avers that:

Poetry is by no means a recent import into Africa from Europe. It is an important and living part of African culture, going back into the distant past in nearly all African societies there has been (and still in many places) a thriving oral tradition of poetry. Poetry and song are basic human expression to accompany the activities of daily life, to give utterance to their joy and sorrow, to comment on life or simply to entertain (1).

This view is anchored on the grounds that modern African poetry is not a new phenomenon and even before the advent of the written tradition, Africans had had their oral forms of poetic expression. A good example of traditional oral African poetry is the *Udje* song-poetry of the Urhobo people of Nigeria. The Urhobo *Udje* song-poetry tradition is usually performed by rival communities on appointed days. The rival communities haul invectives at each other in highly poetic and dramatic forms. Through the use of satire and a whole gamut of figures of speech, *Udje* performers thrill their audience while performing their duty of punishment by words to erring members of the society. Luke Eyoh likens *Udje* with the Yoruba *Ijala* in its role of checking social vices and he believes that it promotes “communal/national stability and development” (“Indigenous Oral Poetry” 84). Tanure Ojaide believes that the *Udje* tradition is “one of the most poetic of Africa’s indigenous poetic forms” (44). J.P. Clark pioneered studies on Urhobo *Udje* while G.G. Darah and Tanure Ojaide collected *Udje* works, translated them to English and examined their literary aesthetics. Clark and Ojaide are influenced by the *Udje* tradition in their

written poetry. Nyong Udoeyop and Eyoh have written on the nexus between Urhobo *Udje* and Clark's poetry.

Apart from its oral origins and influence, modern African poetry is conceived of by Tanure Ojaide as:

[...] unique in possessing a repertory of authentic African features. This authenticity manifests itself in the use of concrete images derived from the fauna and flora, proverbs, indigenous rhythms, verbal tropes and concepts of space and time to establish a poetic form [...] In fact, an authentic African world forms the back drop of Modern African Poetry (104).

Ojaide's view centres on the local colour that can be found in African poetry. This local colour is drawn from the African environment and culture and without it, there is little left of African poetry. Friday Okon believes that modern African poetry expresses "the problems, peculiarities and prospects of politics in the African world in the twentieth century and beyond" (94). Going by Okon's opinion, modern African poetry is fuelled by history and politics in the African continent and it gets its sustenance from these.

In all these, it is clear that modern African poetry is a manifestation that covers a lot of concepts, works and writers. Modern African poetry comprises works inspired by oral traditions, translations of oral works, works that mirror African socio-historical and political realities, works that showcase the richness of African heritage, culture and norms, works that represent the African environment and images, works that are written by Africans; for Africans and which portrays the African total experience.

The Trends in Modern African Poetry

It has been established in this paper that modern African poetry is a very large body of writings emanating from Africa. These writings have been produced at different points in time and against different conditions. Some of these works are continentally tied while others are national in

outlook. It is imperative to identify the trends, canons and generations that constitute the overarching modern African poetic canon.

The concept of a literary canon has been mentioned earlier on. In Africa, canonisation of works is an arduous task, not because the works cannot be connected, but because the line is thin and traditions overlap one another (Soyinka 13). This overlapping of traditions is mainly because writers known for a particular period still write and their works progress into another generation. Other writers who may not belong to a particular canon attempt to write like members of such canon and thus intertextualise them. This is better put by Garuba thus:

Even at the most propitious of times, when a convergence of historical events and creative ferment of the imagination appear to announce their evidence, literary periodization remains a messy business. The happy coincidence of history and the foregrounding of particular thematic and formal preoccupation in literature are often one such moment when a period or school seems inevitably to come into being. But the inevitability is deceptive, masking the constructedness of the category we devise for framing our understanding of it and the time-lines we draw to mark it. For, once timelines are drawn and writers and writing are placed within them, the intuitive clarity of the lines blur, as writers who should be within the period by the nature of their preoccupations and styles fall outside and others within very clearly pronounce their unbelonging in their work. The struggle to both maintain and reconstruct the boundaries then begins as critics scramble to recuperate the distinctiveness of the classification often with qualifiers such as ‘early’ or ‘late’ while the unrecuperable writing continues to mock their best efforts. As boundaries demarcating neat categorizations, therefore, literary periods and schools are porous as they come. As markers of general trends, however, they retain some usefulness, more like provisional maps, open-ended

rather than closed, always inviting revision; their reversibility inscribed, as it were, at the heart of their making (51).

All these factors that have been outlined and which Garuba has surmised come to play when considering the generations of modern African poetry. However, this paper's crux is the examination of the generations and the nomenclatures they go by as well as their main thematic and stylistic thrusts using representative works.

A cursory look at modern African poetic output will reveal eight distinct literary canons/trends. This statement is predicated upon contemporary findings. Previous researchers have identified various trends even though the crux remains the same. Nwoga is often cited for his division of African poetry into the pioneer phase and the modern phase (121-142). Okon identifies some of these canons and labels them: the pioneers, nationalist struggles, post-independence period, which he further divides into: the older generation (1960-1970) and the younger generation (1970-date), and recent echoes. Okon's categorisation is quite detailed and comprehensive. However, some canons have been omitted and these will be addressed in this paper. Ogunyemi is another scholar who has attempted to delineate the canons of African poetry. He divides these canons which he calls *voices* into four generations which are divided by historical progression (229). Ogunyemi's study is akin to that of Ushie who also identifies four generations. The following canons/trends will be examined in this paper: pioneer poetry, modernist poetry, disillusionment poetry, civil war poetry, the alter/native tradition, Niger delta/eco poetry, apartheid poetry and contemporary poetry.

Pioneer Poetry

This is the earliest phase in modern African poetry. This is generally regarded as the point when African poets started to use the written medium for poetic expression. This period spans the 1920s till the late 1940s. Poets who wrote in this tradition were largely amateurs who had just acquired European education and decided to write for various

reasons, mostly nationalistic. Their poetry can simply be regarded as ‘apprentice poetry’ which reflected Western forms and styles (Okunoye 41). Patrick Oloko believes that these pioneer poets should not be taken seriously but seen as mere “historical curiosities” (3). There are two major traditions in this canon which developed almost simultaneously in Anglophone and Francophone African countries: the nationalist poetry and the poetry of Negritude.

Nationalist pioneer poetry was written mainly by Anglophone African poets who had finished receiving Western education in England and had returned to face the realities of colonialism and self-denigration. Through the use of propaganda, these poets wrote highly political poems which reflected the “politics of anti-colonial struggle” (Okon 95). Their poems were highly simplistic in style with the use of the free verse form. The poems lack the literary sophistication of later poets in terms of style. Their themes were mainly on African nationalism and glory. Some of the poets of this canon include Dennis Osadebey, Nnamdi Azikiwe, R.E.G. Armattoe, Gladys Casely Hayford, Michael Dei-Anang, B.W. Vilakazi, Benibengor Blay, among others. A representative work of this period is Dennis Osadebay’s “Young Africa’s Plea”. This poem thematises African nationalism and the superiority of African culture and artefacts. The poet persona says: “Don’t preserve my customs/ as some fine curios/ to suit some white historian’s tastes” (Nwoga 17). These poems condemn the exploitation of Africa’s traditional heritage by the Europeans. The poet then moves ahead to establish that African wisdom and lore are superior to the European ways of life by saying: “Let me play with the whiteman’s ways/ let me work with the blackman’s brains/ let my affairs themselves sort out”. One can see the poet’s attempts at parallelism as a style as well as the play on words. These constitute the simplistic style of the pioneers. Their diction is simple and the poet attempts to express, rather than conceal which is the forte of poetry. The poet persona, like other pioneer poets, also addresses the issue of racism and proclaims the greatness and

superiority of the black man by saying: “Those who doubt my talents/ in secret fear my strength/ they know I am no less a man”. All these constitute the main standpoints of nationalist pioneer poetry.

Negritude poetry is the other tradition of pioneer poetry. Some scholars, however, treat Negritude poetry as a different canon entirely. This paper treats Negritude together with nationalist poetry because of the similarity in themes and style as well as the period in which the poems were written. Negritudism is a philosophical and artistic movement that evolved in France through the writings of Leopold Senghor, Leon Damas and Aimé Césaire. In African poetry, Negritude evolved as a response to France and her hypocritical system of assimilating blacks and making Frenchmen out of them. The French system suppressed African identity and culture and portrayed African culture as inferior. The Negritude poets revolted against this and wrote poems that romanticised and idealised Africa personified as a woman. They idealised and made good, all that is African through the use of “African imagery, symbols and speech cadences” (Okon 98). Their themes centred largely on the greatness of Africa, especially the landscape, history and culture, and Africans. They also wrote on themes that dealt with the hypocrisy of the colonial masters. The main literary techniques employed by Negritude poets were imagery, symbolism, satire and hyperbole. Some of the poets include Leopold Sedar Senghor, David Diop, Birago Diop, Tchicaya U’ Tamsi, Bernard Dadié, and others.

Senghor’s “Black Woman” is used for representative analysis. It is one of the most popular Negritudal poems. The poem thematises African innocence and pristine beauty. This innocence is captured in the lines: “Naked woman, black woman/ clothed with your colour which is life, / with your form which is beauty!” (Nwoga 96). Through the idea of “nakedness”, African innocence is affirmed. The colour of the African skin is praised as “life”. This deliberate, and sometimes exaggerated, romanticisation of African colour is one of the things Negritude is known

for. At the stylistic level, the poem is richer than the nationalist pioneer poems. The poem contains imagery, metaphors and symbolism, among other devices. In the last few lines, the poet uses symbolism when he says: “Before jealous Fate turn you to ashes/ to feed the roots of life” (97). The word “Ashes” is used as a symbol for decay and death in this instance.

Modernist Poetry

Modernist African poetry is a canon of works influenced by European Modernist period. African poets in this tradition wrote mainly through the 1950s and early 1960s. They wrote highly obscure and private poems with techniques which resembled the modernist poems of Ezra Pounds, T.S. Eliot, G.M. Hopkins and W.B. Yeats, among others. The poetry of this tradition was imitative and full of novel techniques. This was the beginning of serious and academic poetry in Africa. The poets were not concerned with propaganda or idealising Africa. In the words of Aiyejina, the poetry was preoccupied with “the poet's private grief and emotions over and above social tragedies and triumphs. It was also poetry distinguished by an undue eurocentrism, derivationism, obscurantism and private esotericism” (112). Their themes centred on the self and the individual. They explored private thoughts, emotions, loss, love, hopefulness, anticipation, experiences and the environment. These themes were engineered using Eurocentric techniques such as imagism, allusiveness, fragmentation, syntactic jugglery, neologisms and symbolism, among others (Chinweizu, Jemie and Madubuike 163). Some of the poets in this period include Wole Soyinka, Christopher Okigbo, Gabriel Okara, Mac Akpoyovwaire, Aig Imokhuede, J.P. Clark, and others.

A representative poem of this period is Christopher Okigbo’s “The Passage” in which the poet thematises his personal and private experience with the goddess Idoto. This experience is captured by the poet thus: “Before you, mother Idoto, / naked I stand, / before your watery presence, / a prodigal / leaning on an oilbean, / lost in your legend” (Soyinka 295).

This extract is basically the poet's personal experience which may not even be easily identified with by the reader. Ofure Aito acknowledges the poem's intensity and its "ability to reflect profundity in the exploration of individual's sensibility as it evolved in a ferment compounded out of the confrontation between traditional interests and modernity" (9). At the stylistic level, one can observe the use of syntactic jugglery in the lines. An example of this is: "Before you, mother Idoto, / naked I stand". This diction has been syntactically juggled much like the poems of Manly Hopkins. The syntax of the poem would have been "I stand naked before you/ Mother Idoto".

Disillusionment Poetry

The poetry of disillusionment is the term used to refer to the poetry of the 1960s. The poetry of this period was coloured by the experiences of independence. After the struggle for independence, most African countries were eventually free of European rule by the year 1960. The prospect of independence and self-rule brought high expectations. Africans thought that self-rule would bring forth an Eldorado and the continent would transform into a utopia. Unfortunately, this was not the case. African leaders became grossly corrupt and dictatorial. Expectations were shattered. There was disappointment which later metamorphosed into disillusionment. The poetry of this period was socio-political and poets decried the corruption of African leaders. Nwachukwu Agbada describes this period as that of "Afro-Pessimism" (73). Most of the poets of this period had written earlier but had not been socially concerned. However, the activities that permeated the society were too gloomy for the poets to be private and obscure. They wrote to address the failure of leaders to meet expectations. Their themes centred on bad leadership, tyranny, corruption, and social commitment. Their techniques were largely Modernist and based on techniques such as imagery, realism, symbolism, etc. Poets of the time include Wole Soyinka, Christopher Okigbo, Lenrie Peters, Kwesi Brew, Kofi Awoonor, and others.

Christopher Okigbo's "Hurrah for Thunder" is analysed as representative. The poem addresses the dashed hopes of the people in the newly independent African society. This poem has been regarded as prophetic by some critics. The poet persona thematises corruption in the verse: "But already the hunters are talking about pumpkins: / If they share the meat let them remember thunder" (Okigbo 67). The poet persona airs his angst through the metaphor of "thunder". The "hunters" is used as a symbol of corrupt politicians and the idea of sharing the "meat" suggests the looting of the collective wealth of the people. Stylistically, the poem is full of symbols and images. In the first few lines of the poem, the "elephant" is used as a symbol to represent Nigeria's federal and regional governments "whose tenacity in monopolising power made the thunder clap inevitable" (Eyoh, "Political Leadership" 80).

Civil War Poetry

The poetry of civil war in Africa is informed by the numerous civil wars fought in the African continent over the years and most notably the Nigerian civil war which was fought from 1967-1970. African civil wars are usually caused by socio-political and ethnic tensions. Corruption, tribalism, nepotism, military incursion and dictatorship usually serve as background to the outburst of a civil war. The Nigerian civil war was fought between the Biafran secessionists which were mainly Igbo and the Federal Republic of Nigeria. The war was fought to keep Nigeria as a united federation against the secession and formation of the Biafran Republic. This secession was informed by ethnic tensions, military incursion and human rights abuses. Apart from the Nigerian civil war, other wars fought in the African continent included: the Liberian civil war and the Sierra-Leonean civil war. Civil war poetry usually thematises pain, the horrors of war, grief, anguish, hunger, famine, death, etc. The techniques include realism, symbolism, imagery and satire. Some of the known civil war poets are J.P. Clark, Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Mamman Vatsa, Christopher Okigbo, Pol Ndu, among others.

J.P. Clark's "Dirge" is a modern African civil war poem. The poem thematises grief, pain, loss and destruction. The poet persona says: "Show me a house where nobody has died, / Death is not what you cannot undo / yet a son is killed and a / Daughter is given..." (Clark 25). In these lines, pain is conveyed by the theme of death. Death is so pervasive that there is no house where none has died. This is the true image of war. Iyabode Daniel believes that Clark decries, in this poem, the loss of community and nationalism among Nigerians "over and above his pain over the loss of his friends" (152). Eyoh confirms the foregoing when he asserts that the poems in Clark's *Casualties*, in which "Dirge" is found, deal with "violence, pain, loss, and sorrow [...] with war" (*A Study* 113). In terms of style, the poem is simplistic and it employs vivid imagery and realism to convey the war experience.

Alter/Native Poetry

The term "alter/native" was employed by Funso Aiyejina to refer to the generation of poets that wrote in the 1970s and 1980s. These poets are referred to as the younger generation by Okon (102). These poets were tutored and influenced by the poets of the earlier generation. Their poetry was mass-oriented and it employed the Marxist ideological stand. The poets wrote against the background of military dictatorship, corruption, gloom, ethnic unrest and mass hysteria. They wrote in simple diction and employed oral poetic strategies in the poems. Their themes were centred largely on corruption, disillusionment, military dictatorship, revolution, nepotism, etc. Their techniques include realism, oral aesthetics and satire, among others. Some of the poets include Tanure Ojaide, Niyi Osundare, Jack Mapanje, Syl Cheney Coker, Kofi Anyidoho, Funso Aiyejina, Ossie Eneke, Harry Garuba, Odia Ofeimun, Jared Angira, Steve Chimombo, Frank Chipasula, and others.

A representative poem of this period is Odia Ofeimun's "How Can I Sing?" This poem thematises corruption at its worst manifestation and the role of the poet in treating societal ills. These themes are laid bare in

the lines: “I cannot blind myself/ to putrefying carcasses in the market place/ pulling giant vultures / from the sky” (Soyinka 123). In this verse, the poet thematises societal ills and refers to them as “putrefying carcasses”. These ills, caused by the corrupt leaders, attract “giant vultures” which are symbols of war, death and decay. The poet, however, assures the readers of his commitment to fighting these ills by saying that he cannot blind himself. Stylistically, this poem uses symbolism as a form of satire. The poet uses the symbol of “carcasses” and “market place” to represent the dearth of the African society and its propensity towards corruption.

Niger Delta/Ecopoetry

This canon of modern African poetry developed mainly in the 1990s. The poets in this tradition are mainly from Nigeria’s Niger Delta Region. Other poets, who write mainly eco poetry, come from a wide variety of backgrounds. These poets all have something in common; they decry the constant destruction of our natural and environmental habitats. The Niger Delta poets, however, take it more personal due to oil companies which exploit their crude and destroy their flora and fauna without any succour whatsoever. Nigeria made a great deal of fortune from the oil boom of the 1980s. This fortune was made at the cost of the Niger Deltans whose lands/environments have been desecrated, fishes poisoned, animals killed and human inhabitants sent packing. The ecopoets decry the destruction of the ecosystem by human activities and modernisation. They predict a final decline in the ecology which will be detrimental to all life. The Niger Delta and Ecopoets write using satire, symbolism and realism. Some of the poets in these traditions include Tanure Ojaide, Ogaga Ifowodo, Niyi Osundare, Onookome Okome, Joe Ushie, Basse Nnimmo, Ibiwari Ikiriko, Chin Ce, etc.

In Ifowodo’s “Jesse”, we find the themes of pain, bitterness and environmental devastation. The poet decries the ill maintenance of oil pipelines which causes oil spillage that kills and destroys the ecology. He

describes these oil pipes “as corroded and cracked/ by the heat of their burden” (Ifowodo 17). The poet also decries the destruction of forests and natural habitations saying: “The forest quivered as trunk after trunk snapped/ and a nameless rage wagged greenfingere/ branches in the air as they fell to the hungry axe” (3). All these inform the thematic thrust of Niger Delta and Eco poetry. Stylistically, the poet employs symbolism to represent some of the factors militating against the ecology and the Niger Delta at large. An example of such symbol is the “hungry axe” which stands for man’s destructive tendencies to his own environment.

Apartheid Poetry

The poetry of apartheid is informed by the South African black experience. Apartheid was instituted as a form of racial segregation in South Africa. The white South Africans instituted racially discriminatory laws which limited the freedom and total life of black South Africans. Blacks were not allowed to go to the same schools, attend churches and live in the same places with whites. Blacks were not allowed to vote or to be voted for. The aboriginal blacks were thus reduced to mere tenants in their land. Some poets wrote to address these divisions and talk to the conscience of the white oppressors. Most of these poets were harassed and even detained. Their themes included segregation, protest, pain, inequality, racism, oppression, etc. Their major technique was the protest form, critical and socialist realism, imagery and symbolism. Poets in this tradition include Mazizi Kunene, Lewis Nkosi, Dennis Brutus, Oswald Mtshali, Wally Serote, Richard Rive, Njabulo Ndebele and others.

A representative poem of this tradition is Oswald Mtshali’s “The Master of the House” where the poet decries the displacement of Africans from their traditional abodes. The poet presents the pain and anguish of the black people using the lines: “I am a faceless man/ who lives in the backyard/ of your house/ I share your table/ so heavily heaped with/ bread, meat and fruit/ it huffs like a horse/ drawing a coal cart” (Mtshali 55). Black people are referred to as “faceless” people, without identity, who

have been displaced and made to live in the “backyard” of the white man’s house. This, and many others, inform the themes of apartheid. Stylistically, visual imagery is used to present the extremities of the conditions of the black man in apartheid South Africa. Instances of visual imagery abound in the verse rendered above. The poet paints the visual image of a man who lives in the backyard of another man whose table is heaped with good food. This imagery is used to contrast the conditions of the white man with that of the black man.

Contemporary Poetry

The term, “contemporary poetry”, is used as a ubiquitous term to cover the writings of poets who started writing from the 1990s and the 21st century poets. Okon calls these poets “Recent Echoes from a Globalised Africa” (107). Contemporary African poetry addresses issues of globalisation, corruption, the ICT, migration, exile, and others. The poets in this tradition were influenced and taught by the alter/native poets. Their styles are similar and some of them are socio-politically concerned. Other poets of this generation employ the Parnassian philosophy and write using the philosophy of arts for art’s sake. They write of love, emotions, grief, hope, pain, etc. Some of these poets include Remi Raji, Tanure Ojaide, Wunmi Raji, Niyi Osundare, Ebi Yeibo, Rome Aboh, Imo Okon, Akachi Ezeigbo, Ebele Eko, Afam Akeh, Chin Ce, Ogaga Ifowodo, Onookome Okome, Joe Ushie, Nnimmo Bassey, Peter Onwudinjo, Esiaba Irobi, Olu Oguiibe, Isidore Diala, and others.

A representative poem of this period is Ebi Yeibo’s “Tsunami Reminds Us...”. This poem addresses the tsunami that wrecked havoc in Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India, Thailand, Maldives and Somalia, in the year 2004 and which killed a large number of people. The poet persona says: “Tsunami, Tsunami, / Why did you do this to me? / Tsunami, my grief,/ Tsunami, our scourge; / Tsunami, the destroyer of our world” (Yeibo 13). This poem thematises the pain and destruction meted out on people by the Tsunami. Although the tsunami was not in Nigeria, through globalisation,

the poet has sympathised with the victims of the tsunami. Stylistically, the poem uses repetition, apposition and parallelisms. These are used to express the gravity of the experience.

Conclusion

Modern African poetry has been examined as a unique literary manifestation which is made up of various canons/trends. These trends are informed by socio-political happenings. The periodisation of modern African poetry is no easy task because of the fairly new nature of this literary tradition. The poets that wrote in the early periods are still writing till date and new poets are writing like the poets of the earlier generations. This situation creates a problem in canonising African poetry. However, this paper has identified eight broad canons of modern African poetry and these include pioneer poetry, modernist poetry, disillusionment poetry, civil war poetry, alter/native poetry, apartheid poetry, Niger delta/eco poetry and contemporary poetry. These appellations have been used by the researcher based on the dominant issues each period concerns itself with. The paper has also analysed some of poems, in terms of theme and style, of the various poetic canons with the aim of identifying their significant features. While the researcher does not assert that this study is prescriptive, he hopes that knowledge has been contributed to the broad discussion on the periodisation of modern African poetry.

*****Mathias Iroro Orhero** is of the Department of English, University of Uyo, Nigeria

Works Cited

- Aito, Ofure. "The Poet as Town-crier in a Nation in Conflict: Okigbo's and Ojaide's Poetry." *Brno Studies in English* 40.2 (2014). Web. 17 Aug. 2016.
- Aiyejina, Funso. "Recent Nigerian Poetry in English: An Alter-Native Tradition." *Komparatistische Hefte*. 15.16 (1987): 49-64. Print.

- Bloom, Harold. *The Western Canon*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014. Print.
- Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie, and Ihechukwu Madubuike. *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature: African Fiction and Poetry and their Critics*. Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishers, 1980. Print.
- Clark, John P. *Casualties*. London: Longman Press, 1970. Print.
- Eyoh, Luke. "Indigenous Oral Poetry in Nigeria as a Tool for National Unity." *Nigeria English Studies Association* 13.2 (2010): 17-29. Print.
- . *J.P. Clark - Bekederemo's Poetry: A Study in Stylistic Criticism*. Uyo: Scholars Press, 2005. Print.
- . "Political Leadership in Poetic Imagination: A Study of Okigbo's Path of Thunder." *Journal of Humanities* 5.1 (1996): 78-84. Print.
- Garuba, Harry. "The African Imagination: Postcolonial Studies, Canons, and Stigmatization." *Research in African Literatures*. 34.4 (2003): 145-149. Web. 13 Apr. 2016.
- Guillory, J. *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993. Print.
- Ifowodo, Ogaga. *The Oil Lamp*. Eritrea: World Press, 2005. Print.
- Iyabode, Daniel. "J.P. Clark-Bekederemo - The Weeping Poet." *African Study Monographs* 29.4 (2008): 147-157. Print.
- Kaplan, Carey and Rose, Ellen Cronan. *The Canon and the Common Reader*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990. Print
- Meadows, Martin Thomas. *The Literary Canon as a Dynamic System of Chaos and Complexity Theory*. Diss. Oklahoma State University, 2006. Print.
- Mtshali, Mtshali. *Sounds of a Cowhide Drum*. London: Oxford, 1972. Print.
- Nwachukwu-Agbada, J. O. J. "Christopher Okigbo, Uprooted Culture and the Roots of Afro-Pessimism in His "Fragments Out of The

- Deluge". *Centrepoint Humanities Edition* 14.1 (2012): 73-89. Web. 17 Aug. 2016.
- Nwoga, Donatus. *West African Verse*. London: Longman, 1976. Print.
- Ogunyemi, Christopher. "Salient Themes in African Poetry: A Re-Appraisal of Library and Information Utilization Process for New Media." *Journal of Philosophy, Culture and Religion*. 3.1 (2015): 1-11. Web. 13th Apr. 2015.
- Ojaide, Tanure. "Examining Canonisation in Modern African Literature." *An International Journal of Asian Literatures, Cultures and Englishes*. 3.1 (2009): 1-20. Print.
- . *Poetic Imagination in Black Africa: Essays on African Poetry*. Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 1996. Print.
- . "Poetry, Performance, and Art: *Udje* Dance Songs of Nigeria's Urhobo People." *Research in African Literatures* 32.2 (2001): 44-75. Print.
- Okigbo, Christopher. *Labyrinths*. London: Heinemann, 1979. Print.
- Okon, Friday A. "Politics and the Development of Modern African Poetry." *English Language and Literature Studies*. 3.1 (2013): 94. Print.
- Okunoye, Niyi. "Critical Reception of Modern African Poetry." *Cahiers D'e'tudes Africaines*. 176 (2004): 769-790. Web. 12 Apr. 2016.
- Oloko, Patrick. "'New' Nigerian Poets, Poetry and the Burden of Tradition." *University of Lagos*. Web. 12 Aug 2016.
- Oniyitan, Tolulope. "Understanding African Poetry at a Glance." *VoicesNet.com*. Web. 06 Apr. 2016.
- Soyinka, Wole. *Poems of Black Africa*. Oxford: Heinemann Educational Publishers, 1975. Print.
- Ushie, Joe. "Phases in Nigerian Poetry in English." *New Nigerian Poetry*. 1 (2005): 11-25. Web. 10 Apr. 2016.
- Wilczek, Piotr. "The Literary Canon and Translation." *Sarmatian Review*. 32.3 (2012): 1687-1692. Web. 13 Apr. 2016.
- Yeibo, Ebi. *Maiden Lines*. Ibadan: Kraft Books, 2004. Print.