

## **In the Shadow of the Imperialists: A Philosophico-Materialist Reading of Tanure Ojaide's *Delta Blues & Home Songs* and *Daydream of Ants and Other Poems***

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Tanure Ojaide is known for his ability to use poetry in describing homespun and international domination, as well as challenging environmental injustice. The essentials of his poetics in the poetry collections to be discussed deepen the footprints of this artistic philosophy. Thus, in the collections *Delta Blues & Home Songs* and *Daydream of Ants and Other Poems*, there is an illustration of the nature and strategies Ojaide employs to actualise a basic commitment: transcending the contradictions of ecological imperialism, which is premised on eco-poetry. Ojaide's rationale for this poetic engagement is fathomable given the backdrop of his environment. His environment and ecology are under siege—routinely pillaged by the multinationals in partnership with the political class and systematically brutalised through the instrumentality of “ecological imperialism”. Therefore, since Ojaide's poetry resonates with Nigeria's philosophico-materialist, environmental and political conjunctures in variegated dimensions, it is significant to consider the collections as a refraction of postcolonial Nigerian experience concerning pressures of imperialist order in the Niger delta.

Keywords: Ecological imperialism, cultural materialism, philosophy, Tanure Ojaide, eco-poetry, Niger delta.

### **Introduction**

It is important to fully grasp the import of ecological imperialism by locating its roots in the anthropocentric paradigm. The overriding effect of this concept on Western thought and philosophy was so deep that the environmental as well as ecological policies that came in its wake radicalised the fundamental ecological cycles of the planet. Near to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, “most of the earth had been parcelled out to one metropolitan power or another” (Foster 1994:87) as the occidental world grappled with the realities of ecophilosophy, which roots could be located in the 17<sup>th</sup> century Scientific Revolution. Arguably, the 17<sup>th</sup> century Scientific Revolution did forge the entire Western epistemology as well as reconstructed the socio-cultural and politico-ideological configuration of this region of the world. And this largely informed its economic operation. More than that, it principally gave momentum and scientific legitimacy to the imperial rule of Europe (and the West) over distant lands. Consequently, this practice coincided with the emergence of

Scientific Revolution and the peremptory philosophy of anthropocentric ideology.

To this end, anthropocentric ideology became a groundswell and gave rise to “broad cultural movement” (Muller 1963:247), which its knock-on effects legitimated scientific, anthropocentric quest on the basis of knowledge that can be applied to control, exploit and manipulate nature and humanity; and this has proved to be malignant to humanity and deeply anti-ecological in scope (Capra 1995:23). Coursing through this, the world has witnessed a serious form of polarisation, which finds timbre in the periphery and centre paradigm or town/country thesis, where the core depends on the periphery for the supply of its economic means and materials. So, the control of nature and ecological dominance have become a question of economic priority to the West, whose activities have unleashed damaging environmental consequences to the periphery: loss of biodiversity, deforestation, industrial pollution, floods, loss of soil nutrients such as phosphorous, nitrogen and potassium through the export of fibre and food to the cities – known in the Marxist parlance as “metabolic rift”, regional climate change, historically-conditioned overpopulation, squandering of natural resources, civil disobedience, environmental violence, and socio-economic problems, among others.

As the imperialists hung socio-economic as well as materialist deadweight on less developed nations, by deepening “ecological footprints”, their economy increases at the expense of the colonised. Commenting on this ecological oppression, S.G. Bunker states that:

When natural resources are extracted from one regional ecosystem to be transformed and consumed in another, the resource-exporting region loses value that occur in its physical environment. These losses eventually decelerate the extractive region’s economy, while the resource-consuming communities gain values and their economies accelerate. (1985:25)

Apart from this, there is biological increase in the West, which is part of the tragedies of ecological imperialism. In his path-finding masterwork, *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe*, Alfred W. Crosby considers part of the economic success of Britain (the West) as having ecological and biological implications for the rest of the world, especially the Third World (1986:7). The Old World flora and fauna introduced into the New World environment and ecology caused demographic explosions, which unleashed unfavourable effects on the native species and the ecological wellbeing of the New World.

Granted, Crosby’s book, *Ecological Imperialism* illuminates our understanding of the “biological expansion” of the West, as the subtitle of his book shows, but it does not adequately clarify the political economy of capitalism. The

fundamentals of the contradictions of ecological imperialism were previously considered to a large extent in the writings of Karl Marx, who was a dogged student of Liebig and other environmentalists. In Liebig's notion, ecological imperialism is sheer "robbery system" (Foster 1999:318), that legitimated capitalism as it encourages primitive accumulation of wealth and the peasantisation of the people. Thus, the forceful expropriation of the people from their environment and lands as well as the imperial control of the resources coming from these lands creates significant ecological implications (Ricardo 1952:175). Inscribed into the very edifice of ecological imperialism is this exploitative mandate, which capitalism espouses. Thus, ecological imperialism is a corollary of capitalism: the mainstay of capitalism is ecological imperialism and vice versa. Through the mechanism of global capitalism, imperialist forces impose socio-ecological rules of production on the world, thereby worsening the antagonistic polarity between the core and the periphery - between North and South. Following this, agro-ecosystems were reorganised and systematically reformed in order to intensify, not merely the production of food and fibre, but in actuality, the accretion of personal wealth (Worster 1990:1087) by compradors and capital monopolists.

At the planetary level, ecological imperialism has given rise to the appropriation of the global commons (basically the atmosphere and the oceans) and the carbon absorption of the biospheres, essentially to the advantage of a relatively small number of nations at the core of the capitalist world economy. This pattern has informed the acts of dumping of ecological wastes into the atmosphere, especially in the periphery countries, global warming and climate change, among others.

It is against the above backdrop that Tanure Ojaide has used the instrumentality of art (poetry), which is a veritable tool for social reconstruction to engage with the realities wrought on the Niger delta people and Nigerians by extension by the multinationals and the political class. For Ojaide, every writer has got a duty to perform: the duty of social responsibility – hence, every writer should be endowed with the community spirit, which gives art a utilitarian value to be involved in the drama of social change (Maduka 1981:13). Chinweizu *et al.* in their important book, *Towards the Decolonisation of African Literature*, have echoed the same thing: "... the writer pay [sic] attention to his craft... that his theme be germane to the concerns of his community" (1980:252). Herein lies the resistance poetics of Ojaide about ecological imperialism; it is an artistic commitment to resist the ideo-cultural and politico-economic pressures of ecological imperialism as well as environmental politics in Nigeria.

## Theoretical Clarifications

Cultural materialism is the theoretical framework for this study. The whole attempt to resist colonialism and its concomitants is steeped in cultural resistance rhetoric. This is because culture is at the epicentre of the worldview of imperialism (colonialism). Cultural materialism was first coined by the American anthropologist, Martin Harris in his seminal work, *The Rise of Anthropological Theory* (1968), but was reworked by the Welsh culture critic, Raymond Williams as he incorporated it into literary criticism. It is an attempt to bring materialist perception to bear on that territory of social existence – culture – that was previously thought by classical criticism to be less materialist. Simply put, cultural materialism argues human existence as a function of practical issues of earthly (environmental) reality.

Williams' addendum to this exploration, was what he called "structures of feeling" (Williams 1977: 131-2), which deal with values that are changing and formed as we live and react to the material world around us. In tandem with the remit of this study, in order to begin a fundamental and far-reaching resistance of (ecological) imperialism, it is appropriate to approach it from a cultural materialist perspective. Culture is crucial in understanding the essence of colonialism, domination, hegemony and other forms of power-related practices. Cultural investigation is central in resisting ideological or hegemonic tendencies. The African eco-activist and Nobelist, Wangari Maathai, reasons in this light:

Culture plays a central role in the political, economic and social life of communities. Indeed, culture may be the missing link in the development of Africa (Nigeria)... Further, industry and global institutions must appreciate that ensuring economic justice, equity and ecological integrity are of greater value than profits at any cost. The extreme global inequalities and prevailing consumption patterns continue at the expense of the environment and peaceful co-existence. (My parenthesis, 2005: 200-1)

It is to this end that Lebaron and Pillay have instructed in their stimulating work, *Conflict Across Cultures* that "if culture is an underground river that connects us to others and gives meaning to our beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours, it is our ability to know this river and achieve this connection that creates our ignorance" (2006:25).

At the root of imperialism are cultural differences – conflict of cultures – the "Huntington's disease of our time" (Zizek 2008: 119). Following the meat of ecological imperialism, this development has triggered a sort of core-periphery conflict, which is grossly responsible for "robbing the periphery of its natural wealth and exploiting ecological resources" (Foster and Clark 2004:189). Scholars have

considered culture conflict as a rectilinear fall-out of different civilisations contesting for domination or power. At a global level, this position is underwritten by Samuel P. Huntington's seminal book, *The Clash of Civilisations and the Remaking of World Order* (1997). Thus culture conflict is a corollary of power struggle. According to Horkheimer,

The concept of having power over something includes deciding for oneself and making use of it for one's own purposes. But domination over nature... merely serves as an instrument for individuals, groups, and nations which use it in their struggle against one another ... (1982:412)

In consonance with the aforesaid, "the stories of the white man" (Said 1994:22), not only celebrated the cultural, economic and political supremacy of the colonisers, they equally accounted for the reinforcement and production of the much peddled cultural superiority and values of the occidental world.

### **Nigeria after Colonialism: Engaging Ecological (Neo-) Imperialism**

Since Nigeria's independence in 1960, political leadership has been controversial (Ake, 1992: 32; Mayowa, 2001: 195). It is to this end that Richard Dowden, the British journalist and expert on Africa (Nigeria) indicated in his recent grand expose on Africa titled *Africa: Altered States, Ordinary Miracles* (2009) that "Nigeria has a terrible reputation" (439). The "reputation" referred here is failure of leadership. And currently, the drama unfolding in the Niger delta, "which accounts for most of Nigeria's estimated daily oil production of 2.46 million barrels – most of which goes to the United States and other Western oil importing countries" (Obi, 2009: 104) is disturbing. It is a fresh appendage to Nigeria's many woes: environmental degradation, political dictatorship, infrastructural dislocation and ethnic clamour as well as denial of people's rights and other spectres of under-development. The presence of the multinationals that appropriate rhetoric of global capitalism to further their economic, cultural, political and philosophical intentions to perennially dominate the global marketplace has seriously fuelled this grisly landscape. The multinationals have done this in collaboration with a handful of Nigerians: the political class. Thus,

The multinational oil companies, mainly Shell, Chevron/Texaco, and Elf, have treated both the people and the environment with total disdain and hostility. They have worked hand in hand with a succession of brutal and corrupt regimes to protect their exploitation... The Niger delta has become an ecological disaster zone... (Ekine 2008: 67-8)

Further evidence of the destruction of the Niger delta region of Nigeria finds timbre in resource control issues (Ojakorotu 2008:95), neglect of the oil producing regions following ethnicity (Nnoli 1980:30; Osaghae 1994:9) and political impropriety by the elite. Inya Eteng, a famous Nigerian sociologist offers sombre insights:

What currently prevails in the Southern oil enclave is a specific variant of internal colonialism... The specific, highly exploitative and grossly inequitable endowment/ownership-exchange entitlements relations between the Nigerian state and the oil-bearing communities in particular, which explains why the enormous oil wealth generated is scarcely reflected in the living standard and life chances of the peasant inhabitants of the oil-bearing enclave. (1997:21)

The above socio-economic slough as well as ecological dissonance is underwritten by ecological imperialism, a practice that espouses environmental destruction and philosophico-materialist oppression. The Niger delta, which is the economic base of Nigeria, has witnessed one of the worst shades of neglect and marginalisation nevertheless, about 90% of Nigeria's foreign exchange comes from oil exploration, exploitation and marketing by the multinationals in whose shadow the natives live (Oyeshola 1995:62; Tuodolo 2009: 530).

The logic of this mould of environmental pillage and cultural erosion is further underpinned by oil politics, an upshot of ecological imperialism, which is mainly the bane of Nigeria. Through history, the whole argument about petroleum (oil) history is redolent with fierce frontier capitalism, brute criminality, brazen corruption and the crude application of power. In elucidating this, Daniel Yergin's encyclopaedic masterwork, *The Prize: the Epic Quest for Oil, Money and Power* (1991) adds credence to this position in a penetrating manner. Other books that distil the politics of oil exploration and its effects on the environment in the rhythm of the contemporary global environmental politics and culture include the following: *A Century of War: Anglo-American Oil Politics and the New World Order* (2004) by F. William Engdahl, *The Halliburton Agenda: The politics of Oil and Money* (2005) by Dan Briody, *Where Vultures Feast: Shell, Human Rights and Oil* (2003) by Ike Okonta, Oronto Douglas and George Monbiot, *Hugo Chavez: Oil Politics and the Emerging Threat to the US* (2007) by Nikolass Kozloff, and *Where Vultures Feast: Forty Years of Shell in the Niger Delta* (1999) by Ike Okonta and Oronto Douglas.

Furthermore, in this age characterised by denationalisation and market liberalisation, the frenzied scramble for petroleum exploration, has continued unabated especially in view of the recent world's oil crisis. Thus, it is difficult to divorce oil politics or environmental issues from the social relations of petroleum exploration, a practice that is largely awash with the myth of the rise of the West. This is equally one of the most important roots of twentieth century industrial capitalism.

Therefore, as the multinationals jockey for power, supremacy and the control of oil exploration in Nigeria, the consequences are lingering crises.

It is in view of the above national dissonance and imperialist hegemony that Nigerian writers (poets), which include Tanure Ojaide have engaged in artistic combat to resist ecological imperialism, one of the ugly faces of global capitalism. The mainstay of Ojaide poetry is to use literature to challenge unjust system. For him, literature is a reproduction of social experiences; it is also a method of seeking alternative perspective to imperialist pressures:

In this, poetry is a refusal to succumb, to let go of fundamental values. In the works of certain contemporary African poets one finds challenging perspectives within revolutionary thought ... These poets raise alternatives based on the practices, values and ideas of the indigenous forms of social organisation which have been de-valued... (In Shantz 2007:121)

The Overriding attributes of Ojaide's poetics in the collections: *Delta Blues & Home Songs* and *Daydream of Ants and Other Poems* are emphasis on resisting imperial order and the preservation of biotic community. This literary pattern dovetails with "aesthetics of the earth" (Glissant 1999:149), a literary engagement alive to environmental preservation and ecological well-being.

Consequently, Ojaide reasons with Leopold Aldo, who said in his classic work, *A Sand County Almanac* that "a thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise" (1966:262). With the emergence of eco-poetry, Ojaide's writings have come to be considered environmentally conscious texts; they adumbrate an internecine nexus between the natural world and man's activities on it. In this sense, Ojaide's anti-imperial poetics is an engagement with being in the shadow of the imperialists:

Then Shell broke the bond  
with quakes and a hell  
of flares. Stoking a hearth  
under God's very behind!  
...

Explosions of Shell to *under*  
mine grease-black gold  
drove the seasons mental  
and to walk on their heads.  
... (*Delta Blues...*, 13)

It is the above sobering backdrop, which is being versified in the above lines that animated Ojaide's poetics, as evidenced by Victor Ojakorotu, who takes the logic further – and considers it as activism:

This activism can be attributed to frustration (on the part of the region) arising from both state and oil companies' negligence and destruction of the Niger delta's ecology, which is the basic structure that supports life in the region, as elsewhere. It may be said that the struggle by the people of the region have been predicated on certain fundamental issues, namely: their exclusion or marginalisation in terms of access to oil revenue; their struggle for greater access to resource sharing (known in Nigerian parlance as resource control); environmental degradation; and egregious human rights violation. (2008:93)

Another rendering of Ojaide's literary activism is inherited in these lines:

My horse mounted,  
I obey the wind  
blowing inside me.  
I shut my eyes  
and take a deep breath  
for a clear goal.  
The frontierless land  
will change into a rock  
under my feet –  
I want it to accelerate  
my pace  
and fortify my song... (*Daydream of Ants...*, 9)

### **Unmasking ecological imperialism in Nigeria**

It is cardinal to start unmasking this environmental evil by invoking Vice-president Al Gore's poignant statement in his remarkable work, *Earth in the Balance: Forging a New Common Purpose*. It will alert us concerning the uncommon urgency of this resistance rhetoric or protest literature. He warns: "Unless we find a way to dramatically change our civilisation and our way of thinking about the relationship between humankind and the earth, our children will inherit a wasteland" (1992:220). Ecological imperialism in this dispensation of neo-colonialism is more monstrous and sinister – it takes a subtle, malleable form. This is because the present language of colonialism, which uses neo-colonialism as a veneer, makes it intractable to



understand the peril of ecological imperialism as it comes in the guise of foreign donor packages, international development aids, Multinational Corporations, foreign partnership deals and other hues. This constitutes a subterfuge that hampers attempts to identify the evils that accompany this contemporary form of colonialism, which has left the Nigerian society environmentally battered and socially comatose.

Against the backcloth of the relations of power and administrative mechanism of convenience bequeathed to Nigeria by the imperialists, the political class in Nigeria have sought to maintain these structures as they undermine the place of the minorities (Wirth 1945:347), whose environment (the Niger delta) is being plundered and destroyed by both the imperialists and the Nigerian political class. This has subjected the Nigerian social and geographic space to a national morass and underdevelopment. No gainsaying the fact that “since the discovery of oil in commercial quantities by Shell-BP in Ijaw community of Olobiri in Ogbia Local Government of Bayelsa State in 1956, the inhabitants of the region have persistently engaged the oil companies and the Nigerian state in a series of protest...At the heart of the struggle for participatory environmental governance is the question of resource control” (Ojakorotu 2008:95). And accordingly, Mayowa has said that violence and ethnic agitation in Nigeria can be described from environmental and economic perspectives. It shows its origin from very harsh living conditions of the masses (2001:1). Thus, this development is in the main, “the problem with Nigeria”, to borrow Achebe’s famous phrase. Also, the mainstay of ecological imperialism is to “fashion a new ethic sanctioning the exploitation of nature” (Merchant 1983:164).

### **The Cultural and Ideo-aesthetic Logic of Ojaide’s Environmental Poetics**

Finding alternative voice in representing the environmental, ideo-aesthetic and socio-economic situation in the Niger delta has been Ojaide’s preoccupation in his art (Shantz 2007: 122). This is especially so in the collection under review. This is what has been described as “alternative pedagogy” (Udenta 1994). In bringing this commitment to fruition, poetry is of essence. That is representing “... reality through signification and aestheticisation” (Amuta 1986:129). As Ojaide maintains, a “society cannot prosper without stable institutions...” (Fried 2007:149). And literature is one of such institutions. In this sense as Chidi Maduka affirms,

Most African (Nigerian) writers... there is a direct relationship between literature and social institutions. The principal function of literature is to criticise these institutions and eventually bring about desirable changes in the society. (1981:11, my parenthesis)

Ojaide corroborates this stands in his own words:

There are indications that despite the demise of communism in  
In Eastern Europe, the flowering of multi-party politics in Africa,  
And the gradual dismantling of Apartheid in South Africa, African  
Poetry will continue to be radical. This is because of the debt  
Burden created by IMF and the World Bank and the worsening  
Socio-economic plight of African countries... Poets will continue  
To portray the bleak socio-economic landscape with negative  
And ugly images and dream of light at the end of the tunnel.  
Ojaide 1995: 17)

Since poetry in Ojaide's perception is an instrument for change and societal interrogation, therefore attacking the ideological, aesthetic and cultural arrangements that have informed the depersonalisation of man as well as the despoliation of his environment through ecological imperialism could advance human condition. This was at the heart of the imperialists as the creators of their literature engaged in evangelical crusade to propagate the superiority and hegemony of occidental values, culture and mores to the detriment of the colonised. Such anthropocentric thought schema and literary representation, largely, also served the cultural project of control.

Broadly, ecological imperialism and colonialism ushered in a complex interplay of what Nicholas Dirks described as "coercion and hegemony" (1994:4) thus facilitating the belief that the imperialist rhetoric of Otherness of the natural environment and biodiversity (in the Saidean sense) are true. In stretching this thesis, it is appreciable that

An appreciation and understanding of African poetry is  
Essential in the current context where many are turning  
to cultural expressions opposed to the processes and  
effects of capitalist globalisation. (Shantz 2007:121)

It is within the purview of propagating superior cultural and economic dominance that colonial fiction valorised and legitimated the tendency to exploit the natural environment and its resources. This is perhaps best articulated in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), where brazen cruelty and utter inhumanity are meted to the elephants and the native inhabitants in the Congo Basin. This technically underscores the process of commercialisation of the African (Nigerian) ecosystem and landscape (Myers 2001:100). This warped rhetoric of anthropocentric messianism was behind other colonial fiction that propagates the colonisers' supremacy. These works are tailor-made in this light: E.M Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924), D. Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1789), R. Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* (1885), and G. Orwell's *Burmese Days* (1934) among others that validate the strategies and mechanics of environmental exploitation, ideological attrition of the colonised and cultural atrophy.

Consequently, the mainstay of Ojaide's ecological literature of resistance is informed by negating the above position, which has been reinforced by the artistic-cum-ideological scaffold of the imperialists. Deductively, Ojaide is essentially on a cultural, materialist and environmental redemption crusade.

Dike Okoro's remarks on Ojaide's recent collection, *The Tale of the Harmattan* (2007) offer more insights in this direction:

*The Tale of the Harmatta* is Ojaide's 15<sup>th</sup> poetry publication. Part one of the book, much like Ojaide's previous poetry collections, narrates and reflects on local issues with global implications. We are introduced to the disturbing tale of the oil saga that continues to plague Nigeria's conscience. Ojaide references an array of struggles for a clean environment, multinational sensitivity to local people in their business dealings, minority rights, rights of the people to be treated as humans, and the legacy of grandmothers. (2007:1)

This sense of literary engagement to overturn the shadow of imperialism in the Niger delta – Nigeria by extension is equally shared by Senayon Olaoluwa: "Specifically for Ojaide, the recurrence of the Niger delta condition in his poetry stems from the huge paradox that dogs the history of the region, that is, the paradox of sitting on oil and yet remaining impoverished" (2009:176). This is the spectre of imperialism – which follows a shadow of imperial domination and global capitalism.

There is a continuation of the logic of "the legacy of grandmothers" in "Aridon's Call" in *Daydream of Ants and Other Poems* (1997):

Once Aridon calls,  
mine will be to steer  
tirelessly ahead.  
My horse is mounted  
for a lifelong ride. (9)

"Aridon" in the above lines, is the god or spirit of resistance, which galvanises Ojaide's efforts for the resistance mission. Ojaide takes motivation and reason from this god to conquer "...the tolls of dominion ... in which victims wreak their vengeance" (34). Ojaide's BBC prize-winning poetry, *The Fate of Vulture & Other Poems* (1990) equally adds credence to this artistic sensibility. In the title poem, "The Fate of Vultures", Ojaide remonstrates with the same poet-persona, fugitive politician, Aridon in protecting the bequest of nature: "O Aridon, bring back my wealth from rogue vaults..." (11). By way of intertextuality, there is a repeat of this premise in another poem, "Wails", in *Delta Blues & Home Songs* (1997), where

Ojaide makes reference to the same “Aridon” for assistance to tear the stronghold of imperialism and elite culture:

Aridon, give me the voice  
to raise this wail  
beyond high walls.  
In one year I have seen  
my forest of friends cut down,  
now dust taunts my memory...

I must raise the loud wail  
so that each will reflect his fate...  
The boa thoughtlessly devours  
its own offspring, Nigeria’s  
a boa constrictor in the world map. (18)

The “voice” that “Aridon” offers is part of the change mechanism needed for engaging with the inanities in the region: “ecological war” that the martyred Nigerian eco-activist, Ken Saro-Wiwa adumbrated before he was hanged by the powers that be. Also, parts of the ugly faces of imperialism that Ojaide voices are annealed here in the poem, “Fetish Country”:

Inside the rocky cave they offer sacrifices  
To the god of power, a cobra with hooded face.  
Piles of bodies deck the altar with overabundance.  
The stench from the court shrine asphyxiates the country –  
...  
No body dares in the open to speak ill of the god  
Whose lightning seeks to strike dissonant tongues.  
...  
The howls of human awaiting sacrifice are muffled  
By drums of acolytes possessed by the invisible face.  
There is no end to the demands of crazy gods...  
(*Delta Blues...*, 39)

From the above, images of imperial menace as well as compradoral partnership are represented by such words as “cobra”, “howls”, “acolytes” and “crazy gods”. The gods referred here are political actors in cahoots with the imperialists, who subject the region of Niger delta to perennial plunder and devastation.

There is eloquence of this “dissonant tongue” in another poetry collection, *Daydream of Ants & Other Poems*. Poems such as “Daydream of Ants”, “Aridon’s Call”, and “The Power of Victims”, among other poems exemplify this. Let us

exemplify this from these lines from “Technology”:

Once foragers brought home food  
and robbery was sanctified by hunger,  
the ban on trespassing collapsed;  
the world swamped with hostility.  
(*Daydream of Ants...*, 13)

### **Diminishing the Footprints of Environmental Crisis: Ojaide’s Poetry and Environmentalism**

The repertoire of Ojaide’s art resonates with saving the environment from the perils of imperialist practices and environmental injustice. He sees these ugly practices as synonymous with the erosion of African (Nigerian) values, materials and ideo-aesthetics: “the destruction of the environment as in most of Ojaide’s poems dealing with nature is symbolic of the destruction of African (Nigerian) culture and values” (Shija 2008:2). As an environmentally conscious poet, he allows social facts in his ambience to be located within the borders of literature for mankind’s illumination as well as finding a better dialectics or condition for the toiling Niger delta people. On this score, the French materialist Pierre Macherey declares that “the poem... is not created by an intension (objective or subjective), it is produced under determinate conditions” (1978:78). Commenting on the relevance of art (poetry) to social history, Ojaide offers some illuminations:

Literature has to draw attention to [the] increasing gap between the haves and the have-nots. Literature has become a weapon against the denial of basic human rights... It is understandable why the African (Nigerian) artist is utilitarian. (Ojaide 1995:42; my word in parenthesis)

Engaging with the goings-on in the Niger delta is a form of literary vocation that takes as its provenance eco-poetry as well as earth-centred aesthetics that resists the distorted ideas that ecological imperialism spreads in order to gain popularity through the instrumentality of globalisation and information technology, which have the possibility to homogenise the world. Thus, Ojaide’s poetics “... bears out the remark about the history of imperialism and how this history precipitates the present world order within the domain of globalisation” (Olaoluwa, 2009: 178).

Ojaide’s commitment to the literature that refracts social realities as well as addresses the contradictions existing in the Niger delta is well known. Ojaide’s works that exemplify this artistic faithfulness include the following: *The Eagle’s Vision*, *The Fate of Vultures & Other Poems*, *The Tale of the Harmattan*, *Labyrinths of the Delta*,

and *Waiting for the Hatching of a Cockerel*, among others. The uninhibited capitalist onslaught on the bioregion of the Niger delta and the aftermath of this uncanny state-sanctioned assault are given effulgence in “Delta Blues”, one of the poems in the collection, *Delta Blues & Home Songs*:

This share of paradise, the delta of my birth,  
reels from an immeasurable wound.  
Barrels of alchemical draughts flow  
from this hurt to the unquestioning world  
that lights up its life in a blind trust.  
The inheritance I sat on for centuries  
now crushes my body and soul...

My nativity gives immortal pain  
masked in barrels of oil –  
I stew in the womb of fortune.  
I live in the deathbed  
prepared by a cabal of brokers  
breaking the peace of centuries  
& tainting not only a thousand rivers,  
my lifeblood from the beginning,  
but scorching their sacred soil was debauched  
by prospectors, money-mongers?

My birds take flight to the sea,  
the animals grope in the burning bush... (21)

The lengthy lines refract tragedies of multinationals’ presence and activities in the Niger delta. Their activities crush the biodiversity and environment of this region. Ojaide’s eco-poetic sensibility is represented in bold relief by the use of imagery, contrast, irony, hyperbole and other devices to depict the “immeasurable pain” that his environment is subjected.

Still on the subject matter of dominion and costs of imperialist imposition, Ojaide offers more insights. “The Still Dominion” assays this:

To prove our supremacy over others  
and pride ourselves as master begetters,  
we decided to design impossibilities  
to overcome our irritation as only human.  
This means if there was no rain,  
we would raise water from roots  
of desert trees or mountain heights;

...  
To strengthen the vast dominion,  
we conceived myths and dreamed wild.  
With the magic of our head and hand,  
we brought fate to our own keep  
to will things happen our way.  
Wax became steel, the bird a plane.  
And this unforeseen gift  
Promotes us beyond ourselves... (32)

Ojaide's poetic consciousness of resistance flows in all his artistic collections. In another collection, *Daydream of Ants and Other Poems*, Ojaide reinforces the same logic: the colossal loss of man's environment to imperialism and global capitalism. In one of the poems, "The AT & P, Sapele", he refracts the despoliation wrought on the flora in the Niger delta environment in Sapele, which is home to the famous sawmill in Nigeria that provided (and still provides to a small extent) timber for export:

When I first entered the AT & P  
on excursion from St. George's,  
it was next to the largest sawmill  
on earth...

The planks smelt fresh,  
sardine-packed for export;  
they came in raft by water...

When decades later I went home  
to the delta of hardwood,  
a big clearing welcomed me... (30)

The conservation of Niger delta flora and fauna, which imperialism has crushed is Ojaide's main concern in the above poem. The use of imageries such as "planks" that smelt fresh, "export" and "sardine-packed" illustrate loss of materials and resources to ecological imperialism. In "On the World Summit for Children at the UN, 1990" Tanure Ojaide brings to the fore the same mantra: ecological disaster as well as asphyxiation of the Niger delta flora and fauna:

Dogs will never shed enough tears  
to tell their sorrow,  
goats will never sweat enough in a rack  
to show the world their desperation.  
Babies suffocate from the game  
of loveless elders of state... (70)

Having annealed the class-based damage of nature, Ojaide goes to give another word for this oppressive system: “the game”. The word is a euphemistic representation of foreign domination. Various artistic means are utilised in the above excerpt to paint boldly the effects of this grisly system. The poet uses a sardonic phrase: “elders of state” to ridicule the political class whose duties as statesmen has turned into mutilators of environment and state resources in partnership with the imperialists through the conduit of “the game”.

### **Ecopsychology and Ojaide’s Humanist Poetics**

Ojaide’s artistic faithfulness to works and writings that contribute to humanist culture, which have an expression “of faith in literature’s boundless humanist possibilities” (Okome 2000:177) is well known. As his poetry attempts “to cognise and problematise the contradictions and alienation in human social relationships from bourgeois ethics and psychology” (Lenin 1970:85), it offers a good dose of proletarian ideology and humanism without shedding its literary temper. In Ojaide’s own words, this commitment has become “fashionable among poets from the mid-1970’s more than before to align with the economically exploited, underprivileged masses of the society” (1996:24). This preoccupation is largely characteristic of poets in Ojaide’s mould:

Most of the new poets are inclined to an essentially humanistic ideological position, and tend to operate basically within the ambience and tenets of expressive and pragmatic framework of poetry. (Ezeliora 2000:47)

By exemplification, in Ojaide’s *Labyrinths of the Delta*, *The Eagle’s Vision*, *Blood of Peace*, *The Fate of Vulture & Other Poems*, *Delta Blues & Home Songs*, and *Daydream of Ants & Other Poems*, among others, there is a continuation of this humanist agitation via poetry. Even in his novels: *The Activist* and *Sovereign Body*, there is no less of this uncompromising stance. Basically, the motif of his artistic oeuvre has been passed through a filter: what does it entail to live in an environment dominated by man’s bent on self-destruction and class war?

Ecopsychology basically entails ways of helping humans to counter the pains and bangs of alienation, privation and social inequality. It also constitutes in ways of building a sane society and sustainable culture as a result of environmental problems. As an academic field, the notable historian, Theodore Roszak in his 1992 book, *The Voice of the Earth*, pioneered it. According to Declan Kiberd in *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation* (1995), “postcolonial writing does not begin only when the occupier withdraws: rather it is initiated at the very moment when a native writer formulates a text committed to cultural resistance” (6). This style of



writing and ideological bent are characteristic of Tanure Ojaide's, in which case, he attempts to "see literature inside the context of an ecological vision in ways which restrict neither" (Glotfelty and Fromm 1996:105). In their provocative work, *The Western Intellectual Tradition* (1970), J. Bronowski and B. Mazlish have touched upon the fact that style and ways of portrayal are essential elements in determining the political history as well as cultural state of a particular society or nation. As a result, Ojaide has developed a poetic sensibility that defies the horrors of the zeitgeist in its restless devotion to catalogue the plights of the minorities in a nation teeming with socio-economic misery and environmental emergency. In this sense, "Ojaide's narration is essentially from the point of view of the Niger Delta crisis and by so doing, he interrogates the basis for the intervention and sustenance of the nation" (Olatuwa 2007:242). This is ecopsychological in scope as Ojaide promotes ways of resisting the impacts of ecological imperialism on the psyche of the people through the vision encapsulated in his poetics, which adumbrates ecological conservation, societal regeneration and earth-centred policies.

## **Conclusion**

The significance of culture and materialism to man as they are being shaped by environmental, political and socio-economic realities are the hallmarks of this paper. Also, it has been argued that what gave rise to Tanure Ojaide's pastoral sensibilities or earth-centred poetics is the ecological cum environmental despoliation of the biotic community and biodiversity of the Niger delta region of Nigeria - his childhood provenance, as well as the pauperisation of its inhabitants. For him, art (poetry) has to be in the vanguard of the attempts to winnow out this malaise that is enshrined in ecological imperialism, for environmental and social justice. A major plank of Ojaide's achievements in this context is conscious way he weaves his craft to crystallise poetics of resistance as well as philosophico-materialist underpinning of multinationals' presence in the Niger delta region of Nigeria. Therefore, we have highlighted that Ojaide's overriding attempt in *Daydream of Ants and Other Poems* and *Delta Blues & Home Songs* is to bring this sensibility to the fore.

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