

TRANSITIVITY IN THE POETRY OF OKIGBO AND OJAIDE AND ITS IMPLICATION FOR SECURITY AND NATIONAL COHESION

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Abstract

This paper investigates the "going-on" or happenings in the twentieth and twenty-first century Nigeria in relation to security and national cohesion. Okigbo's "Elegy for Alto" and Ojaide's "Four Pieces" were used for the study. The analysis was hinged on Systemic Functional Grammar approach. Data analysis of the two poems reveals that Nigerians in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries experienced economic, social, political and environmental insecurity which is among the challenges on national cohesion and positive nationhood. The paper among other things recommends that lessons and predictions from nationalistic poetry and other literary genres should be considered in national programmes.

Keywords: security, national cohesion, insecurity, poetry.

Introduction

The syntax of transitivity has been found useful in the analysis of poetry discourses. It is a linguistic tool which exposes the inter connectivity of language and the ideology expressed in the literary genre it is applied (Ogunbemi, 2016). Transitivity is an aspect of clause analysis (i.e. clause as representation). As used and explained in Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG), transitivity construes one of the metafunctions of the SFG, the ideational metafunction, which comprises two components: the experiential and the logical components. According to Halliday and Matthiessen (2004, p.169), the experiential component is a configuration of a process,

participant(s) involved in it and any attendant circumstances. Put in another way, experiential analysis of clauses involves examining and explaining the flow of events or “going-on” which in SFG is modelled as **figure**: a figure of happening, doing, sensing, saying, being, behaving or having (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004, p.170).

The syntax of transitivity is in the domain of clause and is realized through the verbal group also known as “process types” which unfolds through time and space and the participant directly involved in one way or the other. Exploring the system of transitivity in clauses includes explaining who says what, who does what, who feels what, who is who, who acts how, etc. Although “circumstance” (which involves the adverbials and prepositions) is not directly involved in the process types, “circumstance” is, however, necessary in the explication of meaning in transitivity.

In this study, the experiential component of the ideational metafunction is being employed to examine the poems of Christopher Okigbo and Tanure Ojaide written in twentieth and twenty-first centuries respectively. The analysis is based on the fact that one of the resources for any form of literary genre is the “happenings” or “going-on” in the artist’s milieu. Whether the “going-on” or happenings are in the form of behaving, sensing, acting, doing, feeling, being, becoming or belonging, etc, they usually form the theme of literary discourses of the writer’s time and space hence the need for clause analysis of literary genres.

Justification for Selection of Texts

It is believed that Christopher Okigbo and Tanure Ojaide are nationalist poets who translate their ideologies or experiences in their country into poetry discourses. Okigbo’s poems discuss both private and social experiences especially his involvement and view on topics such as religion (both traditional and Christian), politics and other environmental matters. Okigbo’s poems, especially the latter parts of

his poetry collections (“Limits”, “Silences” and “Path of Thunder”) dwell so much on socio-political issues of the Nigerian nation in the 20th century. Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa and Ihechukwu (1985, p.194) refer “Path of Thunder” as a supreme example of poems that demonstrate African tradition of writing or what they call “healthy tradition.” These collections of poems enshrine Okigbo’s name in the cannon of African nationalist writers. From such nationalist works, readers are educated on the prevalent events in their society.

Ojaide on the other hand writes in the 21st century. In addition to love songs, he has also shown interest in socio-political activities of the nation especially as they concern the Niger Delta. (See *I want to Dance and other Poems*). Like Okigbo, Ojaide is regarded as a nationalist poet who sees the activity of his environment – ranging from eco-systems, religion, politics, economics, culture, etc. as major sources of inspiration especially in the collection, *I want to Dance and Other Poems*.

Okigbo’s “Elegy for Alto” and Ojaide’s “Four Pieces” are selected for study primarily because they discuss the happenings in the authors’ society; both poems discuss the socio-political activity of their milieu. Second, the poems were written in different generations. Subjecting the two poems to a clause analysis will help in comparing and contrasting the happenings or events of different period and consequently help in ascertaining levels of progress the nation has made in the themes discussed.

Conceptual Clarifications

Security and National Cohesion and Positive Nationhood

Nwankwo (2011, p.158) defines security as “freedom or safety from all forms of harm or unpleasant experiences (e.g. death, hunger, ignorance, fear, poverty, unemployment, etc)”. Nwankwo adds that it is the duty of government as the managers of the nation to provide social, economic, and political as well as environmental

security to its citizens. But when this important task is neglected, the people would feel marginalised, insecure and disappointed. Ochoche (1997) cited in Udofia (2018, p.408) is of the view that "national security is about the protection and enhancement of values against those that seek to limit or destroy their realization." Udofia adds that security means development and without development there can be no security. According to the Committee on National Cohesion of Meru University of Science and Technology, Kenya, among the ways to achieve national cohesion is by instilling good governance, by engaging in peace keeping and conflict management which deal with security assurance and conflict transformation and only by so doing can the individual members of a country "have a sense as well as a feeling that they are members of the same country, community and institution" (Amos, 2016). This shows that sustainable national cohesion cannot be achieved when security of the people, of their environment and relationship is being bargained at the altar of politics.

Among the core values and features of positive nationhood are issues of security and national cohesion. Enhanced and well organized security system ensures that citizens' life, property, socio-economic and political engagements are not endangered or jeopardized; while national cohesion ensures that member citizens live and work together in every part of the country as well as be allowed to participate in national issues and programmes. Security is an integral part of positive nationhood. It signals peaceful co-existence as well as attracts foreign investment in diverse forms.

Poetry Genre

Poetry as a genre of literature is one of the means of documenting the experiences of the past, present and future of a particular society. This is so because literature is a blend of experience and creativity (Isah and Oguche, 2017, p.177). Literature is a mixture of personal and group experiences; it describes places,

people and events which are close to human real experiences: expectations and disappointment, sorrows and joy, desires and wants, aspirations and inspirations, etc.

The poetry genre which is not as elaborate as the other two genres of literature (i.e. drama and prose), still performs the task of helping the people view their society and to know their areas of weaknesses or progress and how to salvage their battered image (Isah and Oguche, 2017). Nigeria is multi-ethnic, multi-cultural as well as multi-lingual. For Nigeria to function as a nation there is need to constantly reappraise/assess the ‘happenings’ and ‘going-ons’ in the country especially as they relate to issues of security and national cohesion which are core values that signal positive nationhood. Literary genres are among the important records that would help in achieving this task.

Data Presentation and Analysis

“Elegy for Alto”

AND[conj] THE HORN[participant] may now paw [material process, probability] the air /howling goodbye ...

For the Eagles[participant] are [process, verbal] now [circumstance, temporal] in sight
Shadows /in the horizon[circumstance, visual location]

THE ROBBERS [participant, actor] are [process, verbal] here
[circumstance, location] in black sudden steps of showers,
[circumstance, manner] of caterpillars[circumstance, manner]

THE EAGLES [participant] have come [process, motion]
again[circumstance]

The Eagles[participant] rain [material process, contact] down on us
[circumstance]–

POLITICIANS[participant] are[verbal process] back[circumstance, frequency] in giant hidden steps of howitzers[circumstance, manner], of detonator

THE EAGLES[participant/actor] descend[material process, contact] on us[circumstance]
Bayonets and cannons

THE ROBBERS[participant/actor] descend[material process/contact] on us[circumstance] to strip[material process] us [participant/recipient] of our laughter, of our thunder –

THE EAGLES[participant] have chosen[material process] their game[goal],
Taken[material process] our concubines[goal] –

POLITICIANS[participant] are[verbal] here[circumstance, spatial location] in this iron dance of mortars[circumstance/spatial location], of generators

THE EAGLES[participant] are[verbal] suddenly there[circumstance, remote location]
New stars of iron dance

THE ROBBERS[participant] are [verbal]
back[circumstance/frequency] in black hidden steps of
detonator[circumstance, manner] –

Analyses of the different kinds of participants in “Elegy for Alto” reveal that there are four sets of participants: “the horn”, “the

Eagles", "the robbers" and "politicians." "The horn" which is the participant/theme of stanza one line one only appeared once; it is the announcer of an impending danger or arrival of alien visitors. The material process is marked [+probability] while "the air" the recipient participant refers to unspecified environment. The process in stanza two is a verbal process marked [+present, +plural] and the participant involved is also marked [+plural]. It includes circumstance of (spatial) location which indicates a definite space hence the persona can perceive their presence, i.e. "their shadow" and their (indefinite) number. But in stanza three, the participants are visible and describable: they are robbers in a definite environment, "here". "Here" refers to spatial location. Another circumstance (of manner and attribute) is identified: "in black sudden steps of showers, of caterpillars."

Stanza five contains a material process of contact which is different from other processes identified above. "Rain" has the feature [-countable] and naturally wets whatever it "descend[s] on". This shows that the contact "us" made with "the Eagles" is like when rain descends on something or someone and as the process is marked [+present], it means that the action is a present reality. Another material process of contact, "descend", is seen in stanzas seven and eight. "Descend" is a material process of doing involving contact and motion. And considering the verbal elements in the different circumstances, it is obvious that the contact is not a favourable one. For instance, in stanza seven, the circumstance indicates the presence of "bayonets" and "cannons" which are instruments of war. This shows that the arrival of "the Eagles" reported in stanzas two and four is not for peace. It further signals that the "descend the Eagles" made "on us" is an indicator of disunity, war and opposition. Similar to the Eagles' activities, is the activity of the Robbers whose goals are to destroy and dispossess "us" and "to strip us of our laughter, of our

thunder – .” The goal of the "Robbers" is therefore to loot, to rob them of their happiness or peace.

It is observed that these two sets of participants (i.e. the eagles and robbers) have similar motives and semantic feature: predation; they have the tendency to kill and dispossess other creatures of their food, goods or laughter and “thunder”. Even in stanza nine which contains a material process of “chosen” and “taken”, the goal is to dispossess the people of “our concubines.”

Another set of participant identified in “Elegy for Alto” is “Politicians.” In stanzas six and ten, the verbal process “are” is marked [+present tense]. The circumstance involved is that of location/frequency, “back” and manner and accompaniment: “in giant hidden steps, of howitzers, of detonators.” In stanza ten, there are two circumstances of location: a definite space and accompaniments, “here, in this iron dance of mortars, of generators”. This form of circumstance indicates that the politicians of the poet’s experience are not given any action even though they are part of the “iron dance”. There is no form of contact between them and the “us” except, of course, that their presence is being noticed in environment.

“Four Pieces”

When day broke [circumstance/temporal]

On the Niger[circumstance/spatial], the Delta[participant/theme]

Still[circumstance] disrobed[material process/transformation] and
bleeding[process/behaviour]

The robbers[participant/actor] had neither removed[material process]
all the loot[goal] nor sheathed [material process] daggers[goal]

But the cry of the wounded[participant/theme]
stifled[material process] by massive storms[circumstance]

Drew[material process] a column of silence[goal]

Her jewelry of honour[participant/theme]

sold[material process] to stave off[material process/infinitive]
drought[goal]
in their inland capital[circumstance/spatial]
The Delta[participant/theme] bleeds[behavioural process];
disrobed[material process]

The harmattan[participant/actor] breezed[process/motion]
in[circumstance/spatial]
with a scythe[circumstance/accompaniment], not[neg.] net or
hook[circumstance/accompaniment/opposite]
to fish[material process/infinitive] Delta rivers and creeks[goal].
Within seven days of[circumstance/temporal/amount]
its[participant/pronoun] prowling[material process]
The water[participant/theme] turned[process/transformation]
cold[goal]

E-e Ogoiso!
Ogiso!
E-e Ogoiso

In the General's office[circumstance/spatial]
A master plan[participant]
To bridge[material process/infinitive] the entire length[goal]
of the Niger River and creeks[circumstance]
He[participant/pronoun] will conscript[material process]
To nail[material process] their own coffins[goal]

In Ojaide's "Four Pieces" above, the persona begins with circumstance of time "When day broke" which refers to a beginning or an epoch or a new experience. Line two also begins with circumstance of location (spatial). The thematic signification of starting the narration with spatio-temporal devices is to foreground the location of occurrences. Still in stanza one line two, the

participant/theme involved is exposed: “Delta” which is assigned a material process of transformation, “disrobed” and of behaviour process of “bleeding” in line three. Line four introduced another set of participant, “the robbers” which is assigned the material process of “removing” their loot which is their goal.

The participant identified in line six makes reference to “ the Delta” of line two which is “disrobed” and is “bleeding.” Delta’s cry is being stifled, an act of oppression, and the goal is to silence it. Also, the participant (Her jewelry of honour) in line nine is synonymous with the Delta. Line seventeen contains a material process of doing (selling) and of prevention of “drought in the capital.” The last stanza contains a material and behavioural process that reiterate the present condition of the Delta: “bleeding” and the material process of being “disrobed.”

Stanza two begins with a behavioural process of motion and circumstance of location: “breezed in” involving a participant actor, “the harmattan”. Line two of stanza two is a continuation of the first clause; it describes circumstance of accompaniment, “with a scythe” instead of “a hook or net” to fish in Delta rivers and creeks. Although “scythe” is a kind of hook but it has a curved blade and is used for cutting grass and corn, Using a scythe to fish means that the actor’s intension is not to catch fish for food or economic reasons but to destroy them and consequently pollute the river with their blood.

Line four presents circumstance of extent, the number of days the participant actor prowled through or around Delta rivers and creeks which results in a process of transformation: Delta rivers and creeks become “blood-toned”. Prowling is a material process of movement used to describe hunting expedition or aimless movement to stave off boredom or anxiety. So prowling in the river is dangerous for fish and its environment (water). The above analysis shows that it took the actor(s) seven days to transform the Delta from economic

independent community to economic dependent one. The analysis shows that the people's means of livelihood is being endangered.

Stanza three begins with a spatial circumstance, "In the General's office". Line two introduces a participant/theme, "a master plan" which is involved in the process of transformation, "to bridge Delta rivers and creeks." The transformation process has the goal of either making Delta rivers and creeks accessible or to round up the region. Considering the process of operation in line five, it is obvious that the goal is to round up the creek and to subject the fishermen to "nail[ing] their own coffins."

From the above it is observed that the only process of doing assigned to Delta fishers is to nail their own coffins. A fisher is known by his vocation, fishing; but when the process changes from fishing to nailing coffins, it is obvious that the fishers are doomed as the process of nailing coffin connotes death.

Implication of "Elegy for Alto" and "Four Pieces" on Security and National Cohesion

From the poems analysed, it is seen that in the milieu of "Elegy for Alto" the people are being threatened with instruments of war such as detonators, howitzers, mortars and generators. Chukwu (2009) reports that Okigbo's "Elegy for Alto" announces the approach of the Nigeria civil war which eventually claimed the poet's life. The three sets of participants/actors involved in the processes described in the poem have similar features and goals. First, they are in great number; their presence and manner of approaching the vicinity described and with war accompaniments spell danger to the people and their environment. Second, their goal, especially "the Eagles" and "the Robbers," is to dispossess the people of their "laughter, thunder and concubine."

Stanza eleven of "Elegy for Alto" is very significant for this study; it predicts the future:

THE EAGLES are suddenly there –

The circumstance of the above line makes reference to a remote location in time and space but still indicates the presence of "iron dance." The preceding stanza (i.e. stanza twelve) announces the return of "The Robbers" in hidden steps of detonators". So, even in the "new stars of iron dance," (i.e. in the milieu's new era and circumstance) "the robbers" are still present.

It would be recalled from Ojaide's "Four Pieces" that among the participants/actors are "the robbers" who have daggers and whose goal is to loot. What the above means is that Okigbo's prediction in the 20th century is happening in the 21st century Nigeria. "Elegy for Alto" reports of dispossession of a people's "laughter" and "of our thunder" and "concubines." "Four Pieces" similarly reports of disrobing the Delta and selling off of "her jewelry of honour" causing Delta to bleed and cry, which also means that in the 21st century, a people is still being dispossessed of their laughter and honour as reported in Okigbo's 20th century "Elegy for Alto". "Four Pieces" dwells on unfavourable transformation of the Delta rivers and creeks which exposes the fishers to hunger, joblessness and other forms of social and environmental insecurity.

"Four Pieces" in stanza two reports of environmental insecurity in Delta. The participant/actor prowled Delta rivers and creeks with a scythe and within seven days of prowling, Delta rivers become blood-toned; the rivers become unsafe both for fish and the fishers. As the rivers are polluted, the people's vocation is doomed resulting in loss of employment which marshaled in poverty and psychological wreck. Stanza two of "Four Pieces" shows how Delta is being transformed from a growing economy to a stagnant community, from economic independent nation to economic dependent community and this happened within seven days the actor in the form of harmattan "breezed in."

“Elegy for Alto” talks about “broken images”, the use of “commandment and edicts”. “Four Pieces” talks about a plan “In the General’s office” in stanza three which also connotes the use of commandment and edicts. There is, therefore, no doubt that the managers of the affairs of the nation, in one way or the other, have a hand in the experiences reported in both “Elegy for Alto” and “Four Pieces”.

Amos (2016) at a workshop in Meru University of Science and Technology, Kenya identifies the following as indicators of a cohesive society:

- common vision and sense of belonging
- peaceful co-existence among all members
- appreciation and value for people’s diverse backgrounds and circumstances
- similar life opportunities for those from different backgrounds
- strong and positive relationships developed between people from different backgrounds.

From the poems analysed above, it is evident that none of these indicators are present in the milieu of the poems, rather, the narrators show how their environments are challenged by insecurity, deprivation, fear, regional destruction and marginalization which are indications that the issue of security and national cohesion is still being challenged in the 21st century Nigeria.

Stanza four of “Four Pieces” laments how people laugh at the regions even as they are enjoying proceeds from Delta. The persona laments:

We had no friends among the powers.
They introduced a bill to move the lower
Niger and creeks from the abode of abour
to throw enough green over the desert dust

The narration above exemplifies the feeling of not being a part of the same nation as those in power. This exemplifies political insecurity. When other nations of the world are transforming their countries for socio-economic benefits, the managers of the milieu of “Four pieces” are transforming Delta creeks and river to the detriment of the people. It also shows an outcry of a people against the powers that shape the country to the detriment of the inhabitants. Similar lament is also noticed in “Elegy for Alto”:

THE GLIMPSE of a dream lies smouldering in a cave,

Together with the mortally wounded birds (Labyrinths ...
p.72)

Conclusions

From the discussions on “Elegy for Alto” and “Four Pieces,” Okigbo and Ojaide have shown that 20th and 21st century Nigeria are being challenged by issues of social, political, economic and environmental insecurity and lack of national cohesion. The analysis above reveals that many of the indicators of a cohesive nation are lacking in Nigeria hence the title “Four Pieces”. In “Elegy for Alto,” Okigbo identifies the robbers, the eagles and politicians as key participants/actors of the ugly experience in the 20th century while “Four Pieces” indicates “the robbers” as a key factor of Delta's degradation and pollution. Based on the insights provided in the two poems studied, it is observed that Nigeria is yet to grow a cohesive society. The poems show that the people's socio-economic and political engagements are endangered and are jeopardized within a twinkling of the eye. Such insecurity as exemplified in “Elegy for Alto” and “Four Pieces” is a serious threat to positive nationhood.

Recommendations

Based on the information obtained from the analysis of Okigbo's "Elegy for Alto" and Ojaide's "Four Pieces" the study recommends as follows:

- Agents of transformation in whatever aspect of the economy should take into consideration the indicators and challenges of a cohesive society so that they would not do things that would deprive the people of their means of livelihood.
- Environmental security in the Niger Delta and beyond shall be looked into as a matter of urgency
- Lessons from literary works should be considered in any national programme especially the genres that are of nationalistic interest.

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