



## THE RE-ARTICULATION OF HOPE FROM GRIEF: NIGERIAN CIVIL WAR POETRY AS LEDGER

Ogaga OKUYADE

**Abstract:** This paper attempts to re-examine the poetry of the Nigerian civil war to bring to the foreground the disasters it brought upon Nigerians and to caution the generation who did not experience the war, especially the youths on the dangers of resolving socio-political crisis through violence even if some crisis cannot be resolved without one. Invariably, the essay examines poetry written by soldiers who were directly involved in the war, civilians who experienced the war closely or remotely and poets who wrote two decades after the war. From a contrapuntal reading, the poetry of the Nigerian civil war becomes a documentation of hope for a wounded society because of the substantive way it dealt with the traditional themes of the integrity of the individual or the viability of the nation's collective destiny during and after the war. To give the paper its theoretical base, I argue that since the testimony of the Nigerian Civil War has translated into an historical reality, the war story will continue be of strategic importance for Nigerians.

**Key words:** Nigerian poetry, civil-war, soldier-poets, historical reality

**Özet:** Bu çalışma Nijerya iç savaşı sürecinde şiir yazınına tekrar çalışarak savaşın Nijeryalıları sürüklediği felaketi ön plana çıkarmak ve genç, savaşı deneyimlememiş nesli sosyo-politik krizleri şiddet yoluyla çözümleme tehlikesine karşı uyardırmayı amaçlamaktadır. Bu amaçla, makale savaşa doğrudan dahil olmuş askerler, savaşı uzaktan veya yakından deneyimlemiş sivil bireyler ve savaştan 20 yıl sonra savaşa dair yazan şairler tarafından yazılan şiirleri incelemektedir. Kontrapuntal okuma aracılığıyla, Nijerya iç savaşı şiiri savaş süresinde ve sonrasında bir ulusun kolektif kaderinin hayatta kalma gücü ve bireysel bütünlük konusuna geleneksel yaklaşımlarda kalıcı bir şekilde yaralı bir toplumun belgelenmesini gözler önüne sermektedir. Bu makaleye teorik bir temel oluşturabilmek için Nijerya iç savaşına dair tanıklıkların tarihi bir gerçekliğe dönüşmesi sebebiyle, savaş hikayesinin Nijeryalılar için stratejik önem taşımaya devam edeceği düşüncesini tartışmaktayım.

**Anahtar sözcükler:** Nijerya şiiri, iç savaş, asker şair, tarihsel gerçeklik

### Introduction

War stories aren't always about war, per se. They aren't about bombs and bullets and military maneuvers. They aren't about foxholes and canteens. A war story, like any good story, is finally about the human heart (Tim O'Brien).

... yet another generation  
is rudely about to discover  
what their fathers never told them  
(W. D. Ehrhart: "Guns").

Nigerians continue to live in the shadows, haunted by an event that has shaken and made fragile the chord bonding the people -the civil war. This discourse aims at re-reading Nigerian civil war poetry in order to appraise the idea of a nation fifty years after independence. The discourse employs Nigerian Civil War poetry as an instrument for calibrating the project Nigeria against the backdrop of self rule. Sadly fifty years after that abysmal destruction of lives and properties, a lot of Nigerians would call for another civil war at the wake of any form of ethnic, religious and economic crises. Perhaps, the tragedy has not been properly documented for them to see that even the bowels of the earth became full to the brim that it could not accommodate the corpse of those who fell during the war. Others ask how many wars Nigeria needs to fight to become stable. This question becomes very important considering the response of the Nigerian government to the admonition of the Libyan President, Colonel Gadafi on the need for the Nigerian nation to break-up along religious lines.

The Nigerian Civil War had started as an ethnic discord among the elitist cadre of the Nigerian military, but most of those who fought that war responded as individuals so dedicated to their ideology. Their moral fury was directed at those attempting to rupture an already fragile and vulnerable nation held together by suspicion and distrust. And most of them did this in a way that required sacrificing their own lives. The war dealt a serious and deadly geopolitical blow on Nigeria. Nigerians continue to react to the events with deep-seated anger, others with volcanic silence, foregrounding their patriotism, and yet with considerable and persistent puzzlement. Why did this happen? How could it have happened? There is a good deal of uncertainty over what must be done so that such an event will not happen again.

The fact that the war was fought shortly after independence, when the newly weaned nation should be experiencing indigenous economic bliss and beauty of self-governance are enough pointers to the importance of revisiting that crisis. Without doubt, Africans can still learn from their wounds. It is against this background that this discourse attempts a re-evaluation of war through the binoculars of Nigerian civil war poetry. The poetry of the Nigerian civil war is emotionally charged with the artistic and faithful rendering of the original account of the war. For these poets, the catastrophe that erupted from the war has been a tremendous accelerator of history.

The aim of this paper is to examine the poetry of soldier poets on the war and poets who wrote outside the scene of ravage-non-combatants in order to caution the generation who did not experience the war on the dangers of resolving socio-political tensions with violence. Some of the aftermath poetry are not directly about the war, but still directly concerned with the legacy of the war. The poetry on the War rigorously interrogates the psychological and political legacies made available for the generation who did not see the war, so that they can discover for themselves whether possibilities for human redemption exist in the war's aftermath. This brings to light Wilfred Owen's (1965:31) admonition that "all a poet can do today is warn". From this

premise, the war poetry does not only become a therapy, it equally becomes a poultice for the wound of the past.

### **Voices of Soldier Poets on the War**

Nigeria has an outpouring of the civil war literature many years after the fall of Biafra. While not many works examining the war appeared in the first few years after the war, the dam seemed to have burst in the 1980s and early 90s when the trickle turned into a downpour in numerous publishing houses in Nigeria. The war actually altered the experiences of men who enlisted, expecting a heroic experience, but they were forever changed by the realities of war. These soldier-poets, who contributed to this treasure-trove, give eyewitness accounts of the horrors of violence. This account is supposed to be an admonition to the generation who did not see the catastrophe of the crisis. Their poetry configures brutally graphic and shocking images of the atrocities.

*Voices from the Trench* (1978) edited by Mamman Vatsa and *War Cries* by Domcat Bali (1984) remain the poetic documentation of the military voices on the war. Although not very poetic, they evoke the disasters that trail an ambiance of war. It most noted that not all the soldiers who contributed to Vatsa's collection may have fought in the war, but as soldiers they understand the intricacies of a war situation.

Olu Akinyode's "Sacrificial Lambs" examines the relationship between the gods and man. The 'gods' in this context are the leaders whose unguided ambition for power and their questionable sense of nationalism have precipitate the crisis even when they know too well that they will only observe the war from a distance. The poem describes soldiers as sacrificial items to the bloodthirsty gods:

When the gods are annoyed with us,  
we roast and turn to appease their anger.  
Ready and alert, we must be  
For days may come  
To mount the alter and offer  
A supreme price sacrifice (Trench: 25)

The poem does not blame soldiers for their horrific war crimes; the ordinary soldier is instead presented as one at the mercy of forces greater than himself, as the victim of bungled attempts by the elitist cadre of the Nigerian armed forces who love to hold on to power for egocentric reasons. It could equally be bungled orders of uncaring or glory-seeking officers and politicians or of the natural and tragic hardening that would take place in anyone exposed to brutality on a daily basis.

Soldier-poets on the war do not only articulate the harrowing and excruciating experience of war, the evil and the illogicality of the enterprise pervades their poetry. Major Attu's "Advance to

Contact”, enunciates clearly the vulnerability of man during war and the volatility of war. The situation is like the face of the weather. It changes often. Victory smiles at one side in the morning and in the evening the agony of defeat lurks around:

We moved ahead...  
Every day  
We died and lived  
Till the end (*Trench*: 43)

From Bali’s account, there seems to be no complete victory in war. In “Assault Across the Niger” the bravado of the federal troop is celebrated, yet they suffer the set backs of death as they “greedily went into town to loot” (32). Bali’s style is descriptive; it is more of reportage because it gives a chronological account of the events.

I was gripped with fear as the  
H - hour drew near,  
And I began to shiver and perspire,  
‘you must control yourself, I thought in despair,  
As I issued orders that were unclear...

Rat - tat - tat - boom - boom - boom,  
Rent the air as our guns released the bombs  
To herald H - hour and spell doom  
To whoever dared to be in the path (*War Cries*: 10).

Bali is vivid in details of the war account by giving the reader access to swim into the ‘private unconscious’ of the personae, bringing to bear the disparity between his simulated outward bravado and the internal psychic wrangling. Both will present a cinematographic account of the situation bringing descriptive fidelity to Bali’s poetry as the lines carry the readers into the deserted streets, the soldiers’ minds and their fields of fire.

Mamman Vatsa’s “If I must die”, echoes Claude McKay’s “If We Must Die” and ridicules those who orchestrated the crisis. He satirizes the inglorious acts of those engineering the war, who have forced “... poor me/to shoot to kill/those against whom I have no ill” (128). He comments on the caliber of persons who begin wars and their response when the war becomes monstrous:

Wars are started by the mean  
And left to be fought  
By fools like me  
...  
They zoom out in planes so to say  
out of rage and range of the guns  
To countries strange  
Leaving me to die  
Empty - like lie (Voices129).

Ironically, after the war is lost and won, and cities are sacked, infantrymen felled in their number, purchasing victory with their blood, it is the generals and politicians who started the fire who will take the glory. History hardly remembers mere infantry soldiers, but generals always have their space in the books when the history of the war is told because as they return, they “celebrate Thanksgiving Day” (128). “Rifleman’s song” is Psalmic in tone and persuasive in temper. It is the soldier's plea to his firearm. Vatsa here appreciates the fact that heroism is not exclusive. Even soldiers who are well prepared with tactics of different kinds equally need some luck to survive a war:

Rifle,  
Steel-mate  
Don’t disappoint me  
...  
If you fire well  
I can tell,  
...  
If you disappoint me  
in war  
Then I am dead (192).

Vatsa’s poems celebrate a kind of ambiguous polarity. The poems illustrate the importance of patriotism and loyalty even if it means annihilating one’s family as long as it is a military order. “Soldier’s song” espouses this point. While, as the soldiers perform their patriotic chores they regret their rage only after the disaster. More importantly, Vatsa’s poems demonstrate that survival in war is all about chance. “That War Killed Him” and “They Died” are poems dedicated to Majors Umamo and Bugaje -soldiers who fell in the cause of defending the integrity of their land. Bugaje, felled in the war, has no place in history. His disappearance both in life and in eternity does not stem from his fall or his not having a grave, but the fact that he is forgotten

for his loyalty and patriotism. Besides configuring the despoliation of war and the insecurity it brings, Vatsa's poems deal with issues that border on the aftermath of the war. "God Forbid More Wars" and "Remembrance Day" are eloquent examples. These poems lack the psychological depth, emotional carriage and the mood of despondency of aftermath poetry but they are rather charged with the immediacy of the predicament of the war, thereby adding tension and fear to everyday life.

### **Civilian Voices on the War**

Nigerian war poetry records with emotional clarity the bleak moment of Nigeria's history in a manner no other genre of writing has. They also reveal the traumatic experience of Nigerians in a moment of turbulence. The poetry manifests the total eclipse of rationalism, justice and peace, which in turn create a terrifying climate of grievous pains. The poetry does not only abhor and condemn these unfathomable acts of inhumanity; it equally empathizes with individuals who have encountered pains of different forms during and after the war. Although, the poems are scattered across the pages of anthologies and collections, they remain indelible, and will continue to remain artistic artifacts of the war in verse.

Okigbo's "*Path of Thunder*" occupies a seminal and inaugural position in the criticism of Nigerian War Poetry. Okigbo maps the topography of the war while the succeeding generation of poets broadened the horizon. In his "*Path of Thunder*", something melancholic looms against the background of shadows and apocalypses, a prophecy of the end of an historic epoch. One begins to wonder, putting into consideration the fact that the social experience that has shaped the artistic consciousness of these poets is war –how can the agony of war can be aestheticized. To put it more precisely in Yves Reuter's (1992:18) term: "how can we subject what stems from horror to aesthetic judgments?". Amuta (1988:86) remarks that war "puts the greatest pressure on human nature, relationships and institutions, it becomes also a fertile ground for the literary imagination". Being an expression of thoughts and feelings as well as a representation of their vision of the war, their poetry invariably responds to the 'nowness' of the situation -the situation which becomes the subject of artistic creation.

Though the experience of the war is disenchanting and the poetry reads like a jeremiad, the poets capture the conflict wholly, and their sense of documentation is conditioned by artistic concerns. Soyinka (1999:21) puts it explicitly as ability of the poet to appropriate "the voice of the people and the full burden of their memory". Johnson (1980:149) remarks that, "because of the proximity of the experience, the deep passions engendered by events and the personal involvement of the individual do have a direct bearing on the artistic creation". Interestingly, however, the poetry of the era is not bereft of artistic commitment because of the history of the time. The poets exhibit an easily discernable artistic control of their craft in their presentation of the history of the era.

By the end of the war, the poets who wrote did not only paint pictures of the raw absurdities of death in time of war, but they got the chain of history of Nigerian poetry broken. A radical shift occurred, a shift that may explain the present face of Nigerian poetry. The titles and themes of this new poetry emphasize a programmatic concentration on issues of national destiny. Nsukka, a town that housed the only University of the Eastern region then, became the teeming garden from where the post-Okigbo poets flowered into artistic fruition. Azuonye (1972:1) suggests in his

introductory note to *Nsukka Harvest*, a chapbook from where the university alumni and undergraduates expressed their grief, that the outburst of imaginative creativity was informed by a “novel of utter disgust”. The gory sight of the tragic consequence and inconsequentiality of war is reflected in their works. This callous despoliation of the collective dream of the Nigerian people continues to hunt the psyche of these writers as, “... the sadness of a generation whose life ambitions had been cut short by a sad and senseless war” (2).

To the Biafran writers, the crisis is not just a war which signaled the wanton destruction of lives and properties, but the voices of their verse are symbolic of hope for a wounded society. Achebe (1977:84) puts it subtly that “Biafran writers are committed to the revolutionary struggle of their people for justice and true independence”. Thus, the concerns of this discourse anchors on Fouke’s (1983: 20) quiz, “how are literary texts perceived to pass meaning, and under which conditions do we attach meanings to them?” The poetry of the Nigerian civil war derives its pre-occupation from a social context, which is real. This in turn sandwiches the poets between the facts of history and aesthetics, giving the little room to mediate or negotiate their craft between two poles.

Achebe, one of Africa’s foremost writers whose oeuvres define the standard of innovation of African literature with his inaugural and canonical text *Things Fall Apart*, wrote poetry reminiscent of the temper and tone of any imaginative craft written at the time. “The First Shot” imitates the awful languid process of a war situation and equally demonstrates that crisis detonates slowly and once it commences, the possibility of dousing it becomes very difficult:

That long rifle-shot anonymous  
In the dark striding chest-high  
Through a nervous suburb at the break  
Of our season of thunders will get  
Sloop its flight and lodge  
More firmly than the greater noises  
ahead in the forehead of memory (Beware:11)

The above excerpt evinces both the immediate evil of the war as well as the far reaching and remote consequences of the war. For Okara (1978), one of the most lyrical poets of his generation, inspired by the civil war, the surrealistic and philosophical dimensions of his earlier poetry was altered for the need to capture the prevailing attitude of the time. In order to document the dark chapter of this moment of Nigeria’s history, his poetry transcended the private to social commitment. His “Silent Girl” subtly addresses the issue of the moral and psychological consequences of the chaos on individuals and society at large. The poem presents time as a linear process or progression: time past, time present and time future. The situation is so compelling so that the horrific ambience of the war becomes stunning and the girl is unable to recall the moments of glory she once experienced in the past. Okara refuses to romanticize that past because it is the events of the past that has not only given birth to the present, but has metamorphosed into the fire that is consuming the nation. Since the catalogue of events in the past has translated into the chaos of the present, the poet advocates disentanglement with the past

in the anticipation of securing a pellucid future which is only wished but not wholly tenable:

Let's break with the past that bred the present  
and let today be reminder of tomorrow  
though tomorrow may only be a dream  
as dream may varnish in our waking (44)

Besides the tone of doubt easily discernible in the poet's sense of skepticism, the anticipation of a brighter and better tomorrow becomes an artistic schema for keeping faith in a moment of crisis and an effective strategy for utopianizing. The agonies of the war equally reverberate in "Rain Lullaby".

Okara's "Suddenly the Air Cracks" also evokes the turmoil of an air raid during the war with lyrical delicateness. The anxiety and tension of the agony of war permeate the poem. The perspicacity of recognizing the sense of confusion and the apparent disarray created by an air raid cannot be doubted:

... a thick black smoke  
Rises sadly into the sky as the jets  
Fly away in gruesome glee ...  
Again suddenly the air cracks  
Above rooftops cracking striking  
Rockets guffawing before stuttering LMGs  
Ack ack placks diving jets (Fisherman's Invocation: 37)

Pol Ndu, a rising star in the poetic firmament latter to die in an automobile accident in 1976, creates a fogging image of the pre-war situation and poetically demonstrates that there is nothing poetic about war. His poetry reiterates the disillusionments over the meanings of the conflict, the progressive collapse of a dream and the strength of the possibility of new dreams. Ezenwa-Ohaeto (1988:253) argues that Pol Ndu, "loads each word with poetic meaning and he manages to achieve a great intensity".

The themes of misery and pains, occupy a looming space in numerous poems in *Songs for Seers* (Ndu:1974). In "Evocation", the poet portrays the sinister and evil aura that accompanies the threats of war:

Fire flakes  
Rain with  
Fire balls  
The shrieking  
The sleeping  
The naked  
The ragged  
The clothed  
Melting  
In the frenzy (Seers: 20)

Nwachukwu-Agbada (1997:146) suggests that, this unpunctuated poem is emblematic of “the speediness of war arsenal”. These lines capture an ambience of uncertainty and the spate of confusion that envelop the inhabitants of a town about to be lost to war. Besides not being punctuated, it is jumbled and jangled. Ndu uses this graphology to make the poem appear confusing, ambiguous, or chaotic to readers. Often, such formal experimentation is designed to represent the disorder and confusion experienced by soldiers and civilians during the war. Ndu’s incorporation of the seeming illogicalities of the war into the structure of his poetry establishes the fact that he is admonishing the reader to perceive the situation from an unfamiliar position because he is not describing the normal everyday life situation.

In a metaphorically dense and lyrically intense poem, “Troy”, Pol Ndu reaches back to bring not the creation of the second fall of mighty Troy but the destruction of a town in Eastern Nigeria perhaps, Nsukka. The destruction of Nsukka parallels that of Troy:

Butterflies fluttering in the lull  
Of plunders carnage, blunder  
Rape and hope raised on a quicksand (Seers: 20)

Ndu articulates an uncompromising cynicism about the war, and the potential for destructive evil in even the most seemingly innocent and solitary of men. Thus he advocates the replacement of the human specie of man:

When the row drowns  
With its characteristics has in tuffs of ash,  
Brings steel brooms  
And metal bags

for Chukwu may star afresh.

This time

With plastic apes (Seers: 16)

In “Biafra Revisited”, Ndu affirms that memory as Soyinka puts it, “rejects amnesia”, the past has drifted into the plains of history yet it is “always forgotten and always retold” (Seer: 3).

*Energy Crisis and Other Poems* (1977) by Chinweizu is another collection which evokes the traumatic experience of the war. Numerous poems in the collection capture the pains of chaos; they equally focus directly on the spectacle of physical havoc created from the tensions of war. “The Vanished City” describes the evacuation of people from their primordial base to become exiles in strange and foreign lands. The poem is equally laced with images of grief and death. The animus that informs the destruction is foregrounded through the deployment of symbols of anarchism, “She drummed to her gods. Her gods came not. She drummed but they stood in a circle afar”. The last stanza manifests a state of emergency and evokes a compelling atmosphere of a city at the verge of being sacked:

City of the dead!

Dead city of the dead!

...

Like a goat she died with her boast and fools.

skeletons of mansions rattle the breeze

under a coverlet of stars (Energy Crisis: 51)

Some writes and critics argue that P.P Clark Bekederemo’s poetry on the war sought to maintain a distant presence in the imaging of the war situation. Although, the poems reflect the chaos, Clark chooses to maintain a detached position in the reportage of the tragedy of the crisis. This may be because as a direct participant of the crisis, he has watched his close associates die before his very eyes and the strength to re-imagine their deaths in art becomes a little difficult. Clark relies more on descriptive details with searing emotional evocation. Obi Maduakor (1986:27) suggests that the poems in *Causalities* like “Songs” carry an emblem of the strictest etymological sense of nostalgia. The poems proceed from a hypersensitive awareness of history to read like a versified diary. Clark’s poetry on the war is heavily indicting. Although this indictment may have emanated from the personal loss of close allies of the poet from both sides, Maduakor (1982:57) argues that “rather than intensify the tragic mood, they dissipate it by their very passive roles in their context”. Irrespective of the skeptical distance in the tone of the poems, they distinctively bring to the fore the dissipation of national wealth and energy which wrecked an institution erected from the toil of those involved in this dastard act. The poems equally frown at the despoliation of the collective dream of the people of Nigeria. “The causalities” is an indictment of the entire nation. The poem does not only portray the futility of war but gives Nigeria a peculiarly geo-strategic locus in history -a doomed history. Numerous years after the war, Nigeria has not been able to liquidate the cardinal cause of the crisis. Nigeria is not just a new

sanctuary for rhythms of dirge, but she joins the fraternity of war-torn nations. Clark captures this sense when he writes that: “we are characters now other than before” (*A Decade*: 85).

Ken Saro-Wiwa’s *Songs in a Time of War* (1985) captures the unpredictability of a war situation. In “Night Encounter,” Saro-Wiwa attempts to interrogate the theoretical bases of propaganda in relations to art. Invariably, he tries to spark life into the poem not because they refer to real world but because they smack of something immediate and real. He concludes the poem “Were You There”, with a note of grave sincerity, most especially for those who envision the war from a distance: “You would not smile at the radio account of victories and smashed battalions” (Songs: 22).

### **Post War Poetry in Nigeria**

For the poets who began to publish a decade after the war, this elusive and profound relationship between history and artistic creativity is repeatedly the key to a whole poetic world. Some traumas by their nature seem to take time to make them felt in imaginative composition. But from a perspective of the 1990s it is surprising to note how many Nigerian poets of the 1980s have been obsessed by the harrowing memory of the civil war, even in circumstances where the writer was too young to have taken part in the war. For poets like Odia Ofeimun, the war experience was punishing, painful but hardly traumatic, never moving “far away from this intense awareness of decadence ...” (Garuba 1988: 271). In “Where Bullets have Spoken” Ofeimun paints the picture of awe in a period of war and the expectations that trail it:

And what prayers, pray, where bullets have spoken  
a plague rolled by madmen to feed the eighty millions  
what smile where dark craters have blighted  
a sun that we had despaired of holding (*The Poet Lied*: 21).

Ofeimun’s evocative lines, which he realizes through incantatory poetics, evoke the horrifying agony of war. “Exodus 67” captures the totality of an anarchic situation; the refrain of the poem amplifies the above assertion, “the Iroko is spitting fire if you have a child strap him to your bosom”.

Catharine Acholonu seems to be one of the most vibrant female poets among the teeming masculine poetic voices on the war. Yet her poetry of war does not display any marked difference from her male counterparts. Her poetry, no doubt, contributes to the understanding of Nigerian war poetry. *Nigeria in the Year 1999* (1985) is suffused with metaphors of loss, rape, personal and collective angst. In “Other Forms of Slaughter” Acholonu recounts women who suffer the worst of physical, psychological and sexual abuse. During wars women are haunted down as beasts or prey. The subject of her poetry is somber. Cruel images, of abductions, rapes and imprisonments, fill the mind. “Other Forms of Slaughter” evokes the plight women during war:

there were other forms  
 Of slaughter  
  
 When rods of aggression  
 Rip through the sealed valves  
 Of flutes of reed  
  
 When innocent virgins  
 Basking in the sun  
 Suddenly wake up to  
 Greedy eyes  
 Lecherous tongues  
 And devouring breath  
  
 Tear open  
 The thrills of their  
 Delicate legend  
 Unfolding a lustful era  
 Of anarchic bestiality (*Nigeria* 33).

The poem ends in an exclamatory note: “Yeah! These were other forms of slaughter” which is not a connotation of triumph, but the sudden triumphant relief from the exhaustion of the slaughter she describes. Considering the anarchy, Acholonu observes that sometimes death goes beyond the taking of life. There are other kinds of deaths individuals suffer during war. Ode Ogede (2000:92) contends that, “what makes “Other Forms of Slaughter” so engaging is the alarming catalogue of the moral and physiological depravities”. When the pride and arrogance of violence takes the better of man, he spurns the joy of peace and unleashes evil on his fellow man. The poet becomes incapacitated, and this places him/her at the disadvantaged position as a helpless observer. Funso Aiyejina (1988:117) notes that “Acholonu employs the details of that dark period in Nigerian history in fashioning a comprehensive philosophy about oppression, dehumanization and the need to struggle in order to survive”.

## Conclusion

It would be easy to remark that the literature of war is about man’s sense of destruction. However, a collective monologue is as good as silence, because poetry of war has been partly fuelled by man’s energy to destroy. Dale Ritterbusch (1996:145) argues that “loss in aftermath

poetry is a given”, because it is the only “given” about aftermath poetry. More compelling to this study is how civil war poetry is about so much more than destruction and loss. It is about recovery, reclamation, revision and reckoning. It is about excavation and recuperation, the volatility of mankind, the vulnerability of life and the way lives can be dishonorably abused in the frivolous pastime of hate and infamy.

This reading of Nigerian Civil War poetry amply demonstrates that there is nothing inspirational and fascinating to say about massacres. All the poems probe the problems of man’s sense of destruction and question whether the human imagination is strong enough to overcome the atrocities of crises. The poems equally raise questions about the potential of art to communicate or even transform the trauma of war experience into something meaningful. The war had marked the destruction of the Nigerian civilization -the heritage of independence. Nigeria still reeks of that chaos. Since the war has placed Nigerian patriotism and humanism in danger of erosion, or disappearance, it has become clear that, even if it did not alter the basic geopolitical weaknesses of Nigeria, it continues to have a strong impact on Nigeria’s political structures. The poetry of war becomes a call for rescue from the wreckage of dreams, and not to rebuild dreams on the ruins of that wreckage.

The Nigerian civil war poetry has become a pie-chart where the experiences of the war are eloquently documented. Though the war has drifted into the planes of history, the war period has been unique most especially in the artistic documentation of the chaos. Though the war story continues to be of strategic importance in African literature, Nigerians seem to have failed to recognize that the war is not only about disasters, but also opportunities for people to renew their unity. Samuel Asein (1978:166) argues that the literary documentation of the war “can help to illuminate the dark recesses of the mind, and record not the tanks and the artilleries but the emotion, the suffering, the test of man which the crisis entailed”. Whether eyewitnesses accounts by Nigerian infantry men, Biafran soldiers, postmodern explorations, or the private diaries of nationalists and politicians, the literature of the Nigerian Civil war is an emotionally powerful and increasingly popular category of contemporary literature. The poetry becomes an index for the urgent need to rearticulate the importance of nationalism as a signpost to the dangers of constructing primordial ethnic nationalities at the expense of national consciousness. Thus, since the testimony of the Nigerian Civil War has translated into an historical reality, the war story will continue be of strategic importance for Nigerians.

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