



# A GAZELLE OF THE SAVANNAH

SUNDAY ODODO AND THE FRAMING OF  
TECHNO-CULTURAL PERFORMANCE IN NIGERIA

EDITED BY

OSAKUE S. OMOERA

SOLA ADEYEMI

BENEDICT BINEBAI



9	Stage: A Directorial Interpretation of Sunnie Ododo's <i>Hard Choice</i> - Olaitan Lateef Rasheed	116
10	Managing Diversity: Promoting Nation-Building and Peace in Nigeria: A Critical Reading of Sunnie Ododo's <i>Hard Choice</i> - Jonathan Desen Mbachaga	125
11	Peace and Conflict Resolution in Ododo's <i>Hard Choice</i> - Adegboyega A. Karim	134
12	A Prospective Costume Plot for the Production of Sunnie Ododo's <i>Hard Choice</i> - Margaret Gregory Akpan	148
13	Women Heroes in Ahmed Yerima's <i>Yemoja</i> and Sunnie Ododo's <i>Hard Choice</i> - Taye Awoyemi	159
14	Metafunctional Interpretation of Sunnie Ododo's <i>Hard Choice</i> - Taofiq Adedayo Alabi	169
15	Signification and Symbolism of Socio-Political Structures in Sunnie Ododo's <i>To Return from the Void</i> - Omolara A. Emoruwa & Abdulmalik A. Amali	190
16	Avidity as a Blight of an Ideal Society: A Lyrical Analysis of Ododo's <i>To Return from the Void</i> - Damilola Babarinde	200
17	Ododo's <i>Vanishing Vapour</i> and Ebira Cultural Milieu - Adeiza Peter Bello	209
18	Choreographic Possibilities in Sunnie Ododo's <i>Vanishing Vapour</i> (A Dance Libretto) - Damisa Cyrus Suru	219
19	Inserting Nature into Social Vision: Sunnie Ododo's <i>Broken Pitchers</i> Investigated - Foluke R. Aliyu-Ibrahim	228
20	Foregrounding Techniques in Sunnie Ododo's <i>Broken Pitchers</i> - Victor Temitope Alabi	240
21	Tradition and the African Poet: A Study of Sunnie Ododo's <i>Broken Pitchers</i> - Kayode Niyi Afolayan	259

# 19

## Inserting Nature into Social Vision: Sunnie Ododo's *Broken Pitchers* Investigated

Foluke R. ALIYU-IBRAHIM

Department of English, Faculty of Arts,

University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Nigeria

(Emails: rashifolu@yahoo.com; folukealiyu.ai@unilorin.edu.ng)

### Abstract

Nature has always exerted a major influence on poets. However critics of African literature have tended to focus more on the socio-economic and political issues reflected in these works. This has often led to the erroneous conclusion that nature is not as important to the African writer. The killing of Ken Saro-Wiwa in 1995, the winning of the Nobel Peace Prize by environmentalist Wangari Maathai and the introduction of ecocriticism into academic disciplines are however changing the focus of critics. This chapter investigates Sunnie Ododo's invocation of nature images in his poetry collection, *Broken Pitchers*. The study reveals that Ododo deploys both the beautiful and ugly slides of nature to focus attention not only on people but also on nature. Thus in employing these images, Ododo fuses a concern for nature into the social vision enunciated in the collection.

**Keywords:** Poetry, Ecocriticism, Nature, Sunnie Ododo, Climate, Environment, Economy, Culture.

### Introduction

In spite of the publication of Niyi Osundare's *Eye of the Earth* in 1986, the killing of Nigerian Ken Saro-Wiwa in 1995, no doubt, can be said to have been the major influence on the Nigerian poetry that is focused on man's activities as they affect nature. Nigerian poets have followed in the footsteps of Saro-Wiwa as they use their art to draw attention to the exploitation of the people and the environment by a leadership that is portrayed as morally bankrupt. The Niger-Delta region of the country has received the most of such attention. Works that come to mind here include poetry collections such as Ebinyo Ogbowei's *Song of*



*Dying River* (2009), Doutimiarieye Kpakama's *Salute to our Mangrove Giants* (2008), Albert Otto's *Letters from the Earth* (2007), Tonye Biriabebe's *Undercurrents* (2005), Ibiwari Ikiriko's *Oily Tears of the Delta* (2000), Nnimmo Ansey's *We Thought It Was Oil But It Was Blood* (2000). Before these however, has been the seminal *Eye of the Earth* (1986) by Niyi Osundare.

This has however also led to the erroneous conclusion that prior to Saro-Wiwa's eco-activism, African "global eco-critical responses to what is happening to the earth have an almost imperceptible African echo" (Slaymaker 138). Such conclusions, according to Caminero-Santangelo (698) are arrived at as a result of the application of Western eco-critical criteria to African literature. Caminero-Santangelo insists that such criteria negate the African philosophy of nature which 'objectifies nature and places the category of culture/ humanity at the centre of things' (699) as the African perception of nature is anthropocentric. This chapter considers Caminero-Santangelo's position on the African perception of nature as rather extreme as it gives the impression that African writers push issues of the importance of nature to the background. The focus by critics on other socio-economic and political challenges as portrayed in Nigerian fictive materials may have given this impression. The martyrdom of Saro-Wiwa and the introduction of ecocriticism into the academics are no doubt redirecting this focus. For instance in the book published as part of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) entitled *Themes Fall Apart But the Centre Holds* (2009), two of the fifteen critical articles in the book explore Achebe's depiction of nature.

Barau's article 'Bridge-building between Literature and Environmental Values: Lessons from *Things Fall Apart*' (104) explores the ecological values in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Barau argues that Achebe's novel depicts the importance with which Africans, prior to colonialism, held nature and concludes that colonisation is responsible for 'the increasing cases of ecological failures being witnessed all over the continent'. Augustine's 'Things Fall Apart Fifty Years After: An Ecocritical Reading' (2009) attempts to explain how Achebe exploits the environment to develop plot, themes and characters. Mwangi (2004) imbues the setting of Achebe's *Things fall Apart*, Umuofia, with a metaphoric meaning. In Igbo, Umuofia means 'Children of the Forest' therefore, according to Mwangi, Achebe reverses Conrad's characters' view of the African forest as a site for death:

*Things Fall Apart* typifies African village life and its richness as an organic self-sustaining forest which has almost everything that the West - in its arrogance - claims to have come to introduce. In the forests





of Umuofia, there is a system of education, a rich philosophy, and sophisticated art, not to mention a complex religion and medical practice (Nobel Prize: A Shot in the Arm, <http://www.asle.org/site/resources/ecocritical-library/intro/nobel/>).

In this same speech, Mwangi who sees the Nobel Peace Prize won by the eco activist Maathai Waangari in 2004 as a boost to ecocriticism in the study of African literature cites some African writers' interaction with nature. Mentioning such African writers as Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiongo, Zakes Mda, Kristina Rungano, Maria Manuela Margarido and Okot p'Bitek, Mwangi's then concludes with a call for a more conscious study of the environment in criticism. It is this researcher's opinion that this should apply not only to the environment but to nature in general.

What the articles by Barau, Augustine and Mwangi demonstrate is that while nature in the works of African writers may seem embedded in other issues that appear to be more pressing, it (nature) is as important as those other issues. This chapter examines how Ododo deploys images of nature in *Broken Pitchers* (2012) to define his social vision and argues that this vision implies and also includes a concern for nature.

#### Thematic Focus of *Broken Pitchers*

The collection is divided into three parts. The first part entitled "Tension" (9-34) contains poems which, in a lamentable tone, chronicle the story of his native country, Nigeria which is aptly captured as broken pitchers: 'The remains of our treasures/ Are broken pitchers in the pits' (17). The poem 'Quarter of a cent' for example looks at Nigeria after twenty-five years of nationhood and concludes 'At 25, crises cry loud in your kingdom...It is still a slim silver juggling jubilee!' (12). 'Twigs of furies' criticises the corrupt military dictatorship then governing the country, and satirises some of its economic policies. An example of such a policy was the Structural Adjustment Policy (SAP) introduced by the military regime of then military President, General Ibrahim Babangida:

Structural AIDS Policy  
State Advancement in Pain  
Satanic Addendum for the People  
Systematic Acquisition of Poverty--  
Siphoning of Abundant *Petronaira* (20).

The second section under the title "Titillation" (35-42) are love poems



while the last section, "Tutti-frutti" (45-62), contains a variety of poems detailing the poet's different and personal experiences of life. Included in this section are two poems which thematic focus is Nigeria. The poems are 'Flaming tongues' (47) and 'Tick tock...' (56). They seem to be responses to the lament in the first section. 'Flaming tongues' warns that the consequences of the continual neglect of the people by the governed is a violent protest that would lead to an 'inevitable extinction,/ Leaving ash flakes in the creeks' (48). 'Tick tock...' on the other focuses on the people's hope for a better nation:

The calendar clock ticks  
To bring the season to an end-...  
All are busy cleaning sweats of sorrow  
And also busy clearing props of poverty. (56)

Nature images are present in all three sections of the collection; however only the poems with a social message are relevant for the purpose of this chapter.

#### Images of Nature in Ododo's *Broken Pitchers*

The images of nature employed by Ododo to articulate his social vision can be categorised into five. These are flora, fauna, air, landscape and earth images.

**Flora Images:** The poet depicts the regression witnessed in his native country using the lifecycle of a plant. In 'Purgatory of a Race' (13) the poet attempts a comparison between a glorious Nigeria of the past and a dilapidated Nigeria of the present. Nigeria of the past is seen as a 'greenish mighty tree', which is 'mothering nests of birds' (13). The poet imaginatively captures the welcoming ambience provided by the big tree in the choice of the word 'mother'. The birds are a metaphor for the people grouped into the many ethnic groups of the country. The tree is so healthy that its branches are huge and cast a shadow, not of fear, but of security, for the people, against the elements. As such what is heard is a 'Chattering of beautiful songs/ Of content sounded up there' (13). Such beautiful scenery is said to be divinely blessed and as such a clement climate is provided: 'The tree became greener/ As God shed tears of mercy' (13). The result of this is presented in further images and diction that connote progress: 'Fruits more succulent and redolent... a flourishing phase' (14). Nigeria's "oil boom" era is depicted as a period where 'viable wisdom germinated/ Barrels of juice exchanged/ For foreign currencies' (14).

The tone changes thereafter to tones of frustration, anger and despair at the present and nostalgia for the past. In the present Nigeria, the wisdom that reigns





is now described as 'repressive', the juicy fruits have hardened due to an inclement weather and become 'stones' as the birds (the citizens) have become 'imprudent' (14). The effect of this is further portrayed in diction that is contrasted with the green and lush picture presented in the earlier part of the poem. It is now a present devoid of divine blessings:

Yellowish vegetation descended...  
 The territory once loved and cherished \\\n  
 Is now shattered, tattered and wretched;  
 That was when God  
 Ceased shedding tears;  
 The tree now sheds dried tears  
 Where once little creatures  
 Had barricaded themselves  
 Against the heat of the day  
 And the chills of the night... (14)

The inter-ethnic clashes that are a feature of Nigeria's present are depicted as a 'whirling wind/ Blowing frenetic feathers of friction' (14) and rather than the harmony and safety that existed among, and for, the people there is now confusion among the people: 'Twirling and whirl of the birds!/ Their refuge no more safe/ All escape routes stuffed' (14). All the citizens, except the leadership/ ruling class, which is referred to as 'falcons', are subjected to this situation: 'But the falcons are immune' (14). Falcons are birds of prey and this implies that the Nigerian leadership is a beneficiary, rather than a victim, of the situation presented. Ododo caps his presentation of the description of present Nigeria by deploying imagery that is contrasted with the image of a healthy tree presented in the first part of the poem:

There now stands  
 A haggard shadowless structure  
 With stunted criss-crossed arms  
 Like a map's routes  
 Scorched hearth tapping its roots,  
 Squeezing nutrients of life to death. (14-15)

The poem ends with a tone of lamentation and despair at a future that is not clear: 'Is it too far from redemption?/ Where is its hope?... Where?' (15).

In "My Land" (18), the growth of Nigeria as a nation, which turns out to be a



curse rather than a blessing, is captured in terms that are likened to the ripening of fruits. However, it is in an unfavourable condition: 'wreathen mud' in which the country, which is seen as a plant, germinates. Thus what results is compared to 'ripped mangoes dripping in decay'. This has a resultant effect on the senses of sight, smell, hearing and touch as discussed further in the sections below.

**Fauna Images:** 'Mortality' (34) is about the people's capacity to rebel against the tyranny of the leadership; the people are referred to as the 'snail'. The snail's shell is perceived as a quality which could be used, but is not used, to its advantage. The movement of the snail, although not directly mentioned, is implied as the reason why the snail 'lack(s) the steel and the fire' (34) to resist oppression. Hence the poet/ persona wonders how long it would take the snail to be crushed by the wild beast (the government). The adjective 'little' is used to describe the snail and occurs as the first line of each of the three stanzas that make up the poem. It is depicted as suffering in silence, its voice 'too soft for the megaphone/ to transmit above the tremor of the wild marauding beast' (34). However, the poet sees a physical attribute of the snail as a potential to be used to free itself from subjugation: 'I can see a radiant tentacle growing on your head...Likely to uproot the tusk and trunk of the wild champion' (34).

**Air/ Climate Images:** Ododo's use of the wind imagery as a harbinger of evil has been discussed in "Purgatory of a Race" (13) above. "Broken Pitchers" (16) instances another use of imagery connected with the weather to forebode evil. In this poem, the disharmony that exists among the different ethnic groups in the country after a life of peaceful cohabitation is described as 'Clouds of miseries descended/ Created a thick wall of inhibition/ That slides our strides aside unaided...' (17) The alliteration of the /s/ sound in the last line quoted here calls to the reader's mind, a slicing motion aimed at causing division.

'Who picks the baton' (28) is another example of the deployment of the cloud imagery. The poem first appeared in 1989 during the then Military President Ibrahim Babangida regime which was infamous for its oft-postponed transition from military dictatorship to civilian rule programme. In the poem, the poet uses the cloud imagery to hint at the eventual failure of the programme. In "My Land" (18), the nation, rather than mature positively, is described in images of fruits which over-ripen thus portraying decay, the effect of which is described as foul-smelling: 'Everywhere strong rancid stench/ Rends the air - a contaminated purity' (18). The alliteration of the /r/ sound which would be produced with some force, suggests a feeling of anger at the messing up of the air (i.e. at the regression of the country). By the third stanza, this anger has matured





and is thus likened to a volcanic eruption which is worsened by the intense heat of the sun:

My Land bubbles  
like boiling liquid  
The dun inserts its phalanges  
To compliment the amorphous dance  
And sweats to pump up its volume...  
My land hisses out - (18)

Unfortunately, this anger is not utilised for positive change. Rather, it comes out merely as a hiss and the poet laments thus:

Limbs are weak and lazy  
Bodies faint in fantasy,  
Heads turn vacuous fallacy  
Softening out into lunacy. (18)

The people insist on a hope that is not clearly defined: 'Only a belligerent haze of hope/ Now threads the face of the future'. That the poet is dismissive of this attitude can be gleaned from his use of the words "fantasy", "vacuous fallacy" and "lunacy". This tone is further suggested by the use of the word "haze". Haze is light mist caused by the pollution of the air by particles of water or dust. It often forms in hot weather and prevents one from seeing distant objects clearly. Thus the word emphasises the "lunatic" condition discussed in the previous stanza.

Another instance where the poet makes reference to the air is in "Souls without Bodies" (19). The poem explains the lack of an efficient housing policy in Nigeria and how the people go around this lack by providing for themselves places of habitation that are unfit. The low-cost housing units that are supposedly built by the government for the people are derisively referred to by Ododo as 'Lucrative Cosy Heavenly Units -/ Cost too huge for the ordinary man's reach' (19). As a result, these become 'fertile homes for weeds and wildlife' (19) and hoodlums. The paradox of a rich nation unable to provide for its citizens is described thus:

Hardly a befitting tale of a race  
Of mammoth means and measure  
Festering nests of prodigal culture,



But wearing pallid lace of disgrace. (19)

Consequently, the people 'daring the chills,/ Rest on verandas, bus stops, public parks/ And under bridges. Some roam and get/ Nabbed for aimless wandering -' (19). Those who do not sleep outside do not fare any better as 'they are nightly packed like sardines/ In match boxes, to sniff each other's sweats' (19). The poet mockingly refers to the sweat as 'distilled breadths of gaseous effusions' (19) which are hazardous to the health.

In "Twigs of Furies" (20), Ododo deploys imageries that connote sound and air pollution to illustrate the passions that are ignited from the introduction of the Structural Adjustment Policy (SAP) programme of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) by the then Military President Ibrahim Babangida. The people's reaction and government's counter-reaction are expressed in registers of music. The people's pent up anger is stimulated into action and produces 'music of tension...in disruptive harmony' (20). This 'song' produces a ritual dance of death between restive students, fuming market women and the inflamed unemployed on the one hand and the government on the other which responds by shooting tear gas canisters and real bullets. The confrontation is captured in imagery which produces intense noise which would lead to noise pollution:

Mega-sounds are pitched against the cause  
Playing counter music to obliterate  
The motif of a popular invocation  
The Music Echoes On. (21)

The capitalisation of the first letter of each of the words in the last line in the extract above foregrounds the intensity of the volume of 'noise' that is produced. It is not a fight between two equals as is suggested by the word 'mega-sounds'. The might of the government is further emphasised by the floral imagery used to reference the fury of the people: 'twigs' (21).

**Landscape images:** In many of the poems, Ododo portrays the land as a swamp. In a swamp, the earth holds a larger proportion of water than other areas of land. It is a difficult terrain that is more suitable for wild plants than for cultivation. From the first line of "My land" (18), the land is described as 'wreathen mud' a condition that is not favourable for the proper germination of plants and maturation of fruits. The word 'wreathen' suggests that it is the entire land that is in this harsh state. Consequently, the fruits produced are decayed and give off an





offensive smell that the poet paradoxically calls 'a contaminated purity' (18). This sets the tone for the categorical description of the land in the first line of the second stanza as a swamp: 'Everybody is swarmed by the swamp' (18). Nigeria is thus depicted as a country where the conditions of life do not make for progress.

This picture of the poet's native country is maintained in "WAI's Armoury" (23) where the poet describes his country as a swamp. The one stanza 11-line poem bewails the militarisation of policies during military rule. This is exemplified in the "War Against Indiscipline (WAI)" campaign which the military thought would instil discipline in a people. The poet views this policy with scorn and depicts his country as a prison:

Pestering around in the armoured land  
 Wallowing around in the barricaded dungeon  
 Pounded into the guided site,  
 I felt my legs caught in a mischievous swamp. (23)

The picture of the swamp offered by the poet here is not positive as the difficulty of movement in a swamp is stressed with the poet/ persona likening himself to a defeated wrestler.

**Earth Images:** In "Broken Pitchers" (16), Ododo paints the picture of a serene nation with the peace and harmony that existed among the various groups that made up the country at the beginning of Nigeria's road to nationhood: 'In communion we once stood/ Like hills and valleys/ Trying tirelessly to succeed/ To chart a path of honour and pleasure/ For the only thing we both treasure' (16). The nation is portrayed as an earthen ware container (water pot) which bottom does not make for easy balance. Thus the different ethnic groups unite to ensure that it does not break by placing it in a "cushioned round hole". However, the poet/ persona laments that 'clouds of miseries descended/ Created a thick wall of inhibition' and what results is 'The remains of our treasure...broken pitchers in the pits' (17).

In 'Flaming Tongues' (47), the poet used the imagery of the earthenware container differently. The pot holds water, an essential commodity for the sustenance of life. However using imagery associated with the heating of water, the poet warns of an impending revolution which may consume everything in its wake if the tyranny of the government persists:

When flaming tongues  
 Leak a pot out



It gathers tropical plagues  
That hisses out to spout  
A warm warning whistle  
That propels ripples of bridles.  
When flaming tongues  
Leak a pot greedily  
It wears away rapidly  
In pain, patience and hues;  
When survival begets servitude  
Flaming tongues are caught in cheeks  
Never to see their taping altitude  
In an inevitable extinction,  
Leaving ash flakes in the creeks. (47-48)

The "wearing" away of the water pot in "Flaming Tongues" then corresponds with its "breaking" in "Broken Pitchers" (16). While in "Broken Pitchers" the water pot is broken through the cruelty of the leadership, in "Flaming Tongues", the water pot 'chooses' to break in protest. It is interesting to note that earthenware is produced by a combination of air, water, earth and fire, the four elements that is believed by classical Greeks to constitute matter i.e. all of nature. It is equally note-worthy that *Broken Pitchers* serves as the title of the collection. The collection can therefore be interpreted in two ways. The first depicts the resultant cruelty of the neglect of the people by the leadership i.e. that government's inaction to the plight of the people destroys all of nature. The second tells a different story, which is the reaction of the people to a morally-bankrupt leadership, thus such a leadership stands the risk of being rejected not only by their own people but by all of nature itself.

With the significance of "Flaming Tongues" to the major theme of his collection, one wonders why this poem was put in the second part of the collection titled "Tutti Frutti". The poems in this second part of the book of poems deal with personal musings of the poet. "Flaming Tongues" (47) and Tick tock... (56) ought to be in the first section which contains poems that comment on the socio-economic and political challenges of the Nigerian populace.

### Conclusion

This chapter has attempted an analysis of the images of nature in Ododo's *Broken Pitchers* and how Ododo incorporates them into his social vision. These images of nature were categorised into five namely flora, fauna, air, landscape and earth images. Some of these images were used by the poet to depict the





conditions of life and that of the people. Some of the images tie the fates of the element of nature to whatever happens to the country. For example in "Purgatory of a Race" (13) the beginning of Nigeria's journey into nationhood which was a glorious period was described in terms of a healthy fruit-bearing tree. When regression occurs, the imagery used was that of a diseased tree. Some of the (in) action of government was portrayed in images which indicated that nature also was adversely affected.

The culmination of these uses of nature imagery was seen in the imagery of the broken earthen ware pitcher which is a product of the four elements of matter and which also serves as the title of the collection. The poet thus incorporates nature into his vision for a better country.

#### Works Cited

- Augustine, Nchoujie. "Things Fall Apart Fifty Years After: An Ecocritical Reading." *Themes Fall Apart but the Centre Holds*. Ed. Joseph Ushie and Denja Abdullahi, Lagos: Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA), 2009.106-118.
- Barau, Aliyu Salisu. "Bridge Building Between Literature and Environmental Values of Africa: Lessons from *Things Fall Apart*." *Themes Fall Apart but the Centre Holds*. Ed. Joseph Ushie and Denja Abdullahi, Lagos: Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA), 2009.92-105.
- Bassey, Nnimmo. *We Thought it was Oil but it was Blood*. Ibadan: Kraft Books Ltd., 2000.
- Biriabebe, Tonye. *Undercurrents*. Ibadan: Kraft Books Ltd., 2005.
- Caminero-Santangelo, Byron. "Different Shades of Green: Ecocriticism and African Literature." *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory*. Ed. Tejumola Olaniyan and Ato Quayson. New York: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2007. 698-706.
- Ikiriko, Ibiwari. *Oily Tears of the Niger*. Ibadan: Kraft Books Ltd., 2000.
- Kpakiam, Doughtimariye. *Salute to our Mangrove Giants*. Ibadan: Kraft Books Ltd., 2008.
- Mwangi, Evan. 2004. "A Shot in the Arm for African Eco-criticism." The Association for the Study of Literature and Environment. <<http://www.asle.org/site/resources/ecocritical-library/intro/nobel/>> Accessed 6 June 2012.
- Ododo, Sunnie. *Broken Pitchers*. Ibadan: Kraft Books Ltd., 2012.
- Ogbowei, Ebinyo. *Song of a Dying River*. Ibadan: Kraft Books Ltd., 2009.



Osundare, Niyi. *The Eye of the Earth*. Ibadan: Heinemann Educ. Books Nig., 1986.

Otto, Albert. *Letters from the Earth*. Ibadan: Kraft Books Ltd., 2007.

Slaymaker, William. "Echoing the Other(s): The Call of the Global Green and Black Responses." *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory*. Ed. Tejumola Olaniyan and Ato Quayson. New York: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2007. 683-697.