

## **Colonial to Postcolonial: The Slick Alliance in Tanure Ojaide's Poetry**

**By**

**Obari Gomba**

**Department of English Studies  
University of Port Harcourt, Choba,  
Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria.**

### **Abstract**

How does Tanure Ojaide's art depict the connection between the colonial and postcolonial experiences of the Niger Delta? How are colonial habits of power replicated in postcolonial resource possession and dispossession? How is the Slick Alliance central to the structures of control? How does the Slick Alliance link the colonial era to the postcolonial era? The aim of this paper is to discuss the depiction of two eras of the Slick Alliance in Ojaide's poetry; it is to show the similarity in the habits of power in both periods. The paper draws from a number of Ojaide's poems to enunciate the continuum of extraction and conflict in the Niger Delta region.

**Keywords: Colonialism, Postcolonialism, Tanure Ojaide, Poetry**

### **Introduction**

The Slick Alliance is a term used by Ken Saro-Wiwa to describe the tie between the forces/agencies of resource dispossession in the Niger Delta (Nwokeji 65). It refers to the relationship between Western governments/transnational firms and their Nigerian allies on account of hegemonic dependence on Niger Delta oil for centuries. The structure of this relationship is primed to exploit resource-bearing communities.

The axe of imperialism began to ravage the Niger Delta before the era of palm oil trade. It started with the abominable trade in human cargoes which enabled Europe and their local accomplices to fatten on the misery of the region. The activities of Europeans in the region, from the 15<sup>th</sup> century to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, provided the foundation for the project of

colonialism in the “age of palm oil.” That foundation has also come to serve the present era of crude oil extraction. As Ukiwo says, the “Niger Delta stands today – as it has for five centuries and more – at the epicenter of a violent economy of extraction” (70). This situation has given rise to diverse narratives on diverse experiences in the region. Ojaide’s poetry represents a vital oeuvre on the region’s range of experiences.

### **Situating the Context of Imperial Dispossession**

The persona in Ojaide’s “New Rivers” shows his early awareness of the travails that have marked the contacts between the Niger Delta and the Western world. The persona states his awareness of the propaganda of imperialism. In lines 7-10, he says “When a student the Niger was my life blood / in which Mungo Parks imperial boats capsized / amidst cataracts - discovering a known fact.” It has been in the nature of imperialism to re-write history. The drive to monopolize knowledge (and to doctor truth) is actually a smokescreen for the programme of plunder. Ojaide raises the subject once again in the poem entitled “London” which queries the falsehood of hegemony: “Your boy said he discovered the Niger, my lifeblood; who discovered the Thames?” (19-20). The persona’s question builds on the opening lines which strip imperialism naked. In lines 1 and 3, the poem states expressly: “Your mouth has been a blade with which you axed away my pride” even as “you robbed me at home.” The persona is right on the point. “Ocean-going craft have called on the estuaries and creeks” of the region for centuries, and they “have taken, often violently, cargoes – slaves, palm oil, coal, petroleum – of global significance” (Nwokeji 62). It is needless to say that the wounds which the axe of imperialism has inflicted on the Niger Delta are festering sores today, and the sores are found in the narratives of the repressed (of which Ojaide’s poetry is integral).

Ojaide has created exciting poems on the earliest points of this painful history. In “Labyrinths of the Delta,” a poem which predates “New Rivers” and “London,” the persona notes that “Conquistadors drove...gunboats

from the Atlantic.... / drove stakes into the labyrinths of the Delta," and "flashing gold at our faces, broke our love" (91, 94, 96). The poem also ascribes the imagery of the crafty tortoise to the conquistadors/imperialists: "Turn the tortoise back, O Waters, / Bring him back / Spare him mishap on the way" (98-100). Again, the speaker prays: "Bring him back to me; / He broke not only my hands / But also my legs and ribs" (101-03). The speaker hopes to get even.

Bring him back to me  
Spare him mishap on the way here  
And let the villain taste  
What he inflicted on me  
From my own hands. (104-08)

As perceptive as this poem is, it beats its speaker that the tortoise still struts around in disguise. It beats the speaker that the present situation in the Niger Delta is a "more subtle...far more sophisticated means of enslavement" or exploitation (Olaoluwa 187). The speaker's slip of insight in "Labyrinths" is corrected by another speaker in "Ships." The latter accentuates Olaoluwa's position – that there has been persistence in the activities of the "tortoise."

"Ships" depicts the continuum of pain which began from slavery to colonial transfer of palm oil wealth and to postcolonial transfer of petroleum wealth. "Ships" opens with the persona's consternation at the sight of ships. This is the burden of history on the persona's consciousness. Ships have come to symbolize the banditry that has dispossessed diverse peoples through time, of which the transfer of both human and material capitals from the Niger Delta is one terrible example. The persona notes that even today, "Ships are still setting sail / for distant seas / to wreck inland peace" (19 -21). This statement points to the supertankers which cart away the oil resources of the Niger Delta till date. The loss is irreparable: "no new ships bring back / What has been hauled away / With fire-spitting wizardry" (25-7). The pillage is ceaseless: "They can only savage more, /

Infesting coastlines with mines" (28-9). Unlike the speaker of "Labyrinths" who shows a weak grasp of the present situation, the speaker in "Ships" understands the persistence of the West, and prays Olokun to drown the fleet of imperialism (30-31).

"Ships," "Labyrinths," "London" and "New Rivers" shed so much light on the background to oil conflict in the Niger Delta. Those three poems intersect the historicity of the oil motif in Ojaide's poetry; those poems intersect the other poems in Ojaide's oeuvre which enunciate oil conflict from the colonial era to the postcolonial present. This is a broad canvas which helps the reader to note and to straighten the loops in the historicity of a poem like "Oil Remedies" which (like some Nigerian poems on the subject-matter) is not without failings.

### **Palm Oil's Legacy in the Era of Crude Oil**

The poem "Oil Remedies" raises a praise song for palm oil. It tells of the uses of palm oil to the persona's people. There is no doubt that the pre-colonial/colonial trade in palm oil had affected some communities in positive ways; but it is wrong to gloss over all the upheavals that attended the production of that resource as the persona implies in lines 19-20: "The oil we know has always been the lamp - / friend of the eyes, it fuels a bright spectacle." This implies that problem only started with the era of petroleum: "Then came subsoil oil, no longer red but black, / converted by entrepreneurs into capital fuel" (21-2). The poem further laments: "This oil bleeding from the earth flowers light" and the profiteers "sing hymns to fan its incandescence" (23-4), but the oil-bearing communities are left out of the scheme of development. So the poem says: "It is we who live in the dark that give out light. / They make bonfires of our blind ancestor's gifts / after hauling away priceless pools of abundance" (25-7); and they leave "with us silent and roaming epidemics" (28).

The speaker in "Oil Remedies" appears to refer to the era of palm as a phase of tranquility and convivial progress. The poem shares the same tenor of mis-statement with JP Clark's "The Traffic Then and Now," Ibiwari

Ikiriko's "The Palm and the Crude" and Odia Ofeimun's "Children of the Creeks." It is indeed wrong to understate the troubles which the nationalities of the Niger Delta suffered in the era of palm oil trade. It will amount to artistic and intellectual amnesia to ignore the repressive strategies of colonial accumulation, in the days of the palm oil trade, which have set the very foundation of today's petroleum-triggered conflicts. This lapse in "Oil Remedies" is corrected in some other poems by Ojaide. There are examples from poems, in *Waiting for the Hatching of a Cockerel*, which present the right perspective. One of the poems, "Welcoming the Dead," depicts the entry of the Portuguese and the British into the Niger Delta region. The poem opens with: "First came Potokri, ghosts of ancestors or of / unworthy ones refused admittance at Urhoro" (1-2).

Potokri is the Urhobo coinage for Portuguese, the earliest Europeans to scour the coasts of the Niger Delta. As the poem says, the appearance of these strange men shocks the local peoples. The strange men are mistaken for either the ghosts of the rejected or the ghosts of the ancestors to whom the people serve "bowls of food [at] the seashore and riverbank" (21-2). The intriguing ignorance of the Niger Delta nations contributes immensely to the success of the imperial programme of the Portuguese, the British and other European groups. See lines 27-34 of the poem: "we who had always prayed to the sea goddess / to provide abundance jumped at the apparitions / as signs of the benevolence of native gods" (27-9). The folks of the Niger Delta are said to have misread the signs, they feel that their deities, "in their thoughtful ways / had rowed necessities into [their] backyard!" (30-1). The poem says: "The future would tell their kind of guests. / Our folks were yet to know that who gives / wields so much power over recipients" (32-4). The Europeans are seen to build on the weakness/ignorance of local peoples, and they gradually stamp their authority on the Niger Delta. The strategies of control enable the Europeans to attack local culture and religion: "They dangled Dane guns / fired the first shots at / gods and kneeling devotees" (63-5). The poem states that the actual reason for Europe's violent intrusion into the Niger Delta is to plunder the resources of the region. The Europeans

are seen to “take away human cargo for nothing” (58); they take ivory (49); and they “extend beyond ivory to palm-oil” (55).

As palm oil becomes the chief commodity in the Niger Delta at the dawn of the Industrial Revolution in Europe, the Europeans are seen to intensify their scramble for the region: “They bid for palm oil as soon as / men climbed down the palm tree; / they came for shiploads of barrels” (70-2). The speaker adds that the Europeans “gained entry into the home, / buying at no price and selling for profit - / they called it ‘trade,’ this sleight of hand” (73-5). The profiteering of the Europeans is unbridled. It stands in contrast to the simple-minded of local peoples who receive pittance or some laughable wares like spoons and mirrors (76-93) for their goods. Lines 124-126 say “It would take” the local peoples “more than three centuries / to see the guests from the sea as carriers / of not just brass rings and plates but worse.” Europe is known to have used the resources of the Niger Delta to fund its Industrial Revolution, and to in turn dump its trinkets on the region. The scale of profit for Europe was/is humongous.

Thus, the British are motivated by profit to seize the region. The attempt by the British to cast a halo of altruism over their mission of plunder is repudiated in lines 186-191 of “Welcoming the Dead:” “If he had all he needed at home / why would the DO reduce himself / to robbing and jailing his benefactors?” The speaker is not deceived by the claims of altruism: “If the sky were so hospitable to the hawk, / why would it swoop down for chickens / and be cursed by all as a callous assassin?”

Obviously, “Welcoming the Dead” touches many facets of the Niger Delta experience. It touches even the ignorance and complicity of Niger Delta persons and groups in the travails of the region. There is a similar import in “Blues for a Virgin Beauty” which also takes its bearing from the earliest contact of Niger Delta peoples with the Europeans, from the moment when “foreign merchants gave out arms / to chiefs quick to sell their wards with thumbprints / for a hat, a plate, glass beads of no value” (27-9). Those lines accentuate the complicity of the Niger Delta elements from the earliest wave of European accumulation. In the colonial era, the

British merchants are seen to set the rules for trade with the tacit support of willing agents among the victims. It is “the same group who set out rules of trade / that the Royal Niger company followed / to rob palm-oil producers of their sweat,” and they “kept modest men broken by their barges” (31-4).

In their outpost of palm produce across the river they collected kernels and oil in hundreds of tons through middlemen who stood with guns and perforated puncheons for underhand profit... (35-8)

These products are sent to “steamboats [which] stood ready for Liverpool where / they turned the produce to needed products” (39-40). And “England’s hands stretched far afield, fired / rifles; prospered” (41-2). The poem notes, among other things, the Slick Alliance between the British and the local chieftains or middlemen. Whereas the British are known to have held the actual profit and control, the local agents are also shown to have used sleight to rob the actual producers. For another example, see “Modes of Harvest” where the speaker tells of a certain producer who “lost more palm-oil to middlemen’s / sleight than he was paid for his sweat” (15-16). It will always remain to the shame of the Niger Delta that some of its figures and nations are known to have abetted the British conquest of the region.

### **Transition to Crude Postcolonialism**

The dawn of British dominance in the Niger Delta is traceable to the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In “Welcoming the Dead,” the British are noted to have built their monopoly in the region on the basis of “a four-month burlesque in Berlin” (212). This is a reference to the Berlin Conference by which the British secured a concession on the Niger Delta. Direct British control is known to have run untrammled for many years until 1960. “Welcoming the Dead” credits the nationalist movement for the exit of the British. In lines 178-182, the poem speaks of the District Officer, a symbol of British control: “When he refused to go home, / we thrust a

firebrand into his behind" (178-79). This implies that the colonialists were forced out: "and knowing this was a warning shot / before head lopped off shoulders, / be bowed and made a graceful exit" (180-82). The persona seems to have missed a point here. With the benefit of hindsight, it appears the exit of the British is a ruse. As Claude Meillassoux has observed, the independence flag is not entirely a sign of victory. It is just an adjustment in the programme of imperial accumulation, "necessary to the perpetuation of the mode of exploitation" (qtd. in Olaoluwa 187).

The incongruities of the nation-state, which has been fashioned by Britain, have created a continuous wave of imperial-profiteering in the postcolonial era, all at the expense of the Niger Delta region. In the new scheme, there is still a link between a local suzerainty (mainly represented by the state and the ethnic majorities) and a foreign hegemony. It is insightful that this fact is observed by the persona in "Welcoming the Dead" when he says that the British "gathered the tribes into one map / threw a net over groups to found" a so-called "great nation" (204-05). He adds that the British have "superimposed Nigeria over multiple names / amalgamated singular heads into a collective fate" (214-15). The postcolonial state has remained in the grip of the British. The new wave of British "convenience" (220), in the holding of a local suzerainty, is hinged once again on oil. The postcolonial experience of the nationalities of the Niger Delta is a repetition of history. Today, the Niger Delta is a region where oil tankers scour the coastal line "like participants in a local regatta, plying the same waterways that, in the distant past, housed slave ships and palm oil hulks" (Watts 36). The speaker in "Welcoming the Dead" puts it succinctly: "Centuries later oil will bring doom / in the same undercount of barrels as / puncheons by the army of middlemen" (130-32). "To start with," the poem says, "before the trade / that was no trade, a traffic / of slaves ran for centuries" (133-35). And the condition in the Niger Delta has worsened through several generations:



One group metamorphosed into another and into another and there are still slavers in the republic that cart away the oil that drives the nation.... (136-40)

The poem says the slavers leave the Niger Delta “in drought” (141). The power-brokers are described as slavers who dispossess the region. Drought is a metaphor for dispossession, emptiness and loss. History has come full circle. So the poem connects the past to the present: “The same Niger Delta / of palm oil” is today “a protectorate / still gushing oil into refineries” (142-44). The poem states that the Niger Delta is still a protectorate in the grip of oppressors. In the days of colonialism, the British are known to have foisted phony treaties on the region, to have plundered the nationalities of the region in the name of protection. The poem avers that, even today, foreign entities and their local allies have continued to hold down the Niger Delta under the pretext of the law. “The same Niger Delta,” the poem says, is “a protectorate / still gushing oil” (142,144). The experiences of the past are seen to have flowed into the present. There is a corroboration of this point in “The Fallout.”

“The Fallout” takes its trajectory from the time when the “Oil Rivers Protectorate short- changed the folks” (16). From palm oil to crude oil, boom has been turned to doom in a repetitive manner. The poem describes the “oil boom” as “doomed for decades of exploitation” (17); and the Niger Delta is forced to live “the fate of a victim” (18). The fallout of this situation is a continuum of conflict. The nationalities of the Niger Delta are fated to “forever [wrestle] multiplying demons of dominion,” to forever [bruise] from robbers of riverine bounty,” and to be “scalded all over in arsonist fires” (19-21). The point here is that, although the transition from palm oil to crude oil has also marked the transition from colonialism to postcolonialism, the place of the Niger Delta in the tides of history has remained marginal. The Niger Delta has been pushed into a rentier state where, as the persona in “The Goat Song” says, “Government and the

coalition of global lords / have snatched away" (49-50) the resources of the region.

In "For My Grandchild," the persona paints the mosaic of the Niger Delta experience in postcolonial Nigeria. The picture is quite clear in lines 5-8: "With crude oil gushing into slave ships / refurbished as free-market super-tankers;" and the government gives false assurance "of development / with proceeds from export and spot-market deals." Government fails in its responsibility to the people: "No jobs for the graduates in the oil sector / even as wells litter the family farmlands" (9-10). In the face of widespread discontent from the dispossessed, the state resorts to strategies of armed repression. "In the daily dearth of prospects staring at all," the poem notes that "mobile policemen brandish guns in the sun / and, from a safe distance above the ground / hired retired marines keep the pipelines safe" (11-14). The poem argues that the new Slick Alliance, between the West and the runners of Nigeria's rentier state, has left the oil-bearing nationalities in the same repressed condition of old. This is why the persona sees the supertankers of the petroleum industry as refurbished slave ships. In this enterprise of hegemony, the Nigerian state and the transnational firms hire both local and foreign security personnel to protect oil infrastructure in the face of growing agitation in the region. "Villages of imploring eyes marching, hands up..., / ...with green-leafed branches" are "mowed down" (15-16). The poem states that while the Slick Alliance commits acts of violence against local peoples, in the very manner of British punitive expeditions of old, the foreign media are awash with imperial sentiments, and they tell the news with the slant of imperial propaganda: "CNN & BBC embedded with Chevron and Shell / report that local women, stripping before cameras" for the sake of "their dying children and men, are primitive. / In their secure wings they know not Ogoni agonies" (17-20). The adjective "primitive" (19) is the aged lie of imperialism against resource-owners. Note that Escravos, the slave port which has served the hunt of Britain and other European nations for human cargoes, and which has served the British craze for palm oil and kernel in the days of

colonialism, still serves the supertankers of the petroleum industry. The persona in "For My Grandchild" says "With my grandchild born," history is repeated because "the new Stone Age / of a nation very black in the books has begun / with refilled slave ships refurbished as supertankers" (21-3). These supertankers are "anchored at Escravos" among others, and they are "poaching inland as centuries ago" (24). The poem also clearly notes the re-entry of America into the Niger Delta experience, represented by the United States' oil mammoth, Chevron. The presence of Anglo-Dutch Shell and Chevron in the Niger Delta situation is a symbolic re-enactment of the Atlantic Triangle which enabled Britain to transfer labour and materials to its industrial outpost in the New World. The partnership between Britain and the United States (US) has persisted till this era.

### **Conclusion**

The Atlantic Triangle has been constant with its resource hunt. Following the rise of the US as an empire without colonies (that is, with neocolonies) in Post-World War II politics, the US has come to anchor itself, particularly from the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in a new Atlantic Triangle which has come to exist primarily between the Niger Delta, the US and Britain. The new triangle is "based upon oil and gas" (Rowell, Marriot and Stockman xi). Petroleum dependence has given a new edge to the siamese-assault of Anglo-American interest on the Niger Delta. "Big oil has ushered in the most grotesque" type of rentier postcolonialism "in which the central axis is what Ken Saro-Wiwa called a 'slick alliance' between a corrupt state and unaccountable corporations – backed now by the long arm of the Nigerian military and the American empire" (Nwokeji 65). Whereas the US was the foremost consumer of Niger Delta oil for many years, Anglo-Dutch Shell was/is the biggest player in the industry. Anglo-Dutch Shell has continued to exploit the region and to increase its scale of profit to the detriment of oil bearing communities; and the US (till lately) continued to guzzle the oil with such brazen fronts of investment-protection like the

Africom presence. The Niger Delta has been pushed into an era when oil is seen not only as wealth but as power and security in global politics.

The centrality of oil, to global economics and power equation, accounts for why Britain and the US have been unflinching in their resolve to keep the rein on the Niger Delta. The situation has been further exacerbated by the technology-dependence of postcolonial Nigeria. A Slick Alliance has therefore been formed between western powers, transnational oil firms, and the Nigerian state (a typical rentier state) which depends on oil rent. Nigeria is a willing ally with a colonial character. As the British created a colonial state “ostensibly to perform the task it was best known for: to make it easier for foreign companies to accumulate and accumulate” (Omoweh 78), the thrust of Nigeria’s postcoloniality is to fiercely defend the transnational firms which share hegemonic bond with the local suzerainty.

Nigeria’s ethnic majorities are the biggest local beneficiaries from oil export; this has been ensured by the pattern of the country’s revenue allocation. The ethnic majorities have more states and local government units, none of which has been viable without the proceeds from oil. This situation has made things difficult. The Slick Alliance is indeed formidable and large as Rowell, Marriot and Stockman have noted: “Shell and the other corporations do not work alone. They are assisted by governments and a whole web of other companies, institutions and political groupings” (xi). In this alliance, there are also Niger Delta elements who aid and abet the dispossession of the region. These elements are like the local chieftains and middlemen of old - they are incarnations of Chiefs Daniel Oju Kalio and Dore Numa who offered themselves as agents of colonialism. They are sell-outs. There is a portrait of the sell-out type in Ojaide’s “The Community Development Officer”.

Ojaide’s poem notes that the community development officer has no sense of commitment to his people. He profits from the state and the oil industry at the expense of his community. “In the Office of Community

Development,” the poem says the oppressors “control the people’s lives” (1-2). The office works like a colonial establishment:

Like the Situation Report of colonial days the home-raised officer issues daily briefings: who and who of chiefs or youths need to be silenced & what road to be built for tanks to drive through when the people get restive.... (3-7)

The community development office also spies on “women [who are considered to be] quick / to dance naked before television cameras / Area Boys taking their frustration on oil expats” (7-9). The community development officer sells his people to the transnational firms and to the government. At the behest of his benefactors, he spies on agitators. His commitment to the community is pretentious yet he seeks adulation from the hungry and the gullible (39-46). When there is oil spillage or gas explosion, he does not bother (31-34). If his people die like “grasshoppers” (35), he does not care as long as he sits “in a big chair” in an “air-conditioned office with a fat salary” (37-8). He grows rich on the people’s pain – he takes titles, marries many wives and hires a band of police protectors (45-8).

The image of the community development officer is very symbolic. As earlier stated, he represents the pack of Niger Delta elements – chiefs, politicians, educated elite, contractors, youths, etc – who feather their own nests at the expense of the region. These elements latch onto the Slick Alliance; they join the fold with the resolve to “swallow” the region. As it is noted in “Sleeping in a Makeshift Grave,” the region is treated as a game: “If the game’s quartered, the delta will be swallowed whole - / the hunters know they only came together for this prize” (8-9). There is a big scramble by profiteers to dispossess the region. The speaker in “We Are Many” cites the plunderers who are scrambling over the resources of the Niger Delta. The plunderers are quoted as saying: “Earn a mountain from him / before pain or anger – some revelation – / drives the brute” to “attack our throats” (9-12). The insight of the poem’s speaker is that of someone who speaks as

a personification of the oil-rich region. He notes that the plunderers fear the dawn of awareness (14), and they have become quite ruthless in the bid to make gain in time: "And they take turns to ride me. / One, two, three. One mounts me / as another descends" (15-17). The persona laments: "my bane / has always been the incubus of power" (17-18).

All through remembered history, hegemonists have exercised abusive power against the Niger Delta, and they have consistently robbed the region of its resources. The speaker in "We Are Many" depicts these hegemonists as a gang of rapists who are driven by power. Might-is-right has been the rule. And suzerainty still wears the legal guise by which the holders of power dispossess the region today. It is "the same Niger Delta / of palm oil, a protectorate / still gushing oil," according to Ojaide's "Welcoming the Dead" (142-44).

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