

J. P. CLARK-BEKEDEREMO – THE WEeping POET

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ABSTRACT The life and poetry of J. P. Clark-Bekederemo is the focus of this paper. I examined the pain and anguish of the poet over the civil war in Nigeria as expressed in his poems. I found that, despite some apparent weaknesses in the poems, the poet succeeds in projecting his sadness at the carnage and wastage experienced by the nation during that historical period. I conclude that these poems also constitute a warning to the Nigerian people, that they should be committed to restoring the national community so as not to repeat the devastating political failures of the past, especially in the context of the Niger Delta crisis within the Nigerian body politic.

Key Words: Clark-Bekederemo; Nigeria; Politics; Poems; War.

INTRODUCTION

J. P. Clark-Bekederemo is a poet, playwright, and a strong defender and upholder of his traditional heritage. The history and career of this Nigerian author show an attachment to the essential nature of his people.

J. P. Clark-Bekederemo has given to Nigeria a heritage that cannot be ignored in that it has closely mirrored the history of his nation. He has also tried to show, in the process, that the polity could be improved. In Abiola Irele's introduction to *Collected Poems and Plays* (1991: xxxix), he observed that Clark-Bekederemo's "career runs parallel to his country's history".

However, the most striking aspect of the history of his career is that, at every point, his background and associations have elicited an overflow of powerful feelings, which he felt compelled to express in poetry. This is in spite of the fact that he considered his experiences "too atrophied for pen or scribe" (line 15, "Agbor Dancer", *The Poems*). His meta-anthology, *The Poems: 1958-1998*, published in 2002, best illustrates this tendency as it presents in one volume the span of his poetic career over a period of four decades.

In this respect, he seems to fit into Nwoga's (1979) conception of the poet as having an "all-embracing receptiveness to the world". By this, Nwoga suggests that the poet has the ability to borrow from the world through the expression of the impact of his surroundings on his own life. This particular "all-embracing" receptiveness emerges in *A Reed in the Tide* and *Casualties*. He has conveyed deep feelings in a profound manner, thus captivating the senses. In these poems, Clark-Bekederemo has enabled his readers to understand his perspective on his environment. His involvement in numerous activities within his community is made apparent to his readers.

My motivation for examining Clark-Bekederemo's works, especially his col-

lection of poems and war memoirs, *Casualties*, lies in its relevance to the Nigerian experience. The Niger Delta, the poet's home, poses an increasingly troubling problem to the current leadership of Nigeria. The importance of wise and delicate handling of the affairs of the delta to the continued existence of Nigeria is not in doubt. However, it is a historical fact that the peace of the region has been shattered on several occasions. Nevertheless, it may be hoped that the Nigerian nation can be rescued from a series of governmental failures. Tensions are currently high in the Niger Delta region (cf. Mba, 2003; Osakwe, 2005). Despite this situation, the need to remember that Nigerians are one people has been the heart's cry of this Nigerian author over the years. Can there be any excuse for the continued oppression and exploitation of a section of the Nigerian populace by an economic elite? The answer is a resounding "No" from all patriotic Nigerians of good conscience. This constitutes one important reason why it is necessary to look again at Clark-Bekederemo's poems, and especially those that address the consequences for the nation of the indiscretions of its leaders in the 1960s.

The applicability of these poems, written in the 1960s, to the situation of Nigeria at the dawn of the twenty-first century is uncanny. Clark-Bekederemo's role here mirrors that of the biblical Jeremiah who warned his nation, even though his warnings were not heeded. Nonetheless, we may hope that going back to his text may awake the conscience of his nation, saving it from self-annihilation.

Interestingly, in the introductory note to his personal meta-anthology of *The Poems: 1958-1998*, Clark-Bekederemo gave the impression that the pain he felt then, during the Nigerian Civil War, is now a dulled pain. He avers:

This time, the feeling is not so much that of undergoing surgery in my own hands and without any anaesthetics as one of accepting to live with a condition that is now stable and in fact quite comfortable (2002: ix).

Obviously, his compatriots may not agree with his postulation that the condition of the nation is now stable and comfortable. One may, however, see his adjectival choices of "stable" and "comfortable" as a product of the maturity that comes from aging gracefully, rather than in relation to a perspective on the Niger Delta issue that sees it as comfortable and stable. His next sentence reads: "...the prospect of being collected and laid in state is no longer distant" (p. ix). This mellowing attitude can be seen in the subtlety with which he referred to the unhappy state of the Niger Delta environment in his collection within the meta-anthology, *A Lot from Paradise (1994-98)*. Such poems as "Delta Enterprise" and "The Emissaries" from the anthology have very few lines that explicitly focus on the controversial issue of the Niger Delta. Our poet seems to feel he has paid his dues and can therefore begin to look forward to the next phase of the cycle of life. Nevertheless, his vibrant voice remains strong in his vociferous warnings of Nigeria's potential self-obliteration.

THE POET AND HIS ART

Elimimian (1989: vii) noted that assessments of the value of Clark-Bekederemo's poetry have been inconsistent. For example, some critics have described *Casualties* in harsh terms. M.J.C. Echeruo has described *Casualties* as "a disaster" and "sheer journalism" while Kalu Uka called it "rubbish" (Nwoga, 1979: 39). However, it should be noted that the poet, through his artistic voice, was presenting his perspective and interpretation of the events of that period of Nigerian history, a period the poems attempt to chronicle.

It seems that poems are, on one level, essentially reflexive of the artist's worldview, in that they constitute perspectives on themes, subjects and events. In affirmation of this perspective, Dyson and Cox, in the introduction to *The Practical Criticism of Poetry* (1965), observed that the subject of a poem comes straight from the poet's experiences of life, linking the poet with other poets and readers whose experiences in any way touch his or her own.

Based on this argument, one may surmise that a swamp dweller reading Clark-Bekederemo's *Poems* is likely to feel a sense of affinity with the work. In the same way, the heart of a slum dweller reading "Night Rain" will, in all probability, be touched by the situation described there. Of course, this sense of personal connection makes poetry relevant beyond the boundaries of its immediate context, meaning that the importance of Clark-Bekederemo's works extend beyond the Niger Delta. After all, a shack is a shack, wherever it may be located; it is a symbol of poverty.

What are the feelings of average Nigerians who experienced the Civil War? They would probably share with Clark-Bekederemo feelings of anxiety, unhappiness, loss, and desolation in relation to the death and destruction consequent to the bloody fratricidal war of thirty months.

And already
 They are a cache certified fit
 For hurling at the ogre
 They all see in the dark
Night falls over us...

"A Photograph in *The Observer*," *Casualties* (p. 34)

The poem ends on a note of despair, indicating that darkness has already engulfed the land.

Others may feel his sense of joy at the death of those he perceived to be the destroyers of the country.

Boxes were brought by night...
 ... As gifts to the people...
 ... Open the boxes was the clamour...

"The Burden in Boxes," *Casualties* (p. 6.)

There, as a student, he started his writing career. He was the editor of the Students' Union journal, *The Beacon*. He became the founding editor of the UCI poetry journal, *The Horn*, in which his early poems first appeared. This venture was undertaken with the support of his teacher, Martin Banham, who provided both moral and financial support for starting the journal (Stevenson, 1979: 210; Elimimian, 1989: 1). Some of his contemporaries in his student days included Christopher Okigbo, Emmanuel Ifejuana, Abiola Irele, and a number of other Nigerian writers of repute, who were also contributors to the journal. With some of these people, he formed friendships that endured beyond the campus gates, as shown in his later poems.

In 1960, he graduated with honors from the Department of English. In 1962, his first collection of poems, *Poems*, was published by Mbari Publications, Ibadan. In 1965, he published *A Reed in the Tide*, followed by *Casualties* in 1970. In the 1980s, *State of the Union* (1985) made its debut, while *Mandela and other poems* was published in 1988. *A Lot from Paradise* was his gift to the literary world for the 1990s. The backdrop of his birthplace, his school's locale, his close relationship with his grandmother, his friends and his nation all had a profound effect on Clark-Bekederemo's works. In addition to his poetry, J. P. Clark-Bekederemo is also a renowned playwright.

THE WEEPING POET

This study is essentially limited to the state of Nigeria between 1960 and 1970, and its impact on the poet and on his relationships with others during this period. In this respect, I point to the way his poems warn the nation against a repetition of war, especially given the challenge the volatile Niger Delta region presents to the Nigerian nation at this historical moment. It cannot be denied that J. P. Clark's swampy delta birthplace always finds its way into his poetry. He has also noted details of other places he has visited in many of his poems.

Thus, we see the rustic beauty of the city of Ibadan vividly described in "Ibadan", the dirtiness of Calcutta in "Calcutta", and his diverse reactions to the United States of America in his poems about his experiences and observations during his sojourn there in *America, their America*. However, as stated earlier, this study focuses on an examination of J. P. Clark-Bekederemo in mourning, as presented in *Casualties*.

CASUALTIES

Casualties is a collection of 28 poems. It is divided into two parts. The first part is essentially a narrative about the Nigeria of 1960-1968, focusing on the years 1966-1968. The poems in this collection include: "Song", "Skulls and Cups", "Vulture's Choice", "The

Burden in Boxes”, “The Usurpation”, “The Cockerel in the Tale”, “The Reign of the Crocodile”, “Seasons of Omens”, “What a Squirrel Said”, “Leader of the Hunt”, “Conversations at Accra”, “Return Home”, “The Locust Hunt”, “July Wake”, “Exodus”, “August Afternoon”, “The Rat in a Hole”, “Dirge”, “The Flood”, “Aburi and After”, “The Beast”, “Death of a Weaverbird”, “Friends”, “A Photograph in *The Observer*”, “Benin Sacrifice”, “Party Song”, “The Casualties”, and “Night Song”. The second part is about people, situations, and places the poet went to during his trips around the world. Poems included in the second part are: “Incident at the Police Station, Warri”, “The Lagos-Ibadan Road before Sagamu”, “A Lamp by my Window”, “To My Academic Friends...”, “Letter from Kampala”, “Nairobi National Park”, “Addis Ababa”, “A God is the Cow”, “The Players”, “Bombay”, and “Calcutta”. The focus of this study is on the poems that deal with and reflect on the war.

The collection opens with “Song” and ends with “Night Song”. This seems ironic. When one looks at the entire historical context, one wonders what there was to sing about. In “Song”, the first poem, the poet wrote about the friends he had but could not face now, because of the tragedy of the war:

I can look the sun in the face
 But the friends I have lost
 I dare not look at any. (p. 3)

As this poem shows, he was saddened and despairing because the war had created an insurmountable rift in relation to his friends. This could be attributed to their being on different sides, divided by war. This poem can be seen as a sign of a final parting of ways, which the second poem “Skulls and Cups” celebrates. The former association between the lively young group that included J. P. Clark-Bekederemo, Christopher Okigbo, Emmanuel Ifejuana, and Sam Agbam has been destroyed by the war. This is the sad reality the poet has to live with. Even though Clark-Bekederemo tried to depict this sadness with a certain lightness, this lightness poignantly underlines his internal anguish at seeing his friends’ lives wasted, as in the image of lifeless cups.

However, the greatest sorrow of the poet, over and above his pain over the loss of his friends, involves the general loss of a sense of community among the Nigerian people. The mindless killings and bloodshed among a people who once called one another brothers provokes a cry of pain in the eighteenth poem, “Dirge”:

O let us light the funeral pile
 But let us not be the faggots. (p. 28)

Indeed, it is a cry that was not heeded because the violence escalated instead of abating, and corpses began to ‘eat up’ the forest as the piles of the dead grew. There was also another insidious factor that turned everyone in the land into casualties. Clark-Bekederemo expressed this sad transformation in the line

“we are characters now other than before/ The war began” (p. 38: lines 36-37). Indeed, this war “becomes universal in the fragmentation of family fellowship, and understanding, even of the self” (Wren, 1984: 152). J. P. Clark writes:

We fall,
 All casualties of the war,
 Because we cannot hear each other speak
 Because eyes have ceased to see the face from the crowd. (p. 38)

From these lines, it can be seen that the tragedy of *Casualties* and that of the period in general lies in the chilly separation of brother from brother and the irrevocable permanence of death.

This fact is further demonstrated in the two poems: “The Beast” and “Death of a Weaverbird”. “The Beast” concerns the war and what happens in war:

And blood calcifies into boulders
 For brother to hurl against brother (p. 31)

Christopher Okigbo offers an example of this general sense of dissolution. He was a brother, a friend, and a poet. The separation brought about by the war could have been overcome, as reconciliation would have been possible after its end; however, this was not to be as he died in active service on the Biafran side:

Shot,
 At Akwebe
 A place not even on the map
 Made available by Shell-BP
 A Weaverbird, (p. 30)

Casualties did not merely record the events of 1966-68; it was not “sheer journalism”, as described by Echeruo. *Casualties* expresses the heartfelt grief of a patriot at the state of his nation. J. P. Clark-Bekederemo has been described as a nationalistic Nigerian. This could have come about because of his parents (grandmother, Urhobo, father’s line Ijaw) or his marriage (wife, Yoruba), (Wren, 1984: 20). Taking his background into consideration, his feelings and attitudes to Nigeria’s crises become understandable.

His concern about social malaise, concern that goes beyond his preoccupation with war, is apparent in “The Lagos-Ibadan Road before Shagamu”. This poem examines the state of Nigerian roads and the risks of travelling on them. The overloaded passenger bus being driven by a marijuana-intoxicated man is a widespread occurrence in the Nigerian public transport system. The loss in economic and human terms cannot be quantified. Just as in “The Casualties”, the driver, Ashiru, escaped unhurt after driving the “50-odd” passengers to their death. This is comparable to “those who started/A fire and cannot now put it

out,” (p. 37: lines 11-12) or those responsible for the thousands who “Are burning that had no say in the matter” (p. 37: line 13). Those who caused the problem are usually the least affected by the negative consequences; ordinary Nigerians are the victims of the inordinate ambition of a few power hungry individuals (cf. Abike Dabiri, a Nigerian parliamentarian, on her expression of concern about the way Nigerian youths are used by power hungry politicians for political thuggery on NTA Network News of 24 April, 2007).

The image of the bus groaning up the hill before rushing down into the pit offers a metaphor for the nation, overburdened and dragged along, a nation that is then allowed to rush headlong into the ditch of war. As expected, lives were lost: young men, old men, women, children, infants – dead and forgotten – while those who masterminded the events smugly live on in the “smoke-filled rooms they haunt abroad” (p. 37: line 20), and at home. This could be likened to the unnecessary loss of life among ordinary Nigerians, including police, in the wake of the political violence that followed the April 2007 polls in Nigeria. The violence stemmed from Nigerians’ perception that the electoral process had been manipulated by desperate powerbrokers who were bent on thwarting the will and the desire of the populace for change. These powerbrokers gained from the process while the ordinary people lost once again. One cannot help agreeing with Clark-Bekederemo’s insightful observation that those who cause problems are usually the least affected by the end results. The lawlessness exhibited in Port Harcourt three months after the ‘elections’ in 2007 offers a recent example. The bloodbath in Okene, Kogi State is another saddening reality of the political legacy of Nigeria in the wake of the 2007 polls.

At this point, the technical and structural patterns of the poems are of interest. J. P. Clark-Bekederemo’s poems have been accused of being “forced and synthetic” (Darthorne, 1974/75: 195). This observation may have some basis, as some of his poems actually show a break in rhythm in an attempt to create a rhyme scheme. This tendency to try to force a rhyme pattern in an African poem suggests an attempt to mimic European traditions, and artificially impose them on African poetry. The contention here is that this detracts from his work rather than enhancing it. Wole Soyinka’s effortless way of bringing words together is an example of poetry that exhibits confidence through a mastery of the English language. His manner of rounding off the poem “Death in the Dawn” demonstrates this:

But such another Wraith! Brother,
 Silenced in the startled hug of
 Your invention – is this mocked grimace
 This closed contortion – I? (Soyinka, 1967: 65)

A naturalness enhancing the expression of ideas appears to be lacking in some of Clark-Bekederemo’s works.

Nonetheless, if the poems are seen in the context of the above points, the way in which Clark-Bekederemo brings to life ordinary phenomena, and his

attention to detail, becomes extraordinary and meaningful. In “Night Rain” for example, he makes the reader feel as if he or she is actually present in the shack, experiencing the wet night with the narrator as he makes the dark, wet night alive to our imagination. He includes the state of the room, the mother’s habitual movements, the touch of the water, the poverty-stricken nature of their abode, the effect of the rain on the whole land, and the price the night workers like the bat and the owl have to pay.

In “Vulture’s Choice”, he has enumerated details to achieve a climactic effect. He presents a step-by-step description of what led to the 1966 coup, ordered in such a way that the reader feels that there was no other choice for the coup executors than to strike. “Season of Omens”, on the other hand, enumerates the details of why the choice became necessary through his use of repetition for emphasis:

Then came the five hunters (p. 11)

repeated ten times for effect. And finally,

Then struck the five hunters (p. 12)

culminating in a kind of crescendo that marks a climax in relation to all the preceding details, building up to the activities that occurred on the night of the January 15, 1966 coup. Of course, the five hunters refer to the five majors who executed the coup. The refrain “the five hunters” captures the imagination and presses home the centrality of the actors to the events. This technique was also employed by the poet in “A Photograph in The Observer”. He made use of the echoing voice, repeating

Night falls over them

four times in the course of the poem. Finally, for the fifth time, in the last line,

Night falls over us... (p.34)

is used to convey the darkness that the war has brought to the people of Nigeria.

J. P. Clark-Bekederemo expresses a profound private grief of untold loss and public unhappiness. He has despaired over his nation, its losses, and the wounds that have remained raw for so long. He reflected on these years later in his collection *State of the Union* (Wren, 1984: 15).

In the poem “Here Nothing Works” (*State of the Union*), Clark-Bekederemo expresses his frustration at the entity called Nigeria, so beloved but, apparently, so disabled:

What is it in ourselves or in our soil
That things which connect so well elsewhere...

... Dislocate our lives so much that we all
Begin to doubt our own intelligence?

The Poems (p. 118)

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it should be emphasized that the poems of J. P. Clark-Bekederemo in general, and *Casualties* in particular, whatever their weaknesses, have opened the eyes of many to deeply shared feelings. As observed by Egudu, cited in Elimimian (1989: vii), Clark-Bekederemok's "interest is in the problems of human beings everywhere".

Clark-Bekederemo's text mediates an empathetic understanding of the poor and the battered, implying that all are affected:

... Do not tremble then
But turn, brothers, turn upon your side
Of the loosening mats
To where the others lie
So let us roll over on our backs
And again roll to the beat
Of drumming over all the land
And under its ample soothing hand
Joined to that of the sea
We will settle to a sleep of the
... Innocent and the free.

"Night Rain," *West African Verse* (p. 60)

It should be noted that the ending of the poem projects the idea of hope and peace as an antidote to despair on the part of individuals and the nation. Interestingly, this reveals an analogous link to the biblical Jeremiah who, after declaring society's shortcomings, also announced hope for a better tomorrow.

The poet, through his effective use of language, does not only cry for Nigeria's sorrowful history but warns the nation to avoid a repeat performance of the nightmare of the 1960s and 70s; he suggests that Nigeria's politics do not have to lead to self-destruction.

These poems remain relevant today, as the war was needless, the losses senseless and avoidable, and Nigerians' continued suspicious attitudes towards one another unwarranted. The poet is still at his duty post. The warnings of the sage still ring. But will the nation listen?

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